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“Boss Lady”

The Diagonal Networks of African American Women

Photographers from Reconstruction to the Harlem

Renaissance

Masters of Research Thesis



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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the relationships between the first African American women photographers and the various networks they utilised in order to achieve their careers were rooted in notions of respectability, and therefore took on unique ‘horizontal,’ ‘vertical,’ and ‘diagonal’ characteristics. Combining close readings of photographic images with discussion of network theory, I recover the works and lives of neglected African American women artists. Focussing on the period from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, I discuss the impact of ‘horizontal,’ ‘vertical,’ and ‘diagonal’ networks on these women’s careers. By focussing on the foundational years of African American women’s camerawork, I am able to chart the changing ideas of the nature of the professional in relation to these networks and shifting artistic ideas. The Introduction establishes my network theory, and contextualises the silence surrounding African American women photographers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter One explores the importance of marriage as a key vertical network, and how the domestic informed the professional in these women’s careers. Finally, Chapter Two introduces the idea of the diagonal network, and how some African American women photographers used professional networks in order to place themselves at the top of their own hierarchies. By combining network theory alongside photographic analysis and biographical information, I seek to rectify the absence of African American women photographers in the American photographic canon and emphasise the innovative and important nature of these women’s careers.

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**Introduction: “I Need My Hands to Hold Up My Skirts!”: Femininity,
Respectability and the Camera 1865-1910**

In her early 1920s self-portrait, African American photographer Florestine Collins typified many of the conventions of African American women's photography in the early decades of the twentieth century (Figure 1). The subject is posed in such a way that she appears demure, dignified, and modest, posed away from the camera in a way that is reminiscent of traditional notions of nineteenth century portraiture and bust-work. This portrait also captures the most important component of African American women's photography: the theme of respectability. With her embroidered dress, immaculately styled hair, and crossed hands in the lap, Collins presents herself as a representative of the ideal of the race through her style and posing. Yet what adds another layer of intrigue to this self-portrait is that this is not a conventional portrait commissioned by a paying customer, this is how Collins chose to represent herself through the medium in which she was an expert. Through her act of self-representation, we can see the emphasis placed on her own notions of respectability, which this thesis will argue that African American women photographers both used and revised through their social networks and photographic work. Yet there are questions which close reading of images alone cannot answer. How did Collins defy the racial and gender norms of her time to create this unusual career? Who provided her with the technical training to make such a career viable? And, crucially, what social and cultural networks made this possible?



Figure 1. Florestine Perrault Bertrand, self-portrait, early 1920s

Source: Arthé A. Anthony, “Florestine Perrault Collins and the Gendered Politics of Black Portraiture in 1920s New Orleans,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 43, no. 2 (Spring, 2002), 179.

As well as these larger issues, Collins’ unusual occupation meant that she encountered difficulty even in the most everyday settings when her workers were confused over how to refer to her. Valrian Murrell Montgomery, who worked in Collins’ studio whilst a student at Xavier University, wanted to “avoid addressing her too informally as Florestine or employing the overly formal Mrs. Collins.”¹ She therefore settled on an alternative title – “Boss

¹ Arthé A. Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer’s View of the Early Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 99.

Lady.”² Within this dissertation, the African American women photographers represent the title “Boss Lady” perfectly, as they were businesswomen who achieved careers as photographers in their own name and in their own right. Although some had more success than others, by challenging the gendered dynamics of professionalism, and navigating commercial and community-based networks, these “Boss Ladies” became businesswomen and image-makers in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

Florestine Collins was only one of several African American woman who had a career in photography in the period before the end of the Harlem Renaissance; this dissertation also discusses Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Roberts, Elnora Teal, Elise Forrest Harleston, Jennie Louise Welcome, and Winifred Hall Allen, as well as touching on the careers of other women. Yet the canon of American photography neglects these women, despite their engagement with many of its conventions. Combining close readings of photographs with analysis of the networks these women utilised, my thesis provides a comprehensive discussion of the lives and works of these women. The purpose of this is twofold: to recover the untold histories of these women and place them in their proper place in the American photographic canon, and to create and utilise a new framework of ‘diagonal’ network theory through which to discuss these women. In so doing, I recover a long neglected faction of American photographic history, African American history, women’s history, and network theory.

² Ibid.

My central argument whilst recovering these factions is that these careers reveal a new social dynamic for some African American women photographer's careers at the turn of the twentieth century, best described as a diagonal network, creating a site that both proved and created notions of respectability and uplift for the photographer and the subject. Alternative 'diagonal' networks enabled African American women to achieve their careers and uplift their communities through respectability and notions of the 'New Negro' ideal, without the vertical network of marriage. Their manipulation and alteration of conventional relationships into vertical networks (with themselves eventually at the top) and horizontal communal networks (evoking their role in their community) results in these women developing a diagonal network, which in turn uplifts other African American women photographers.

The timeframe of this project is Reconstruction to the end of the Harlem Renaissance. In this introduction, I will outline the network theory I shall utilise, review the existing literature which attempts to grapple with this topic, and discuss the relationship between African American women and the camera from photography's invention in 1839 until the beginning of the First World War in order to fully establish the context in which these women functioned. This reveals how, despite growing racial, gender, and social consciousness, strict gender and racial limitations prevented African American women from activating the horizontal/ vertical networks of professional photography. However, I also focus on those women who did create careers for themselves, as well as those women who utilised the camera in other ways. Chapter One moves to the period before the First World War through the Harlem Renaissance, focussing on Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Roberts, Elnora

Teal, Elise Forrest Harleston, and Jennie Louise Welcome. This chapter focuses on how ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ networks enabled African American women to achieve their careers and uplift their communities through respectability and notions of the ‘New Negro’ ideal. However, these women’s dependence on the ‘vertical’ network of marriage provides its own set of restrictions, challenges, and freedoms for each individual photographer. Chapter Two focuses on the same early 20th century time period, and considers the careers and works of Winifred Hall Allen and Florestine Collins alongside notions of the ‘diagonal’ network.

Network Theory: The Vertical, the Horizontal, and the Diagonal

The idea of ‘vertical,’ ‘horizontal,’ and ‘diagonal’ networks is one that requires unpacking before further analysis can begin. All of these women worked in an unusual industry for the time, utilising a variety of networks in order to train and establish careers. For some, their principal network would be their marriage, as their career came as a result of their husband’s careers. For others, their networks were rooted in more formal notions of professionalism, including apprenticeships and training roles. However, all of these networks tend to fall into two categories: either a ‘horizontal’ or ‘vertical’ network. ‘Vertical’ networks speak mostly to hierarchical family and business dynamics, whereas ‘horizontal’ networks reference more communal and publicly shared networks. Emerging from these two networks, some women also experience a more ‘diagonalizing’ network. The idea of ‘horizontal,’ ‘vertical’ and ‘diagonal’ networks is rooted in anthropological attitudes to networks, rather than the more traditional social network analysis. Anthropological network analysis focuses more on the “connections between

people, most clearly demonstrated by the central disciplinary tenets of kinship and exchange, and demonstrates the difficulty of abstracting the study of networks from their disciplinary contexts,” which is more revealing of the gender, race, and class dimensions of the networks.³

Familial networks, such as the role of the husband, and community networks, including the church and other local community organisations, were vital to how these women maintained their unusual careers. These were not traditional professional networks, such as those navigated by white women photographers. Nor were these political networks, as scholars have discussed in relation to events such as the Seneca Falls Convention for women’s rights in 1848.⁴ These non-traditional networks were vitally important for African American women photographers to navigate. Their navigation of both horizontal and vertical networks reassured their communities of their respectability as women and photographers.⁵ Whilst I would define a horizontal network as a communal, broad ranging network which encompasses a variety of roles – including involvement in communal but non-professional networks such as the church – the notion of vertical networks more clearly defines the familial networks. Vertical networks imply a stringent hierarchy, with the husband placed at the top. This is not to suggest that the wife is

³ Penny Harvey, Hannah Knox, and Mike Savage, “Social Networks and the Study of Relations: Networks as Method, Metaphor, and Form,” *Economy and Society* 35, no. 1 (February 2006), 115.

⁴ Wendy Hamand Venet, *Neither Ballots nor Bullets: Women Abolitionists and the Civil War* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 1.

⁵ African Americans considered the photography a highly respectable occupation, as photography scholar Deborah Willis suggests that they were “ambassadors” within their communities. However, as a male-dominated occupation within the African American community, African American *women* had to heighten their own personal respectability to suit their unusual occupation. See Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2000), 35.

always the lowest in the hierarchy – often other family members may perform additional functions within the network – but the husband is almost always at the top of the vertical network. Vertical networks also have a more narrow focus, as they have one goal – in this case the foundation and maintenance of a photographic business. Horizontal networks, on the other hand, may have a significant number of people involved and a diverse number of goals that would result in community uplift, with a more communal and less hierarchical structure. As each relationship and community dynamic is unique to each woman, the exact node which each woman functioned as within the network would be different. Whilst in Chapter One the idea of the vertical network applies to a familial structure, in Chapter Two the women do not utilise their husbands as a network to further their careers. As photography professionalised, the vertical network also becomes more formally professional, encompassing business practices such as apprenticeships and training jobs. The networks of professionalising black women photographers in fact came to have a more *diagonal* character, blending hierarchical and more egalitarian and communal relationships. However, all of these women navigated both horizontal and vertical networks, and the hierarchies and power dynamics apparent within them, to maintain middle-class respectability.⁶

The diagram below demonstrates the relationship between the horizontal and vertical planes of networks (Figure 2). As family is such a key

⁶ Although other scholarship dedicated to African American women's networks and notions of respectability exists, none link to the professional field of women's photography. See Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American women of the South and the advancement of the race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), and Floris Loretta Barnett Cash, *African American Women and Social Action: the Clubwomen and Volunteerism from Jim Crow to the New Deal, 1896-1936* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).

institution for these women, the domestic networks form both the x-axis and a y-axis on this diagram. The horizontal network of the domestic is represented along the bottom x-axis, referring to the non-hierarchical, communal, side of domestic support available to these women by their families and friends. This is in contrast to the domestic y-axis, which refers to the hierarchical nature of marriage and the husband at this time. The other sides of the diagram refer to the professional networks available to these women outside of the home. The x-axis refers to professional work hierarchies, which often functioned in the same hierarchical way as marriage did. The top y-axis refers to community organisations that, whilst not necessarily professional in nature, occupy a space outside of the home. These may include organisations such as the Church and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. During each subsequent chapter, the diagram will have the networks utilized by each discussed photographer marked onto it, in order to properly demonstrate each woman's unique relationship to their horizontal and vertical networks.

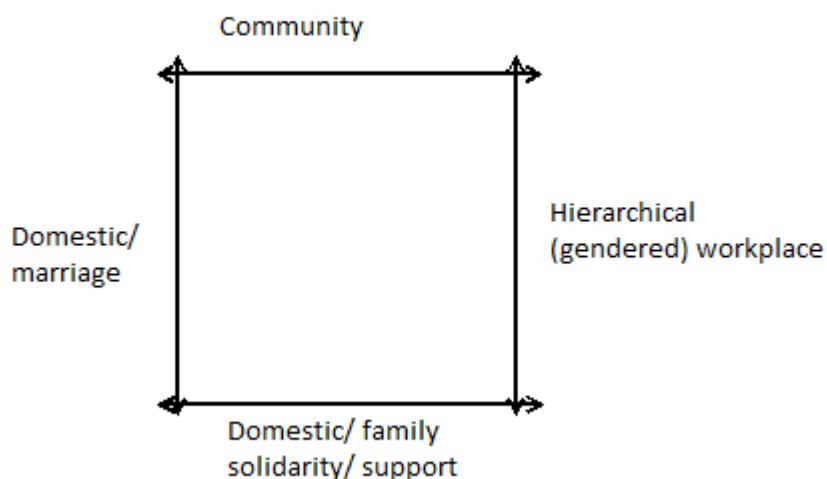


Figure 2. Networks of African American Women Photographers Diagram, Version 1, 2017

The idea of such non-professional social networks, and their prevalence in the working lives of these African American women photographers, is indicative of the class makeup of the African American community of the time. Like many other African American women's networks, such as the settlement housing organisations and club-women's networks, the idea of uplift and community improvement was paramount to the idea of networks. Within the settlement housing movement, in which middle-class African American clubwomen utilised a series of networks to provide social programmes for the poor African American communities, "the clubwomen looked to progress and respectability to bring the masses in step with the values and attitudes of the middle class" as "the reform of the individual behaviour became a strategy of reform."⁷ Whilst some of these organisations were interracial, the majority tended to be solely African American, especially in the South.⁸ Likewise, middle-class ideals of respectability and roots within the domestic sphere were also features in African American women's networks. Yet this notion is inherently problematic, as it relies on notions of uplift. Uplift is a contentious word in African American intellectual thought, as it implies the patronising need to rise up and "save" those who are being uplifted. Typically in African American culture, middle-class African Americans applied this term to the working classes, and implied a shift from the folk culture of the masses to the more 'refined' styles of the middle class which more closely resembled white culture. E. Franklin Frazier refers to this group as the 'Black Bourgeois,' and writes that this group has been "uprooted from its "racial" tradition and as a

⁷ Cash, *African American Women and Social Action*, 4.

⁸ Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South*, 29.

consequence has no cultural roots in either the North or the white world” as it has “rejected the folk classes of the Negro masses.”⁹ Therefore, following Frazier’s logic, in the act of attempting to ‘uplift’ the working class into their middle class reality, they are doing nothing more than uplifting them into their “world of make-believe.”¹⁰ The patronising nature of the term uplift is important to consider, as it does imply that there is a right way and a wrong way to exist as an African American.

My own study of these photographers contributes to this problematic notion of uplift. The close readings I offer engage heavily with notions of respectability and uplift, as the photographers offer idealised and respectable images of their subjects. Yet the standard to which they set themselves is, for the most part, a white standard. The photographers in this dissertation embrace the very aesthetic which Frazier deplors, by rejecting images of “folk classes” in favour of images that signify affluence and intellectualism with symbolic props and costumes. There are both pros and cons with presenting African Americans this way. On the one hand, it is a rejection of African roots, and of an acceptance, and therefore complicity with, white standards of beauty and respectability. On the other hand, it is an assertion of self-worth and recognition at a time of extreme racial prejudice, along standards that both the oppressor and the oppressed will recognise. It is a rejection of stereotypes and a statement of equality. Whilst it is not my place to pass judgement on the problematic notions of uplift and standards of beauty these photographers engaged with and whether they were right or wrong to do so, it is important to

⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

acknowledge the controversial and classist nature of these terms. Yet scholars have argued that this mode of networks serves to further entrench individuals in their community even as it uplifts them out of it. The way that networks of uplift and privilege informed respectability functioned for African American women educators in many of the same ways it functioned for photographers, as: “the enabling process was in one way highly individualistic and destined to create or ensure class privileges. It did, after all, enable these women, psychologically and intellectually, to undertake tasks that others were less apt and less able to undertake. But at the same time that the process set these women apart from others of their community, it also made them a part of that community.”¹¹ Therefore, notions of uplift serve both the ‘uplifted’ and the individual doing the uplifting by entrenching them ever deeper in their community.

Although scholars have not gone beyond the discussion of uplift to apply network theory to black women photographers, Judith Davidov’s work *Women’s Camera: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture* applies network theory to white women photographers. Davidov states that “the threads that link them into a kind of network are their connection to the White/Käsebier version of Pictorialism, their mutual regard and support, and the way in which each of them uses her own experience to experiment with mimesis and alterity.”¹² This mutual regard and support included corresponding with

¹¹ Stephanie J. Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

¹² Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women’s Camera: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 37.

each other, evaluating each other's work, and providing advice and guidance. Yet Davidov's study does not extend to African American women photographers in any capacity other than as subjects for white women to photograph; as "others" who reflect the photographer's own "outsideness."¹³ This dissertation considers network theory and African American women photographers of this time period together for the first time, filling in the gaps existing scholarship.

Existing Literature on African American Women's Photography

African American women photographers' networks are not the only neglected area in scholarly literature. These women have received little scholarly attention at all. Many histories of photography, including recent publications, fail to acknowledge the role of African Americans, let alone the work of African American women specifically. The first two chapters in *Photography in the Nineteenth Century* typify this attitude to photographic history, as it focuses on the white, male photographers.¹⁴ As a result, texts such as this suggest that African Americans and women have no role within the canon of American photography. This is a misconception that has continued to persist into the twenty-first century, as texts such as Kaja Silverman's *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part One*, offer a high concept but mostly white perspective on photography.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Martha A. Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991).

¹⁵ Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or, The History of Photography, Part One* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015-).

In the late twentieth century, however, scholars began to attempt to bring both African Americans and women into the discussion of an American photographic canon. Ground-breaking texts such as Naomi Silverman's *A History of Women Photographers* sought to challenge the male dominated history of photography by writing a history focussed solely on women photographers. Yet whilst her work is significant, it offers only a brief overview of African American women photographers within the broad history of women's photography, limiting discussion to two paragraphs within a book that is hundreds of pages long, and considers only three figures in brief.¹⁶ Indeed, flaws persist throughout Rosenblum's handling of women of colour. Rosenblum states that a key "mission" of her text is to "suggest the diversity of those who found in photography a pastime, a profession, and in some cases, a passion."¹⁷ However she then develops this framework along the diversity of *personalities* apparent in her work, listing examples of women with different attitudes – all of whom are white women. To claim that her work celebrates diversity and then focus on a group of white women and their temperaments is an example of the racial exclusivity that is all too frequent in this field of study.

However, the field of photographic theory has diversified over the last decades of the twentieth century, with more attention paid to ethnic minorities and women who choose to pursue photography than ever before. Deborah Willis has been at the forefront of this shift, placing more emphasis on African American and women photographers. Willis's work recovering individual

¹⁶ Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (London, NY, Paris: Abbeville Press, 1994), 151.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

photographers, moments of photographic history, and emphasising the importance of photography to the African American community as a whole has greatly improved the diversity of the field of photographic history. Her works range from emphasising early African American photographic culture in *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* to the African American female body in visual culture in *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. Indeed, increasingly scholars have been revisiting well-documented areas of African American history and re-evaluating them through the lens of photography. This can be seen most significantly in Leigh Radford's *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle*, where she "examines the vital yet contentious role photography has played in the mobilization, expansion, and consumption of three twentieth Century African American social movements."¹⁸ Yet all of these studies primarily view women as subjects, largely focussing discussion on the bodies of the women within the photographs rather than considering the women who took the pictures at any length. As I show in this dissertation, the relationship between African American women and the camera changed, so that they moved away from being the subjects of men and white women to become shapers of their own images.

The most significant text for my project is Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's ground-breaking *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*.¹⁹ In this, Moutoussamy-Ashe creates an encyclopaedia of African American women

¹⁸ Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁹ Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993).

photographers, including biographical information and their images (where available). Although her research and scope is impressive, the lack of any in-depth visual analysis of the images, and analysis of each woman only in isolation, raises broader questions about the history of African American women's photography. Moutoussamy-Ashe frames her approach to photographic analysis exclusively within a biographical context, and does not acknowledge either the networks or the larger aesthetic and historical traditions within which these women operated. This is an issue shared by Arthé A. Anthony, whose work on Florestine Collins has resulted in articles and books which I will be utilising in my work. Whilst her discovery of images is impressive, as is the narrative history she constructs, it remains limited by her lack of photographic analysis and isolationist approach.

Anthony and Willis' works provide a vital starting platform to this project, as one of the biggest challenges facing researchers in this area is the lack of information and surviving sources available on the African American women photographers. Evidence suggests that many photographers placed little importance on their roles. Jewelle Anderson describes how Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, writer of *Viewfinders*, discovered a cache of Winifred Hall Allen's photographs:

She interviewed Winifred Hall Allen, a contemporary of the late Mr. VanDerZee, in her small apartment. There she found three boxes of negatives stored at the top of a closet. They were infested with cockroaches and Allen had to be persuaded to let Ashe take some of the negatives away to clean them up. The three boxes represented less than half of her collection. The rest she'd destroyed feeling that they had no

value. Her sense of the prevailing culture's sentiments about their lack of worth was, of course, sadly accurate.²⁰

This lack of regard for her own work is indicative of many of the women in this project, who regarded their own work as a means to an end and did not consider their images to be of much artistic merit outside of their own communities. However, whilst some women have had family members preserve their legacy and bring them to some degree of attention – such as Wilhelmina Robert's daughter Wilhelmina hunting for boxes of photographs under their house – others such as Allen did not have a familial network invested in their past. Therefore, information about Allen's past is sketchy. Where Allen is included in photographic studies, her biographies contain only the bare facts: "Winifred Hall Allen took over a flourishing business in New York's Harlem, taught her husband the necessary techniques, and documented the faces and streets of the neighbourhood before retiring to another profession in 1950."²¹ However, the images which have survived and the networks which she used to achieve her career warrant consideration, in order to place her work and life in its proper place in photographic history, despite the problematic research context. As the negotiation of networks was particularly problematic for African American women, particularly more public and professional networks, little formal records remain where their familial networks were not able to preserve them. Despite their striking innovations, their legacy remains

²⁰ Jewelle Gomez, "A Century of Black Women Photographed," in *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, eds. Liz Heron & Val Williams (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 452.

²¹ Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 151.

relatively marginal. Although this is not surprising given their marginalization in photographic history, it is an absence I seek to rectify in my project.

African American Women's Place in the History of Photography

This absence is, in many ways, a result of centuries of racial and gender prejudice. For African American women, the history of photography has largely been a narrative of exclusion, as the elitist nature of photography and the double jeopardy of discrimination faced by being both African American and female conspired to restrict their participation in the photographic process. Despite growing racial, gender, and social consciousness, strict gender and racial limitations prevented African American women from activating the horizontal and vertical networks of photography. However, African American women were not entirely absent from the history of photography at this time, as they had their photographs taken as subjects, utilised photography in their activism, and even participated in the photographic industry in certain capacities. In this introduction, I first outline how racial and gendered prejudice marred photography's very inception in America, from the daguerreotype to the emergence of pictorialism. I also chart the changing relationship between African American women and the camera, and how scholars have attempted to fill the gaps in their photographic history. Ultimately, I discuss the women who did work in photography during this period and address the reasons for the extreme obscurity which surrounds them, as well as why the networks they would later utilise are ineffectual or absent.

When Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre invented the daguerreotype in 1839, it was an instant success and captured the public imagination. The “earliest and least manipulable of the commercial photographic processes,” it revolutionised the way that people considered self-representation in art.²² Marcy J. Dinius’s *The Camera and the Press* suggests of the daguerreotype that “photography begun as daguerreotype, yet daguerreotypy is both like and unlike subsequent forms of photography.”²³ Kept under glass to prevent the chemicals from reacting in the air, daguerreotypes would often mirror and reflect the viewer’s face alongside the image and from certain angles would appear in negative. Beaumont Newhall notes that “despite its popularity, the daguerreotype was doomed. It did not lend itself to ready duplication. It was fragile and had to be kept under a glass in a bulky case, or framed. And it was expensive.”²⁴ Because of the expense, most people encountered daguerreotypes through reading descriptions in the press rather than seeing the objects themselves, and so they therefore entered public consciousness “verbally, not visibly.”²⁵ From the outset, photography preoccupied those who engaged with it and wrote of it with notions of truth; that photography was a scientific process which portrayed the subject as they truly exist to be. By 1847, “Daguerreotype had already come to stand for a certain kind of truth, for objectivity, the impartial reproduction of facts...” and “it was not very long before “daguerreotype” became a common verb that meant telling the literal

²² John Gage, “Photographic likeness,” in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 123.

