

Cameras at Work: African American Studio Photographers and the Business of  
Everyday Life, 1900-1970

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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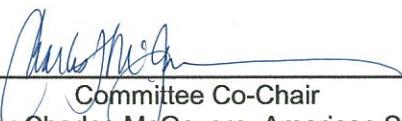
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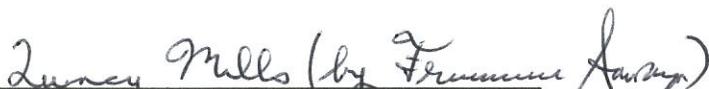


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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the professional lives of African American studio photographers, recovering the history of an important industry in African American community life during segregation and the long Civil Rights Movement. It builds on previous scholarship of black photography by analyzing photographers' business and personal records in concert with their images in order to more critically consider the circumstances under which African Americans produced and consumed photographs every day. During the first half of the twentieth century, urban photography studios constituted essential spaces where African Americans considered ideas of commerce, art, labor, leisure, class, gender, and group identity; "Cameras at Work" situates studio photographers in the history of photography, twentieth-century black cultural politics, and the trajectory of African American business history. The rich records of the Scurlock Studio in Washington, DC center and focus my analysis, which I develop via close comparison of the Scurlocks with a number of other professionals including Morgan and Marvin Smith, Austin Hansen, Louise Martin, and Ernest Withers. These men and women acted locally while empowering African Americans to share their own images nationally, thus contributing to the creation of a wholly American visual culture. Throughout, I treat photographs as objects through which camera operators, consumers, and viewers articulated an understanding of themselves as well as the historical moment in which they negotiated the making of the photograph.

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For my parents, Bill and Julie Piper

## Introduction

In his short essay “A Sunday Portrait,” Edward P. Jones ponders a photograph of his mother, Jeanette Satana Majors, sitting in front of a painting of the U.S. Capitol dome. Jones aligns the portrait, taken before his own birth, with “millions” of pictures purchased by “thousands upon thousands of other poor blacks … in the first decades of the twentieth century” who, upon arriving in the urban North, sought out a photographer’s studio in order to make a record of their transition to city life.<sup>1</sup> Sitters for these portraits, Jones asserts, wanted to show off newly purchased clothes and objects, and to send the visual evidence of their new urban identity back home to relatives that had not made the migration. If newly arrived African Americans found in the North still more degrading and difficult labor or merely a different tenor of racial discrimination, the photographs they posed for allowed them, at least, to present their bodies in a way that gave them pleasure. By Jones’ own description, Majors’ portrait revealed her as “precious,” “majestic, so young and so innocent.”<sup>2</sup>

Jones imagines meeting his mother in the late 1930s on her way to have this portrait made in an unnamed studio in Washington, DC. Jones stops his mother as she reaches for the door of the studio, attempting an intervention that might have given her a less difficult life. In the dream, Majors regards her future son warily, and continues into the studio. Dodging customers streaming in and out of the front door, Majors leaves with a receipt to pick up her prints in a week’s time. At the end of the essay Jones imagines entering the space of the studio himself and asks them to “take my picture the same way

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<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Jones, “A Sunday Portrait,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, Deborah Willis, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1994), 35-40.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, “A Sunday Portrait,” 37.

you took that of the woman who came before me.”<sup>3</sup> On the surface, Jones’ piece is about a family history and the power of photographs to communicate across time. Yet, he also calls our attention to the mental and physical spaces around an African American photography studio, where “well-dressed, well-coiffed young people” traversed the 7<sup>th</sup> Street sidewalk, his mother conversed with her photographer, and the cardboard backdrop located Majors firmly in the American capital. Focusing on the spatial details included by Jones draws our attention beyond the simple importance of the studio to how it functioned as a space for African Americans to perform identity, to interact with a community, and to imagine oneself in new ways.

During the first half of the twentieth century, photography studios constituted essential spaces where African Americans considered ideas of commerce, art, labor, leisure, class, gender, and group identity. “Cameras at Work” situates studio photographers in the history of photography, twentieth-century black cultural politics, and the trajectory of African American business history. The rich records of the Scurlock Studio in Washington, DC center and focus my analysis, which I develop via close comparison of the Scurlocks with a number of other professionals including Morgan and Marvin Smith, Austin Hansen, Louise Martin, and Ernest Withers. These men and women acted locally while empowering African Americans to share their own images nationally, thus contributing to the creation of a wholly American visual culture. Throughout, I treat photographs as objects through which camera operators, consumers, and viewers articulated an understanding of themselves as well as the historical moment in which they negotiated the making of the photograph.

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, “A Sunday Portrait,” 40.

Chapter One begins with the participation of Addison Scurlock and other photographers in the nascent black business movement of the early twentieth century. Leaders of the National Negro Business League (NNBL), including Booker T. Washington himself, routinely employed metaphors of sight, light, and vision when petitioning African Americans to demonstrate their achievements and spread the gospel of uplift. Photographers in the NNBL eagerly strove to make the Washingtonian “ideal” visible through images of successful black business ventures and proprietors. At NNBL meetings and local league functions, photographers like Scurlock addressed challenges unique to black photographers operating in a segregated economy. Proponents of intra-racial commerce used photographs of black-owned property, enterprise, and individual portraits as part of a broader claim made by members of the National Negro Business League, and followers of Booker T. Washington generally, that capitalism/markets offered a viable path to full civic inclusion. Emphasizing the politics of respectability and uplift, photographers of Scurlock’s generation visually demonstrated what they saw as a connection between individual success and community good, where property and propriety also served as evidence of League members’ fitness for leadership.

Orienting the Scurlock Studio within a history of professional photographers’ rooms, Chapter Two illustrates how the spatial elements of the business reinforced uplift politics and class-based arguments for racial equality. Close examination of the studio exterior suggests how Scurlock’s business fit into the physical geography of Washington, DC but also the mental landscape of black Washingtonians. A walk through the comfortable domestic interior of the studio’s reception room shows that in 1911 Scurlock created a safe space for African Americans to refute the racist images of American visual

culture and to re-imagine themselves as part of a larger body of African Americans. A trip to Scurlock Studio meant entering a space where customers might try on the dress and objects that prepared them as consumers and confirmed their respectability.

However, the studio could also prove a restrictive space where African Americans policed their own class and gender codes. Addison Scurlock's studio arrangement simultaneously confirmed his own middle-class bona fides, allowed him to sell even more portraits, and signaled the photographer's own evolving political interests. By dressing up his commercial venture like a domestic interior, Scurlock made the studio into a politically potent "homeplace," giving it a utility that went beyond cameras and prints to create a community space suitable for meetings and other interactions.

The following chapter explores the mission and vision of Morgan and Marvin Smith, also through the analysis of their studio space. Pinpointing their studio at 243 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem helps to position their work and lives in both a physical place and historical context. For friends and customers with the means, Harlem offered the chance to have a portrait taken at the M. Smith Studio. For the Smiths, a photography studio bound them to Harlem, gave them a way to earn an income, and served as an outlet for their creativity. The Smiths prioritized images of African Americans that were polished, glamorous, and performative. In practice the Smiths were busy connecting the images of the New Negro to a new turn in the photographic representation of African Americans and Harlem in particular. That the brothers incorporated photography as part of a broader artistic practice lent their studio space a sense of hybridity: simultaneously a home, business, music club, and art salon. This is not to say that the Smith studio was necessarily egalitarian. Indeed, it primarily served Harlem's middle class and elite into

the 1960s. However, the Smiths' relationships with artists and celebrities and their own prominence in the neighborhood helped make their studio into an important Harlem social hub.

Chapter Four turns towards the working lives of photographers and considers the decisions they made to operate a successful business. This chapter begins with the portrait, the basic unit of business for studio photographers, and a consideration of some concerns unique to African American photographers in the first half of the twentieth century. One difficulty in particular persisted during the inter-war period: black entrepreneurs could *still* find themselves at pains just to convince black consumers to spend their money “within the race.” Some photographers claimed advantage by learning to use film technology designed specifically for white faces in ways that made African Americans feel good about how they looked. The most successful portraitists, like Addison Scurlock, considered contemporary trends in popular photography to appeal to customers, even developing a kind of “visual brand.” Virtually all photographers took jobs outside the studio because of demand for their work, but also to pad their bottom line. Many black photographers contracted to produce group photographs for African American institutions like fraternal groups, social clubs, and churches. This connection to institutions extended to educational entities that ranged from segregated public schools to trade schools to historically black colleges and universities. For some photographers, especially in the South, school contracts became the bulk of their business; a reliable stream of income that dried up after integration. Other studio photographers prone to hustling took up nightclub photography or, as Ernest Withers described it, “table work.” In the process of selling quick shots to revelers, they documented leisure time in black-

controlled social spaces. Between World War I and the 1950s, studio photographers balanced all of these modes of work, both to meet their own economic needs and to serve their clients. They were *able* to pursue several different kinds of photography because the black press and segregated schools concentrated a need for their services and because African American consumers still desired professional photography in significant numbers.