²³ Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

²⁴ Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 39.

²⁵ Dinius, *The Camera and the Press*, 13.

truth of things.”²⁶ The idea of photography, and daguerreotypy, being inherently democratic medium took on a special significance and prominence in America; “of all countries, America adapted the daguerreotype with the most enthusiasm, and excelled in its practice.”²⁷ It was officially recorded that “403,626 had been taken in the year ending June 1, 1855” by the state of Massachusetts.²⁸ Yet despite this prominence, the exclusive and expensive nature of daguerreotypy would exclude African American women and the networks they would later utilise. The extreme racial prejudice of the time contributed towards photography’s inaccessibility.

For decades white print culture depicted African Americans in derogatory ways, as “in the regularized and stereotyped forms of printer’s blocks of runaways, or as caricatured, subhuman creatures held up for derision or advertised for sale, the common representations of African Americans were visually controlled by the press and other ideological apparatuses of the dominant culture.”²⁹ With the invention of the daguerreotype, and its emphasis on ‘truth,’ white supremacists sought to further entrench notions of African American inferiority. Louis Agassiz’s portraits of African American slaves, taken in 1850 by Thomas Zealy, demonstrate this. These daguerreotypes show a number of African American slaves, with the women stripped to the waist and the men entirely naked (Figure 3).³⁰ Agassiz presented them as scientific

²⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, “Chapter One: The Emergence of a Keyword,” in *Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 17.

²⁷ Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 33.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African-Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover & London: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, in association with University of Washington Press, 2006), 16.

³⁰ For the purposes of this dissertation, I did not think it necessary to display the entire image to illustrate my point, as my discussion is focussed on Delia’s gaze. Out of a desire not to

studies of the African American body that would support his notions of African American inferiority, whilst many modern scholars have described them as little more than “titty shots” that evidence white supremacy.³¹ By having Delia and her kin facing the camera directly, in a marked departure from the style of the time, “the pictures of Delia and Drana represented carefully composed images of black women’s bodies and faces that were designed to demonstrate their inherent racial difference and inferiority.”³² In her text *Delia’s Tears*, Molly Rogers states the importance of truth to the development of these images, as “a photograph was more than a representation: it proposed a new way of seeing, a new way of understanding the world that rested on notions of universal Truth. This made photography revolutionary.”³³ It is telling that few images of African Americans existed that did not in some way promote the idea of their inferiority, whether as props in slave households or as in these “scientific” images.

reproduce this evasive image, I have cropped it. The full image can be found in the reference provided.

³¹ Suzanne Schneider, “Louis Agassiz and the American School of Ethnoeroticism: Polygenesis, Pornography, and Other “Perfidious Influences,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace & Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 221.

³² Deborah Willis & Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 7.

³³ Molly Rogers, *Delia’s Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 14.



Figure 3. Joseph T. Zealy, Delia, Country born of African parents, daughter of Renty, Congo, quarter-plate daguerreotype, 1850

Source: Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

Yet overemphasizing these images and ignoring the wider context of African American photography at this time is dangerous, as Maurice O.

Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith write:

Today we know more about Louis Agassiz's dehumanizing scientific daguerreotypes of enslaved African Americans than we do about early African American photographers and the African American men and women who commissioned daguerreotypes... We know more about the imagery of racism than we do about what African American men and women did when they took photography into their own hands.³⁴

Whilst white supremacists used photography to suggest the inferiority of African Americans, African Americans themselves utilised it to advance their own careers. Some of the early daguerreotypists were African American men; within the first decade of photography's emergence in the 1840s figures such

³⁴ Shawn Michelle Smith and Maurice O. Wallace, "Introduction: Pictures and Progress," in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of Early African American Identity*, eds. Shawn Michelle Smith and Maurice O. Wallace (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 4.

as Jules Lion (Lyons), James Presley Ball and Augustus Washington all operated successful galleries. Lion was creating daguerreotypes as early as 1843, commonly of cityscapes, yet had to sell his equipment in 1860.³⁵ Ball and Washington, on the other hand, were “politically engaged abolitionists and used their photography skills to expose the abhorrent institution of slavery by promoting anti-slavery activities.”³⁶ As the daguerreotype fell out of fashion and easier techniques emerged, such as the calotype and the tintype, the number of African American male photographers increased.

There were also white women who were engaged in photography during these foundational years. Naomi Rosenblum notes that “women have been actively involved with photography ever since the medium was first introduced in 1839.”³⁷ This was mostly in a technical capacity, often with their husbands, as “even though women did not operate cameras or own enterprises as frequently as men, they did play a significant behind-the-scenes role in producing the finished images in well-capitalized daguerreotype establishments.”³⁸ However, due to photography’s scientific reputation and the cumbersome nature of the equipment, people regarded it as inherently masculine, and there were few women who actively participated in taking photographs themselves. It would take the emergence of pictorialism and amateur photography as a leisure pursuit in the late nineteenth century to properly place women in the photographic canon, both as professionals and hobbyists. Yet few African American women were unable to benefit from

³⁵ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 4.

³⁶ Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 5.

³⁷ Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

these developments, as the vertical and horizontal networks that would enable them to function as photographers and even subjects did not yet exist due to both gender and racial prejudice.

The development of pictorialism alongside formal portraiture would advance the role of white women in photography, and would hint at the styles and networks of future African American women photographers. By the late nineteenth century, the invention of the Kodak camera in 1888 and the increasing debates about photography as an art form versus merely a recording tool, coupled with slightly more progressive attitudes towards women, set the stage for an international pictorialist movement. Although there is no definite definition of pictorialism, Davidov writes that “Pictorialist photographers, one might say, wished to preserve in their carefully crafted pictures the very thing Walter Benjamin would declare dead after the invention of photography: the *aura*, the unique and irreproducible quality that made pictorial a work ‘art.’”³⁹ In this way, pictorialism was more about capturing a sense of feeling and emotion than it was about capturing scientific truth, although the two naturally bled into each other as photographers staged and constructed the truth. Rather than a site of scientific study, the pictorialist’s studio functioned as a fantasy, theatrical, performative space. Peter Henry Emerson, one of the first proponents of pictorial photography, believed that photographs should resemble human sight as far as possible, and so advocated that “to reproduce human vision with the camera, he advised the photographer to put the camera’s lens slightly out of focus.”⁴⁰ For the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus

³⁹ Davidov, *Women’s Camera*, 52.

⁴⁰ Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 142.

on two of pictorialism's main functions: to convey art, typically through an emotional response from the viewer, and to as closely as possible present an image as though from human sight. This leads to the generation of believable yet fantastical images. Alfred Stieglitz was the main figure responsible for bringing this movement to the United States, and he created an ideology with himself at the centre. This ideology, and those key figures who gained fame for following it, were overwhelmingly white.

Pictorialism offered women a unique role within its ideology. As previously stated, white women had functioned in a mostly behind-the-scenes role until the emergence of Pictorialism. The physical difficulties of carrying cumbersome equipment, aggressive "advertising wars", and restrictive notions of femininity meant that there were far fewer female photographers than male.⁴¹ Pictorialism changed this. For the first time in photographic history, women's femininity was a desirable trait. Rosenblum writes that "women were supposed to have an intrinsic artistry that enabled them to convey each individual's character and to understand the virtue of indefiniteness, which brought the camera image closer to hand-made art."⁴² Scholars consider Gertrude Käsebier "without question the most renowned of American women portraitists," and her photographs portray the essence of pictorialist photography's roots in progressive ideology.⁴³ Davidov notes that "Käsebier's

⁴¹ Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839-1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 13.

⁴² Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.

special interest in studies of mothers and children had to do with her interest in progressive child-raising methods,” as can be seen by her images (Figure 4).⁴⁴



Figure 4. Gertrude Käsebier, *Blessed Art Through among Women*, platinum print, 1899

Source: “Blessed Art Though among Women,” The Met, accessed 16/08/2017, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/33.43.132/>.

Whilst the preoccupation with the female body, maternal connections, and the natural world was undoubtedly rooted in somewhat of a patronising attitude towards women, it allowed them opportunities for artistic expression and advancement in the field of photography. Pictorialism did not just function as an artistic style; it also functioned as a network. With pictorialist photography clubs and publications, pictorialism afforded women a network of communication and support. Photographic conventions and aesthetics

⁴⁴ Davidov, *Women’s Camera*, 60.

themselves shifted to reflect social and cultural changes, as women were “encouraged by the recognition given them in the photographic press and especially by the highly regarded female professionals to whom they apprenticed or from whom they sought advice and inspiration.”⁴⁵ These networks of support and encouragement were inherently exclusive, however. Rosenblum describes how “requiring a measure of leisure, a degree of education, and some sense of self-worth, photography fit well into a social scheme that had provided large numbers of women with just these attributes,” indicating the inherently middle-class nature of pictorialism.⁴⁶ Naturally, this excluded not only working class women, who would not have been able to afford the cumbersome equipment, but also African American women, who would not have been welcomed within these pictorialist networks. Although pictorialism was a medium for both the amateur photographer and the professional, African American women were not included in these networks in either capacity. The ways in which white women used their genders in order to further their careers would, however, be reminiscent of how African American women would do the same within their horizontal and vertical networks within later decades, as their communities would seek them out for pictures of their children in line with pictorialist notions.

Although they were unable to significantly benefit from the emergence of pictorialism in the late nineteenth century, African Americans nonetheless engaged with photographic practice and theory throughout the nineteenth century. As we have seen, African American men were among some of the

⁴⁵ Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 93.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

first American daguerreotypists, and many prominent African Americans recognized photography's capacity for racial uplift. Frederick Douglass, a former slave and prominent abolitionist, was the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, as he recognized it as "a great *democratic* art."⁴⁷ He praised photography's accessibility and potential for racial pride within everyday African Americans, as he stated "the humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago."⁴⁸ Douglass had his photograph taken at least 160 times, and each time there are some stark similarities (Figure 5 and Figure 6).⁴⁹ He was always dressed in fine clothing, suggesting respectability and refinement. He rarely smiled, creating a sense of dignity and a serious demeanour. Stauffer, Trodd and Bernier suggest that Douglass's gaze was also innovative for the time, as he would meet the camera's gaze in some images. Where figures such as Henry Snelling would state that "the eyes should be fixed on some object above the camera, and to one side, but never into, or on, the medium," Douglass instead "stares sternly into the camera lens in a dramatic and crafted pose. It sent a message of artful defiance or majestic wrath..."⁵⁰ In contrast with the Delia images, where her direct gaze was instructed by a white male and was intended to suggest her inferiority, here Douglass repurposed this technique. Nor was Douglass alone in this; countless African Americans would commission portraitists to capture the likeness of themselves and their families in respectable trappings. This emphasis on respectability would pave the way

⁴⁷ John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York & London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), x.

⁴⁸ Smith and Wallace, "Introduction," 6.

⁴⁹ Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, ix.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

for the demand for images, which would later enable African American women to access networks in order to carve out careers for themselves.

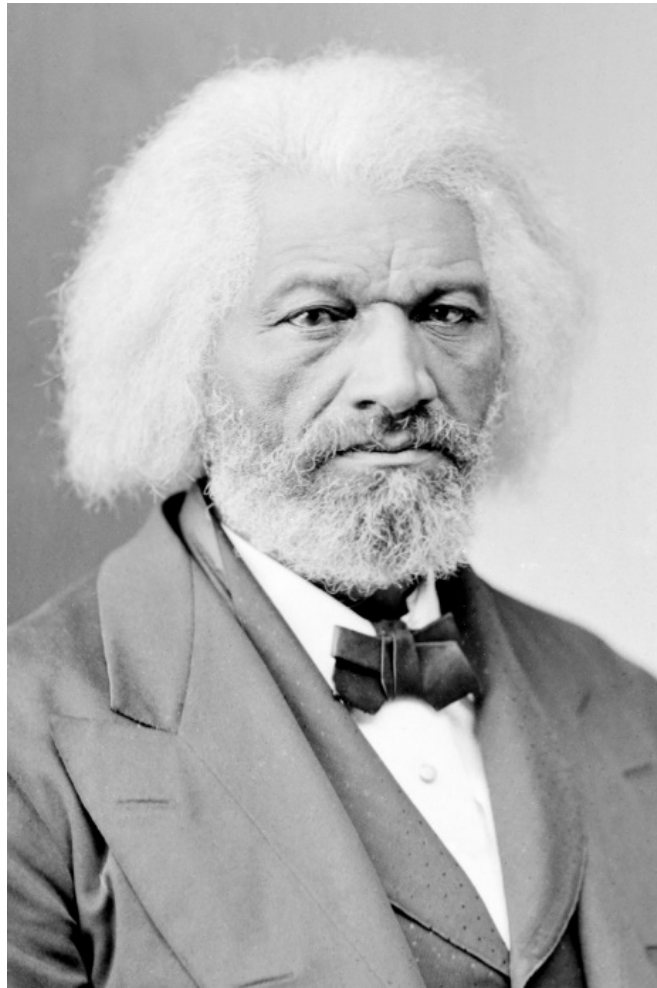


Figure 5. Matthew B. Brady, Frederick Douglass, 1877.

Source: John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York & London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 54.

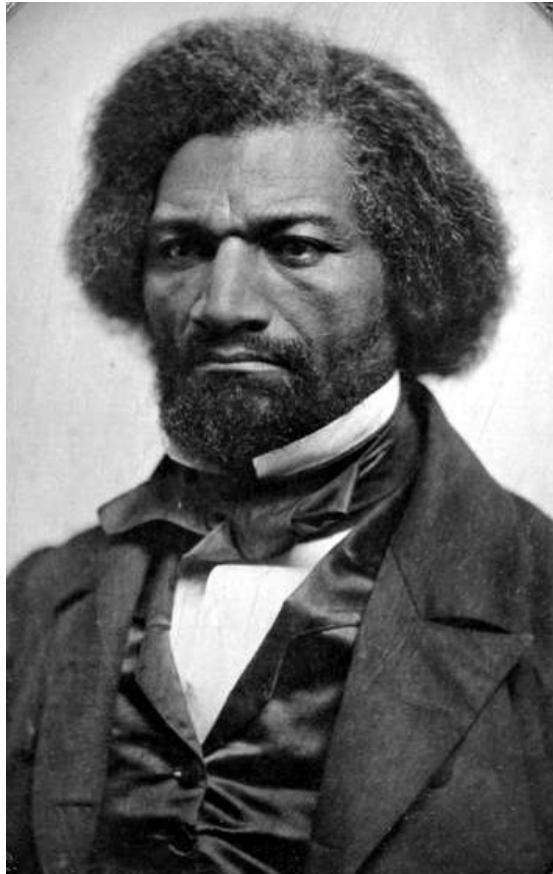


Figure 6. Unknown Photographer, Frederick Douglass, 1856.

Source: John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York & London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 13.

One of the key reasons for African Americans' increasing photographic preoccupation was their desire for middle class respectability. As Reconstruction failed and the harsh realities of Jim Crow segregation set in, a disturbing visual culture trend emerged: lynching photographs. White supremacists murdered African American men or women in public acts of mob violence, with 3,446 confirmed lynchings happening between 1882 and 1968.⁵¹ Postcards of the lynchings became common, as whites would take pictures of

⁵¹ "Lynching Statistics," The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.chesnuttarchive.org/classroom/lynchingstat.html>.

the events and sell them to other whites who would send them to relatives. In the midst of such terror, it is not surprising that African Americans were keen to engage in their own acts of self-representation, and defy the images of them that the dominant white culture perpetuated. Yet some African Americans used lynching photographs as political tools, notably Ida B. Wells. When on her lecture tours, Ida B. Wells would often present pictures of lynching victims and portraits of the victim's families:

Just as photographs of executed African Americans relayed the raw violence of lynching and the abjection of the black figure, the genre of portraiture conferred and confirmed black dignity, respectability, and humanity. Wells augmented her literature with professionally made photographs of lynchings, of herself, and of a lynch victim's loved ones left behind in order to present a fuller picture of what was at stake in the fight against lynching: black womanhood, the sanctity of the black family, and the credibility of American civilization as a whole.⁵²

Although not engaging in the mechanical process itself, this shows an African American woman using photography for her own political cause.

Nor was Ida B. Wells the only African American woman to use photography in this way. Michael Chaney wrote on how slave narrative writer Linda Brent fashions her hiding space into a camera obscura in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Chaney writes that “conveyed through metaphors of the camera obscura and physically structured like one as well, the garret permits invisibility from systems of optic domination while affording the viewer painfully ensconced within it an alternate vision of optic power via a one-inch

⁵² Leigh Raiford, “Ida B. Wells and the Shadow Archive,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace & Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 299.

diameter peephole.”⁵³ In this way, Chaney argues, Brent harnesses the metaphor of the camera to raise questions about the power of looking and viewing. Sojourner Truth and her relationship with the camera has received far more scholarly attention. Famously saying “I sell the shadow to support the substance,” Sojourner Truth was a fugitive slave whose image was widely distributed during the abolitionist period (Figure 7).⁵⁴ Rohrbach wrote of Truth that her “... command of her image through her active use of iconography, legal protection, and marketing exposes Truth in her various roles as artful purveyor, producer, and product.”⁵⁵ Truth actively shaped the reproduction of her image, engaged with the photographic process at every stage. Her use of props, and the way she combined the “garb of Quaker womanhood”⁵⁶ with a head wrap which “references an African past” set precedents which would be mirrored in the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Yet whilst these women undoubtedly used the camera for their own ends, limiting discussion of African American women photography at the time entirely to them distracts and abstracts the reality of the African American women photographers, some of whom were functioning at this time.

⁵³ Michael Chaney, “Mulatta Obscura: Camera Tactics and Linda Brent,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace & Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 109.

⁵⁴ Augusta Rohrbach, “Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth in Black and White,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace & Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.



Figure 7. Photographer Unknown, “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” 1864

Source: Augusta Rohrbach, “Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth in Black and White,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds. Maurice O. Wallace & Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 89.

The first recorded African American woman involved in photography was Mary E. Warren, a photographic printer from Houston, Texas in 1866. Warren was active during Reconstruction, following the abolition of slavery and the Civil War. In fact, 1866 was the same year in which Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, granting African Americans citizenship and civil rights. Yet it was also a period of racial tension, as 1866 also marked the year of the

formation of the Ku Klux Klan.⁵⁸ From a time of such promise and pressure, historian Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe discovered a Houston City Directory which listed Warren's name, address, job, and the fact that she was coloured. Moutoussamy-Ashe writes of her discovery:

It is not known how or where Mary Warren learned her craft; but considering the photographic techniques of the period, she must have received at least some formal one-on-one training... But in order to be listed in the city directory, while being black and a woman, her work must have been respected and taken seriously. There are no records in Texas that gave evidence of what happened to Mary Warren or to the work she did. Nothing tells of her life before or after 1866.⁵⁹

The lack of information makes Warren an intriguing figure. As Moutoussamy-Ashe states, "she must have been an unusual person. She was a Southern black woman, working in a profession unusual for black or white, male or female, in an unusually conservative and prejudiced part of America."⁶⁰ Yet there is little other information known about her, as she does not appear in any subsequent censuses or directories. Much of Warren's life has faded into obscurity, as was the case with many other African American women of the time.

Twenty years later, in the 1880s, evidence indicates that two other African American women were involved in photography. By this time, the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 had effectively signalled the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of Jim Crow segregation. Yet despite this, the number of African American women trying out photography was slightly increasing. In 1886, a Memphis newspaper wrote that Fannie J Thompson

⁵⁸ Clayborne Carson, Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, and Gary B. Nash, *The Struggle for Freedom: A History of African Americans, Volume 2, Since 1865* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2011), 262.

⁵⁹ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

“will devote her school vacation to the study of photography.”⁶¹ According to the 1880 census, Thompson had previously worked on a farm, was divorced, and had five small children, but by the 1880s was studying photography and “frequently appeared in the society pages.”⁶² Whilst it is unclear whether Thompson was a hobbyist or a professional photographer, it is certain that she practiced photography at a time when few women did. Hattie Baker, on the other hand, worked on “photographic enlargements” in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1887.⁶³ This technical supportive role is reflective of the kind that many white women would have held in photography at this time – behind the scenes, working with dangerous chemicals. In the same advertisement Baker also states her role as a seamstress; working at one moment in a domestic, traditionally feminine role, and in the other at a mechanical, unusual occupation.⁶⁴ The obscurity surrounding these women suggests that society did not applaud their efforts, and that there was a lack of support networks surrounding them. Indeed, the 1890 census listed 2,201 women photographers, of which only six were African American.⁶⁵

By 1900, the numbers of women photographers had risen sharply to 3,587, of which only 17 were African American.⁶⁶ Again, little information is

⁶¹ Deborah Willis-Thomas, *Black Photographers 1840-1940: A Bio-Bibliography* (Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1984), 12.

⁶² Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, “Viewfinders Proposal,” Box 1, Folder 3, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017, 5.

⁶³ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 17.

⁶⁴ Samuel W. Black, “African American Photographers of Cleveland, 1930-1965,” The Western Reserve Historical Society, accessed 23 June, 2017, http://academic.csuohio.edu/tah/regional_arts/africanamerican/p9african.pdf, 9.

⁶⁵ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

available on these women, and none of their images appear to have survived. Yet these women did exist, and were the first women of colour in America to take up this challenging and unusual career. Another intriguing figure, for her very obscurity, is Mary E. Flenoy. Listed in the Danville City Directories in 1899 and from 1903-1906 as a photographer, she was “cognizent of her dual role as a photographer and entrepreneur, [and] attended several conventions hosted by the National Negro Business League...”⁶⁷ Yet again, there are little to no records of Flenoy’s life, as “no-one in Danville today has ever heard of Mary Flenoy or has any sense of a black woman in 1899 with a camera in her hand.”⁶⁸ Instead, we must rely on speculation and uncertainty. Moutoussamy-Ashe, in her history of African American women photographers, offers the theory that “Mary Flenoy worked as a domestic for the English family at least until 1893... the possibility exists that Mary Flenoy learned her photography skills while working at the English home...”⁶⁹ However well founded this theory is, it remains but a theory. These women were highly unusual for their time, as the social status of African American women at the time would have worked against them.

Middle-class African American women, the women who would later take up this career, were mostly absent in the first decade of the twentieth century. At this time, African American women experienced a contradictory and complex paradox regarding their roles in society. Economic hardship required that many of them work, with many middle-class African American

⁶⁷ Paul Finkleman, *Encyclopaedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 84.

⁶⁸ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

women carrying out menial labour, whilst still being expected to adhere to the ideals of the “cult of domesticity” established in the 1800s. With a focus on “piety,” “purity,” “submission,” and “domesticity,” African American women had to meet this standard of femininity whilst frequently facing prejudice and performing menial labour, as well as bearing the responsibility of the upkeep of the home, performing “multiple roles as a matter of survival and expectation.”⁷⁰ As a result of these contradictory expectations, some middle-class African American women would reject photography as not a respectable or feminine enough career. In 1902, W. W. Holland wrote a piece for *The Colored American* entitled “Photography for Our Young People,” in which he lamented the lack of interest that young African American women had towards photography. Holland recounts an occasion where an African American woman was offered “a photography outfit as a present,” and she responded by saying “Oh, I cannot bother with a tripod and a camera. I need my hands to hold up my skirts!”⁷¹ These notions of gendered respectability speak to many middle-class African American women’s ideas at the time. Working-class African American women, on the other hand, could not afford equipment and formal training remained inaccessible. It would take decades until working class African American women could attempt photography as a viable career.

In the subsequent chapters, I focus on the networks used by African American women photographers from 1910 onwards where we begin to see African American women utilise various horizontal and vertical networks in

⁷⁰ Norma T. Burgess, “Gender Roles Revisited: The Development of the “Woman’s Place” Among African American Women in the United States,” *Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 4 (Jun., 1994), 399.

⁷¹ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 20.

order to establish themselves as businesswomen and image makers. The networks which are absent in this early history of African American women can be seen in full force in subsequent chapters. As the camera provided opportunities for white women and African American men, and created networks for the latter in particular, it focused on African American women as subjects before 1910. Crucially for the women in Chapter One, as African American men became able to engage with careers in photography, so too do they begin to include their wives in this process. Central to this argument are the ideas of respectability, networks, and uplift that this introduction has interrogated.

Chapter One: “Two Hearts That Beat As One”: The Networks and Power

Dynamics of African American Women’s Photography 1910-1930

When African American couple Edwin A. Harleston and Elise B. Forrest were married in New York in 1921, it was after years of a long and career-orientated courtship. Edwin had proposed to Elise many years previously, but they were not to be married until Elise completed training as a photographer so that, when husband and wife, they could open a studio together.⁷² Edwin’s career framed their engagement; he would open a portrait studio with his new wife as the studio’s photographer upon completion of her training. Their marriage was partly entrepreneurial in nature, yet they were not equal business partners. When a local newspaper reported on their marriage, the reporter describes Mr Harleston as “an artist of pronounced ability [who] has done some highly credible work painting portraits of well-known men of the race” and Mrs Harleston as someone who, alongside her more lauded experience as a teacher and clerk, “has also given some time to the study of photography.”⁷³ Despite the intrinsic importance of Elise’s contribution to The Harleston Studio, this reporter, like historians ever since, neglected her key role in the business’s success, and her wider contribution to the American photographic canon, downplaying her role to that of a studio assistant. In reality, she was a confident and capable photographer in her own right.

⁷² Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 34.

⁷³ “Two Hearts That Beat As One In The City By The Sea,” Box 2, Folder 16, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017.

When the newspaper announced their marriage under the heading “‘Two Hearts That Beat As One’ In the City by the Sea,” it unwittingly described a union deeper than marriage alone; the two were committing to becoming business partners.⁷⁴ During the period of 1910 to 1930, many African American women made similar commitments. They began romantic relationships in professional yet conventional roles such as clerks or teachers, and emerged as professional married women photographers. In this way, marriage became a fundamentally important vertical network through which African American women were able to access a career which had been inaccessible to them. For some, this network was liberating, allowing them to explore their own independence and creativity whilst being supported, not controlled, by their husbands. For others, such as Elise Forrest Harleston, marriage provided a more restrictive network which their husbands controlled and which imposed women’s personal as well as professional dependence.⁷⁵

In this chapter, I will uncover African American women previously rendered peripheral in American photographic history, and show how they were able to develop careers through working closely with their husbands, utilising various horizontal and vertical networks. I will briefly consider the role of women who worked within the industry without taking their own images, such as Mamie Estelle Scurlock and Gaynella VanDerZee, before focusing on the careers of Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Roberts, Elnora Teal, Elise

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ In comparison, white women photographers were frequently able to become photographers without the support of a husband, particularly by the 1920s. Noted Pictorialist photographer Gertrude Käsebier had a highly dysfunctional marriage, living away from her husband from 1880 onwards, yet was able to create a thriving career. See Barbara L. Michaels, *Gertrude Käsebier, The Photographer and Her Photographs* (New York: Abrams, 1992).

Forrest Harleston, and Jennie Louise Welcome. These four women all worked as photographers with their husbands, and had key but overlooked roles in the success of these community hubs. Furthermore, scholars have neglected these women's role as artists, as their work represents not only the values and aspirations of African Americans during the Jim Crow era, but also builds upon the cornerstones of photographic genres such as portraiture and pictorialism. While they did not revolutionise the techniques and conventions of photography, they did use canonical aesthetic tropes in new ways for a specifically African American clientele, in ways which point to a unique and underdeveloped strand in American photographic history. Therefore, failing to analyse these women's images is to miss an important piece of American photographic history.

These women appear to have operated entirely in isolation from each other, at different ends of the country. Whilst Roberts and Harleston were both active in South Carolina, they were active in entirely different cities: Roberts in Columbia, and Harleston in Charleston. Teal also operated within the South, as she worked in Houston, Texas. Jennie Louise Welcome, on the other hand, worked in the urban north of Harlem, New York. It is interesting that these women worked in broad geographical and cultural isolation from each other, as they could not rely on people in a similar situation for support. Instead, they created their own systems of networks from what they had available to them. From the local church to the institution of marriage, the women who married into their careers as photographers navigated respectable and middle-class networks along both horizontal and vertical planes. Even those who were involved in more traditionally professional networks, such as formal training

schools or the NAACP, were only able to access these institutions because of their husband's support and consent. This is again parallel to the clubwomen, many of whom were able to devote their time volunteering as a result of their husband's support.⁷⁶ The images produced by the women in this chapter reflect the domestic rooted nature of the networks, as they uplifted both their subjects and themselves towards the idea of an affluent middle-class whilst remaining in a strictly domestic setting. Although the notion of uplift remains problematic, as discussed in the introduction, it motivated countless women to action.

By positioning the women in this chapter on the network diagram, as seen in the introduction, we can see how uniquely each woman experienced her own networks (Figure 8). Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Roberts, represented by the black cross, is highest on the diagram in order to reflect just how much the vertical network of marriage dictated her photographic practice. Roberts's husband deliberately kept her removed from a professional context, as he wanted to protect her from prejudice, so she is instead positioned between the family networks she utilised (by having her son cook meals) and the local community organisations she was part of (such as the Church). Elise Forrest Harleston (the red cross) is also reliant on the network of marriage, hence her high place on the diagram. However, she also made use of professional training networks such as photography schools, albeit at her husband's insistence. She also made use of communal networks in her home city in order to reinforce her respectability, such as the NAACP. It does not appear she relied on other members of the family to sustain her career. Finally, the blue

⁷⁶ Cash, *Clubwomen*, 30.

cross represents Elnora Teal. She is the lowest in this chapter, as she does become a photographer through her husband but is able to claim her own studio which is largely independent of him. Horizontally, she remains positioned equally between domestic and professional networks, as she does not appear to have been overly reliant on one over another. The only figure who does not feature on this diagram is Jennie Louise Touissant Welcome, as the networks she navigated in order to ascertain her career remain unclear. However, she remains an important figure for this dissertation, due to her use of advertising and contribution to the photographic record of African Americans during World War One.

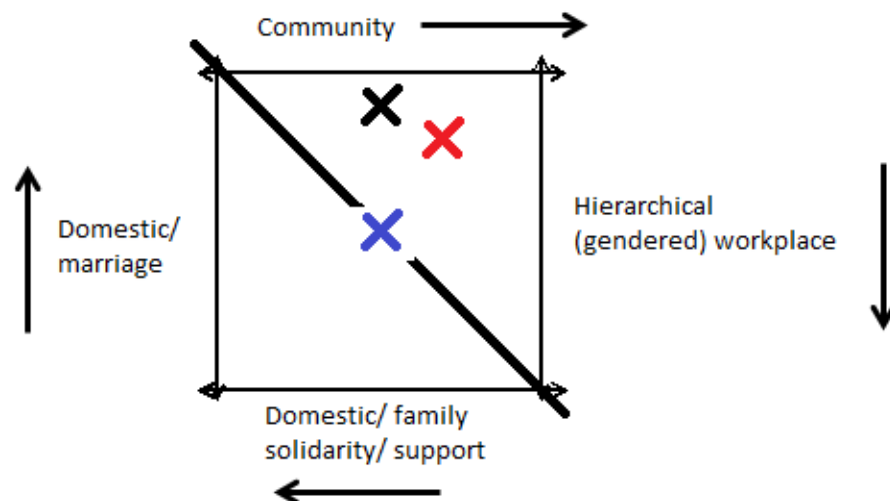


Figure 8. Networks of African American Women Photographers Diagram, Version 2, 2017

Examining census statistics reveals the extent to which African American women were limited as photographers from 1910 to 1930. Whilst they do not accommodate those women who may have utilised photography at a non-professional, amateur level, my analysis focuses on the networks and techniques utilised by those women who were professional in the sense that

they made a career from their images. Therefore, census statistics are valuable as they draw to our attention those women who identified themselves as professional photographers. As demonstrated in the introduction, in the early stages of photography's development, African American women faced far more societal constraints than both white women and African American men. This meant much slower advancements for African American women in photography than other groups. Proportionately, far more white women and African American men carved out careers in photography than African American women from 1900 to 1930. Census statistics show that by 1900, African American women made up only 17 of the 3,587 women photographers, although this number began to increase in the following two decades.⁷⁷ By the 1920s, there were 7,119 women photographers and 608 African American photographers, of which African American women photographers made up 101.⁷⁸ Of these, I will be discussing six at length in this chapter. The fact that the number remains small, yet by 1920 makes up a significant percentage of all African American photographers (16.6%), indicates an untold story of African American women's advancements in the profession in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Whilst women and African American men were undoubtedly still restricted when compared to their white male counterparts, and societal pressures affected each group in specific ways, they were able to move out of a more staged, restrictive studio setting, begin to photograph landscapes and architecture, and practice early photojournalism; something that most African

⁷⁷ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 19.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

American women professional photographers would not attempt until the 1940s.⁷⁹ Indeed, it was not until the 1940s that African American women would be able to experience the same level of photographic freedom that white women had in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Within the context of the 1910s and 1920s, white women were able to set up supportive networks to uplift and educate, providing feedback and exhibition opportunities for each other, as they had in the previous century.⁸⁰ African American men were more restricted in their networks, as their careers remained in isolation from each other, although they were more able to access training courses and invest in equipment by the 1920s.⁸¹ By contrast, African American women did not have access to these networks, as society viewed their roles as wives and mothers as taking precedence over any career-development. The support of the vertical networks provided by their husbands was the main reason that the women in this chapter were able to establish careers in photography.

African American women were not just limited in terms of access to formal networks; they were also limited in artistic opportunities. Following white women's increased visibility during the Progressive movement, as well as the opportunities afforded to African American men and white women following World War One, white women and African American men were able to work outside of a studio setting, exploring other photographic mediums

⁷⁹ See the work of Elizabeth "Tex" Williams. Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses: Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998), 13.

⁸⁰ See discussion of Davidov's theory of pictorialism networks in the introduction.

⁸¹ Pearl Bowser, "Pioneers of Black Documentary Film," in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, eds. Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 17.

aside from pictorialism and portraiture. By the beginning of the 1930s, white women and African American men were experimenting with landscapes, documentary photography, photojournalism, architectural photography and modernism. White women such as Frances Benjamin Johnston and Gertrude Käsebier engaged with pictorialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Margaret Bourke-White and Dorothea Lange were pioneers of modernism and photojournalism as the twentieth century progressed. African American men such as James Presley Ball in the nineteenth century and Cornelius Battey in the early twentieth century explored the areas surrounding their studios and travelled across the country to take their own images, whilst still engaging in portraiture and pictorialism. In addition, they began to experiment with more adventurous concepts than commercial portraiture; photographers such as James VanDerZee began to develop nude images as early as the 1920s.⁸² Some white women had begun experimenting with nude portraits as early as 1914, and Imogen Cunningham photographed a male nude in a remarkable departure from portrait conventions of the time.⁸³ This was something that African American women would not be able to engage with for decades to come, as notions of respectability and what was appropriate for African American women would make it largely impossible.

Respectability also governed the idea of the ‘New Negro’: an African American ideological ideal which gained special precedence during the Harlem

⁸² Deborah Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1993), 21.

⁸³ Steve Meltzer, “A Woman’s Eye: How Imogen Cunningham broke through gender barriers to help redefine modern photography,” *Imaging Resource*, 23 August, 2013, <http://www.imaging-resource.com/news/2013/08/23/womans-eye-how-photographer-imogen-cunningham-broke-through-gender-barriers>.

Renaissance. There is no exact definition for the term ‘New Negro,’ as even during the 1920s there were differing opinions on its meaning. However, it generally described the “new intellectual community” that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, was catalysed by the growing racial pride African Americans felt post World War One, and gained prominence during the Harlem Renaissance: a community of African Americans who felt “proud of their race, self-reliant, and demanded full citizenship rights.”⁸⁴ Crucially, the term ‘New Negro’ implied the desire for racial uplift of the individual and the community, which the Harlem Renaissance reflected. Levels of racial pride, and presenting oneself with dignity to distance oneself from the stereotypes of the ‘Old Negro,’ helped achieve this. This firmly rooted the idea of the ‘New Negro’ within a middle-class setting, with the ideal of ‘elevating’ working-class African Americans to their level rather than appreciating their own unique culture.⁸⁵ Although this idea originated in the urban north, it filtered down to the South where it took on a distinct form, linked to more Southern, conservative ideas of respectability within a more violently segregated system.

The term ‘New Negro’ remained a masculine one, as African American women were “cast... in a supporting role” in the movement.⁸⁶ White women had experienced a ‘New Woman’ movement around the turn of the twentieth century; the intellectual narrative of the ‘New Negro’ largely excluded African American women. Indeed, whilst figures such as Nella Larsen would attempt

⁸⁴ Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 35.

⁸⁵ This can commonly be seen in representations of the ‘New Negro,’ as in the character of Lenore in the novel *The Living Is Easy*. See Jennifer M. Wilks, “New Women and New Negroes: Archetypal Womanhood in “The Living Is Easy,” *African American Review* 39, no. 4 (Winter, 2005), 575.

⁸⁶ Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), xviii.

to redress this imbalance in their work, the ‘New Negro’ narrative of the ‘New Negro Woman’ remained limited and contradictory. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson convincingly argues that the images of the ‘New Negro Woman’ and “mulatta,” or a pale-skinned African American woman, were interlinked. This was a figure in art and literature who was “styled as the ideal template for measuring black femininity, she was, by turns, a constrained symbol of Victorian womanhood, a seductive temptress, and a deceptive, independent, modern woman.”⁸⁷ Whilst African American men faced the image of one who had to uplift the race through their dignified, middle-class respectability, society expected African American women to fill roles fundamentally grounded in whiteness and contradiction. This was a problematic yet important contradiction that every photographer in this chapter had to interact with when attempting to capture the identities of their subjects.

That African American women felt the effects of what bell hooks and other black feminist scholars have termed “double jeopardy” – the dual prejudice faced by being African American and female, as introduced in the introduction to this piece – is undeniable, and it had a huge impact on the lives of African American women regardless of their careers.⁸⁸ This continued into the Jim Crow era, as African American women often responded by creating their own networks of community activism to uplift themselves and their communities. For instance, African American women had created significant networks with an uplift orientation in the clubs they formed, which scholars

⁸⁷ Ibid., xix.

⁸⁸ Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (Autumn, 1988), 42.

are beginning to discuss at length.⁸⁹ However, there is no evidence to suggest that a wider photographic community within these networks, where African American women photographers could support and advise each other like white women photographers, existed.

This lack of a wider African American women's photographic community and professional networks meant that African American women utilised *personal* networks in order to achieve professional advancement. This makes researching individual photographers more difficult, as materials exist in private, personal collections rather than professional and camera club archives, and the work of many photographers from this period has been lost. Figures such as Gertrude Lewis, who was active in 1925 in Houston, Texas as a photographer, and Lucy Calloway Howard, who took part in a 1921 exhibit in New York, are just two examples of these women whose careers have been lost to history.

There is also uncertainty surrounding the lives and works of several women who worked within their husband's studios without explicitly taking photographs. It was not uncommon for studios at this time to have images taken by one of a team of photographic assistants, yet to have the credit for the image go to the owner of the studio.⁹⁰ Gaynella VanDerZee is one example of this. The second wife of famed Harlem photographer James VanDerZee,

⁸⁹ See Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), and Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁹⁰ See Matthew Brady taking credit for the images of Alexander Gardener. Barbara McCandless, "The Portrait Studio and the Celebrity: Promoting the Art," in *Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Martha A. Sandweiss (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1991), 54.

Gaynella took photographs within her husband's studio, including a portrait of VanDerZee himself (Figure 9).⁹¹ Scholars have long neglected Gaynella's contribution to her husband's studio, but her influence on the studio's formation was extensive. As she was married to another man when they opened their first studio, VanDerZee said "I let it appear that it was her studio and I was working for her," as they perceived that her whiteness would make them more attractive tenants.⁹² Records list her as the President of the company, whilst James VanDerZee was the vice-president.⁹³ VanDerZee named the studio for her, the GGG Studio, and she was responsible for most of the studio's administrative support.⁹⁴ In many ways James VanDerZee would not have had as much creative freedom in his own right without Gaynella; she was instrumental in his development of nude photographs. VanDerZee was taking nude images as early as 1923,⁹⁵ and he attests that this would not have been possible without Gaynella's assistance, as he recounts that "there was no difficulty to make these pictures because my wife was there too, and she'd just undress them and put them up in the pose there and then I'd set up the camera..."⁹⁶

⁹¹ Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee*, 40.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁶ Deborah Willis, "Nude in Front of Fireplace," Box 12, Folder 11.13, VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983 (1993), Deborah Willis professional files, Sc MG 452, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 24/02/2017.



Figure 9. Gaynella VanDerZee, James VanDerZee, 1931

Source: Deborah Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1993), 40.

Gaynella VanDerZee subverts the idea of marriage as a ‘vertical’ network, with the husband positioned at the top of the hierarchy. James would have been unable to establish his business in the way that he did without Gaynella, and her prevalence on the business side of the studio elevates her position in the ‘vertical’ network of marriage within the context of their business. However, whilst her gender was undoubtedly a factor, her whiteness is what enabled her to establish the studio in the way that she did. In this way, the vertical and horizontal networks that African American women photographers utilised in order to achieve their careers took on a unique dimension in Gaynella’s case. Gaynella was a European immigrant who passed as African American in order to fit within the Harlem community, and her

long-neglected role calls into question the roles of other women in studio settings, such as Mamie Estelle Scurlock.⁹⁷

Scurlock Studios is an oft-cited cornerstone of African American photographic history. Based in Washington D.C., Addison Scurlock set up a photographic studio in his parent's house in 1904, and opened a storefront studio in 1911.⁹⁸ Addison and his sons, George and Robert, would keep the studio for most of the twentieth century until its closure in 1994, photographing events such as the riots following the death of Martin Luther King in 1968. Yet their primary enterprise was portraiture of Washington's African American middle-classes. Like the other figures I examine, the Scurlocks placed emphasis on respectability and racial betterment through representation. Leading up to an exhibition on the Scurlock Studio at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, museum director Lonnie Bunch said of the images that "in some ways I think the Scurlocks saw themselves as partners with Du Bois in...crafting a new vision of America, a vision where racial equality and racial improvement was possible."⁹⁹ Of fundamental importance to this business was Mamie Scurlock, who worked as the business manager for her husband's studio.¹⁰⁰ This is also the primary role which VanDerZee filled, but she also took images as part of this. It would not, therefore, be impossible that Scurlock fulfilled a similar role, and may have taken images when no one else was available. Even so, Scurlock's exact role

⁹⁷ Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee*, 40.

⁹⁸ David Zax, "The Scurlock Studio: Picture of Prosperity," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-scurlock-studio-picture-of-prosperity-4869533/>

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Jane Freundel Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," *Washington History* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1989), 43.

within her family's studio remains unexplored, adding to the silence surrounding the work of the businesswomen involved in photography at this time. This absence of information extends from the African American women studio managers to the photographers themselves, contributing to a significant omission in African American photographic history.

“I Would Say She Was My Father’s Assistant, Really”:

Wilhelmina Pearl Selina Roberts and The Roberts’ Art Studio

Whilst Gaynella VanDerZee had creative freedom and independence within the network of marriage, others—including Wilhelmina Pearl Selina Roberts – remained inextricably linked to their husbands. Roberts was born in South Carolina in 1887, as one of ten children.¹⁰¹ Her mother was a cook, and her father was a country schoolteacher.¹⁰² Her mother’s history as a former slave inspired Roberts to become educated.¹⁰³ A college educated, family-orientated woman, Roberts was one of only 101 African American female photographers by 1920.¹⁰⁴ Yet Roberts did not enter the world of photography until she married her photographer husband in 1902 at the age of 19, and did not become an active photographer until her husband opened his own studio in South Carolina in 1920. Roberts entered the world of photography as a direct

¹⁰¹ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 178.

¹⁰² Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn, “Wilhelmina Roberts: Black Woman Photographer,” Box 2, Folder 9, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017.

¹⁰³ “Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn,” Box 2, Folder 9, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017, 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

result of her husband, Richard Roberts. The network of marriage was arguably at its *most* vertical within the context of the Roberts' studio.

Wilhelmina and Richard married in 1902 in Florida, and moved to Wilhelmina's hometown of Columbia, South Carolina in 1920 with their eight children. Here they set up their photographic studio, named The Roberts' Art Studio, later in 1920.¹⁰⁵ Based in this racially segregated city, Richard was an unusual man in many ways; he worked full-time as a custodian whilst simultaneously maintaining his own photographic studio. To him, the studio was something akin to a hobby – unlike many other photographers I examine, Richard Roberts depended on the income generated in his day job to support his studio. The Roberts' Art Studio was not a profit-making entrepreneurial endeavour; it was a labour of love which he shared with his wife. Outside of the studio, Richard did not permit his wife and daughters to work. This is because, according to Wilhelmina and Richard's daughter, "he knew that segregation would be too much. He didn't want us to experience that."¹⁰⁶ However, within the context of his studio, Wilhelmina Roberts was able to experience working life within an environment that Richard deemed appropriate for his wife.

Roberts functioned in the studio primarily as Richard's assistant. When asked in an interview if "your mother was a photographer?" her daughter responded "well, I would say that she was my father's assistant really."¹⁰⁷ Despite the studio being Richard's venture, Roberts "learned from her husband

¹⁰⁵ Wynn, "Wilhelmina Roberts: Black Woman Photographer."

¹⁰⁶ "Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn," 17.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

the mechanics of the camera” and managed the studio when he was at work.¹⁰⁸ She also read photographic books, but had no formal training or instruction aside from that which her husband taught her.¹⁰⁹ Roberts’s role as a photographic assistant encompassed a wide number of tasks, including but not limited to taking her own images when her husband was away. What began as Roberts selling homemade cookies in the waiting area of the studio, in a classically gendered form of labour, soon evolved into a more photographic role.¹¹⁰ When asked what her mother’s most important contribution to the studio was, Roberts’s daughter stated:

I think it was in meeting the people who came there and they had confidence in her and I think they were then able to be more relaxed when Dad took the pictures. Also, she was the one who designed a little dressing room and kept it supplied with things that people would use to comb and brush their hair when they came in.¹¹¹

Roberts also helped pose the subjects whilst her husband took their pictures, and adjusted their clothing and appearance accordingly. Examining the pictures that Wilhelmina herself took reveals the extent to which she valued respectability in her work, which was something that she was able to transmit onto her husband’s images through her assistance in staging.