The fifth chapter examines some of the challenges and opportunities Robert Scurlock confronted as an African American photographer working after World War II in Washington, DC. Specifically, it considers Scurlock's efforts to make a career in photography outside of his father Addison Scurlock's shadow by taking advantage of broadening opportunities for African Americans while continuing to serve the community that had supported his family's business for decades. Robert Scurlock made a career in photography that insisted that African American professional photographers could find some success in the mainstream consumer economy. By opening an integrated photography school and a color printing studio, Robert anticipated changes in the market for photographs but also expanding opportunities for African American businesses. As the city of Washington changed demographically and civil rights activists argued that economic freedom and access to the marketplace were part of full citizenship, Robert Scurlock established Custom Craft Studios, Inc. to pivot towards an area of the industry he thought would be the most profitable – color printing for corporations, the US Government, and other photographers.

Taken together, these chapters examine the professional lives of African American studio photographers, recovering the history of an important industry in

African American community life during segregation and the long Civil Rights Movement. It builds on previous scholarship of black photography by analyzing photographers' business and personal records in concert with their images in order to more critically consider the circumstances under which African Americans produced and consumed photographs every day. This project looks to the working photographers in African American communities as agents of black critical and creative life during the last decades of Jim Crow and over the course of a social revolution. Using historical resources that reveal the everyday business of black studio photographers this dissertation seeks to better understand the real cultural work these photographers' images performed in African American homes and neighborhoods across the nation.

In an effort to complicate the history of African American studio photography, my aim has also been to illustrate how each photographic image is the result of personal interactions and that portraits are objects born of real relationships, however brief. The prevailing scholarship on black photography in the first half of the twentieth century has heretofore lingered on how those pictures were "reflective" of African American life during that period. "Cameras At Work" aims to illustrate some of the ways that studio photographers' work was more than a mirror, but it was in fact *generative* of African American creative, political, and social life.

African American photography studio occupied a unique nexus in community life where multiple networks overlapped. Over the course of the business day portrait sitters, workers, visitors, and spectators could converse and consider myriad subjects taking place in front of the camera and out in the greater world. In that regard, commercial photography studios shared similarities to the barber shop, the beauty salon, the Church,

the law office, and even the corner bar as important spaces where African Americans gathered to express themselves in relative freedom and safety. One thing that made photography studios different was that the men and women who ran them went about the business, *every day*, of producing visual records of individual expression that were then easily disseminated and could encourage the creation of new spaces of strength.

Dynamic as they were, a full accounting of African American photography studios requires multiple tools to fully understand them. Professional black photographers engaged in art, commerce, institution building, organizing, and much more. Accordingly I examine the work of said photographers using a wide array of disciplinary lenses: from visual culture studies, to art history, to interior design, to biography, to business history, and urban planning. I argue that although African American studio photographers often operated businesses at a small scale, their work provides a unique way to think about African American capitalism, the Civil Rights Movement, the history of photography, and the study of everyday objects. The importance of the photography studio to African American community life during this period underlines the need to take a closer look at how these “cameras” worked.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **“To Develop Our Business”: Addison Scurlock, Photography, and the National Negro Business League**

In February of 1909, photographer Addison N. Scurlock addressed the Washington, DC branch of the National Negro Business League (NNBL) on the topic of “Creating Business.”<sup>1</sup> Just twenty-five years old and selling photographs out of his living room at the time, Scurlock urged his peers to cultivate “attractive surroundings,” “adequate facilities,” “creative ability”, “sagacity in putting forth ideas,” and a “progressive spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Demonstrating these traits in a “convincing” and accessible way would address a “lack of confidence” in black owned businesses on the part of African Americans.<sup>3</sup> Interested in more than profits, however, Scurlock ended his speech with an exhortation:

We must possess a spirit higher than mere commercialism. We should feel that it is a civic duty to use every means to develop our business to the point where it will add in a national way to the community. In fact a high ideal with an intelligent discontent until that ideal is reached, is the strongest uplifting force in any field of endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

Scurlock and other members of the NNBL believed their business efforts more important than simply earning a living. Following their leader Booker T. Washington they believed business was a righteous means to uplift African Americans. Addison Scurlock (Figure 1) undoubtedly enjoyed the double utility of the verb “develop” in reference to growing

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<sup>1</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, “Creating Business: A Paper Read Before the February Meeting of the Local Negro Business League,” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no.1 (April 1909), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7.

<sup>3</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7

<sup>4</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7.

enterprise. His own business, the production and distribution of photographs, made Scurlock uniquely suited to make the Washingtonian “ideal” visible through images of successful black business ventures and proprietors.

Following Scurlock’s own plea, photographers in the NNBL had a duty to represent a “higher spirit” of commerce, which they saw as linking capitalism to community empowerment and citizenship. Leaders of the Negro Business movement routinely employed metaphors of sight, light, and vision when urging African Americans to demonstrate their achievements. That charge often extended beyond the realm of business during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Especially under the aegis of Booker T. Washington, representations of economic self-sufficiency and accumulation garnered African American’s attention. This chapter explores black photographers’ efforts, and the experience of Addison Scurlock especially, to do their “duty” while developing their own successful photography practices. For Scurlock and other photographers in the National Negro Business League, the camera proved a key means to grow African American commerce and attempts to install themselves at the top of African American social hierarchies.

### **Representative Men and Black Business**

The Scurlock family joined a wave of African American migration to the national capital that began during the Civil War and did not slow until after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Constance Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1967. Prior to the Civil War, African Americans lived in Washington as enslaved and free people, practicing general labor but also skilled trades like carpentry and catering. Free African Americans populated the city in such numbers that they sustained a number of community

Migrants ranged from the formerly enslaved and poor rural transplants during Reconstruction to an emerging black professional class. In particular Howard University, Freedmen's Hospital, and the Federal Government drew African American educators, lawyers, physicians, and dentists. Employment, housing, and other resources were taxed, and significant rifts emerged between new rural migrants and an older established class of black Washingtonians. A group of black elites known colloquially as “the Four Hundred” differentiated themselves from less affluent neighbors based on family connections, skin color, and their relationships with white politicians. By the early 1900s, Washington boasted the largest urban African American population in the country, though residential neighborhoods and economies were increasingly segregated.

As segregation hardened in the capital in the 1890s, Jacqueline Moore argues, the black elite began to realize that most white Washingtonians did not distinguish African Americans by class. Though Jim Crow in Washington never reached the violence of the Deep South, laws banning separate facilities were no longer enforced by 1901. By 1913-14 the Woodrow Wilson administration had officially segregated the federal government.<sup>6</sup> Forced to acknowledge some sense of racial solidarity, those black

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institutions, including the first African American YMCA in 1853. During the Civil War, African Americans streamed into the capital from Virginia and other confederate states, a pattern that only increased during Reconstruction. Neighborhoods, unsurprisingly, separated along class lines, but the system of alley-dwellings in Washington meant that upper and lower classes lived in close proximity. See also: Blair A. Ruble, *Washington's U Street: A Biography* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010); James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington, DC, 1910-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press), 1994; Francine Curro Cary, ed., *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, DC* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996). Forthcoming work by Maurice Jackson promises to bring Constance Green's seminal work up to date.

<sup>6</sup> As congressional Reconstruction ended and Southern lawmakers returned to Washington, the real political and economic opportunities available to African Americans began to erode. Congress passed The Organic Act of 1879, taking home rule away from the city and, not coincidentally, disfranchising the District's large number of African American voters. Essentially, Washingtonians came under the control of

Washingtonians aspiring to elite status learned to “do something for the race,” securing patronage of the working classes and shoring up the class hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Though the “Four Hundred” remained influential, status depended on new factors like education or community work rather than just familial connection or lighter skin color. As the Supreme Court legally justified public segregation and whites enforced their own codes through physical and systemic violence, African Americans necessarily focused inward to provide for their own communities.

Between roughly the 1880’s and 1920, new leaders comprised of entrepreneurs and professionals – as opposed to clergy and educators – adopted “a powerful separatist ideology of race relations....[including] black unity, cooperation, and separate economic and institutional development.”<sup>8</sup> Facing a racial climate that made integration all but fantasy, this new class of leaders sought to address the needs of African Americans through commerce and independent cultural institutions. Local advocates of black economic solidarity included figures like W. Calvin Chase of the *Washington Bee*, government clerk Andrew Hilyer, pharmacist William H. Davis, self-made financier John W. Lewis, printer F. Morris Murray, and photographer Daniel Freeman. For many of this generation, the impulse to do something for the race translated into what *Colored American* editor Edward E. Cooper famously described as “a great agitation for business”

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southern lawmakers who wanted to reshape the national capital in keeping with the Jim Crow policies of the South.