Of The Roberts’ Art Studio surviving images, Roberts has taken four of them. One of these is a portrait of an unidentified woman, exemplifying the notions of respectability that Roberts sought to typify in her work (Figure 10). The portrait shows an African American woman directly facing and gazing into the camera, meeting the eye of the viewer. This is consistent with the

¹⁰⁸ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 40.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ “Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn,” 4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

conventions of standard photographic portraiture of the early twentieth century, whereby meeting the gaze of the camera brought the viewer into the image, creating “the necessary incorporation of the viewer’s gaze into the subject matter of portraiture.”¹¹² The fashion of the unnamed woman is also reflective of Roberts’s attention to detail in her images; her hair is in a neat, tight bun, stylish earrings frame her face, and her glasses give the impression of intelligence and education. At a time when many photographers attempted to dress their subjects in a more youthful, flapper-style dress, this woman has deliberately kept on her glasses in an evocation of intellect and respectability. Her clothing attests to this; the contrast between the light background and the dark clothing, coupled with the comparison of the dark fabric with the white collars and cuffs, creates an eye-catching oppositional effect that is apparent in most portraiture of this era. With this outfit in particular, the straight lines on the fabric give the impression of upright posture and propriety. As African American people made up approximately 95% of the clientele of the studio, exemplifying the notion of the ‘New Negro’ and ‘New Negro Woman’ was of fundamental importance to their images.¹¹³

¹¹² Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Islington: Reaktion Books Limited, 1991), 8.

¹¹³ “Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn,” 9.



Figure 10. Wilhelmina Roberts, Unidentified Woman, Date Unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 43.

The image of the ‘New Negro Woman’ was often contradictory and problematic, as women encompassed notions of Republican Motherhood, sexual desirability, and often emphasising the paleness of their skin, suggesting a perceived higher class. Whilst for many young women this progressive attitude meant dressing in flapper dresses, pearls, and feathers, for other women, typically in the South for those of an older generation, the New Negro style meant dressing in a fashion more consistent with nineteenth century portraiture. Indeed, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson suggests that the ideal ‘New

Woman' was "a signifier of African American propriety, domesticity, and civilisation, all central aspects of the New Negro movement..."¹¹⁴ This would have been reflected by both the photographer's desire to photograph their subject consistent with artistic conventions, and the subject's idea to be viewed with their own notions of respectability, which they can then display in their home. Roberts's image *Grandmother with three children* exhibits these notions, as it draws on aspects of nineteenth century portraiture and pictorialism simultaneously, combining nineteenth and twentieth century notions of art and respectability (Figure 11). This image is also consistent with notions of pictorialism; as the contrast between the white dresses and the dark background, use of props in the form of balloons, and soft focus create a feminine quality to this image. In addition, what little can be seen of the painted backdrop suggests flowers, curtains, and a painted bay window, which is again consistent with the romantic qualities of pictorialism within a domestic setting. Whilst in portraiture it was common for subjects to be holding objects of symbolic significance – for instance, a man seeking to appear intelligent might be holding a book – here we can see that the grandmother at the focal point of the image is holding the hands of her granddaughters in her lap. We can also see that she rests one of her hands on the shoulder of her granddaughter. In this way, Roberts creates an image that cultivates a sense of a close, interlinked family.

¹¹⁴ Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman*, xvi.



Figure 11. Wilhelmina Roberts, Grandmother with three children, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 42.

Whilst family and marriage were the most significant component of the vertical network that Roberts utilised the most in her role as a photographer, as it was her husband's studio and training that enabled her to take on a role which involved taking photographs, Roberts's emphasis on respectability in her images reveals the extent to which her place in the community affected her work. Indeed, second only to her marriage, the role of the Church was of fundamental importance to Roberts's work and identity. Roberts and Richard met and courted at a Church Convention in South Carolina, and they remained

active in their Church community until Richard's death.¹¹⁵ As she was "very active in the church," her role in the community as a respectable figure doubtlessly would have contributed to the amount that her clients would, as her daughter previously stated, "trust" her upon entering the studio.¹¹⁶ There was another African American male photographer in Columbia at this time, but Roberts's daughter does not recall them having any interaction and it is unlikely that he provided any networking opportunities due to their professional competition.¹¹⁷ By navigating horizontal networks such as the Church, Roberts was able to cultivate her own respectable and trustworthy public reputation, which she could then utilise to secure patronage and reassure clients at her husband's studio. In particular, she was able to evoke her role as a mother in order to photograph the subject that would become her "specialty": young children and babies.

Two images of young girls, with stark similarities between them, best exhibit Roberts' speciality (Figure 12 and Figure 13). Both evoke notions of respectability within pictorialism. In both images, the young girls wear white dresses framed against a dark background. The fact that these girls appear to be dressed in their Sunday best is indicative of the role which the network of the Church would have played in securing their customers, and how tied this network was to notions of middle-class respectability. Again, the notion of pictorialism is apparent with the use of feminine props, such as the fresh roses in one portrait and the chaise longue in the other, performing the dual function of creating a stylish portrait and suggesting the affluence of the family that

¹¹⁵ "Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn," 1.

¹¹⁶ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 40.

¹¹⁷ "Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn," 9.

commissioned the portrait. In this way, these images of young children perform the respectability and middle-class aspirations of their families. This is an aspiration that, according to her daughter, Roberts understood all too well, as the fact that her mother was a slave meant that she “was trying very hard to become educated and move away from slavery and I think it was important to her how people looked.”¹¹⁸ As Roberts’s daughter maintains, “she felt photography was an important record. She and my father started a mission.”¹¹⁹ To record one’s family at their best, and fulfil middle-class aspirations, was a desire that the Roberts family’s slave past perhaps entrenched in her photographic staging.



Figure 12. Wilhelmina Roberts, Wilhelmina Robert’s daughter, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 41.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Figure 13. Wilhelmina Roberts, Little girl and roses, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 41.

When Richard Roberts died in 1936, Wilhelmina “closed the studio and sold the equipment,” as she and Richard “had built a close relationship centred on taking pictures.”¹²⁰ She never worked in photography again. Although her son Gerald attempted to take over the studio, she served a purely advisory role and the studio quickly closed.¹²¹ Wilhelmina’s community, and indeed probably herself, viewed her role as a photographer as intrinsically linked to her role as a mother and a wife. Whilst this means that upon her husband’s death she gave up the career that she had been developing, and the network of marriage limited what she was able to photograph and how much credit she received for it, it also means that her work reflected the aspirations and desires

¹²⁰ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 41.

¹²¹ “Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe interview with Wilhelmina Roberts Wynn,” 5.

of her community, both behind the camera and in front of it. Her use of vertical networks restricted her professional and artistic development at the same moment it gave her the opportunity to work within a highly unusual and uplifting career. Yet Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Roberts was not the only African American woman photographer who was active in her own husband's business in South Carolina in the early twentieth century, nor the only one who worked within a strictly vertical, hierarchical family network.

“I Am the Only Woman”: Elise Forrest Harleston and the Harleston Studio

The Harleston Studio was a husband and wife portrait studio, run by portrait painter Edwin A. Harleston, with his wife Elise serving as a photographer to the studio. In contrast to Wilhelmina Roberts, who in some ways was a photographic assistant to her husband's hobby, the Harleston Studio operated with a more sophisticated and unique business structure and relationship dynamic. Opened in spring 1922, they operated in Charleston, South Carolina, where “the black professional class served the demands of the black community well.”¹²² As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, their engagement framed the development of Edwin's career, and Elise's training coincided with their engagement and subsequent marriage. Their marriage and studio represents one of the more nuanced and complex uses of marriage as a network in a photographic career, with their studio being at once repressive and liberating, and having aesthetic control with elements of artistic freedom.

¹²² Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 34.

Of all of the African American women based in the segregated South at this time and all of the women who were married to an artistic husband, Harleston was the only one who appears to have received any formal training. This would challenge the notion of vertical networks being inherently linked to hierarchical marriage and being crucial to Harleston's career, if this training was not at her husbands' insistence. At Edwin's suggestion, Harleston enrolled at the E. Brunel School of Photography in New York City in 1919. In his correspondence with Harleston, Edwin asked her to "Find out for me, please, every fine point about photographing a drawing and a painting for patent reasons – we may need it someday."¹²³ It is revealing that he asks her to do it "for me," suggesting that she is doing the work directly on his behalf. Reading further extracts of their correspondence, Harleston writes to Edwin that:

I am the only woman, there is one other colored, a young man from Wilson, N.C, and a Jap. Then there are Jews, Germans and Danish. They are very polite and today, everyone wanted to show me something. The instructor is a young man, German I think, I can hardly understand him.¹²⁴

This illustrates how unusual it was that a woman would undergo training at this time, and how the men on her course indulged her, giving the impression that she was an unusual figure in this context. It is telling that the course attracted minority figures from a diverse range of background, yet societal restrictions meant that she was the only woman. Reading her correspondence further reveals her financial dependence on Edwin, as she received money

¹²³ Mae Whitlock Gentry, "Elise Forrest Harleston," African-Americans and South Carolina, accessed 24 May, 2017, <http://polisci.usca.edu/aasc/EliseForrestHarleston.htm>.

¹²⁴ "Letter from Elise to her husband," Box 2, Folder 16, Viewfinders – Elise Forrest Harleston File, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017.

from him regularly, and her dismay at their separation and the distance between them.¹²⁵ Following her graduation from E Brunel School of Photography in 1921, Edwin encouraged Harleston to complete postgraduate study at the Tuskegee Institute in 1921, an institution synonymous with the ideal of the ‘New Negro’. He apparently “sensed in Elise much more latent talent,” and “as he was still away most of the time,”¹²⁶ suggested that she further her education and study under C. M. Battey. Battey was acclaimed in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People’s magazine *Crisis* in 1917 as “one of the few colored photographers who has gained real artistic success.”¹²⁷ The fact that Harleston was able to utilise more formal, male-dominated photographic training networks only through her husband’s approval and financial support is indicative of the restrictive networks available to women in the early twentieth century, as well as the restrictive dynamic of a marriage that dictated much of Harleston’s artistic practice.

This is also apparent in the way they both worked in the studio. Their business model was simple and effective – Edwin painted his customers from the photographs that Harleston took of them. Edwin was a trained painter and portraitist, who had spent time studying in Europe where painting from photographs was common, and he understood the merits of his wife being able to secure his clients’ likenesses in film before he captured it in paint.¹²⁸ This meant they could respond to the middle-class aspirations of their community

¹²⁵ See correspondence from Elise to Edwin in Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017.

¹²⁶ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 34.

¹²⁷ Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 39.

¹²⁸ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 35.

by securing their likeness in paint, linked to the ideal of the ‘New Negro’ and racial uplift through self-imagining, but also work with the working-class reality that most of these individuals would not have had the leisure time to sit for a painted portrait. Even middle class African Americans often had significantly less leisure time than the white middle class due to the more demanding roles their work would typically take. Their business model generated high levels of customer satisfaction, as having Harleston photograph them “pleased his clients, for it saved them many hours of posing.”¹²⁹ There is no archival evidence of how much artistic liberty Harleston had; whether Edwin trusted her to take pictures and was happy to paint from whatever she took, or whether he would instruct her. However, scholars have long established the idea that there exists a unique relationship between the person *taking* the photograph and the person sitting for the photograph, within their exclusive viewer/ viewed relationship.¹³⁰ It is therefore appropriate to surmise that Harleston was able to present her own views in her images.

It is clear just how closely Edwin imitated Harleston’s work when the paintings and photographs are set compared side by side. For instance, Edwin’s *Portrait of Miss Sue Bailey with the African Shawl* (Figure 14) is based on Harleston’s *Photograph of Miss Sue Bailey* (Figure 15), and the painting is a near-perfect copy of the photograph. The posing of the figure, with the hands crossed in the lap, modest clothing, and fashionable yet demure hair style is consistent with the idea of “the New Negro.” It draws on portrait conventions from the 19th century, calling to mind the images that Sojourner

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ See Lindsay Reckson, “Touching a Button,” *American Literature*, Volume 88, Number 1 (2006), 31-65.

Truth would use of herself. Whilst other portraitists played up notions of youth and wealth in their images, and Harleston herself photographed her sister dressed up in feathers and pearls, here Harleston's simple composition and design allows us to experience a more everyday example of the 'New Negro Woman,' consistent with Southern ideals of female propriety. With white perceptions of African American women so often leaning towards sexualised stereotypes, such as the 'jezebel,' it is understandable that African American women would resist this depiction by leaning towards portrayals of themselves in keeping with Southern conservative ideals of respectability.¹³¹ This would be seen significantly in Harleston's pictures of African American women of an older generation, as they would resist the flapper style of the Harlem Renaissance in favour of a more Victorian style. Indeed, the 'New Negro Woman' that Harleston presents is brought to life in Edwin's image, with the addition of colour, removal of background, and closer emphasis on the face of the sitter. Harleston's image, when compared directly with Edwin's interpretation of it, shows just how instrumental the images Harleston took were to Edwin's success. Indeed, many of Harleston's photographs have a thumb tack imprint on their corners, showing where Edwin attached them to his easel while painting.¹³²

¹³¹ See Rupe Simms, "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women," *Gender and Society* 15, No. 6, (Dec., 2001), pp. 879-897.

¹³² "Edwin A. Harleston: Painter of an Era 1882-1931," Box 2, Folder 2.12, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017, 17.



Figure 14. Elise Forrest Harleston, Miss Bailey with the African Shawl, 1930

Source: Box 2, Folder 2. Winifred Hall File, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, 1984-1985, Sc MG 343, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. 21/02/2017.



Figure 15. Edwin A. Harleston, Miss Bailey with the African Shawl, 1930

Source: “Miss Bailey with the African Shawl,” ArtNet, accessed 2 May, 2017, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/edwin-augustus-harleston/miss-bailey-with-the-african-shawl-BXQMXKTDGtYhU3IkpdsMHg2>.

Although Edwin was a respected artist in his lifetime, he only gained prominence as an African American artist of merit following his death. W. E. B. Du Bois referred to him as “the leading portrait artist of the race,” but racial prejudice and family pressure dogged his career.¹³³ In 1926, the gallery cancelled a planned exhibition following a backlash from the white artists within the community. He had to keep up business as an undertaker at the same time he pursued a career as an artist, often storing caskets in his and Harleston’s studio.¹³⁴ Although as a business operator he in many ways fulfilled a middle class role, this does complicate the notion of the bourgeois

¹³³ “Edwin Harleston: 1882-1931,” The Johnson Collection, accessed 25 April, 2017, <http://thejohnsoncollection.org/edwin-harleston/>.

¹³⁴ “Edwin Harleston 1882-1931,” Gibbes Museum, accessed 12 April 2017, <http://www.qivmg.com/gibbes/html/harlest/harlestf.htm>.

nature of African American artists as he was unable to support himself entirely from portraiture. Yet the Harleston's' middle class identity as business owners, image makers, and community activists indicates the nuanced middle-class role they had in their reality, albeit with working-class elements. In recent years Edwin Harleston has been increasingly celebrated and lauded as a key artist of the Charleston Renaissance: a period of artistic awakening in Charleston between World War One and World War Two.¹³⁵ Yet Elise Harleston's contribution receives little consideration, and profiles of Edwin fail to acknowledge the role of his wife at all.¹³⁶ During an exhibition of his work at Your Heritage House in 1983, the exhibition guide notes that "without Elise's assistance and encouragement, it would have been impossible for Teddy to work in the undertaking business execute his painting, and give so generously of his time to the community."¹³⁷ Yet this exhibit, whilst discussing Elise Harleston's role in the business and as a photographer, fails to include any of Harleston's images by themselves, or consider her work on its own merit.

In fact, although her husband's role in the studio was paramount, Harleston's images warrant independent consideration. For example, Harleston's picture of her sister Marie speaks to a different idea of the 'New Negro,' and more specifically the 'New Woman,' rather than notions of Southern propriety (Figure 16). The image of Elise's sister Marie typifies the

¹³⁵ Susan V. Donaldson, "Charleston's Racial Politics of Historic Preservation: The Case of Edwin A. Harleston," in *Renaissance in Charleston: Art and Life in the Carolina Low Country, 1900-1940*, eds. James M. Hutchisson & Harlan Greene (University of Georgia Press, 2003), 176.

¹³⁶ Gibbes Museum.

¹³⁷ "Edwin A. Harleston: Painter of an Era 1882-1931," 18.

height of 1920s fashion, evoking images of the flapper that were popular at this time. The closely cropped bob, lace headband, and use of white feathers and fur detail on her jacket suggest the affluence and fashionableness of her sister. The framing on this image is closer than with Harleston's other images, putting the focus on the sitter's face. In this way, her youth and beauty is emphasised, as minimal props or background are in place to distract the viewer's attention. Indeed, Edwin then captured Marie's likeness in paint based on this image by Harleston, but pulled back the focus to include more of Marie's body and more negative space in the background (Figure 17). Not only does this suggest compositional differences between Harleston and her husband, it also illustrates how Harleston placed more emphasis on faces than Edwin, who often made them smaller in his images. Harleston therefore arguably focused more on the identity of the sitter, whilst Edwin emphasised a wider composition within a broader view of the person. This suggests that Harleston was more interested in documenting the reality of the sitter whilst Edwin focused on a wider, more artistic composition; a trait that suited them both to their respective mediums.



Figure 16. Elise Forrest Harleston, Elise's Sister, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 36.



Figure 17. Elise Harleston, A painting of Elise's sister by Edwin Harleston, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 36.

The emphasis on affluence and respectability in these images remains consistent in the transition from wife to husband. Yet Harleston did not just convey respectability through traditional means. Several of the pair's images also focussed on the elderly, and celebrate their legacy of hard work and suffering under slavery. Dressed in their working clothes – whether as a soldier, market woman, or chimney sweep – these images make use of working tools as props and working clothes as costumes to convey the hardship that they have undergone. The soldier's image is framed such that, whilst his face is still clearly visible, the middle of the image is taken up by the medals on his jacket, making them as the focal point of the image (Figure 18). Wearing a Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) uniform hat badge indicates that he was a

member of the organisation, which was a postbellum organisation for Union army soldiers and sailors.¹³⁸ This indicates that this man fought against rebellious slaveholders in the Civil War, with the sash suggesting that he fought in the Navy. The centrality of these artefacts serves to highlight their importance and the soldier's own heroism. Furthermore, the soft-focus which is so consistent with notions of pictorialism can be seen by looking at the soldier's hand on the cane, which more sharply throws the medal on the soldier's lapel into contrast. By focussing on his medals, and making them central to the image, Elise highlights his respectability not as youthful or affluent, but as a war hero.

¹³⁸ See collectable military veteran Americana. "POST-WAR, G.A.R. BRASS WREATH HAT BADGE," The Military Americana, accessed: 10 June 2017, <http://www.horsesoldier.com/products/veteran-memorabilia/gar/8888>.



Figure 18. Elise Harleston, Old Man “Scout,” date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 37.

The images of the market woman (Figure 19) and chimney sweep (Figure 20) are less traditional in their nature, as they are body-length images, and the backdrop is deliberately blank. In contrast to some of the elaborately painted backdrops in other photographs, or backgrounds that are kept dark to provide contrast with the pale clothing, this is a marked departure. It provides no distraction from the people posing within the photo, who meet the camera’s gaze directly. The centrality of their working tools to the images – including the market woman’s baskets and trays and the chimney street’s walking stick

and chimney sweeping apparatus on his back – gives the image a sense of credibility. However, their clothing, whilst undeniably well-worn, is neat and clean, indicative of Harleston’s middle-class need to convey working people in a way that is aesthetically pleasing. Whilst Harleston is able to accommodate a working-class reality in her staging and use of alternative portraiture conventions, her middle-class sensibilities present limitations on this. In this way, Harleston conveyed a sense of working-class respectability in her photography; even as she also took images of a younger generation decorated with finery and attempting to convey wealth and success, these particular images were a testament to the sacrifices and hardships that the older generation had endured and survived.

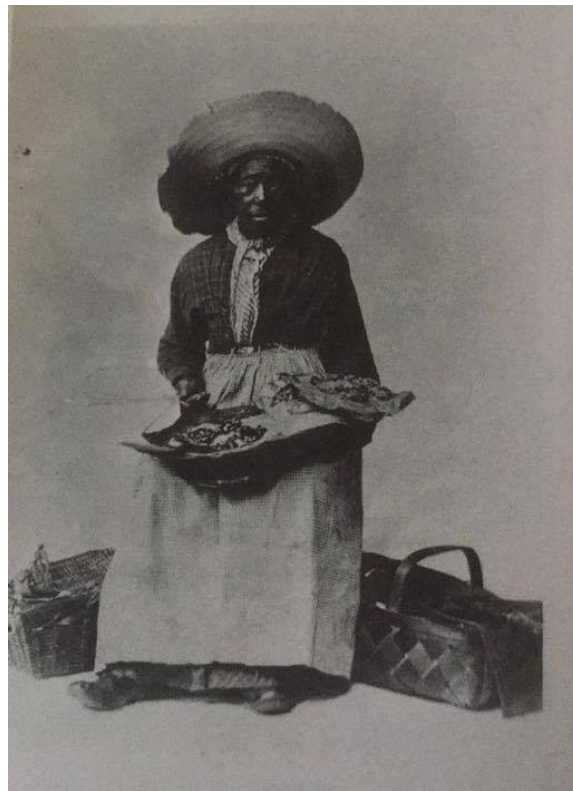


Figure 19. Elise Harleston, Market woman, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 39.



Figure 20. Elise Harleston, Chimney Sweep, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 39.

The belief that they should be recording the people in their community at their best was an ideal shared by both Elise and Edwin Harleston. In a 1923 letter to Elise, Edwin explained his plan to carry on the legacy of Henry Ossawa Tanner, the first internationally acclaimed African American portrait painter, by portraying African Americans “in our varied lives and types with the classic technique and the truth, not caricatures . . . to do the dignified portrait and take the picturesque composition of arrangements or scenes showing the thousand and one interests of our group in industry, religion, general social contact.”¹³⁹ Between the two of them, they sought to capture the diverse and admirable community around them, celebrating their respectability

¹³⁹ The Johnson Collection.

in the process, in a clear illustration of their ‘New Negro’ mentality of uplift and racial advancement. Of intrinsic importance to this goal was their standing in their local community. Edwin founded the first chapter of the NAACP in Charleston, South Carolina and served as its first president. Also, similarly to the Roberts’, they were active churchgoers and contributed significantly to their local services. As the Harleston Exhibit Guide states, “when Plymouth Congregational Church called on them, they responded wholeheartedly, singing together in the choir, working for the Organ Fund that first year. Teddy was also a member of the trustee board of the church for more than a decade.”¹⁴⁰ Harleston’s support of her husband was fundamental to his ability to be active within these networks, in which she was also involved. Although these horizontal and vertical networks did not provide them with formal *artistic* networks, by increasing their standing in their community they were able to increase their own respectability and, as a direct result, their studio’s reputation. Therefore, whilst their marriage and the formal training that Harleston undertook were networks of fundamental importance, the wider community horizontal networks available to the pair sustained their business.

Although the network of marriage was restrictive, it afforded Harleston creative freedom in other ways. Significantly, it seems that Harleston was the only professional African American woman photographer based in the South in the early twentieth century who was able to take photographs outside of a studio setting (Figure 21). Harleston’s photograph, *Landscape*, conveys the middle ground between the freedom and her restrictions. It is outside a studio setting, and allows her to experiment with the picture framed naturally by

¹⁴⁰ “Edwin A. Harleston: Painter of an Era 1882-1931,” 17.

trees. Yet the focal point of her picture is the child in the centre of the frame, as although the distance and shade obscure the details of her face, it adds to the mystical, fantastical quality that pictorialist images of the outside so often exhibit. The natural world dwarfs the children, and surrounds them on all sides. Therefore, in this image the children add to the photograph but are not necessarily its primary subject; rather, their place within the natural world becomes the photograph's subject. She still uses gendered subjects such as children, but her husband's presence and support allowed Harleston the artistic freedom to practice photography in a setting denied to many women photographers who had a more independent relationship with their spouses.

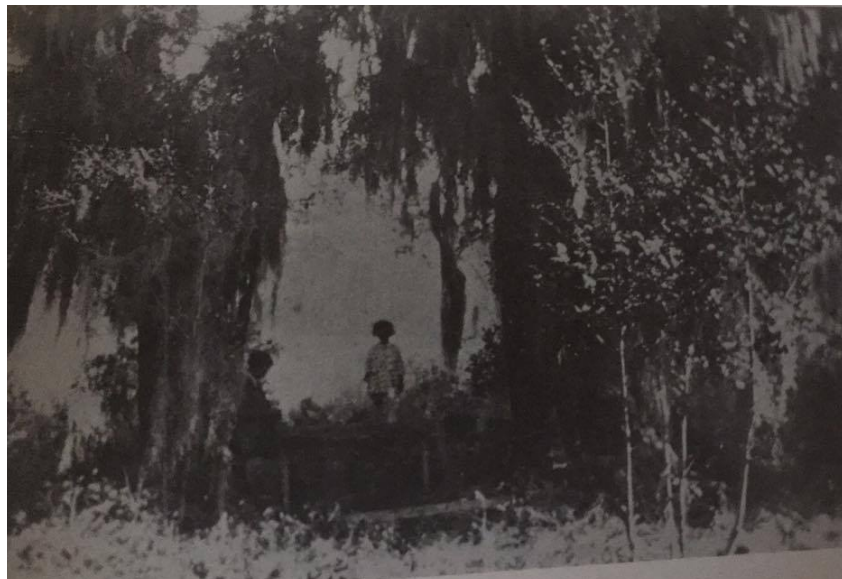


Figure 21. Elise Harleston, Landscape, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 39.

Yet despite some of the artistic freedom that their relationship offered, Harleston's career remained inextricably tied to that of her husband. Similar to The Roberts' Studio, when Edwin died of pneumonia in 1931, Harleston shut

down the studio and did not practice photography again. One of the last images she took was of Edwin's "flower-covered, unmarked grave."¹⁴¹ She was married to another man within the year, and relocated from South Carolina. According to her great-niece, "Elise never spoke of her first husband or her work as a photographer, but for almost 40 years, she saved all of Edwin's letters and nearly two dozen of her glass-plate negatives, a cache that was discovered after her death."¹⁴² She helped to build her husband's studio, depicted her community in a way that captured its members' dignity and respectability, and, alongside the other women in this chapter, contributed to the canon of early twentieth-century photography. All of this was possible due to her navigation of horizontal and vertical networks, from marriage to the church, which allowed her the opportunity for some creative freedom. Whilst the network of marriage remained entrenched in its verticality, as can be seen by Edwin's dominant role in both the business and in subsequent historiography, it allowed Harleston an element of creative and professional freedom. Like the other women in this chapter, Harleston's marriage formed a foundational network and a gateway into a professional and artistic career.

"Photography of a Better Kind": Elnora Teal and the Teal Portrait Studio

Another African American woman also followed this model of horizontal and vertical networks to establish and maintain a career in photography, but with a significantly different outcome. Elnora Teal was an African American woman who ran a portrait studio with her husband in the segregated South, yet their relationship and business operated in a very

¹⁴¹ Gentry, "Elise Forrest Harleston."

¹⁴² Ibid.

different dynamic to those of the other women discussed in this chapter. Teal and her husband Arthur C. Teal both became established photographers in their own right, but at the time of their marriage Arthur was an itinerant photographer who travelled and took images.¹⁴³ Upon their marriage, Arthur taught Teal the basics of photography and opened a studio in Houston, Texas at 111 Andrews Street in 1919.¹⁴⁴ Here, they worked together as photographer and photographic assistant, in a relationship dynamic similar to that of the Roberts' studio. As the business expanded, so too did Teal's role, and, "she grew to love developing photos in the studio," and began to take a more active role in the business.¹⁴⁵ Within a few years, the Teals had opened two studios: one at 411 ½ Milan in the heart of downtown Houston, and another on Dowling Street in the heart of the black residential community.¹⁴⁶ When Arthur purchased the second studio, Teal became the sole runner of the Milan studio, entirely independent of her husband. Although they shared the same name – The Teal Portrait Studio – and they considered their businesses one, Teal had complete creative control over her studio. In this way, marriage was a liberating, vertical network; it provided her with the financial support and training in the early stages of her career, before allowing her artistic and personal freedom for artistic expression. Yet within the context of the 1920s the network remains vertical, as her husband is able to achieve a degree of creative freedom on account of his gender.

¹⁴³ In the nineteenth century, itinerant photographers were regarded akin to roving salesmen, cheats, profiteers, snakeoil salesmen, and carpetbaggers. The shift to a studio setting which accompanied Arthur's marriage to Elnora implies a more stable, respectable, and financially secure lifestyle change.

¹⁴⁴ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 44.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Despite Teal's artistic prowess and independent nature of her business, it is significant that Teal was never able to photograph outside of a studio setting. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe notes that "Elnora Teal never photographed outside of her downtown studio, but because of its location, she was always busy."¹⁴⁷ Whilst Arthur travelled around the state and established his own photography school, Teal remained restricted to a studio setting for most of her career. Although the space within the studio offered creative freedom, I would argue that the fact that they were not given the opportunity to leave this space indicates that it was restrictive in nature. This was common for most early twentieth-century African American women photographers; whilst their community reputation and respectability deemed it acceptable for them to have the unusual career of photographer, their gender and conservative notions of respectability restricted them to a studio setting, as well to photographing mainly women and children. Yet they were still able to use this restrictive setting to convey their artistic and communal agendas.

As with Elise Harleston in *The Harleston Studio*, scholars and members of the artistic community have often neglected Elnora Teal's contribution to *The Teal Portrait Studio*. When Alan Govenar created a "comprehensive" exhibition and accompanying book in 1994 entitled *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas* he featured the work of Arthur Teal.¹⁴⁸ He dedicated a page's worth of description to Arthur, stating: "Arthur C. Teal (1891? – 1956) travelled around the state as a portrait photographer.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ "Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas," *Documentary Arts*, accessed 21 March 2017, http://www.docarts.com/portraits_of_community_exhibit.html.

He opened his first studio in Houston, Texas in 1919, and in 1942, began his own school of photography in the city.”¹⁴⁹ Govenar then followed this with a list of Arthur’s notable students, but made no reference to Elnora Teal as Arthur’s wife, student, or photographic business partner. Although Govenar qualified his work as “not definitive in scope,” this omission is notable in an exhibit that attempts to be inclusive and “comprehensive.”¹⁵⁰

Teal’s gender did not just dictate the kind of credit she has received in the present day, but also the clients that her business appealed to in her lifetime. As with the other women in this chapter, Teal’s studio proved particularly popular with women and children. Her images display many of the conventions of portraiture that African American women adhered to during the early twentieth century. Her female clients saw Teal’s gender as an advantage, as they perceived that she would be more sensitive to the needs of female and young clients than her husband photographer. Her photographs entitled *Unidentified Portrait* (Figure 22) and *Mrs. Irene Frazier* (Figure 23) illustrate this. Reminiscent of the works of Harleston and Roberts, Teal typifies the notion of pictorialism in portraiture in these images. In the *Unidentified Portrait* the contrast of the white cloth on the dark background, the soft focus, and the use of theatricalised staging (as evidenced by the chair that the child is leaning on and the bonnet they are wearing) are consistent with this school of photography. Furthermore, the fall of the fabric and the age of the child,

¹⁴⁹ “Portraits of a Community: African American Community in Texas,” Exhibition Guide, Box 18, Folder 18.3. Deborah Willis professional files, Sc MG 452, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 24/02/2017, 3.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

coupled with the child's upright pose, suggests that there may be someone or something behind the infant holding them up.¹⁵¹ Whilst it is difficult to say for certain, the conventions of child portraiture during the early twentieth century suggest that this is likely, and illustrates Teal's professional handling of her youngest clients. Elnora's image *Mrs. Irene Frazier*, likewise, typifies many of the conventions of pictorialism and children's portraiture, but the mother's presence in the frame makes this a distinct kind of portrait. The framing of the photo places the entwined hands of baby and mother in the centre of the photograph, and by emphasising the literal interconnectedness of their hands she emphasises the closeness of their relationship.

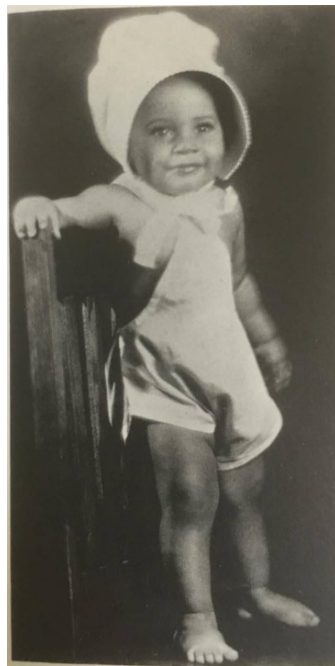


Figure 22. Elnora Teal, Unidentified Portrait, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 47.

¹⁵¹ At this time, it was not uncommon for clamps to be used to hold up children for portraits.



Figure 23. Elnora Teal, Mrs. Irene Frazier, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 47.

As with the works of Harleston and Roberts, the notion of respectability was of intrinsic importance to Teal's images. Teal's portraits of children signal this, but it is even more apparent in her portraits of African American women. Two of her portraits – *Ethel Mosley* (Figure 24) and *Unidentified Portrait* (Figure 25) – typify the style of portraiture that Teal sought when she took pictures of young women. They are clearly both wearing makeup, as lipstick is evident on their faces, and their clothing contrasts further with the background. Their positioning at a three-quarter angle, but with their faces facing the camera, gives the photograph a more intimate and personal

feel, as whilst their closed body language denies the viewer, they turn to face the camera head-on. This also emphasises the patterns on their clothing and the makeup of their hair, for which Teal became particularly well-regarded as she “paid such close attention to detail” and “bought photography supplies the way some women bought materials for their fine dresses.”¹⁵²



Figure 24: Elnora Teal, Ethel Mosley, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 46.

¹⁵² Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 45.



Figure 25. Elnora Teal, Unidentified Portrait, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 46.

Yet Teal did not just take pictures of women. One of her clients was the famous African American opera singer Roland Hayes, giving a rare example of Teal's handling of respectability with a male figure (Figure 26). The role of fashion remains intrinsically important, as Hayes' immaculate suit and tie are visible in the image, which is representative of male 'New Negro' fashion. His three-quarter framing, looking off to the side of the camera, gives the impression of a forward-looking, respectable member of society. His parted lips suggest speech; that he is even at this moment actively engaging in another task. Teal's work is another example of the image of the 'New Negro;' of using her craft to attempt to uplift her race. The fact that Teal was able to photograph such a well-known male figure indicates her reputation and photographic prowess.



Figure 26. Elnora Teal, Roland Hayes, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 46.

As with other women in this chapter, this reputation was one that Teal and her husband cultivated with their standing in the community. Their business slogan, which featured heavily in their advertising, was “photography of a better kind,” which soon became synonymous with their business and the respectable image for which it strived.¹⁵³ Significantly, Teal was then heavily involved in the photography school that Arthur established in the 1940s. It is unclear exactly to what extent Teal and Arthur were involved in local networks such as churches. However, unlike other women in this chapter, Teal actively used her privileged position to uplift African American women photographers

¹⁵³ Kendall Curlee, “Teal Portrait Studio,” Handbook of Texas Online, accessed 10 September, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kjtwc>.

as well. She hired a photographic assistant, Lucille Moore, who developed images, provided administrative support and, significantly, took photographs. Although Lucille worked more closely with Arthur, as she “took over the studio in his absence,” Teal was key to her employment.¹⁵⁴ Here an African American woman was independently employed as a photographer, and employed a female African American photographic assistant. Although Lucille Moore left the business in 1946 to “teach school,” Teal had created her own vertical network of support in which to train future African American women photographers.¹⁵⁵

Elnora and Arthur Teal’s business was remarkable in many ways, and not least because they were able to keep their business afloat during the Great Depression of the 1930s. By reducing their prices, remaining accessible to all their customers, and servicing the needs of their community in a way sufficient to sustain demand, they managed to survive the economic downturn that devastated so many businesses.¹⁵⁶ The business continued even after Arthur died in 1956: Elnora Teal ran both the studio and the photographic studio for nearly a decade following his death. Teal is a transitional figure in the history of women’s photography in many ways, and had a complex relationship with the networks she utilised. Whilst she could not surmount the Southern conservative ideals of femininity that dictated that she remain exclusively

¹⁵⁴ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 44.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Lashawn Harris, “Running with the Reds: African American Women and the Communist Party during the Great Depression,” *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 1 (Winter, 2009).

within a studio setting, she did navigate vertical and horizontal networks to achieve a photographic education and a studio of her own.

“The Foremost Female Artist of the Race”: Jennie Louise Touissant

Welcome

In the case of one final photographer, different dynamics enabled her to navigate notions of marriage restrictions, community activism and respectability in ways that her counterparts did not experience. Jennie Louise Touissant Welcome was born under the name Jennie Louise VanDerZee, and was the sister of famed Harlem photographer James VanDerZee. Yet in contrast to James’s historical legacy, African American photographic history has neglected Welcome’s work. She and her husband Ernest Touissant Welcome ran a studio in Harlem in 1910, right before the wave of migration that took Harlem from being 10% black to 70% black.

As the only Northern African American woman discussed in this chapter, it is worth noting that Welcome was right in the heart of the ‘New Negro’ movement within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. The celebration of African American culture, the racial pride, but also the entrenched misogyny of the movement would have affected her day-to-day life, particularly considering her unusual role as a female photographer at this time. Whilst the other women in this chapter had a Southern view of the ‘New Negro,’ Welcome functioned in the Harlem-based origins of the term. The way in which Jennie advertises herself suggests a level of racial pride in herself which is more in keeping with a more self-confident, almost masculine-inflected conception of the ‘New Negro.’

Welcome ran an advert in a 1910 issue of *Crisis* magazine under the name Mme. E. Toussaint Welcome, declaring herself as “the foremost female artist of the race.”¹⁵⁷ Of all the women in this chapter, she is the only one who seems to have publicly referred to herself as an “artist” rather than as a photographer, suggesting that she views her work as “art” rather than just a vocation. Whilst it is impossible to define exactly how these women viewed themselves, as artists, professional business women, or documenters of their community, or some combination therein, it is telling that Welcome refers to herself first and foremost as an “artist.” She and her husband ran their first business, The Toussaint Conservatory of Art and Music, as part studio and part school, encompassing music and art. Yet on the advertisement it is Welcome’s name that is the one listed, and not Ernest’s. The advert lists the studio as “conducted under the supervision of” Welcome.¹⁵⁸ Whilst they were both undoubtedly involved in the business, it appears that Welcome was actually more directly involved than her husband. Currently, the exact role her husband fulfilled remains unknown.

Little information is available on Jennie and Ernest Welcome’s studio, and little of their work has survived. They were involved in a diverse range of artistic endeavours, including photography and filmmaking, under the name Touissant Motion Picture Exchange from 1918. In 1918, they produced a twelve-part serial newsreel entitled *Doing Their Bit*, “detailing the efforts of blacks in the military” during World War One.¹⁵⁹ The documentary celebrated

¹⁵⁷ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 29.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵⁹ Paula J. Massood, *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 210.

the contribution of African Americans to the war effort, documenting “the military and economic role played by all races in the War of Nations both ‘Over Here’ and ‘Over There’.”¹⁶⁰ For works such as this, some scholars regard Jennie Welcome as the first African American woman director.¹⁶¹ Welcome also produced a lithograph celebrating the African American soldiers of the 369th Colored Infantry, painting their faces from photographs and celebrating each soldier by name.¹⁶² Dubbed the Harlem Hellfighters by their German enemies, their courage and valour in battle elevated white opinion of African Americans as the *New York Tribune* stated that “never have white Americans accorded so heartfelt and hearty a reception to a contingent of their black country-men.”¹⁶³ Welcome’s artistic endeavour no doubt contributed to this reputation within the local community.

Yet, in photographic history, Welcome is widely regarded, first and foremost, as James VanDerZee’s sister. Indeed, she was instrumental to his success, as she gave him his first photographic job working within her studio in New York, inverting the traditional gender hierarchy. After moving from Newark, New Jersey, his role in Welcome’s studio provided VanDerZee’s gateway into the Harlem photographic scene, enabling him to gain the proper insight and training that he needed to open his own studio.¹⁶⁴ In this way, the network of family operated differently for Jennie Welcome, as she chose to

¹⁶⁰ Bowser, “Pioneers of Black Documentary Film,” 17.

¹⁶¹ Kyna Morgan and Aimee Dixon, “African-American Women in the Silent Film Industry,” Women Film Pioneers Project, accessed 21 March, 2017, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/essay/african-american-women-in-the-silent-film-industry/>.

¹⁶² Bowser, “Pioneers of Black Documentary Film,” 17.

¹⁶³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Who Were the Harlem Hellfighters?”, *100 Amazing Finds About the Negro*, accessed 10 June 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-were-the-harlem-hellfighters/>.

¹⁶⁴ Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee*, 39.

provide opportunities to her own male family members through her work. Yet whilst VanDerZee's Harlem photography has received acclaim, Welcome's contribution to the Harlem art scene has not. Although there is evidence of her work during the First World War and its immediate aftermath, from 1920 onwards there is little trace. By 1929, she and her husband had moved their business to a house on Long Island.

Jennie Louise Welcome, like Elnora Teal, serves in many ways as a transitional figure. Although she was a clear example of the 'New Negro Woman' – who clearly exhibited racial pride and self-determination – her past remains shrouded in mystery. Crucially, the networks which she utilised remain largely unclear. Exactly what was her husband's role in the business? Did he provide financial support, sit on the side lines, or was he the primary force behind the business? The obscurity into which the couple fade currently gives us no answers to any of these questions, but the fact that she was able to take such a dominant role in her own advertising is indicative of her prominent role in the business. Although her exact relationship to the vertical and horizontal networks that dictated her career remains unknown, her use of advertising, investment in portraying her community during World War One, and influence on the career of her brother, James VanDerZee, indicates just how uplifting to their communities and families these women photographers could be.

Across this chapter, the influence of vertical and horizontal networks on the early careers of African American women photographers has been evident. As these women have utilised the vertical network of marriage alongside the horizontal community networks available to them, they were

entrenched in the racial, gender, and class politics of the time. The way in which their images adhere to the politics of respectability and the ideals of the 'New Negro' and the 'New Negro Woman' evidence this. Having careers tied to their husbands, whether within a hierarchical marriage, or a more independent arrangement, these women all operated within a vertical network. Jennie Louise Welcome remains the uncertain figure here, as the exact role of her husband remains unknown. Yet her prevalence in her own advertisements, and the lack of mention of a husband, indicates an independence not demonstrated by any of the other women in this chapter. Indeed, Welcome's advertisement creates an image of a woman who, in many ways, better reflects the careers of two figures who did not rely on marriage as part of their utilised networks to create careers in photography – Florestine Collins and Winifred Hall Allen.

**Chapter Two: “The Leader of the Tribe”: The Diagonal Networks and
Art of Florestine Collins and Winifred Hall Allen**

For some African American women, the increased independence they had as photographers was reflected by the high esteem in which their staff members held them. Florestine Collins was ultimately her staff member’s boss, but she was also simultaneously a friend, a colleague, and in some cases a family member. All of Collins’ employees appear to have held her in high regard, with Betty Goudeau Wethers stating that “she *ran* the business and she took *care* of business,” and that “she was the kind of businesswoman who could step on your shoes and not even ruin the shine.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed, Wethers comments in her interview with Arthé A. Anthony that Collins was “the leader of the tribe,” with the “tribe” referring to “many of Florestine’s employees, especially the teenage girls for whom she felt responsible.”¹⁶⁶ From giving them employment to ensuring that they got home safely at night, Collins created a network of faithful staff members whilst placing herself at the top of the workplace hierarchy. Winifred Hall Allen also demonstrates this, as both were businesswomen who achieved careers as photographers in their own professional spaces independent of their husband’s careers. In this chapter, I will establish and confirm Collins and Allen’s statuses as the “Leader of the Tribe” within their own communities.

In contrast with the women in the previous chapter, African American photographers Florestine Collins and Winifred Hall Allen were able to achieve careers as photographers without the vertical network of marriage. Using

¹⁶⁵ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 98.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

methods unique to each's geographic and cultural location, that remain consistent with each other, Collins and Allen created photographic roles that empowered themselves and members of their communities. They were able to do this on their own terms far more than any other African American women until this point in time, although both remained constricted by societal and cultural pressures in many ways. Their navigation of horizontal and vertical networks incorporates a different system of power dynamics and relationships to those previously discussed, resulting in a new framework that I term the diagonal network.

The term 'diagonal network' speaks, in part, to the shortcomings of notions of the 'horizontal' and 'vertical networks' to encompass the more nuanced relationships of Collins and Allen. As we have seen, most of the women in the previous chapter relied on and utilised the 'horizontal networks' within their local communities alongside the hierarchical 'vertical network' of their family lives, particularly their photographer husbands, in order to successfully operate as photographers. However, whilst Collins and Allen remain entrenched with the community network of the 'horizontal' network, the notions of the hierarchical, patriarchal 'vertical' are insufficient to encompass their experiences. Indeed, these women receive formal training in a workplace environment in a transitional 'vertical' network. Whilst they first occupy a position on a low node in the 'vertical network,' they progress to the highest 'node' at the top of the 'vertical' hierarchy. Married women photographers, such as Wilhelmina Roberts, Elnora Teal, and Elise Forrest Harleston, were below their husbands in this 'vertical' hierarchy. Furthermore, Collins and Allen use their position at the top of their own 'vertical' network to

provide professional and uplifting opportunities to other African American women. The network of the family also takes on a unique and far less patriarchal form, as it shifts from a vertical network with a husband at the top to something more communal and diagonal in nature. Therefore, due to the hierarchical yet transitional nature of the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' networks, the term 'diagonal' networks helps understand the lives, works, and networks of Florestine Collins and Winifred Hall Allen. This is a crucial lens through which to understand early African American women's photography, as it encompasses the changing nature of their roles within these hierarchies throughout their careers. These were not women who started and ended their careers in the same roles, as many of the women in Chapter One did. For Collins and Allen, as with women in subsequent decades, they would utilise diagonal networks to uplift themselves and the members of their community.