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999). In Washington and other cities increased racial animosity on the part of whites led to class anxiety within African American communities, but also encouraged greater racial solidarity/interdependence. In cities like New York, Chicago, and Washington, arriving multitudes of rural, unskilled and impoverished African Americans were looked down upon by older classes of migrants and elites.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Andrew Fitzpatrick, “A Great Agitation for Business:’ Black Economic Development in Shaw” *Washington History* 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1990/1991): 50.

that gripped the District in those decades.<sup>9</sup> If the growth of Washington's African American businesses seemed rapid, making it happen was no easy task. White banks generally refused to loan money to African Americans or charged exorbitant interest. To secure capital and protect investments African Americans formed their own mutual help societies, founded insurance firms, and eventually established their own banks.<sup>10</sup>

Addison Scurlock arrived in Washington, DC in 1900 when his father, George C. Scurlock, moved his family north from Fayetteville, North Carolina.<sup>11</sup> A family of talent, education and privilege, the Scurlocks settled in an upper class neighborhood just north of the Capitol centered on Howard University and Freedmen's Hospital. George Scurlock taught law at Howard while his brother Herbert Scurlock taught in the chemistry department. Their sister Mattie Scurlock taught in the District's vaunted public schools. Addison Scurlock made his own ambition clear by listing his occupation as

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Cooper, *The Colored American*, October 19, 1901. "In the early 1880s there began a great agitation for business. Meetings were held in all the churches, the ministers preached special sermons on the importance of our people going into business, and many new enterprises were founded...all showing a genuine business awakening."

<sup>10</sup> Many of the institutions that would grow into black-owned banks, insurance, and savings and loan outfits in the twentieth century had roots in mutual aid societies that date from the antebellum period but the most famous were established following the Civil War. Without the means to save money or grow capital through investment, many communities formed aid societies to help members with burial expenses and other hardships. Similarly, fraternal orders spun off insurance firms, as white companies were unlikely to offer life or property insurance to African Americans. As aid societies and insurance companies grew, they often found it prudent to form their own banks to secure their funds as well as those of their neighbors. While those funds might have been significantly less than those available through white financial institutions, through the mid-twentieth century, black entrepreneurs looked to their own community for support.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the history of the Scurlock Studio and Scurlock family see Paul Gardullo, et al., *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2009); Jeffrey John Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity in Twentieth-Century Washington, D.C., as Chronicled Through the Art and Social Realism Photography of Addison N. Scurlock and the Scurlock Studios, 1904-1994" (PhD diss., Howard University, 2005); Jane Freundel Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," *Washington History*, (Spring 1989): 40; Peter Perl, "The Scurlock Look," *Washington Post Magazine*, December 2, 1990, 20; Jacqueline Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1976.

“photographer” in the 1900 census.<sup>12</sup> Dating from that year, the earliest extant picture of Addison Scurlock shows the seventeen-year-old leaning against a stone wall in North Carolina with his camera case close by his side.<sup>13</sup>

At least three African American photographers already operated within the city limits when Addison Scurlock moved to Washington, DC. The *Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, published in 1901, listed O’Hagan C. Jerome of 1248 9<sup>th</sup> St NW and Edward M Johnson at 102 4 ½ St NW.<sup>14</sup> The most prominent photographer, Daniel Freeman, operated a studio, gallery, and bicycle shop at 1516 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW.<sup>15</sup> Born in Virginia in 1868, Freeman studied photography under a white teacher on Pennsylvania Avenue and exhibited his work in the Negro Building at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895. By 1901 Hilyer described Freeman as “our premier colored photographer,” exemplary for a “business well established...patronized by all classes including some of the prominent people of the city.”<sup>16</sup> Though Freeman preceded Scurlock in the trade by several decades they faced similar professional challenges. The two photographers became friends, but also fierce competitors. Eventually, Daniel Freeman served as vice president and president of the Negro Business League of the District of Columbia (NBLDC).

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<sup>12</sup> Population Schedule for the Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, roll 160, page 15B, image 30, Ancestry.com.

<sup>13</sup> *Young Addison Scurlock Holding Coat and Wearing a Straw Hat, Leaning against Brickyard within Fenced Yard, 1900*, series 1, box 18, Scurlock Studio Records, 1905-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington, DC (hereafter, Scurlock Studio Records); Gardullo et al., *Picturing the Promise*, 197.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew F. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory: A Compilation of the Efforts of the Colored People of Washington for Social Betterment; A Historical, Biographical, and Statistical Study of Colored Washington at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and After a Generation of Freedom*, (Washington, DC: The Union League, 1901), 79.

<sup>15</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 14-16.

<sup>16</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 14-16.

Scurlock also began his career as an apprentice to a white photographer on Pennsylvania Avenue named Moses Rice.<sup>17</sup> Many black photographers apprenticed under white professionals in part because they were more numerous at the beginning of the twentieth century. Scurlock possibly found Rice more open to an African American apprentice than Washington's established black photographers. During the training period, Rice would receive the benefits of Scurlock's labor, but faced little risk that a young African American photographer could open a studio nearby or compete for white customers in the future. African American photographers might have thought twice about training up competition for a limited number of black customers. Scurlock worked for the Rice studio until 1904, when he began accepting his own portrait appointments in his parents' home at 447 S Street.<sup>18</sup> In 1907 Scurlock moved his "studio" to his first home at 1202 T Street, one block off of rapidly growing "You Street," and several blocks west of a raucous entertainment district on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. When Scurlock addressed his peers at the NBLDC in 1909, the photographer was still two years away from moving into his own designated commercial space.

Andrew Hilyer first organized the Union League in 1892 to produce "lectures, sermons, publications [and] agitations...urging a larger development of the business of the colored people."<sup>19</sup> At a meeting in 1893, Hilyer recited a list of professions that lacked African American representation in the District, including bankers, engravers, cobblers, and veterinarians. "Among these," Hilyer added, "it would seem to us that there

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<sup>17</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 25. Jeffrey Fearing, a Scurlock Historian and family member, speculates that because Rice was from Canada he was predisposed to train black photographers.

<sup>18</sup> Fearing also speculates that Scurlock made his early portrait of Paul Laurence Dunbar at this address. See Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 71.

<sup>19</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 1.

is a splendid opening for a first class Afro-American photographer as we all like to have our pictures taken.”<sup>20</sup> That year, and on three subsequent occasions, the Union League published directories of black-owned institutions focused largely on businesses in the District.<sup>21</sup> Hilyer and the Union League understood their directories to be more than a list of working grocers but rather, “a compilation of the efforts of the colored people of Washington for social betterment,” linking individual business achievement to improvement of life for all African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Hilyer believed that “the line of racial resistance [was] least” in the realm of commerce and that business ventures offered the most promising means to overcome Jim Crow.

In the *Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, Hilyer identified significant tensions between African American entrepreneurs and customers. Hilyer claimed that a persistent impediment to black achievement came not from white animosity or structural inequity, but from a preference among some black consumers for white-owned business. So prevalent was this attitude that African American merchants detected “a hostile public opinion... [and] that as a rule, the people of their own race shun them, and that their patronage comes almost entirely from the white race.”<sup>23</sup> Business owners suffered criticism of their own. Hilyer wrote that “many colored businessmen are very vindictive,” because of the perceived slight in favor of white-owned establishments. Still, Hilyer praised local proprietors for achievement under “adverse conditions,” and proclaimed

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Wells and Haberstich, “The Scurlock Studio: A Biography,” in *Picturing the Promise*, 198. See “An Address on the Union League and the Industrial and Organized Status of the Colored People of the District of Columbia, Annual Meeting” (April 1893), Andrew F. Hilyer Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

<sup>21</sup> Churches are also listed in the director, and an association made between organized religion and business efforts. Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 140-146.

<sup>22</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory* 4.

that observable success and accumulation in DC were among the “encouraging signs of the progress of the race.”

As guidance for its readers the 1901 *Directory* featured “Representative Men” in a number of occupations that Washingtonians might model themselves upon and patronize.<sup>24</sup> The profiles provide “examples of conspicuous success that show the possibilities for our youth, where energy, ability and fidelity to duty are combined.”<sup>25</sup> Dating from antebellum references to Frederick Douglass, the idea of a “Representative Man” that embodied idealized qualities of achievement and self-possession, a precursor to the “Race Men” and “New Negroes” of the Twentieth Century.<sup>26</sup> While Douglass’s body initially “represented” the best of black America to outsiders, he quickly understood how photographs could help as a medium for sharing his own example across different audiences.<sup>27</sup> Hilyer’s use of the term confirms that African Americans of Freeman’s generation recognized the symbolic burdens placed on (or presumed by) the black middle class, but also the continued utility of visual metaphors in uplift politics. Daniel Freeman and young apprentice Addison Scurlock certainly understood the camera’s capability to make their best plain for others to see. Producing images of Representative Men and their achievements elevated photographers’ own businesses above “mere commercialism” into a political act.

Daniel Freeman earned special mention in the Union League Directory because he took his responsibility as a “successful man in the high-class ceiling of life” seriously.

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<sup>24</sup> The exclusion of women from the Union League “Representatives” belied the real presence of female entrepreneurs in the city. Fitzpatrick notes a handful of women engaged in various trades, including druggists, tailors, and merchants.

<sup>25</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> See Ginger Hill, “‘Rightly Viewed:’ Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass’s Lectures on Pictures,” in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, eds., Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 41-82.

<sup>27</sup> Hill, “Rightly Viewed,” 45-54.