When the network diagram places Allen and Collins, their diagonality becomes apparent due to its transitional nature (Figure 27). For these women, the dot represents their relationship to these networks at the beginning of their career and the cross marks their position at the end. The green cross represents Allen, and the yellow cross represents Collins. Marriage was not a key factor in Allen's career, but in its early stages she did train her husband to help her with photography before their separation. Instead, she trained in photography school and undertook a professional, albeit hierarchical, apprenticeship in the professional sphere. From there, she was able to work as her own boss, with ultimate control over her own studio and no reliance on familial networks. Collins also did not rely on marriage in her relationship, but was reliant on domestic networks such as family and friends in the early and later stages of

her career. Like Allen, Collins also trained in formal capacities such as apprenticeships before branching off on her own. Despite this similarity, however, both women had a different professional relationship to their local community; whilst Allen would exit the studio in order to photograph the community, Collins had to rely on bringing the community to her studio through advertisements and personal reputations. Doubtlessly Allen had to do this as well, but Southern notions of femininity functioned Allen's studio into the only space in which she could work. Therefore, the notion of diagonality comes in part from their transitional nature, but also with more specific elements of diagonality that come from their uplifting of other young African American women photographic assistance.

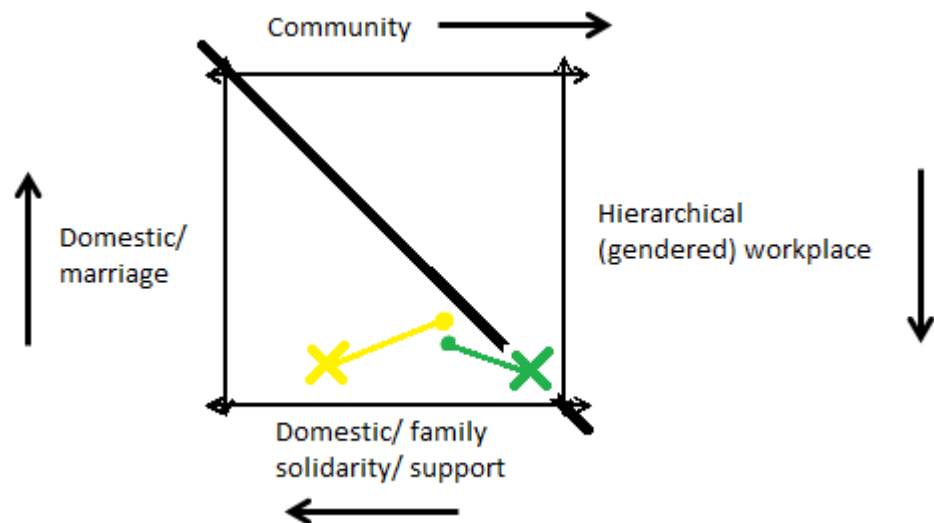


Figure 27. Networks of African American Women Photographers Diagram, Version 3, 2017

Before continuing with the close analysis of the work and lives of Florestine Collins and Winifred Hall Allen, however, it is important to acknowledge the challenges they pose to the definition of 'African American.' Collins was of Creole descent: a group which has, historically, been interpreted

as having regarded themselves as superior to African Americans due to their European heritage. However, scholars have since come to regard these interpretations as “stereotypical and overdrawn.”¹⁶⁷ In contrast, Allen was a first-generation Jamaican immigrant based in New York. While based in Harlem, which by 1930 was 70% black, her Jamaican identity would have no doubt complicated her experience in the city.¹⁶⁸ Although both Collins’ and Allen’s experiences would have been distinct to their own cultural heritages and geographic locations, I argue that their experiences as non-whites of African descent in their respective communities would have meant that they would both have to navigate similar networks and overcome similar obstacles. The identities of these women were by no means synonymous, particularly as Jim Crow segregation took on different forms in the urban North and in the South; yet it would be problematic to fail to consider their works through the lens of their common experiences as non-white women of African descent. Nor am I the only academic to consider their experiences within this frame of reference, as Florestine Collins appeared in the documentary *Through A Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*,¹⁶⁹ and Winifred Hall Allen is a prominent figure in Jeanne Moutoussamy Ashe’s *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*.¹⁷⁰ Their contributions were significant for African American culture, despite their more contingent and complex connections to specifically African American communities. By exploring these

¹⁶⁷ Arnold R. Hirsch, “Fade to Black: Hurricane Katrina and the Disappearance of Creole New Orleans,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3, (Dec., 2007), 754.

¹⁶⁸ “An Affluent, White Harlem?,” *Gotham Gazette*, accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/demographicis/4077-harlems-shifting-population>

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Allen Harris, *Through A Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, DVD, directed/performed by Thomas Allen Harris (Sundance: Chimpanzee Productions, 2014).

¹⁷⁰ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 60-71.

figures within their own unique geographic and cultural contexts, yet acknowledging the elements of discrimination and networking that were similar, I believe that both figures can contribute to the history of African American women's photography.

“Marching Into the Streets”: Harlem, the New Negro, and Winifred Hall

Allen

Winifred Hall Allen was a Harlem-based photographer who was active during both the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Depression. Allen navigated diagonal networks in professional and personal capacities, as she engaged in formal training and apprenticeships for the former, and teaching her husband photography for the latter. She also rooted her work in the local community, contributing to the notions of respectability and uplift as she portrayed local businesses owned by women, along a horizontal network. Furthermore, she would be one of the first African American modernist photographers, as she would gain increased personal freedom to innovate her images. She is a distinct figure in many ways, not in the least because she was a Jamaican immigrant. Coming to the city of New York at the age of 18, she received formal training at the New York Institute of Photography whilst working as an apprentice at the Woodard Studio.¹⁷¹ By working her way up through the apprenticeship to eventually taking control of the studio, Allen took full advantage of her surroundings to establish herself as one of the key documenters of the Harlem Renaissance. That scholars have given her little

¹⁷¹ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 60.

attention is remarkable, as although much of her life has faded into obscurity as the dates in which she operated are vague, the wealth of photographs left behind provide valuable insight into Allen's community and her work.

Winifred Hall Allen operated within the dual contexts of the Harlem Renaissance and The Great Depression. Starting in 1929 with the Wall Street Crash, the Great Depression was a period of economic downturn in the United States, with high unemployment, deflation, and low levels of economic growth. The Depression caused the numbers of African American photographers to sharply decrease from 545 in 1930 to 122 in 1940, undoubtedly affecting significant numbers of women photographers.¹⁷² Yet New York City remained at the heart of the photographic industry, with Kodak boasting that there were 1,500,000 cameras in active use there in 1936.¹⁷³ Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe points out that that was equal to "about one camera per family for a population of seven million."¹⁷⁴ With the amateur scene in New York thriving, it is testament to Winifred Hall Allen's skills as a businesswoman that she was able to sustain a professional photographic business in the climate of the Depression.

As seen in consideration of the career of Jennie Louise Welcome, Harlem was a cultural hub of African American life in New York City. Yet whilst Welcome was present in the years of the First World War and the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, it is likely that Winifred Hall Allen was more active during the end of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 1930s. Therefore,

¹⁷² Ibid., 53.

¹⁷³ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 52.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

despite their close geographic location, it is unlikely that these two figures worked at the same time, especially considering that Welcome had moved to Long Island by 1929. This was a time where James VanDerZee was also documenting Harlem life, and where photography was a lucrative business. Within her photography Allen would attempt to capture the rich makeup of Harlem life at this time by capturing the diverse cultural landscape, from jazz to Garveyism, and encompassing an evolving artistic form, from conventional portraiture of the New Negro ideal to modernist interpretations of the individual in an industrial landscape.

Unlike Wilhelmina Roberts, Elnora Teal, and Elise Forrest Harleston, Allen did not rely on the vertical network of marriage in order to achieve and sustain her career. Allen attended the New York Institute of Photography, which became a registered business in 1914.¹⁷⁵ This was the same institution that Elise Forrest Harleston attended in 1919, although it would later change its name. That these two women attended the same institution under different circumstances – in different decades, from different backgrounds (one an immigrant and one from the South), and with different relationships shaping their lives – indicates the changing nature of the photographic and social landscape these women had to confront. One was only able to attend thanks to her husband's direct support, and would go on to work directly with him, whereas the other was an immigrant who would set up her own business independent of her husband. This is also indicative of the lack of training opportunities available, as two very different African American women

¹⁷⁵ "NYIP History," New York Institute of Photography, accessed 29 June 2017, <https://www.nyip.co.uk/about/history>.

attended the same institution despite their different situations. New York offered a sanctum for both of these women. Yet there remain other consistencies across their careers as well. Notably, they both relied on male professionals in the early stages of their own careers, as a gendered vertical hierarchy continued to dominate the early stages of their careers. However, this hierarchy is something which Allen was able to transcend.

Winifred Hall Allen worked as an apprentice for the William Woodard Photo Studio in New York whilst she studied. Here, she gained a practical business understanding alongside the theoretical photographic knowledge she would have gained through the New York Institute. Moutoussamy-Ashe notes that “after graduating, she took over the Woodard Studio when Woodard moved to Chicago.”¹⁷⁶ This in some ways mirrors the experience of Harleston, as she too was economically dependent on a male figure who also introduced her to a studio setting. In this way, we see how photographers such as Allen continued to rely on vertical networks structured by a patriarchal hierarchy in order to attain commercial and aesthetic autonomy, but by the 1930s, such photographers did so outside of the vertical network of marriage specifically, and began to assume a clearer public and professional identity. Despite her initial lower place in the hierarchy of this vertical network, she placed firmly at the top once she had taken over the studio, attesting to shifting power relations being a defining characteristic of the diagonal network. When considered alongside the community uplift her photography enabled her to enact, as part of a mutually beneficial horizontal network, Winifred Hall Allen navigated the vertical network of the male business structure like other women

¹⁷⁶ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 60.

photographers navigated the network of marriage, creating something more diagonal in nature. Indeed, Winifred Hall Allen inverted the idea of a vertical hierarchy within the institution of her own marriage, as she taught her own husband Fred Allen photography.¹⁷⁷ Although his exact role in the studio, if any, is unclear, it is apparent that the notion of vertical networks applied to Allen in a remarkably different way to the other women I examine, resulting in a diagonal network, as she remains the only figure to take over a male colleague's business, and not a husband's.

Allen's photographic assistant, Bernedice Wesley, suggests that Allen's marriage was unsuccessful, as she stated that: "I think she was married or either divorce at least separated because she slept in the back of the store. That shop essentially had three parts, three partitions."¹⁷⁸ She details the layout of the studio: "the first section was sort of the studio section, and the next section was where she took portraits at the same time she had that cot there and the last section was where there was a toilet and then a developing room... [sic]"¹⁷⁹ Wesley stated that she "could never tell where one ended and one began."¹⁸⁰ In this way, for an unknown period of time, her studio formed both her home and her work; a blending of the domestic and the professional space. The contrast between the failing domestic narrative network and the actual physical professional space, which also functions as a home, is suggestive of the diagonality of her networks. Allen's use of the vertical network of marriage

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "Interview with Bernadice Wesley," Box 2, Folder 2, Winifred Hall File, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, 1984-1985, Sc MG 343, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017, 1.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 15.

offered her some support, as her teaching him photography suggests he in turn helped her in the studio, as with the women in Chapter One. However, this blending of spaces is suggestive of something more diagonal in nature; as their relationship disintegrated, her professional space became her domestic space. The shifting nature of her relationships both to her husband and the spaces available to her is a key part of her diagonal network, as she was able to adapt and advance her career despite personal setbacks across vertical networks. She fashioned her professional space into a personal one in a diagonalizing and empowering act.

Stylistically, Winifred Hall Allen is also a unique figure among African American women photographers. Due to her situation in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, Allen was able to engage with both studio portraiture alongside a more documentary lens as she took pictures of Harlem businesses and figures. Whilst the Southern ideals of feminine propriety limited other women almost exclusively to portraiture within a studio setting, Allen was able to transcend the boundaries of both the studio setting and the conventions of pictorialism, combining elements of modernism within her images. Yet, in a manner similar to the Southern based women, her portrait photography remained lucrative and bound by gendered ideals of pictorialism and the New Negro. Blair argues that Allen's adherence to these styles contributed, in part, to her historical neglect, as "although Harlem was becoming one of several U.S. centers for black photographers, the latter had emerged during the Renaissance out of a commercial studio tradition dependent on uplift modes; its most distinguished commissioners, James VanDerZee and Winifred Hall Allen, were generally dismissed in the decades after the Renaissance as

purveyors of an overly stylized, white-mimed gentility.”¹⁸¹ Her portraits of African American women demonstrate this trend towards the pictorial.

Two portraits of African American women – *Portrait, in a satin dress* (Figure 28) and *Untitled Portrait* (Figure 29) – attest to the role of pictorialism in Winifred Hall Allen’s portraiture. Despite the different women, the stylish outfits are remarkably similar. Both wear light, full-length gowns with low necklines – consistent with the fashions of the period. Their short hair is further reflective of the styles of this period. Furthermore, both wear pale, statement necklaces, suggesting at wealth, affluence, and fashion. The backdrops are also consistent with the ideals of pictorialism, despite their different styles. *Untitled Portrait* features a painted backdrop with clear pictorial influences, from the natural aesthetic of the trees to the romantic, classical architecture of the open gate. *Portrait, in a satin dress* also has pictorial influences, as the soft fabric of the curtains creates a light/dark contrast that frames the central figure of the seated woman. Finally, the women both meet the camera’s gaze directly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this act of meeting the camera’s lens bring the viewer into the image, allowing the sitter to make a connection with the viewer and hence demonstrating their confidence. In this way, these images are consistent with the ideal of the New Negro Woman.

¹⁸¹ Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 31.



Figure 28. Winifred Hall Allen, Portrait, in a satin dress, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 63.



Figure 29. Winifred Hall Allen, Untitled portrait, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 65.

With regard to portraiture, one of Allen's key business models was to encourage walk-ins to engage in more elaborate services. Photographic assistant Bernedice Wesley recounts how Allen had a standard photographic booth – “a sit-in one like in the subway” – to entice customers.¹⁸² She details how “... we tried to convince them to do something better, so for the simplest thing, for the simple enlargement, for the simple little shot I'd do it so it was automatic center, then I'd go in the back and sometimes as I said I'd make enlargements and I used to do some retouching brushcolor...”¹⁸³ Once the person had agreed, Winifred Hall Allen would use her interpersonal skills to put the client at ease; “she could coax them to relax and so they came out sort of vivid and living...”¹⁸⁴ This can be seen in the relaxed posing of the figures, and is also indicative of the intrinsic role Allen had in their posing. Allen's astute management of commercial and entrepreneurial aspects of photography shows how decisively she took charge of the professional sphere.

Like Elnora Teal, Winifred Hall Allen also took the formal portraits of the men in her community. Allen's portraits of male African Americans are also consistent with the ideals of the New Negro. In particular, her 1936 portrait of the studio owner William E. Woodard typifies the notions of portraiture established above (Figure 30). Woodard's tie and suit signify his respectability, and the soft focus around the edge of the frame which is so common within pictorial photography casts the features of his face into sharper

¹⁸² Moutoussamy-Ashe, “Interview with Bernadice Wesley,” 8.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

contrast. Yet Allen did not always follow these standard portrait conventions. In the image *Two men looking over papers*, we can see a far more theatrical type of portraiture (Figure 31). Here, there are two male figures in the image. The suits are consistent with ideals of respectability, but it is their actions that are most consistent with the ideal of the New Negro. Both men are caught in the act of reviewing papers, leaning together to examine the document. By rejecting the gaze of the viewer, and focussing their attention on their work, the men have an air of engrossed intellectual pursuit. Their poses also suggest at closeness and cooperation – they lean into each other, with the man on the right resting his hand on the other man’s shoulder. They therefore appear to the viewer as a single unit with a common, intellectual purpose, consistent with the advancement ideal of the New Negro and the “Talented Tenth.” Intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois popularised the term ‘Talented Tenth’ in his 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth,” stating “the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst.”¹⁸⁵ Although this idea is problematic due to its basis in classist superiority, akin to the notion of uplift, it captured the middle-class African American imagination. Indeed, Natanson emphasises this when he states that “portraits of the ‘talented tenth’ had been the staple of black studios since the earliest days of American photography, and these subjects continued to dominate the depression-era work of such leading camera

¹⁸⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” Teaching American History, accessed 21 July 2017, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-talented-tenth/>.

people as: James VanDerZee and Winifred Hall Allen in New York...”¹⁸⁶ In addition, the choice to have them standing rather than seated, as is more common in traditional portraiture, suggests at a more active and empowering role. Therefore, Winifred Hall Allen pushes the boundaries of pictorial portraiture in order to advance the image of the New Negro.



Figure 30. Winifred Hall Allen, William E. Woodard, photographer, 1936

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 70.

¹⁸⁶ Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 29.



Figure 31. Winifred Hall Allen, Two men looking over papers, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 70.

Yet the images of masculinity that Allen captured also encompassed the radical politics of the Harlem community. In her portrait *A Garveyite*, Winifred Hall Allen presents a portrait of a Garveyite soldier in his uniform (Figure 32). Garveyism refers to the black nationalist ideology that became prominent in the 1920s, advocating the desire “to arouse a unified race consciousness in all peoples of African descent, whether living in the United States, the West Indies, or Africa; to strengthen this united black race by organizing black-owned and managed, large-scale business enterprises and shipping lines; and finally, to create a black- governed nation in Africa that

would host the creation of a renewed black civilization and stand up for the rights of black people every- where.”¹⁸⁷ This is apparent in the dignified manner in which this figure’s likeness is captured. By having the portrait showing the Garveyite at full length, we can see the entirety of his uniform; from his immaculately shiny shoes, to the prominence of his medals against his pale uniform, to the length of his sword which he holds in the hand closest to the camera. The backdrop is also distinct from other images discussed so far, as it is clearly not a painted backdrop and appears to be taking place in some sort of meeting hall. That Allen took this photograph outside of a studio setting is significant, as it suggests that Allen was able to transcend the limits of one space where other African American women photographers were not. The figure stands in front of a covered table, with chairs in the background, framed against a dark flag and a portrait of another African American man. Between the immaculate uniform and the sense of an upcoming meeting, Allen creates a sense of activism, of the figure being part of something greater than just himself. The image’s low framing adds to this, as rather than meeting the camera’s eye at an equal angle, centre to the middle of the frame, the Garveyite’s eyes remain at the top of the frame. In this way, his gaze appears to be looking down at the viewer, creating the impression of a higher status figure with gravitas and dignity. In this way, by portraying this figure so favourably, Allen engaged with the radical Black Nationalist politics of Harlem, not just a middle-class pictorial ideal.

¹⁸⁷ Beryl Satter, “Marcus Garvey, Father Divine and the Gender Politics of Race Difference and Race Neutrality,” *American Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Mar., 1996), 44.

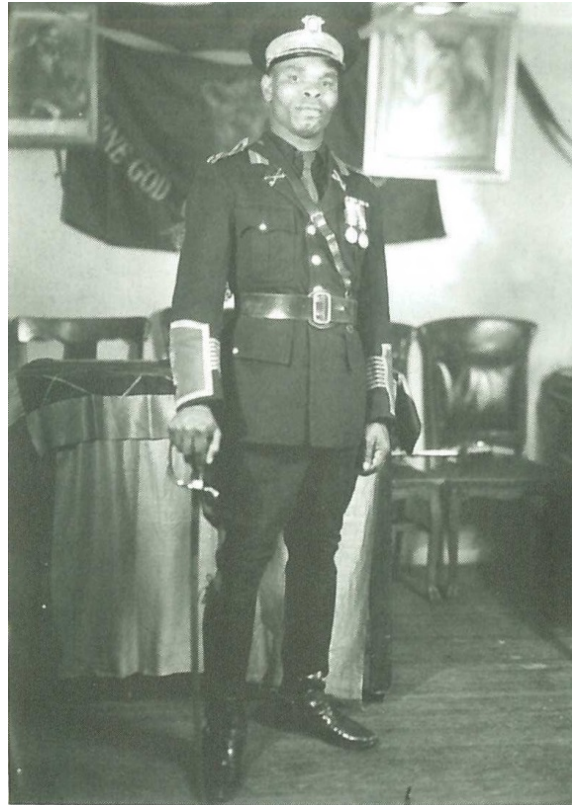


Figure 32. Winifred Hall Allen, A Garveyite, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 70.

Nor was this the only way Winifred Hall Allen rejected purely pictorial photography. Allen receives the most attention as a photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, and for serving as a kind of documentary photographer of Harlem life. In this way, she engaged with horizontal, communal networks in a truly unique fashion, as she fulfils the role of documenter and, simultaneously, ‘uplifter’ by capturing them as respectable and vibrant sites of racial pride. This is particularly apparent with her images of the Harlem nightlife and businesses run by African American women. This frequently took place outside of a studio setting, as Bernedice Wesley stated that “when she left the office, she would be going to parties, where people wanted to make records of

what was happening in their particular lives at the time.”¹⁸⁸ One of the most vibrant examples of this trend is her photograph entitled *A musical and dance group* (Figure 33). In this, we can see a full piece band and performers mid-performance, in the middle of a space which appears to be a dance hall. This is one of the most dynamic pictures by an African American woman photographer of this period— every figure is moving and performing, engrossed in their own act. The microphone creates a line which splits the image two-thirds through, but none of the figures are too close to it. Instead, the figures operate on different levels, with some kneeling and some upright, and all looking in different directions. There is no uniformity of gaze in this picture – some performers look at each other; others look to the camera – creating a scattered and dynamic look to the image. The figures are smiling, but the lack of engagement with the camera creates the sense that they are enjoying their own music. The two figures at the front are particularly engaging – a female trumpeter kneels on the floor pointing up at the man who appears to be the frontman of the group, who is moving in such a way that his leg is carving a line across the image, further creating a sense of movement in the image. The sense of cooperation yet spontaneity in this image evokes a sense of jazz: that everyone is a part of the intrinsic identity, and hence sound, of the group. It is likely that Winifred Hall Allen received payment to take this image for the band’s publicity, and it is therefore unclear if Allen has manipulated the poses to *evoke* a sense of spontaneity and movement, or if this was taking in a moment of performance. However, the sense presented by this image is a sense of jazz and cooperation, perfectly mirroring the dynamics of the Harlem

¹⁸⁸ Moutoussamy-Ashe, “Interview with Bernadice Wesley,” 5.

Renaissance. The fact that there is a woman in the frame in such a subservient position – kneeling and pointing up at the male lead – could be construed as disempowering, but I would counter that her position at the front of the stage, even in front of the microphone, puts her at the forefront of the audience’s attention. Indeed, Winifred Hall Allen was adept at taking empowering pictures of women within the Harlem community.



Figure 33. Winifred Hall Allen, A musical and dance group, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 62.

One key way in which Winifred Hall Allen achieved this empowerment of local African American women was through her focus on local businesses. In particular, her photo series on Harlem-based beauty studios run by African American women shows how “she documented the businesses owned and

operated by women in that community.”¹⁸⁹ Whilst other women utilised horizontal communal networks in their spare time to enhance their own image of respectability, Allen adopted a different approach. With images such as these, Allen rooted herself in the horizontal network of her local community as a documenter – at once a part of and participating, but also a separate observer. In this way, the horizontal communal networks she encountered and photographed directly benefited her career, as it provided her with vibrant subjects outside of a traditional studio setting. This would also have benefitted the businesses she photographed, as her respectable and attractive images presented them how they would wish the public and any potential customers to view them. Thus, the term diagonal network is apt when describing Allen’s career, as she navigated these horizontal networks in a way that consolidated her own business, and her own role at the top of that business. In so doing, she also participated in the politics of gendered uplift, by portraying women in her community as empowered businesswomen.