The profile listed Freeman's own middle-class bona-fides in the form of social connections: membership in the Free Masons, Protective League, Washington Amateur Art Society, and the Social Temperance Society. Described as a "considerable taxpayer," Freeman's property and expansive operation served as further evidence of his quality. The Freeman studio boasted "all the latest and most approved apparatus...instruments alone costing over \$500...annexed to his studio a picture framing department and a bicycle store, keeping in-stock a full line of bicycle sundries."<sup>28</sup> The 1901 Directory made clear that Daniel Freeman demonstrated "both genius for his profession, practical tact and love for his calling... sheer force of merit, [and] confidence of the public." Hilyer presented the growth of Freeman's operation as evidence of his fitness as a businessperson, while suggesting the centrality of a professional photography studio for black Washingtonians even before 1900.

To the Union League, the successful business focused in particular on the needs of their African American clientele. For instance R.E. Hammond, the "most successful colored grocer" owed some fifteen percent of his trade to white clientele, but credited African American consumers with making his venture successful. By stocking "what *his* people want, sell[ing] it to them the way they want to buy it and as cheap as [the] competition," Hammond insured that, "*his* people will patronize him [my emphasis]."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Freeman's success stemmed from "a close study of the wants of his patrons and a strenuous effort to satisfy his customers."<sup>30</sup> The relationship between African American businessperson to customer was a possessive one, and the best kind of entrepreneur, so the *Directory* suggested, aimed specifically for intra-racial business. To

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<sup>28</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 14-16.

<sup>29</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Hilyer, *The Twentieth Century Union League Directory*, 14-16.

do so was part of the way that black businesses strove to differentiate themselves from white commercial enterprises.

While black business owners could overcome indifferent consumers, they still faced the challenges of discriminatory financial institutions and spatial segregation. Pro-business publisher W. Calvin Chase wrote in *The Washington Bee* that, “every avenue of trade is closed to us.”<sup>31</sup> In 1910, Chase lamented that, “white businessmen have so centralized and monopolized Pennsylvania Avenue, the leading thoroughfare for white people, as to crowd out the Negro businessman quite exclusively.”<sup>32</sup> Chase continued that, “the inevitable trend of circumstances [is] that the only up-to-date business center and opportunity for a respectable thoroughfare for colored people lies on You Street [sic] between 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> streets, with possibly adjacent blocks running along the intermediate streets, especially 11<sup>th</sup> street.”<sup>33</sup> In the area roughly outlined by Chase, which in the 1960s came to be known as part of the Shaw neighborhood, African American businesses multiplied from about fifteen in 1880 to over three hundred in 1920.<sup>34</sup> A few years later, Chase directly put his finger on that contradiction, writing that, “while the *Bee* is against and has opposed segregation in this city, it has certainly forced the colored brother and

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<sup>31</sup> W. Calvin Chase, *Washington Bee*, January 12, 1889, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Chase, *Washington Bee*, April 23, 1910, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Chase, *Washington Bee*, April 23, 1910, 6. Though African Americans lived in several neighborhoods across Washington, major commercial districts emerged on the aforementioned U Street NW and on perpendicular 7<sup>th</sup> Street NW. Though many people frequented both thoroughfares, they also understood the former street as catering to more of a middle class demographic, while 7<sup>th</sup> Street drew more of a working class clientele to pool halls, theatres, and bars.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzpatrick, “A Great Agitation for Business,” 50. See Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998), 182-224. Walker made “The Golden Age of Black Business” a popular shorthand for the period of 1900-1930. As noted below, observers of black business during and immediately following “the golden age” would qualify that assessment in different ways. For an additional contemporary synthesis of the history of African American business see John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

sister to come together more.”<sup>35</sup> The residential concentration of African Americans in specific neighborhoods created business opportunities and new commercial zones.

W.E.B. Du Bois led one of the first extensive national studies of African American business in 1898, presenting the findings at the Fourth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problem at Atlanta University the following year. Du Bois and his colleagues collected responses from 1,906 African American business owners, which they estimated to constitute approximately seventy-five percent of the national total, based on results of the 1890 Census.<sup>36</sup> In addition to service roles traditionally occupied by African Americans (barbering, undertaking, catering, etc.) the largest numbers of respondents operated groceries, drugstores, and other general merchandise trades.

Photographers made up only a small percentage of the total numbers of black-owned businesses - just eight photographers among 1,906 respondents in Du Bois’ 1899 survey.<sup>37</sup> Although Du Bois’ considered photographic galleries among those businesses “towards which capital has but recently turned,” the eight photographers claimed an average of nine years of experience and a total of \$7,600 invested in their studios.<sup>38</sup> More accurately, the 1890 US Census Bureau recorded 190 professional black photographers

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<sup>35</sup> Chase, *Washington Bee*, April 19, 1916, 73.

<sup>36</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro in Business: Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together With The Proceedings of the Fourth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 30-31, 1899.* (Atlanta, Georgia: Press of the Atlanta University, 1899), 4-9. Du Bois’s study qualified “business man” to mean someone with “considerable” capital invested (five hundred dollars was a suggested figure) and a fixed place of business. See Du Bois, “Negroes in Business,” 216.

<sup>37</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 4-9.

<sup>38</sup> Du Bois included news of a Richmond photographer with a \$1,500 studio, a Charleston photographer in business for twelve years, and a New Bedford, Massachusetts camera worker who “commenced as an errand boy, and eventually bought out the leading photographer in Southeastern Massachusetts.” Although Washington, DC, received special attention as an example of “the Negro’s best development” the District registered only one unnamed “Photographer and Artist” that boasted twelve years in service as well as twelve-hundred dollars in capital. More than likely, that individual was Daniel Freeman, who often advertised himself as such. Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 4-9, 16-24, 28-29, 39.

and 247 photographers by 1900, numbers which continued to rise.<sup>39</sup> Census enumerators counted 404 and 608 African American photographers, respectively, in 1910 and 1920.<sup>40</sup>

The low number in the Atlanta University study may have been due to criteria that favored business owners who invested over five-hundred dollars in capital and neglected part-time photographers. Though Du Bois estimated that nearly eighty percent of African American businesses represented investments of \$2,500 or less, he maintained that even the smallest venture meant “a great deal...a step in social progress worth measuring.”<sup>41</sup>

Du Bois’ report provides returns from several cities shown in detail, and includes news of a Richmond photographer with a \$1,500 studio, a Charleston photographer in business for twelve years, and a New Bedford, Massachusetts camera worker who “commenced as an errand boy, and eventually bought out the leading photographer in Southeastern Massachusetts.”<sup>42</sup> Washington, DC received special attention in the report as the city exemplified “the Negro’s best development.” However, the District registered only one photographer. More than likely, that individual was indeed Daniel Freeman, who often advertised himself as “Photographer and Artist” elsewhere, and boasted twelve years in service as well as twelve-hundred dollars in capital on Du Bois’ survey.<sup>43</sup>

Du Bois meant his study and the subsequent conference to be more than an academic exercise and actively encourage entrepreneurial activity. In a series of resolutions, Du Bois and conference organizers articulated a view of business as a “far-

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<sup>39</sup> Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York, 1998), 223, table 7.3.

<sup>40</sup> The Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Volume 4, Occupation Statistics, table VI, 428-429, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov); The Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Volume 4, Occupation Statistics, table 5, 356-357, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

<sup>41</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 28-29.

sighted measure of self-defense” that “would make for wealth and mutual cooperation.”<sup>44</sup>

Du Bois urged consumers to think beyond bald economic rationalism and patronize black-owned businesses “even at some disadvantage,” for the promise that, “ten million people who join in intelligent self-help can never be long ignored or mistreated.”<sup>45</sup> Du Bois urged cooperation along racial lines in the form of “Negro Business Men’s Leagues, and the gradual federation from these of state and national organizations.”<sup>46</sup> Du Bois did not, however, see business development as a cure-all and tempered his enthusiasm with a sobering assessment of the prospects for small businesses heading into the twentieth century:

The large industry, the department store and the trust are making it daily more difficult for the small capitalist with slender resources and limited knowledge to live. This will have an unfortunate effect upon the Negro, for not only will he, with his white brother, lose ground in much of the retail business, but him unlike the other, will not be readily admitted to positions of direction and co-operation in the large business.<sup>47</sup>

Facing an increasingly corporate economy that promised to heighten the disadvantages placed upon black Americans, Du Bois encouraged cooperative endeavors that would concentrate the resources of small-businesses. As the twentieth century progressed Du Bois grew more critical of strategies and organizations that focused solely on business as a means to political empowerment. Du Bois, as much as anyone, realized the contradiction inherent in relying on capitalism as a path to civic inclusion: ensuring African American business success required the continued segregation of an African

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<sup>44</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Like Hilyer, Du Bois advised consumers that benefits of spending money within the race outweighed any benefit in price or convenience that white business owners could provide. Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Du Bois, *The Negro in Business*, 50. For proprietors, Du Bois stressed the necessity of a college education, the use of forward thinking business practices, and the encouraging of customers through outstanding customer service.

American marketplace. While Du Bois continued to advocate collective effort and grew increasingly more nationalistic, he saw rival Booker T. Washington's efforts as exacerbating class inequality amongst African Americans while doing little to protect the citizenship (and safety) of African Americans.

Despite comparatively small numbers of professional photographers, major advocates for black economic empowerment spent a good deal of effort thinking about photographs and using cameras to further their goals. Historian Shawn Michelle Smith has written persuasively about the strategic use of photography in the construction of black identity, focusing on displays like the photographs collected by Du Bois for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition.<sup>48</sup> Booker T. Washington greatly appreciated how photographs could be used to frame his message. Michael Bieze argues that the Wizard of Tuskegee kept tight control over his own photographic image, tailoring details of his representation to particular audiences.<sup>49</sup> So famous was Washington, his portrait (alongside Abraham Lincoln's) featured in “countless” African American homes at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> When he arrived in New York, Marcus Garvey selected James VanDerZee as the official photographer of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). VanDerZee was tasked with capturing UNIA activism and Garvey’s demonstrations in his signature martial regalia.<sup>51</sup> Addison Scurlock managed to meet all of these figures across the camera, taking Washington’s portrait in 1910 (Figure 2) and maintaining a long relationship with Du Bois as portraitist and

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<sup>48</sup>Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Washington maintained a long correspondence with George Eastman (who became a significant donor to Tuskegee) and white photographers Jacob Riis and Frances Benjamin Johnston as well as black photographers C.M. Battey and A.P. Bedou. See Michael Bieze, *Booker T. Washington and the Art of Self-Representation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 185; Bieze, *Booker T. Washington*, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Willis, *VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 46-48.

contributor to *The Crisis*.<sup>52</sup> Although the images unfortunately no longer exist, Garvey sat for portraits in the Scurlock Studio three times between 1919 and 1920.<sup>53</sup>

Although Du Bois first publicly advocated the creation of “Negro Business Men’s Leagues,” it was Booker T. Washington who organized the first annual meeting of the National Negro Business League in Boston in 1900.<sup>54</sup> Washington used the NNBL to spread his messages of self-help, maintaining that racially distinct business institutions were not only sustainable but offered the most immediate means for civic inclusion. During his presidency of the NNBL Washington argued that members should be interested in more than accumulation, and that wealth and property were a means to secure civil rights. “Mere material possessions are not, and should not be made, the chief end of life,” Washington proclaimed, “but should be made as a means of aiding us in securing our rightful place as citizens.”<sup>55</sup> Washington’s logic ran that financial success helped to demonstrate African American “usefulness” to whites, and presumably, would lead to greater political rights and an easing of racial animosity. By historian John Burrows’ assessment, Washington’s followers held tight to the “notion that if Negroes acquired middle-class status and wealth the Race would be accepted by whites and

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<sup>52</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, *Booker T. Washington*, 1910, Series 4, Box 618.04.88, Scurlock Studio Records. For Washington’s portrait, see Gardullo, et al., *Picturing the Promise*, 164. Du Bois often relied on Scurlock to illustrate articles in *The Crisis*, and selected his work for the cover for the first time in April 1911. Robert S. Scurlock, Handwritten Note, n.d., The Deborah Willis Research Collection, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY, hereafter, Schomburg Center.

<sup>53</sup> Addison Scurlock and Mamie Scurlock, “Studio Session Register, 1911-1922,” Series 8, Scurlock Studio Records, hereafter, Studio Session Register, 1911-1922.

<sup>54</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the First Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Boston: National Negro Business League, 1900). The National Negro Business League (NNBL) published the text of their proceedings yearly, recorded by stenographer William H. Davis of Washington, DC.

<sup>55</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the First Annual Convention*, 25.

prejudice would disappear.”<sup>56</sup> Washington’s ability to blend a gospel of success with social Darwinism “captured the imagination of a generation” of black businesspeople and the NNBL grew quickly.<sup>57</sup> Though numbers vary depending on the source and counting method, the League claimed that three hundred chapters had been founded by 1905, and in 1915 when Washington died national membership was estimated as high as 40,000 (over 600 chapters).<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, Washington’s death, leadership struggles, the ascension of the NAACP, and the League’s failure to address proactively the myriad challenges facing African American business owners contributed to the organization’s dwindling influence in the 1920s and 1930s. In the long run, Washington’s rhetoric failed to account for the very real factors like corporate conglomeration and economies of scale. Adherents had to consistently juggle the contradictions raised by a dedication to laissez faire capitalism *and* a purposefully concentrated, separate African American marketplace. The small size of African American businesses made them especially vulnerable, and league efforts at cooperation after Washington’s death also failed. While attractive to many, Washington’s bootstrap rhetoric could not achieve economic equality on a large scale, not to mention full citizenship rights.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> John H. Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth: A History of the National Negro Business League, 1900-1945* (Auburn, AL: Hickory Hill Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth*, 72. Though the Washington and the NNBL were slow to fully accept female entrepreneurs, the organization accepted, in theory, all comers across different industries. Speakers’ roles at early annual meetings were overwhelmingly filled by male League members.

<sup>58</sup> Albon L. Hosley, “The National Negro Business League,” in *Progress of a Race: On the Remarkable Advancement of the American Negro*, eds., J.L. Nichols and William H Grogman (Naperville, Illinois: JL Nichols, 1920), 211-29.

<sup>59</sup> Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth*, 26.

## **Putting Cameras to Work at the NNBL**

For the national League, annual meetings and subsequently published minutes “played a significant role in the fostering of an image for white consumption.”<sup>60</sup> Booker T. Washington and his Executive Secretary Emmett J. Scott promoted the success stories pitched at annual NNBL conventions as a means to expand the influence of the Tuskegee machine. The NNBL made press releases to black newspapers regularly and published convention minutes each year. The annual reports included trade-specific guidance from convention presenters as well as general “Hints and Helps” for improving local branches. At the same time both the conventions and published minutes “played a significant role in the fostering of an image for white consumption.”<sup>61</sup> Critics like Du Bois decried a penchant for boasting at NNBL conventions, underlining Washington’s near constant concern with projecting the appearance of “progress” to outsiders.<sup>62</sup>

Booker T. Washington also charged each member of the NNBL to claim the moral authority to lead other African Americans in their home cities by becoming an evangelist for capitalism. Their property and physical capital would signal neighbors to follow their lead. At the 1902 convention in Richmond, Washington stated that

more and more our people are looking to such men as compose this organization for guidance and leadership....The people are beginning to look for leadership in the type of man who owns his home, who has a bank account, who has the respect and confidence of not only the black people but the white people in the community where he lives.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth*, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth*, 64.

<sup>62</sup> Michael B. Boston, *The Business Strategy of Booker T. Washington: Its Development and Implementation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 98.

<sup>63</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the Third Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Richmond, VA: National Negro Business League, 1902), 13.

Washington's repeated use of visual language here is instructive. Not only were African Americans "looking" for inspiration, he charged his organization with creating "visible" examples so that the African American working class might view and be convinced of the benefits of class-striving. At the 1908 Convention, Isaiah T. Montgomery, founder of the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, spoke about his branch's efforts to "bring into conspicuous observation every success," to "keep constantly in view the fundamental principles" of the NNBL, and to "bring to light, to disclose, so to speak, the things being done by our race."<sup>64</sup> In Washington, DC Tuskegee operative Roscoe Conkling Bruce put a finer point on it by stating that the successful business owner "[became] in a money-getting time a definite concrete argument to white men and to black men that black men can be more than hewers of wood and drawers of water, than cooks and coachmen."<sup>65</sup> Over and over again advocates of black capitalism deployed metaphors of vision and display to urge on their peers. As much as photographs of the businesses and proprietors would make black leadership and "higher spirit" visible, photographs of black-owned institutions would make these ideals concrete and easily understandable.

If the poor and underemployed had "trouble" reading the signs Washington urged NNBL members to "take from the street corners, from the bar rooms and dens of sin and misery every colored boy and man found in idleness," and show such idlers by the "actual, tangible, visible results that they are entitled to respect and confidence [as their]

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<sup>64</sup> Isiah T. Montgomery, "Building Up a State Negro Business League," *Report of the Ninth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Baltimore, MD: National Negro Business League, 1908), 138.

<sup>65</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce, *Service by the Educated Negro: Address of Roscoe Conkling Bruce of Tuskegee Institute at the Commencement Exercises of the M Street High School, Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, Washington, DC, June 16, 1903* (Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee Institute Press, 1903), 14. See also Fitzpatrick, "A Great Agitation for Business," 56-58.

leaders.”<sup>66</sup> Among the most powerful images in this regard for Washington were pictures of middle-class homes and commercial space which made accomplishment visible in a way even white viewers were bound to understand.<sup>67</sup> While full citizenship and equality remained elusive, easily reproduced images of property or other achievement evinced the photographic subjects’ moral superiority and fitness for leadership. Photographers in the NNBL were specially positioned to put that message in front of the eyes of African Americans in an attractive way.