Her image *Lilac Beauty Shop* shows an African American woman standing in the doorway of Lilac Beauty Shop parlour (Figure 34). The figure is somewhat enveloped by the size of the shop, yet her confident pose and contrasting pale dress prevents her from being dwarfed by it. Instead, by leaning against and slightly in front of the building, the viewer gets a sense of ownership and confidence from the woman. Her pose compounds this; meeting the camera’s eye directly, with her hands in the pockets of her uniform, and sly smile on her face, the viewer gets a sense of her casual and relaxed role in the

¹⁸⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 388.

business. This is in contrast to the two male figures in the corner of the image, who are clearly looking to walk across the space and in so doing are blurred. This apparently accidental contrast makes the stillness of the woman all the more noticeable. Furthermore, the reflection in the window of the opposite buildings creates a sense of the scale and position of the urban situation of the business. One final point of note – serving as the *punctum* of the image for me – is the bust in the shop window.¹⁹⁰ The fact that this bust appears to be white speaks to the troubled gender dynamics of the time – that even whilst African American women could find empowerment through their own businesses, the standards of beauty to which they had to conform remained white.

¹⁹⁰ The term “punctum” refers to “that accident which pricks me” in a photographic image – a detail that evokes a unique, emotional response for the viewer. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).



Figure 34. Winifred Hall Allen, Lilac Beauty Shop, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 62.

Another image of a female-owned beauty parlour – *Mrs. Scott, owner of the Ritz Shoppe, seated in the front* – takes a different approach to portraying its owner as an empowering figure (Figure 35). Here, the photograph shows the inside of the business, with all of the women employees

sat in their chairs in a diagonal line. The line they create matches that of the pattern on the floor, creating a sense of continuation and symmetry within the image. This matches the uniformity of the women – their hairstyles, uniform, and shoes are all consistent with each other, and create a sense of professionalism in the regularity of their appearance. Mrs. Scott, the business owner, meets the gaze of the camera and sits at the front of the women. What must it have meant to her, as a female African American business owner, to have her picture taken by an African American woman? It must have, at the very least, been a validating experience for Scott. In this way, Allen asserts the worth and respectability of Harlem businesswomen, in an uplifting act along horizontal lines.



Figure 35. Winifred Hall Allen, Mrs. Scott, owner of Ritz Shopper, seated in front, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 67.

The final way in which Winifred Hall Allen's images should be analysed, which further compounds her unique role in the history of African American women photographers, is her experimentation with modernism. Not only does this recover her position as a transitional figure in African American photographic history, it also reveals how far her utilization of the diagonal network allowed her further creative and personal freedom with her photographic subjects. Thus far, we have seen portraiture overwhelmingly conform to notions of pictorialism, which has been utilised to compound ideas of the respectable New Negro and New Negro Women. Yet whilst this was a technique which Winifred Hall Allen utilised in her work, her image *A.C. Harris, cleaning the Lido Pool on 146th Street* is far more consistent with ideas of modernism than any other style (Figure 36). Modernism "required that photography cultivate the photographic – indeed, that it invent the photographic – so that its legitimacy would not be questioned," thus it rejected the pictorial notion that photography mimics formal portraiture.¹⁹¹ Therefore, cityscapes dominated modernist photography, with the likes of Margaret Bourke-White placing the emphasis on the industrial landscape in her images. The cityscape is intrinsic to modernism, as Katharine Mullin notes "a key motif in modernist literature."¹⁹² Likewise, Winifred Hall Allen's image focuses more on the industrial landscape than Harris, as the blank space of the pool stretching out behind him dwarfs him. The high rise building to the right

¹⁹¹ Andy Grundberg, "The Crisis of the Real: Photography and postmodernism," in *The Photography Reader* ed. Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 175.

¹⁹² Katharine Mullin, "Cities in Modernist Literature," *The British Library*, 25 May, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/cities-in-modernist-literature>.

of the frame, which is higher than the camera lens itself, further creates a sense of industrial scale. The remnants of pool water at the bottom of the image reflect the Harris' image back on itself – the only somewhat natural feature of this image. This dualism compounds the impact of Harris' pose, as he sits with his head in his hand. He is most likely waiting for the pool to finish draining, but the pose suggests that he may be more downcast than the other portraits have so far suggested. This is consistent with the ideas of modernism – that of the industrial taking prominence over the individual. The use of symmetry and black space is also consistent with this idea. In this way, Allen is a transitional figure between the pictorialism of portraiture and modernism of documentary photography. In this way, those scholars who have dubbed Allen as purely a “portrait photographer” are inaccurate.¹⁹³ Her engagement with the public space outside of a portrait studio, her role as a professional photographer, indicates that she was also one of the earliest African American modernist artists. Her removal from gendered expectations that dictated so many African American women limit themselves to portraiture, afforded by her navigation of diagonal networks, allowed her the creative freedom to explore this new genre.

¹⁹³ Jacqueline Ellis, *Silent Witnesses*, 13.

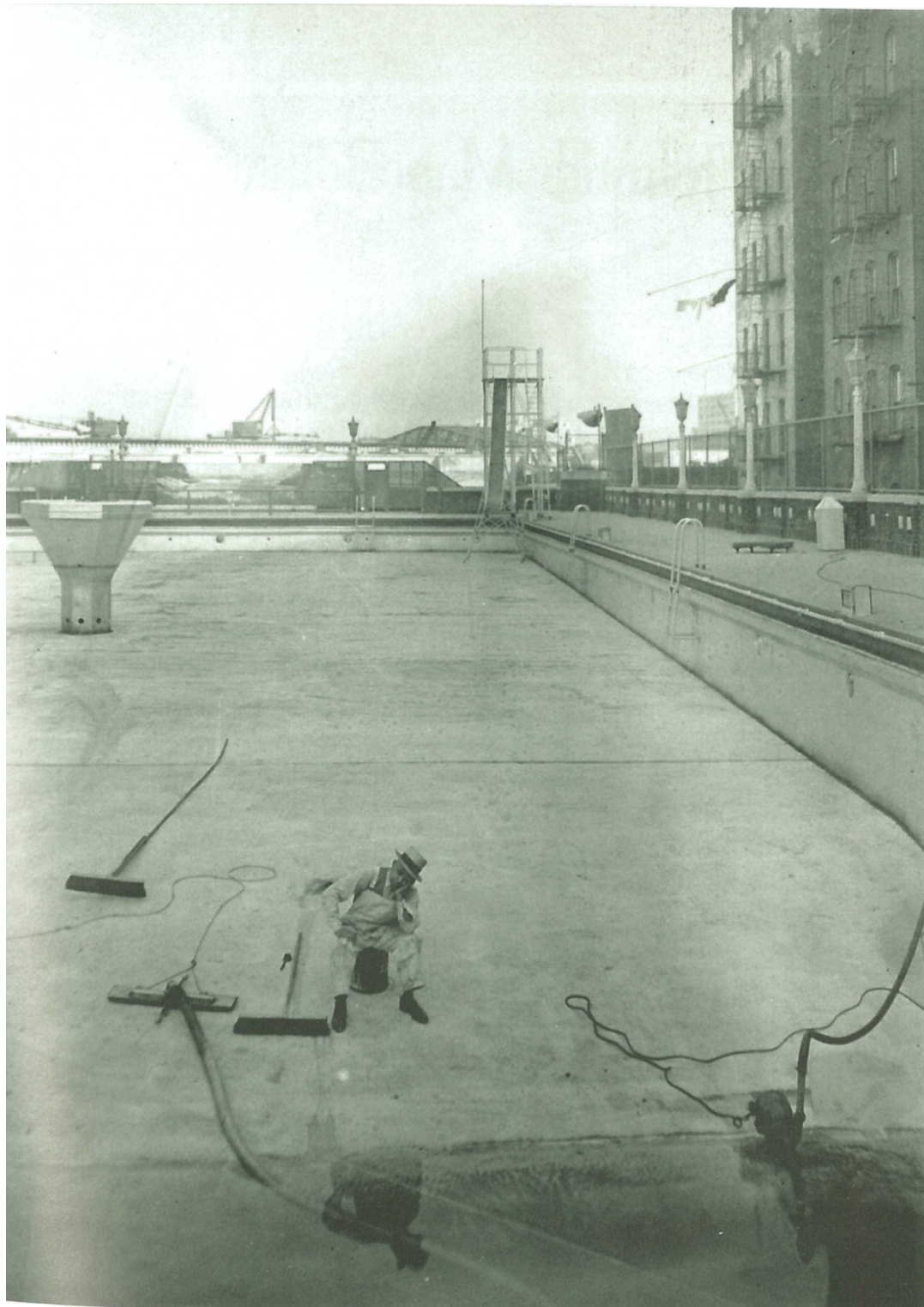


Figure 36. Winifred Hall Allen, *A. C. Harris*, cleaning the Lido Pool on the 146th Street, date unknown

Source: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (New York & London: Writers & Readers Publishing, Inc., 1993), 71.

Winifred Hall Allen worked for twenty years documenting Harlem and its residents. Her bold use of both pictorialism and modernism in her images is indicative of her nature as an important transitional figure in the mid-twentieth century. Around 1950, however, she gave up photography as a profession and “embarked on a career in nursing, which she pursued for over twenty years.”¹⁹⁴ The reason why remains unclear. As we have seen, she considered her work of so little importance that many of her images would be lost over the years. Yet the way in which Allen was able to create a career for herself as a photographer in this time, and even defy so many of the norms imposed on other African American women photographers of this period, is testament to her importance within a canon of photography. Her navigation of diagonal networks – from formal training, to apprenticeships, to teaching her husband photography, to rooting her work within the local community – allowed her greater artistic and personal freedom. Wesley, Allen’s assistant, recalls how she remembered her as a “kind of a very secret person [who] kept things to herself, I knew none of her family... but I can see her yet strapping her camera on her and marching out into the streets.”¹⁹⁵ This idea of Allen as a secretive yet determined and dynamic woman, who utilised the diagonal networks of the time to uplift herself and others, is one that deserves proper recognition in American photographic history. Nor is Allen the only African American woman whose determination enabled her to have a career independent of her husband. Far more scholarship has been dedicated to the New Orleans based

¹⁹⁴ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 60.

¹⁹⁵ Moutoussamy-Ashe, “Interview with Bernadice Wesley.”

photographer Florestine Collins, but there are clear echoes of Winifred Hall Allen's experience despite their vastly different geographic location.

**“She *Ran* the Business and She Took *Care* of Business”: New Orleans,
Passing, and the Photography of Florestine Collins**

In recent years, more scholarly attention has been drawn to the life and work of Florestine Collins, in large part due to the documentary *Through A Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, and the publication of *Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer's View of the Early Twentieth Century*. Both texts emphasise the uniqueness of her career, her incredible achievements facing the gendered and racialized prejudices of her time, and attempt to place her in the wider canon of African American photographic history. Arthé A. Anthony, the writer of *Picturing Black New Orleans* and the figure who discusses Collins in the documentary, is not only an established academic, but also Collins' great-niece, thus utilising her conversations with her relative and her subjects in order to shine a light on a career which could have easily been lost to history. Yet both of these texts do her work a disservice by not analysing her work closely. Her portraits are treasure troves of information about Collins' attitude, agenda, and artistic sensibilities, and whilst the biographical information and anecdotal information is invaluable, her works deserves proper in-depth analysis. Her images display the conservative notions of middle-class respectability which dominated African American culture in New Orleans at the time, as exhibited by her use of pictorialism. Within this framework, her use of networks becomes particularly compelling, as she navigated the very gender constraints which she herself conveyed in her art; creating nineteenth century pictorialist

imagery whilst working as an independent African American businesswoman. She achieved this by creating a diagonalizing support network around her – from the transitional vertical network of apprenticeships, to the horizontal networks of Church traditions, advertisements, and her family members – which she used to uplift herself, the women she hired to work for her, and her community.

Florestine Collins was born in 1895 in New Orleans, a city with a unique racial makeup. New Orleans in the early twentieth century was, despite being more liberal than most Southern cities at the time, heavily segregated. This was not along racial lines that were merely black and white; the Creole identity further complicated the racial makeup of the city where Florestine spent her life. Historically, Creoles had been regarded as “an unusually superior class of black” by their white contemporaries, and been spared the worst of the treatment that their African American brethren faced.¹⁹⁶ However, as the Civil War imposed rules outlawing free assembly and imposing curfews on the Creole populations, whilst white working immigrants from other states further polarised black and white identities, by the time Collins was born in 1895 all such special treatment had been lost to Jim Crow segregation and they were regarded by whites as virtually indistinct from those of “black” descent. Despite this subjugation of Creole communities under segregation, many Creoles “continued to see themselves as a culturally distinct group” and “even though they were not legally granted the same rights afforded whites, by no

¹⁹⁶ Sylvie Dubois and Megan Melançon, “Creole Is, Creole Ain’t: Diachronic and Synchronic Attitudes toward Creole Identity in Southern Louisiana,” *Language in Society* 29, no. 2 (Jun., 2000), 240.

means would they tolerate categorization with blacks.”¹⁹⁷ This included schools which were only for Creole children. Yet Collins was able to utilise her Creole status in order to access a career which would allow her to uplift not only the Creole community, but also the wider African American community as well. She was able to do this by passing for white.

In 1909, Collins had to leave school after completing the sixth grade in order to support her family. As the oldest child, her bricklayer father could no longer afford the \$1 - \$1.50 a month for her private schooling, and she was required to enter the workforce. Most young women were keen to avoid working directly for whites, as maids or housekeepers, for fear of sexual harassment. Collins, however, would utilise her pale skin to pass as white and gain access to an industry which otherwise would have been closed to her. In the 1910s she worked as a clerk for Jerome Hannafin, a finisher (developer and printer) for Herbert J. Harvey, and, prior to her 1917 marriage, a stationary embosser and developer for the Eastman Kodak Company.¹⁹⁸ Her enthusiasm and skill meant that she was able to exploit these menial tasks and begin taking actual photographs, as Hannafin in particular was, in Collins’ own words, “so lazy that he would want to go to a show. So he saw that it was to his advantage to teach me how to take pictures so that he could go and leave me in charge... He saw that I was apt and learned easily.”¹⁹⁹ Thanks to her utilisation of the very segregationist system that intended to constrain her, by the time that

¹⁹⁷ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Arthé A. Anthony, “Florestine Perrault Collins and the Gendered Politics of Black Portraiture in 1920s New Orleans,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 43, no. 2 (Spring, 2002), 170.

¹⁹⁹ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 2.

Collins had set up her first studio in 1920, she was a fully-trained businesswoman and photographer. Collins navigated a vertical network – that of a male-operated studio – in order to extract the training and technical skills she would require to go into business for herself. For the women in the previous chapter, marriage fulfilled this role. Yet Collins would adapt this conventionally vertical network of professional authority by upending the male-dominated hierarchy of the workplace, and utilizing horizontal networks of the community, to create a more diagonal network which fused elements of her own personal authority with a wider co-operation and solidarity with family and friends.

As her first studio was located in her own living room, Collins's clientele in the early stages of her career were mostly family and friends. In Collins's case her family forms a diagonal network of support and uplift – they experienced uplift as a result of her respectable images of them, and she experienced uplift by having a chance to practice her craft. Collins used and adapted *both* domestic, home-based networks alongside professional networks, by resisting the strict hierarchy of the former, and by asserting control and authority in the latter. Therefore, the presence of family and friends in Collins' early images are indicative of a diagonal network at play – one of more mutual advancement. Even from her earliest images, the artistic choices apparent in her work speak to a racial uplift in their trappings of respectability. Collins' picture of her mother is indicative of this (Figure 37); we see her dressed in a fur coat, with her hair up above her head, consistent with ideals of respectable fashion at the time. She looks off in the same direction her body is facing, creating a silhouette similar to that of a classical bust. In this way, the image is

consistent with the high-art notions of pictorial photography. Indeed, this picture exemplifies the template of standard portraiture of this time and place. Likewise, the photograph entitled *Unidentified young woman* typifies the standard of pictorial portraiture of this time (Figure 38). Unlike the portrait of Collins' mother, this young woman sits facing the camera diagonally, directly meeting its gaze. She is also dressed in a fashionable 1920s style, with feathers, white fabrics, and pearls suggesting at an affluent and stylish lifestyle. Despite their different techniques, both of these images are intended to evoke notions of respectability and fashion in their composition; the use of backdrops to create contrast and draw our attention to the eyes of the figures. Yet even in her formative years, Collins was not afraid to attempt to bend the rules of portraiture to accommodate for the femininity and fashionable desirability of her subjects.



Figure 37. Florestine Collins, Emilie Jules Perrault, Florestine's mother, early 1920s

Source: Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2000), 59.



Figure 38. Florestine Collins, Unidentified young woman, Bertrand's studio, early 1920s

Source: Arthé A. Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer's View of the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkley: University Press of Florida, 2012), 4.

Many of her earliest images were of close personal friends who worked in more traditional jobs, such as maids and seamstresses, which required them to wear uniforms. But this is not the version of them that Collins presents to us. Instead, in her images of her friends, we see women who are glamorous, stylish, and independent. In this way, she engages with the horizontal network of the workplaces these women operated within, by subversively expressing their *non-working* identity. Daisy Young and Jeannette Warburg Altimus were two of her friends who were “always willing models” whilst Collins was

developing her early techniques.²⁰⁰ An early 1920s image of Warburg is an example of the kind of aesthetic that Collins sought to capture in her earliest work (Figure 39); that of the confidence, beauty, status, and femininity of black women. Warburg sits in a pale dress, with a string of pearls about her neck.²⁰¹ The paleness of the dress against the darkness of the background, coupled with the softer lighting, creates a contrasting effect which highlights the softness and femininity of Warburg's frame. The pearls, in addition, suggest at affluence and status, giving the impression of wealth and privilege in contrast to the reality of Warburg's working life. It is her expression that is the most captivating part of the image, however. Whilst images of Collins's customers would most commonly have the subject meeting the camera's gaze directly, here Warburg is faced slightly off centre to the camera, and looks down demurely, with a slight smile to herself. In this pose, and with this expression, Collins creates a version of Warburg which is mysterious and secretive. She does not seek the gaze of the viewer, but has visibly contented herself within the realms of her own thoughts. Looking away and down does not lower her status in the eyes of the viewer, but rather gives her an air of the untouchable; an intellectual and feminine independence. Indeed, the idea of representing a person's intellectual identity is consistent with the ideals of the New Negro in portraiture.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 71.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 43.



Figure 39. Florestine Collins, Jeannette Warburg, practice model, early 1920s

Source: Arthé A. Anthony, Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer's View of the Early Twentieth Century (Berkley: University Press of Florida, 2012), 43.

Collins's photograph of Mae Fuller Keller (Figure 40) is one that Anthony pays close attention to, stating that the photograph captures her "self-possession and confident beauty and sexuality," despite her being employed as a "mere maid."²⁰² In particular, Anthony focuses on her staging, and how she is "seated while posing provocatively, but gracefully, on a beach with her legs crossed" and with a "sleeveless short dress, watch, and "Egyptian bob" hairstyle" which "symbolize the personal and political freedoms sought by many women..."²⁰³ In this carefully chosen pose, the viewer's attention is drawn to every aspect of Fuller's outfit; the intricate lace of her hem, the watch

²⁰² Anthony, "Florestine Perrault Collins," 174.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 175.

round her wrist, and the immaculately clean suede of her shoes. It is rare that Collins fits the entire person within a frame, yet this image of Fuller is poised in such a way as to capture her likeness from head to toe. The pose that Collins puts her in is playful, and whilst Fuller engages with the camera she does not quite smile. Rather, it appears as though she is in the act of turning to face the viewer, her mouth slightly parted as though about to speak. The fact that Collins has posed her so unusually, breaking the conventions of the traditional portraiture that she usually adheres to, makes this image an example of Collins's attempts to push the boundaries of her art. The overall effect is one of empowerment and independence; this young woman is casual, relaxed, and yet effortlessly elegant in her dress.



Figure 40. Florestine Collins, Mae Fuller Keller, early 1920s

Source: Arthé A. Anthony, “Florestine Perrault Collins and the Gendered Politics of Black Portraiture in 1920s New Orleans,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 43, no. 2 (Spring, 2002), 181.

By 1923, Collins’ business success had grown to such an extent that she was able to move her studio, then named Bertrand’s Studio, from her living room into a studio on 610 North Claiborne Avenue, in the heart of New Orleans’s African American community. This allowed her business to become far more lucrative, on account of her increased public exposure. Collins was a skilled marketer thanks to her use of advertising, with which she differentiated herself successfully from her competitors by using her gender, a factor which should have placed her at a disadvantage to her male competitors, to her own advantage. Collins’ use of advertisements was inherently diagonal in nature, as she uses her gender in order to position herself at the top of a workplace hierarchy in the eyes of the public. A *New Orleans Herald* advertisement from 1925 stated that: “I Like to Make Pictures of Children,”²⁰⁴ and asking her potential customers “why not a picture of the child with the first book bag, on the way to school for the first time – preserve that wonderful moment.”²⁰⁵ Anthony maintains that this advertisement “appeals to mothers with its implications that as a women photographer, she had special skills for understanding the importance of critical movements in a child’s development.”²⁰⁶ Although Collins never had any children herself, she utilises her gender and the assumptions that people will make at the time to directly compound her status as a businesswoman. She takes this even further in her

²⁰⁴ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 41.

²⁰⁵ Anthony, “Florestine Perault Collins,” 177.

²⁰⁶ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 74.

1926 advert in *Crescent City Pictorial*, as she makes an image of herself central to the advertisement (Figure 41).²⁰⁷ At the time, it was unusual for photographers to include an image of themselves in their advertisements. Yet in the image, we can see that Collins (then named Bertrand) makes herself the focal point of the advertisement. Within the context of the wider page, the self-portrait of Collins sits centrally, and her direct gaze emphasised by the fact that it is the only portrait on the page immediately catches the reader's eye. Her outfit and appearance is consistent with those portraits of her friends we have already seen. Once the portrait has caught the reader's eye, however, it is the second image that is the image to the right that asserts her businesswoman identity. A small boy sits in the centre of the frame, acting as the *punctum* as the high ceilings dwarf him and the downward angle created by the perspective of the room.²⁰⁸ Collins, standing to the viewer's left, contrasts this image in her pale dress, and frames the boy both literally within the scene and spatially within the photograph. Here, we see Collins at work, not looking at the camera, with the contrast created by her dress emphasising her femininity at the same time her disregard of the viewer and focus on her dress emphasises her status as a businesswoman. By asserting her own identity and gender so directly in her advertisement, she further places herself at an advantage over her male counterparts. When reaching out to her community, a strictly horizontal network, Collins orientates herself around her gender; using it to generate business for herself and entrench her own position at the top of her own vertical network within her studio. Therefore, Collins' use of

²⁰⁷ OCW Taylor, "The Crescent City Pictorial," Tulane University Digital Library, accessed 2 December, 2016,

<http://cdm16313.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16313coll63/id/35>, 22.

²⁰⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

advertisements exemplifies her adaptation of conventional domestic and professional identities in a more complex, diagonal network.



Figure 41. OCW Taylor, *The Crescent City Pictorial*, 1926.

Source: OCW Taylor, “The Crescent City Pictorial,” Tulane University Digital Library, accessed 2 December, 2016, <http://cdm16313.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16313coll63/id/35>.

By taking pictures of key moments in the life of babies, children, women and men, Collins asserted that these moments had worth; that their weddings, graduations, and communions warranted celebration and commemoration. By letting her clients shed their uniforms and roles associated with their normal lives, Collins was attempting to create a safe space in which they had an opportunity to present themselves outside of their work identities. As Anthony maintains, “dressing up symbolised the transformation they underwent when they were no longer at work, where they were expected to be deferential to whites in manner and dress.”²⁰⁹ The racial pride that she inspired

²⁰⁹ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 85.

led to her photographic studio becoming, for her customers, a key part of the rites of passage in their lives. As resident Mrs Ruth Barthélemy stated, for each of her children he would make “two stops: the church for baptism, and the photographer.”²¹⁰ This suggests a parallel between religious and photographic ritual within the African American people of New Orleans, as the photographs Collins offered resonated within the community. As she reinforced their respectable, Christian image, they too reinforced her business and her image as a businesswoman. Therefore, the Church provided a key horizontal network which Collins was able to utilise.

At times, however, her presentation was so radical that it drew criticism from the local community. When Collins took a picture of teenager Nettie George in the early 1920s, she was experimenting in bolder costume choices, in this case by draping fabric over the body of a subject rather than dressing them (Figure 42). The image of George shows a beautiful young African American woman, facing the camera directly and smiling. In contrast to Collins’ previous images, this figure is dressed without the finery and props that imply the higher status of her friends. Instead, a simple cloth covers George, with her right shoulder exposed and a low neckline. The focus is much tighter than in Collins’ previous works, as the framing hides George’s arms and hands from view. The fact that George is smiling, and appears slightly hunched, gives this image an impression of significantly less artificial staging than is apparent in some of Collins’s other images, emphasising natural beauty and youth than on implied status. Collins attempt to experiment with costuming techniques that may not have the subject formally dressed draws

²¹⁰ Anthony, “Florestine Perrault Collins,” 177.

parallels with many of her white contemporaries, such as Cunningham, and African American male photographers, such as James VanDerZee, who had been able to artistically advance into nude photography. George's father, however, demanded that Collins remove it from display in her window. According to Anthony, his objections were that "the neckline of what his daughter was wearing [was] too revealing" and that the photograph had "been put on display without his permission."²¹¹ Not only is this indicative of the kind of attitudes that young women faced regarding the perceived purity and sanctity of their bodies, but it indicates the delicate tight-rope that Collins walked with every picture that she took. She had to convey pride and desirability, but in a way that was in keeping with the conservative values entrenched in her community at the time. Indeed, this was a tight-rope that Collins was struggling to walk in her personal life as well.

²¹¹ Ibid., 176.



Figure 42. Florestine Collins, Nettie George, practice model, early 1920s

Source: Arthé A. Anthony, Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer's View of the Early Twentieth Century (Berkley: University Press of Florida, 2012), 75.

Collins' first husband, who was nicknamed "Iceman" by her family, was a staunch conservative who struggled with his wife's career and aspirations.²¹² At a time where photography remained a highly unusual profession for women, Collins' unique role within her community caused a rift between her and her husband. Furthermore, Anthony suggests that it was "because of his jealousy of other men, she was not free to attend the Mardi

²¹² Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 1.

Gras balls that represented being ‘in society’ to her.”²¹³ Whilst having her original studio in her home allowed her to negotiate the realms of domesticity by appealing to patriarchal sensibilities about working “in the home,” when her success enabled her to open her own studio in the heart of the business district it doubtless strained her marriage more. Although he had no bearing on her career, the limitations he placed on Collins’ freedom within the community are in many ways reminiscent of the hierarchical structure of a ‘vertical’ network, albeit without the career advancement. Yet Collins would reject this hierarchical structure. In 1927, Collins met her husband’s friend Herbert (Claiborne), and ran away with him to secure a speedy divorce from her husband. They would move back to New Orleans in 1928. For the Creole community, Catholicism made up a huge part of their collective identity, and the notion of divorce was practically unthinkable. The fact that Collins was so active in achieving her own happiness, even to the extent of risking the alienation of her own community, indicates that she was far more radical than the label “portrait photographer” would first convey.

The ways in which Collins continued to negotiate her gender roles and diagonal networks throughout her career compounds this. Her utilization of her family reveals how diagonalizing her career was. During the early years of her first marriage, Collins relied on close-knit familial networks to ensure that she met her domestic responsibilities whilst maintaining her business. In these relationships and activities, which fused elements of horizontal and vertical networks, we can see another instance of the diagonal networks as the crucial vector for African American women photographers. Her mother and

²¹³ Anthony, “Florestine Perrault Collins,” 172.

grandmother frequently helped her with the housework and cooking, as Collins did not know how to cook. They continued this support both to support her inexperience in marriage and, later, Collins' hectic schedule provided by her working life. Her father also assisted significantly, building the darkroom extension onto her house when her studio was in her living room. As we have seen, her friends were eager to model for her. Whilst Florestine Collins did not have access to the same networks that white women had – she was, after all, the only African American female photographer in New Orleans at the time – she constructed her own networks from her family and friends, functioning their familial roles into business roles, all while conforming to the conservative notions of femininity apparent at the time. She did not stop with just handiwork and modelling, either; she actively sought to educate and train her family and friends in the art and business of photography as well. Her sister Thelma Lombard was a saleswoman, her other sister Mildred Gardina and family friend Walterine Celestine co-managed the establishment, and her brother Arthur became a photographer in his own right.²¹⁴ Indeed, Anthony mistakenly assumed that Collins had learned photography from her brother, but Collins “corrected the mistaken assumption in no uncertain terms, making it clear that she, the oldest, had introduced her younger siblings to photography.”²¹⁵ Ironically, her brother would be able to journey outside of the studio and town in order to take photographs further afield; something that Collins would rarely be able to do. Collins succeeded in helping to economically secure and uplift her family through the vertical network that she

²¹⁴ Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 11.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

herself created, and situated herself at the top of. In this way, her transition into this role was diagonal in nature, as she actively utilised her community and family to further her career whilst she successfully gained autonomy over vertical networks in the studios in which she worked.

Within this network, she further challenged racial notions at the time by welcoming darker skinned African American workers; not just conforming to the lighter-skinned prejudice amongst the Creole people of the time. Valrian Burrell Montgomery, a darker-skinned African American woman who worked in the studio, stated that Collins did not share the entrenched prejudice of many Creoles, as “they didn’t make me feel funny or anything. We just loved each other.”²¹⁶ The fact that she was able to pursue a divorce and employ and photograph darker-skinned African Americans in the context of the 1920s whilst still being a respected part of the community indicates the high regard that the community must have had for her work and her ability to document their most important moments, as she functioned as one of the “ambassadors to African-American communities.”²¹⁷ Looking at her images of ‘Unidentified graduate and communicant’ from the early stages of her career in the 1920s emphasises this, as we can see two African American children at a foundational moment in their lives (Figure 43). Collins’ theatrical use of props and costume is in full force here, as the older girl sits on an elaborately carved throne, holding a rolled up document that the viewer is to assume is her diploma. The boy, likewise, holds in one hand a tall candle, and in the other a bible with dangling rosary beads. Both children are dressed from head to toe in

²¹⁶ Ibid., 99.

²¹⁷ Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 35.

spotless white clothing, indicating the conservative nature of their outfits and their purpose. Their expressions are solemn, and they meet the camera's gaze directly, indicating the gravitas of their achievements. Indeed, Collins' framing—light on a dark background, full-length, seating the girl so the two are at a similar eye-level – paints both of these events as equally important and equally reverential within the space of the photograph.



Figure 43. Florestine Collins, Unidentified graduate and communicant, early 1920s

Source: Staff of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, "Florestine Perrault Collins," *knowlouisiana.org Encyclopaedia of Louisiana*, article published 12 September 2012, <http://www.knowlouisiana.org/entry/florestine-perrault-collins>.

Collins was active until her retirement in 1949. She continued to work into the 1930s, during which time she wore a suit during her work, and successfully managed to keep her business prosperous throughout the Great Depression. She offered a wide variety of products – from smaller, cheaper reproductions to large, expensive prints – which kept her business lucrative and affordable. Her groundwork in the 1920s had established her photographic work as a part of the traditions of the African American experience in New Orleans, meaning that even as people were attempting to cut costs and save their money, they viewed Collins' portraits as a necessity. Equally, her decision to serve all African Americans, and not just those of Creole descent, turned out to be a hugely profitable choice. The fact that Collins' business survived one of the most significant economic downturns in modern history, coupled with her gender and race factoring against her, is testament to her determination and skill in her profession. This is made all the more remarkable when compared to her contemporaries in the North, most of whom started as photographers by working under their husbands or receiving help from male photographers, as they were also denied access to the kind of networks to which white women had access. Yet by skilfully subverting and circumventing the gendered and racialized limitations placed on her in her specifically segregated context, Collins created an environment in which she and her support network were able to flourish. The vertical and horizontal networks she utilised in her career – from passing in studios to utilising her family – resulted in a unique diagonal network that Collins used to further her own career. By granting her images the close-reading they deserve, as well as emphasising the many ways she defied the conventions of her day both

personally and within her business, we can see how truly remarkable the life and work of Florestine Collins was.

Winifred Hall Allen and Florestine Collins were both able to outlast the hardships of the Great Depression thanks to their skill, business acumen, and ability to meet the demands of their communities. They drew on the ideals of the New Negro, for both African American men and women, to present their subjects with an aura of intellect and respectability by using pictorialism. This made them both reflective of the ideals of their communities, as well as intrinsically important to their self-representation. Whilst other women relied on a husband to support their careers in photography, their use of diagonal networks allowed Collins and Allen to reject this framework. Through using various transitional vertical networks, such as apprenticeships and formal training, and community based horizontal networks, such as the Church, newspaper adverts and local businesses, both women were able to create a diagonal network of career advancement. Although both relied on male figures to train them in the foundational years of their careers, both would ultimately emerge at the top of their own hierarchies – as “leaders of the tribe.”

**Conclusion: “She Knew What She Was Doing”: Professionalization,
Femininity, and Emergence from the Studio**

As this project has shown, African American women photographers were an emerging presence in the early twentieth century. Thanks to various horizontal and vertical networks, these women were able to create vibrant and unusual careers for themselves at a time when the camera was an object which was largely inaccessible to most African American women. The camera was a professional tool, not an amateurish hobby. Whilst white women were able to practice photography in their spare time, for most African Americans the camera remained out of reach in the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet, even as the Harlem Renaissance was coming to an end, some African American women were emerging who utilised photography in different ways. One crucial figure who did this was Eslanda Cardoza Goode Robeson. Although mostly known as the wife of actor and activist Paul Robeson, Robeson was an established academic and intellectual in her own right. Her use of photography provided a crucial, yet often overlooked component of this.

Eslanda Robeson’s relationship with the camera is complex and contradictory. On the one hand it was a professional tool she used in order to travel to and document dangerous locations, yet on the other it was a hobby deeply rooted in her personal life. Robeson’s very approach to photography differed from the other women I examine. Most of the women in previous chapters approached photography from an aesthetic point of view, having come into photography via their families or specific photographic training. Their work ties into pictorialist notions of women and the camera; that women’s emotion and sense of beauty made them well suited for the

photographic medium. Whilst figures such as Winifred Hall Allen would move away from portraiture to challenge this ideal, Robeson's interaction to photography was always different. Whilst these other women's experiences were rooted in art, hers were rooted firmly in science. Her background of attaining a B.S. in Chemistry at Columbia University and working as a chemist and technician at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York motivated her to become interested in photography, as she felt that "you have to stay put in a laboratory if you want to work at chemistry."²¹⁸ The nineteenth-century ideas of photography as a scientific medium come full circle with Robeson's attitude; rather than excluding African American women from pursuing photography, in this instance they enabled it. Robeson's focus on a scientific approach also evokes nineteenth century notions of Truth in photography, as her anthropological approach in many ways mirrored the Delia daguerreotypes.

One of Eslanda Robeson's first anthropological trips was to South Africa in 1936. Although initially denied a visa, she decided to travel to South Africa with her son Pauli regardless. She used her friends in Africa as a network in order to get off of the boat at Cape Town and receive her visa, as "before her departure she telexed ahead to friends in South Africa – Max Yergan and a very well respected South African doctor – who were to meet her at the boat. When she and Pauli arrived, they were greeted by Yergan and by the local Africans. Eslanda was granted her visa."²¹⁹ She recounted her trip in *African Journey*, where she would utilise photography in order to reflect her "diasporic politics of identification. This viewpoint recognizes, creates, and

²¹⁸ Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 93.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

extends cultural and political connections among people of African descent.”²²⁰ Including over sixty images, Maureen Mahon writes of the images that:

Here, she followed the anthropological process of providing information to make “the exotic” seem familiar, selecting photographs that attacked dominant representations of “primitive Africa.” There are pictures of a wedding party, family groups, and neatly attired children standing outside their school. These are not wild-eyed natives, but people who have homes and families. Their hair is carefully groomed and their clothes—whether Western or African—are tidy. Many of the photo captions identify people by name or occupation, individualizing them and creating a feel of informal snapshots from a vacation rather than of scientific data.²²¹

In this way, she utilises a kind of politics of respectability in order to contribute to the “de-exoticizing” of the subjects in her photographs. One of the most fascinating images is the only one in her original book in which she includes herself and her son (Figure 44). In this image, four figures stand side by side: Eslanda Robeson, her son Pauli, the Mulamuzi (the chief justice of Buganda) and an unknown second boy. The positioning of the figures – with the two boys separating the two adults – also serves as a bridge between the African and African American identities of the adults. All figures are dressed respectfully for their respective cultures, with the Mulamuzi wearing an official white robe with a blazer around it. Eslanda Robeson herself is dressed in a skirt, long coat, and hat with earrings clearly visible. Robeson is the only one clearly at ease with the camera, as she smiles openly at the viewer. The other figures, including the children, all gaze unsmilingly at the camera. This

²²⁰ Maureen Mahon, “Eslanda Goode Robeson's African Journey: The Politics of Identification and Representation in the African Diaspora,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 8, iss. 3 (Dec., 2006), 102.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

image creates the sense that Robeson is the most contented of all of the figures, and is the most positive person in the group. Yet this image does not just contain a positive image of Robeson. By combining the American African self in herself and her son alongside the mainland African self of the Mulamuzi, she advocates her “diasporic politics of identification.” The dedication in her book also speaks to this: “for the brothers and sisters, who will know whom I mean.”²²²



Figure 44. Photographer unknown, Pauli and I (left and right) visit with the Mulamuzi, the chief justice of Buganda (next to Pauli), at his home in Kampala, 1946

Source: Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946).

Yet her work is not just a political exercise; Robeson’s anthropological approach is apparent as well. She dedicates considerable space in the

²²² Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946), 5.

photographic section of the book to the objects and places in the communities. In the same way which the African American women portrait photographers would use domestic props such as flowers and furniture to signify respectability, Robeson uses them to signify an authentic African culture. Robeson includes objects such as pots and wicker objects (Figure 45) and locations such as the Coronation House in the palace grounds (Figure 46). She also includes images of members of the African community such as a portrait of a *Lady of Nkole ferry* (Figure 47). This woman, like the figures in the previous portrait, looks unsmilingly at the camera. Robeson is less preoccupied with capturing an aesthetically pleasing and traditionally respectable kind of femininity in keeping with American norms, and more with portraying the truth in this woman's life. Rather than imposing American, and white, notions of respectability onto this figure, as so many of the women discussed in this thesis did, Robeson rejects these imposed standards in favour of an anthropological truth.

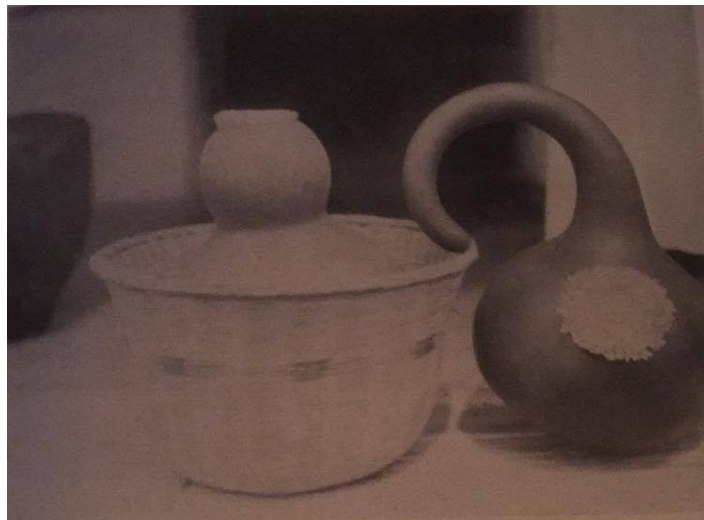


Figure 45. Eslanda Robeson, “Old things” at Hoima, Bunyoro, 1946

Source: Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946).



Figure 46. Eslanda Robeson, Coronation House in palace grounds at Kabarole, 1946

Source: Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946).

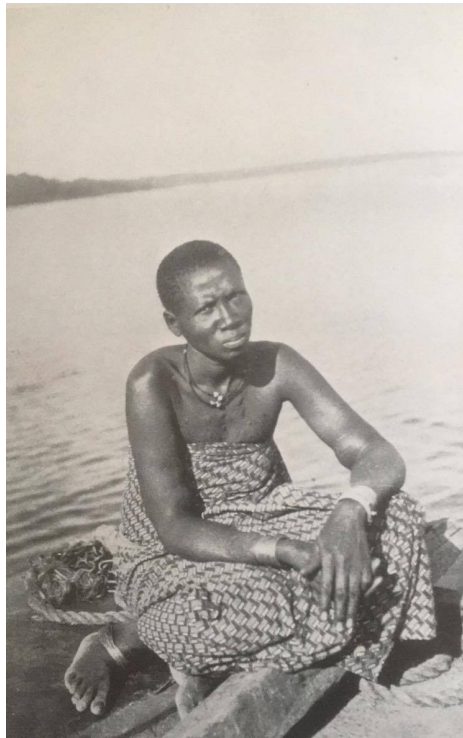


Figure 47. Eslanda Robeson, Lady of Nkole ferry, 1946

Source: Eslanda Robeson, *African Journey* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946).

Eslanda Robeson's scientific background and emphasis on portraying truth would be demonstrated by more African American women in the coming decades, as more and more entered the photographic fields of journalism and documentary photography. World War Two would provide more opportunities than ever before for women's camera work, as government-employed photographers such as Elizabeth "Tex" Williams, and as journalism photographers, such as Vera Jackson. By this time, we can see that African American women photographers had been able to emerge from the confines of the studio to photograph the wider world.

This is not to say that gendered restrictions did not continue to play out on the lives of African American women photographers. Like the other women I examine, she incorporated photography in her home life as well. In an interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Robeson's son Pauli recounts how photography "began with her as a hobby. She took photos of the family and of friends and she set up her own darkroom, got her own chemicals and then you know set up her own room in the back of a little place next to one of the bathrooms."²²³ The idea of incorporating the domestic space of the home into a functional photographic space has been a theme throughout this thesis, yet in this case Robeson's role as a hobbyist rather than a professional is implied. By 1936, however, Pauli recounts how "by then obviously a professional with the

²²³ Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "Interview with Paul Robeson, Jr.," Box 2, Folder 2, Winifred Hall File, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, 1984-1985, Sc MG 343, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, 21/02/2017, 1.

camera. She knew what she was doing.”²²⁴ As the camera became a more portable device, which African American women were able to utilise in a variety of spaces, the line between the professional and the hobbyist became increasingly blurred. Furthermore, a reduction in the importance of familial networks occurred. Robeson practiced photography independently of her husband and, whilst she takes snapshots of her family, does not appear to utilise them in any professional capacity. Increasingly, fewer networks were required for African American women to access photography, as they were able to access the camera on their own.

By considering the career of Eslanda Robeson, we can see just how far photography had shifted from the beginning of Reconstruction. From a time when the camera was an inaccessible object, and notions of scientific truth attempted to prove African American inferiority, photography had become a tool of empowerment for African American women. The transitional period of the Harlem Renaissance was integral to this shift, as was the work of the women photographers within this period. These women utilised various horizontal and vertical networks in order to make these careers workable for the time of gendered and racialized prejudice within which they operated. Throughout this work I have been utilising a diagram system, in order to properly illustrate these women’s use of networks. By putting all of these women on the same diagram, we can see the varied experiences these women had (Figure 48).

²²⁴ Ibid., 10.

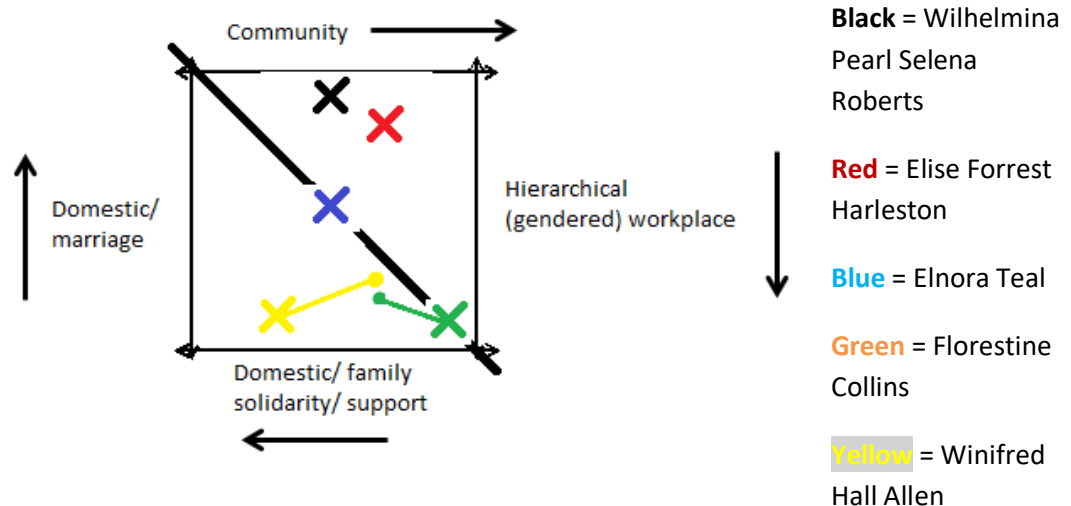


Figure 48. Networks of African American Women Photographers Diagram,

Version 4, 2017

When considered alongside each other, we can see that the ways in which the networks utilised by these women were never exactly the same. Some remained reliant on their husbands. Others were able to transcend the patriarchal institutions which attempted to limit them, through either passing as white or forming their own business and hiring their own support network. Yet despite these distinctions, certain parallels are apparent. Each woman grounded her career in notions of community uplift, and portrayed community in respectable and appealing ways. They were all, also, reliant on a male figure for training and support at some stage in their careers. Finally, they all operated in isolation from other African American women photographers, except for those who they themselves hired. By considering the images of these women alongside the framing reference of networks, we can see just how entrenched these women were within their communities and notions of uplift. Not only were they seeking to reconstruct the image of the African American body in a time of racial turbulence, they were also reconstructing notions of femininity

both within their images and within their own households. Whilst their attempts to emulate whiteness may be criticised, they challenged and sought to correct the dominant narrative of white supremacy. These remarkable women were trailblazers and radicals.

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