In the era of World’s Fairs and Exhibitions boosters of black business predictably relied upon photographic demonstrations to prove their claims about African American capability.<sup>68</sup> Prior to the second national convention in Chicago Booker T. Washington issued a press release co-signed by publisher and ally T. Thomas Fortune expressing the desire of the officers of the league to make a large exhibit of photographs at Chicago of the places of business of our people as well as of the persons engaged in business. These photographs should show both outside and inside views as far as possible.<sup>69</sup>

Washington urged attendees to send their images to Tuskegee as soon as possible, and notably stressed photos of real commercial space as much as portraits. At the following

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<sup>66</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the Third Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Burlison Mooney traces the iconography of African American domestic spaces from slavery through the spaces described by Washington: “Similar to photographs used to counter physical and occupational stereotypes, photographs of prosperous black dwellings confronted the negative images of African American domestic architecture in the white-owned media. Images of homes in black journals conveyed aspiration, accomplishment, and (by implication) assimilation.” See Mooney, “The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage: An African American Architectural Iconography,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 1 (March 2002): 55-56.

<sup>68</sup> See Walter B. Weare, “New Negroes for a New Century: Adaptability on Display,” in *The Adaptable South: Essays in Honor of George Brown Tindall*, ed. Elizabeth Jacoway, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 90-123; Julie K. Brown, *Contesting Images: Photography and the World’s Columbian Exposition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

<sup>69</sup> Booker T. Washington and T. Thomas Fortune, memorandum draft, “The Second Annual Session of the National Negro Business League,” n.d., microfilm, reel 752, Booker T. Washington Papers, 1853-1946, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, hereafter, Booker T. Washington Papers.

convention in Richmond, Virginia in 1902 the Executive Committee issued a special resolution:

We further tender to our exhibitors our thanks for the photographs supplied. And as the executive committee have found this exhibit highly interesting and instructive, we recommend that it be made a permanent feature and that the members and of the League labor to make it still more attractive.<sup>70</sup>

Though a summary included in the 1902 convention minutes counted only seven photographers among reporting local chapters, the attention paid to the profession suggests the camera's importance in boosting the League's vision of race-conscious capitalism.<sup>71</sup>

Photographers themselves recognized opportunity in the NNBL to share their work, publicize Washington's message and, undoubtedly, get paid. In 1909 Addison Scurlock wrote to Emmett J. Scott at Tuskegee asking him to approach Booker T. Washington about the possibility of Scurlock working as photographer for a commission on the state of Liberia. While Scurlock thought "photographs would be of great value in making a report," Scott failed to take him up on the offer.<sup>72</sup> Just after Washington's death in 1915, John Lampton of Pawnee, Oklahoma petitioned Scott to be named official photographer. Lampton wrote:

[Convention] views are always wanted by the officers, newspapermen, and other members to help advertise and boost the League. I have heretofore stood back out of professional courtesy to those who claimed to be official photographers, and thus I have failed to get a great many features which my friends have asked me to take. So I hereby ask your honorable body to designate me as the official photographer for the NNBL and I'll see that things of special interest are photographed right.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the Third Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 126.

<sup>71</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the Third Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 123.

<sup>72</sup> Addison N. Scurlock to Emmett J. Scott, March 12, 1909, Booker T. Washington Papers.

<sup>73</sup> John Lampton to Emmett J. Scott, December 29, 1915, Booker T. Washington Papers.

The Executive Committee did not accept Lampton's proposition, but did use local photographers in convention host cities.

Photographers did gain exposure for their work at national meetings through the distribution of official programs. In 1909, the Louisville Business League provided a souvenir booklet to all attendees. J.R Neighbors of Neighbors Photography Studio and his assistant Lavinia B. Sneed edited the program. The Studio's advertisements and photographs in the program announced proficiency in portraiture and flash photography, as well as willingness to photograph anything at any time "day or night, rain or shine."<sup>74</sup> The Studio's full page spread in the program featured a portrait of "Ms. Sneed" and a view of the well-appointed interior at 726 Walnut Street. A competitive advertisement in the same booklet by J.C. Ramey's Sunlight Photo View Co. offered its photographic services for "picnics and lodge [events]."<sup>75</sup> Upon returning home from Louisville, attendees from Washington, DC, reported that "the photographers did their duty in metropolitan style and the house of every delegate will be ornamented with a group [photo] of the League's greatest convention."<sup>76</sup> Talking about photography, posing for portraits, and viewing photographic images all constituted significant activities for NNBL members at national conventions.

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<sup>74</sup> "Official Souvenir Program of the National Negro Business League, Louisville KY 1909," reel 762, Booker T. Washington Papers. Another publication distributed at the Louisville convention promoted the Neighbors' Studio as a superlative establishment and an example for all of the NNBL: "There is but one Negro photographer in Louisville, and he does an immense business. JR Neighbors, who has a studio in the Douglass building, went into the picture business twelve years ago, with no money and a little room in a shanty as a studio. His success has been phenomenal, and an inspiration to a number of young men and women who have studied under him, and are now serving as assistants." Rev. L.G. Jordan and Nannie H. Burroughs, "Negro Business of Louisville: Industrial Progress of Some of the People Who Will Entertain the National Negro Business League on Occasion of Its Tenth Annual Convention," *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 5, (August 1909): 19.

<sup>75</sup> "Official Souvenir Program of the National Negro Business League, Louisville KY 1909."

<sup>76</sup> "Report from the National Convention," *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 6 (September 1909): 10.

To that end the Mound Bayou chapter of the NNBL produced one of the most extensive accounts of their own work just one year after Louisville. Aurelius P. Hood's *The Negro at Mound Bayou: Being an Authentic Story of the Founding, Growth, and Development* tallied over 120 pages and sixty photographs detailing the history of the town, its prominent professionals, social organizations, and natural resources.<sup>77</sup> Hood counted six thousand residents in the surrounding area, and his book includes business profiles, portraits, and architectural views in order to:

introduce to the world the type of negro men and women who have made Mound Bayou; who may be taken as tide and worthy representative of her present standard of citizenship; and in whose characters are embodied the future aspirations of the town, the colony, the race, the Nation.<sup>78</sup>

In the effort of producing an “authentic” history of the town, then, the Mound Bayou Business League encouraged new investment and demonstrated the “ability, judgment, and discretion” that, in the eyes of the League, made them suitable race leaders. Hood, in fact describes the town as “the farthest step forward in the demonstration of the Negro’s pre-eminent fitness for race autonomy.”<sup>79</sup>

The images published in *The Negro at Mound Bayou* were made by “Professor” George W. Burt. Hood’s profile of Burt reflects the photographer’s early struggles as a businessman, a common career trajectory to which Scurlock seems to have been an exception. Hood describes Burt’s rise in photography as “something less than meteoric or spectacular,” from origins that seemed hopeless: “from an insignificant beginning and a tardily growing custom that could scarcely have been though to justify confidence in its

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<sup>77</sup> Aurelius P. Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou: Being an Authentic Story of the Founding, Growth, and Development” (Nashville, TN: AME Sunday School Union, 1910).

<sup>78</sup> Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou,” 119.

<sup>79</sup> Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou,” 10.

future.”<sup>80</sup> Adhering to the NNBL’s master narrative, however, Burt’s career shone as yet another instance of perseverance. George Burt first worked as school teacher in rural Mississippi, likely toiling under the same stifling poverty and racial intimidation described by Du Bois during his own two years in a Tennessee schoolhouse.<sup>81</sup> Burt claimed he left the classroom because “the road to advancement through [education] was too closely restricted for the youth of courage and ambition,” and began to learn photography in 1897.<sup>82</sup> Burt arrived in Mound Bayou in 1900, opening his own studio just a few years ahead of Addison Scurlock. Hood described Burt in superlative terms, including traits like “ambition,” “determination,” “persevering industry,” and “honesty of effort” in order to hold him up as an example to other strivers in the NNBL.<sup>83</sup>

Annual convention organizers made sure to include photographers as speakers on the official program. In addition to vocalizing the NNBL’s values, photographers stood as an example of a growing and potentially profitable field for African Americans. Daniel Freeman addressed conventions three times: on the NBLDC (1913), the photography business (1915), and on “Food Conservation” (1917).<sup>84</sup> While some photographers’ speeches minimized the difficulty of their work or the thin line between survival and insolvency, they also shared details about how black photographers in particular strove to make their studios competitive with established white photographers.

At the 1917 convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee, hometown photographer H.M. Brazelton shared his experience overcoming some African Americans’ preference

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<sup>80</sup> Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou,” 25, 74.

<sup>81</sup> See W.E.B. Du Bois, “On the Meaning of Progress,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

<sup>82</sup> Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou,” 74.

<sup>83</sup> Hood, “The Negro at Mound Bayou,” 25, 74.

<sup>84</sup> Freeman appeared at the 1917 Chattanooga, TN, convention as an emissary of the United States Food Administration urging attendees to begin cutting consumption of food to contribute to the war effort and avoid the drastic rationing that Europe had undertaken.

for white-owned businesses. Brazelton opened his own shop in 1904, the same year as Addison Scurlock. Trained under a German photographer, Brazelton became the first African American photographer in Chattanooga and described his “entrance into this new field [as] a surprise to my people.”<sup>85</sup> Even Brazelton’s own friends deemed the prospects of his success “impossible.”<sup>86</sup> Brazelton’s experience reflected continuing distrust on the part of African American customers who saw some advantage in buying from white merchants. Brazelton continued:

[a] white photographer told me of an old colored lady coming into his studio (this was after I had been in the photographic business about six months and had demonstrated my ability to make colored people any color they wanted to be and still preserve their likeness) and said “I wants my picture made but I never heard of a black man down on East 9th St, making pictures before and I am afraid he will spite me.” (Laughter) He assured her he was personally acquainted with the proprietor of the Brazelton Studio and asked her to give me a trial, she left saying: “I will give him a trial but I know he will spite me. (Laughter)<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps the woman in Brazelton’s anecdote felt that the photographer catered to white customers and would treat her rudely, that Brazelton could not offer a sufficiently low price, or that Brazelton did not possess the skill to make her portrait. Though Brazelton described such incidents as “rare,” laughter in the audience recorded by the stenographer suggests that everyone in the room had some experience confronting those ideas. Though he did not explain how he did so, Brazelton overcame the woman’s apprehension, made her portrait, and summarized that “there is no business in the city of Chattanooga

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<sup>85</sup> H.M. Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” *Report of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Annual Conventions of the National Negro Business League* (Atlantic City, NJ: National Negro Business League, 1918), 84-86.

<sup>86</sup> Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” 84.

<sup>87</sup> Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” 85.

operated by a Negro that receives [as] large a part of the entire patronage as the Brazelton studio.”<sup>88</sup>

True to the NNBL master narrative, Brazelton overcame the woman’s apprehension, of course, but Brazelton’s story revealed an important way that black photographers created additional value for their product that could counter white economic advantages. As testament to the mastery of his trade, Brazelton stated that in the course of six months he quickly “demonstrated [his] ability to make Colored people any color they wanted to be and still preserve their likeness.”<sup>89</sup> His customers regularly expressed preference in the representation of their skin tone and appreciated Brazelton’s ability to control their appearance on film. Given his audience, Brazelton also implied that the white photographer did not understand African Americans’ desire for that level of representational control, and intimated that black consumers were more comfortable expressing those concerns to a photographer of their race. Two years prior, when Daniel Freeman addressed the 1915 convention on “Photography as a Business,” he expressed similar attention to skin color, bragging on his ability to render “a variety of colors of faces, ranging from white, brown, black, etc. [and] many of these wearing white costumes which increase the contrast.”<sup>90</sup> Against the hurtful representations of blackness in popular culture, or in a color-conscious community where lighter skin tone conferred certain class privileges, African American consumers wanted to control what their photographs said about their own racial identity. Brazelton asserted that photography was “the one businesses, if you do it right, you need have no fear of racial competition, nor

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<sup>88</sup> Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” 85.

<sup>89</sup> Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” 85.

<sup>90</sup> Daniel Freeman, “Photography as a Business,” in *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Boston: National Negro Business League, 1915), 215.

[fear for the] patronage of your own people.” Doing business the “right” way included understanding the specific wants of an African American customer and demonstrating an expertise that white photographers either could not or did not care to possess.<sup>91</sup>

### **Framing Success in Washington, DC**

Residents of Washington, DC secured a charter for their local chapter from the NNBL in 1905. In the NBLDC nationally-known leaders like Hilyer, Chase, Judge Robert H. Terrell, William H. Davis (Official Stenographer of the National Body) and J.C. Napier (future NNBL president) shared equal footing with small-business owners like grocer A.H. Underdown, pharmacist Amanda Gray, financier John W. Lewis, and printer F. Morris Murray. Architect W. Sidney Pittman served as the chapter’s first president, with Daniel Freeman as his first deputy. By 1909, the NBLDC boasted seventy-five members “of good financial standing.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1913 at the NNBL convention in Philadelphia Daniel Freeman (by then president of the NBLDC) maintained that African Americans in the city could not be relied upon to automatically spend along racial lines. Here, Freeman keyed upon an aspect he found unique to Washington consumers:

A large percentage of the Negro population of Washington City is made up of government employees and their families, hailing from almost every state in the Union, who because of their somewhat transitory employment seem not to regard Washington City as their permanent home; and as many of them remain entirely strangers to each other during their sojourn in our city, there is an absence of that

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<sup>91</sup> Given his audience, Brazelton also implied that black consumers were more comfortable expressing concerns about the representation of skin color to black photographers.

<sup>92</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no.1 (April 1909): 6.

spirit of clannishness or fellow feeling which is an asset to the Negro business man of other cities.<sup>93</sup>

Freeman downplayed an active history of class and color discrimination on the part of Washington's African American elites, instead proposing that the NNBL would better address the lack of "fellow feeling." Freeman meant his dour assessment to underscore the achievements of the NLBDC, because he found it "more difficult for a Negro to succeed in business [in Washington] than in many cities farther south."<sup>94</sup> Against such difficulty and as "concrete evidence" of the League's work, Freeman cited an expansion from "but two or three colored enterprises on U Street" to at least two dozen on the thoroughfare, including "a shoe store, a drug store, a jewelry store, a haberdashery establishment, a millinery store, a confectionery, and other business places" owned by African Americans.<sup>95</sup>

Just two years later, addressing the convention in Boston, Freeman revised his assessment, and proclaimed Washington, DC to be a "great field" for African American businesses. By then, Freeman saw the "variety of citizens from all over the United States who hold positions in the United States government" as an advantage. "[553] Colored teachers drawing salaries" and uncounted employees of Howard University and Freedmen's Hospital represented significant buying power, on top of "thousands" of hired servants and domestic help "working in both black and white homes," that represented the "vast amount of money which is poured into the hands of the Colored

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<sup>93</sup> Daniel Freeman, "Report on the Washington Negro Business League (General Minutes)," *Report of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Philadelphia: National Negro Business League, 1913), 109.

<sup>94</sup> Freeman, "Report on the Washington Negro Business League (General Minutes)," 109.

<sup>95</sup> Freeman, "Report on the Washington Negro Business League (General Minutes), 110. Presumably, Scurlock Studio, by 1913 located at 900 U Street, fell under the category of "other."

people of Washington year in and year out.”<sup>96</sup> In his 1915 address, Freeman cited even greater numbers of successful African American business, including four unnamed photographers.<sup>97</sup> Freeman credited the NBLDC with the expansion of U Street, citing in particular their collaboration across businesses, churches, and educational institutions while promoting city-wide league meetings and events.

The NBLDC also made photographs a regular part of its local efforts. In 1909, the Executive Committee appointed Addison Scurlock Chairman of the Committee of Annual Fairs. Fresh from winning a Gold Medal at the Jamestown Exposition of 1907, where the “exceedingly large” photography exhibit proved an enduring highlight, Scurlock understood how well photographs would show-off African American business acumen to Washingtonians of all races.<sup>98</sup> Scurlock made recommendations to the general meeting in May. In order to “show the achievements of our business firms,” Scurlock suggested the NBLDC should:

secure a suitable hall, arrange it in booth spaces and induce the representative business men and women to exhibit examples of their highest attainments. The motive for such an exhibition would be to present in a collective way the colored business enterprises of Washington, with the hope of more definitely focusing the attention to their efforts and thereby, if found worthy, to bring substantial increase in patronage.<sup>99</sup>

Scurlock’s proposal paralleled national exhibitions in purpose but acknowledged a desire among his peers to attract more customers. With Scurlock at the helm, it seems reasonably certain that discussion about “representative men and women” involved reflection on photography as a medium or tool. Of course, when exhibitors in DC needed

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<sup>96</sup> National Negro Business League, *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Boston: National Negro Business League, 1915), 214.

<sup>97</sup> *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 214.

<sup>98</sup> Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis, *The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States* (Richmond, VA: Negro Educational Association, 1911), 201.

<sup>99</sup> “Local Business League Notes,” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no.2 (May, 1909): 10.

photos for their own booths, one can imagine that they would find the Chairman of the Exposition available to help them at reasonable prices.

Among the most visible efforts of the NBLDC was the publication of the *Negro Business League Herald*, the first newspaper published by an NNBL affiliate. Although short-lived, the *Herald* received special commendation from Booker T. Washington and Emmett Scott during its run in 1909.<sup>100</sup> Writers for the journal publicized meetings, encouraged black Washingtonians to patronize “one another,” and promoted new ventures. The *Herald*’s editors advocated strongly for the formation of African American banks and investment firms. Like Scurlock’s Annual Fair, the *Herald* maintained somewhat of a local focus and members placed their own advertisements. The Lincoln Memorial Building Company, organized by W. Sidney Pittman, enthusiastically sold stock to fund a combination theater and office building. The Lincoln Company described their investment opportunity as a chance to make money, but with the ultimate goal “to present the Negro in his true light before the eyes of the world.”<sup>101</sup> Sharing a similar commitment to positive representation through visual evidence, the *Herald* gave subscribers a free copy of “Progressive Negro Washington: A Souvenir Album of Photographic Views of the Washington Negroes’ Advancement.”<sup>102</sup>

The *Herald* took seriously the need to address poor perceptions of black businesses amongst black consumers. A major concern among NBLDC members, African American consumers in DC continued to patronize white businesses because they could offer lower prices or better products. In its very first issue, the *Herald* published

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<sup>100</sup> “National Negro Business League Officially Endorses Herald,” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 6, (September 1909): 13. The *Herald* generally published some version of this endorsement every month.

<sup>101</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 5 (August 1909): 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 1, (April 1909): 13.

Addison Scurlock's address as "Creating Business: A Paper Read Before the February Meeting of the Local Business League."<sup>103</sup> Ever optimistic, Scurlock saw two main advantages for black businesses. First, he cited a "racial attitude" spreading amongst African Americans, one that perceived a relationship between individual business success and communal goals for African Americans. Additionally, Scurlock argued, "the average Negro...finds but little competition among his own people."<sup>104</sup> Conceding that these factors offered promise, Scurlock maintained that racial affinity alone could not ensure that customers come through the front door. Skirting concrete problems like the inability to secure credit from white banks, higher rents, and a segregated marketplace, Scurlock echoes a consistent concern that African Americans often preferred to buy from white merchants.

Scurlock judged the gap between what consumers believed about black businesses, and what those operations were capable of, to be vast. Working against African American businesses were "Caucasian" businesses already operating at a "high standard of excellence" with which African American businesses must compete "in order to get the general trade of the colored people, who are in most cases his necessary patrons." "Creating confidence," he wrote, should be a priority for businessmen and women, and required the aforementioned "attractive surroundings, adequate facilities, [and] wide-awake methods." Scurlock asserted that the buying public valued "up-to-date business methods" and an orientation towards the future:

Seek to make application of any advance step. The result of this will be the frequent bringing before the people of new ideas. The exercising of creative

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<sup>103</sup> Scurlock, "Creating Business," 7.

<sup>104</sup> Scurlock, "Creating Business," 7.

ability, quickness and sagacity in putting forth ideas is the progressive spirit that characterizes the prosperous firm.<sup>105</sup>

In Scurlock's estimation, forward thinking extended beyond the walls of one particular business and out "before the people." Small businesses like his own incubated a "progressive spirit" that was about creating profits for an individual firm but also tied to advances in community organization, politics, and public culture. Linking these traits to the racial identity of the business in the mind of black consumers proved imperative, Scurlock suggested, because race loyalty alone could not always overcome the economic rationalism that led black consumers to endure poor treatment in white businesses just to pay lower prices. Scurlock insisted that businesses needed to "to not only tell of things, but do so in a manner that is convincing."<sup>106</sup> When Scurlock photographed his peers in the NNBL, those images helped to put the traits of a progressive business out "before the people." Scurlock added that skillful advertising "should not only tell of things, but do so in a manner that is convincing." Due to the presumption of veracity imbued to photographs, the images demonstrated (more than merely told) of a "progressive spirit" in a more "convincing" way.<sup>107</sup>

By all accounts, Addison Scurlock's business took off rather smoothly, and without the financial struggles expressed by many entrepreneurs in the NNBL. Scurlock's road could have been made easier by the success of Freeman, as well his own relative class privilege. Addison Scurlock learned very quickly to take photographs the "right" way, or at the very least in a style that proved extremely popular in black Washington. Though Scurlock Studio letterhead dating from 1909 bears the slogan "Representative of

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<sup>105</sup> Scurlock, "Creating Business," 7.

<sup>106</sup> Scurlock, "Creating Business," 7.

<sup>107</sup> Scurlock, "Creating Business," 7.

Pictorial Photography,” the photographer rarely made scenic photographs.<sup>108</sup> Balancing his own visual interests against the desires of his customers, and financial necessity, Scurlock worked hard to develop a portrait style that conveyed stoicism, pride, and middle-class propriety.<sup>109</sup> By and large Scurlock’s portraits became increasingly standardized, easily identifiable to his customers for the “Scurlock Look.” Standard features of his aesthetic look involved soft deep focus, delicate retouching, lighting that brought out hair texture, and according to son George Scurlock, “just the right amount of dignity and confidence.”<sup>110</sup> In addition to his famous portraits, Scurlock took on all manner of paying photographic work. In the 1913 *Sherman Directory and Ready Reference of Colored People in the District of Columbia*, Scurlock listed the breadth of work he could perform, including “enlargements and copying, portraits in sepia and mezzotint, locket portraits, interior and exterior views, [and] flashlight work.”<sup>111</sup> Scurlock’s most common advertising slogan, “Photographs Just a Little Different,” promised something new or unique while remaining ambiguous enough to spark curiosity. Scurlock positioned his own work apart from established photographers like Freeman, or white photographers on Pennsylvania Avenue. As he developed his own

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<sup>108</sup> Some of the earliest images taken by Addison Scurlock are portraits of his wife Mamie Fearing Scurlock and other family members posed in open fields, on river rocks at Great Falls Park, or leaning against monuments. *Waterfront of the Potomac River* (1915) reflects some early experimentation with pictorialism or scenic photography.

<sup>109</sup> In his study of photographer Harry Shigeta, Christian Peterson points out that, until after the 1910s, professional photographers had very little time or leeway to experiment visually with pictorial methods. This could be especially true for minority photographers already pinched by a segregated consumer base. James VanDerZee seems a significant exception to this idea. See Peterson, “Harry K. Shigeta of Chicago,” *History of Photography*, 22, no. 2 (1998): 183-198.

<sup>110</sup> Fearing, “African American Image, History, and Identity,” 140.

<sup>111</sup> *Sherman Directory and Ready Reference of Colored People in the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC: Sherman Directory Company, 1913), 372. At one point Addison Scurlock apparently considered expanding his operation. At Christmas in 1914, Addison’s sister Mattie gave him a copy of N.A. Amstutz’ *Handbook of Photoengraving*, first published in 1902. A year later (1915) Scurlock listed himself as a photographer and engraver on a roll of delegates travelling from Washington to the national convention in Boston. See Series 9, Box 1, Scurlock Studio Records.

aesthetic, Addison Scurlock recognized that customers had certain expectations and promised that Scurlock images would differ “*just a little*” [my emphasis] from the average picture.<sup>112</sup> In another advertisement that ran in the same issue as his column, Scurlock appealed to vanity: “The inauguration of 1909 is now a thing of the past, but your elegance on the different social occasions can be effectively perpetuated by the Scurlock portraiture by photography [sic].”<sup>113</sup> Even without photographs attached, these were Scurlock’s efforts to advertise his business per following his own emphasis on “individuality.”<sup>114</sup>

The majority of photographs published in the *Herald* accompanied features rather than advertisements because the cost and effort of printing photographs remained prohibitive in 1909.<sup>115</sup> Some articles included buildings and landmarks like the 12<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA or the True Reformers Building. Each month, the *Herald* profiled individual firms, competitors in a particular trade, or businesses in a specific Washington neighborhood. “Negro Business Enterprises Along U and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets,” for instance, included a large photograph of the interior of Gray and Gray’s Pharmacy detailing “the many fine fixtures and showcases” inside Amanda Gray’s “most luminous satellite of colored business.”<sup>116</sup> The same article also included portraits of Raymond, F. Morris, and Norman Murray of Murray Brothers Printing. In the May 1909 issue, *Herald* staff writer

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<sup>112</sup> The following are all advertisements run in *The Negro Business League Herald*: “The Scurlock Studio 1202 T St NW Photographs Just a Little Different, Phone North 1364 – M,” (November 1909): 2; “The Scurlock Studio 1202 T St NW Photographs Just a Little Different, Phone North 1364 – M” (December 1909): 1; “If you want ‘Photographs just a little different’ go to Scurlock 1202 T Street, northwest – Adv (August 1909): 21.

<sup>113</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no.1 (April 1909): 8. Later, Scurlock cast his studio as a hip up-and-comer: “Oh, you Kid! Have your photographs made by Scurlock, the Photo Man.” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 6 (September 1909): 2.

<sup>114</sup> *Negro Business League Herald*, 1, no.1 (April 1909): 7.

<sup>115</sup> The Lincoln Memorial Building Company and Howard University constituted notable exceptions. Some of the photos in a collage of Howard buildings were in fact taken by Addison Scurlock.

<sup>116</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 3 (June 1909): 2.

Samuel Hill described the Underdown Delicatessen as the “Castor and Pollux of Negro business houses,” containing “everything in the delicatessen line. The air of comity and civility can be felt here in the services rendered. This establishment compares favorably with any of its kind in Washington.”<sup>117</sup> Although photographs took up but a small amount of column space in the *Herald*, the use of images did significant work to demonstrate the proficiency of the businesses pictured in the paper, as well as in the *Bee* and *Colored American*.

In the *Herald*, complimentary reviews of NBLDC businesses were accompanied by portraits of the owners, occasionally taken by Scurlock. Typically framed in three-quarter bust poses, featured businessmen and women appear serious and dignified, without adornment or artful composition. When Arkansas lawyer Scipio A. Jones visited the capital in the course of his duties as Vice President of the NNBL, the *Herald* editors chose to guide the viewer a little more forcefully towards the proper reading of member portraits. The *Herald* described Jones’ photograph as, “a pleasing likeness of the original, show[ing] plainly the strong progressive characteristics of a man who is laboring hard and accomplishing great things for himself and his people.”<sup>118</sup> As business owners, and still “representative men and women,” the members of the NBLDC wanted portraits that conveyed a sense of seriousness, diligence, and orientation towards the future. Addison Scurlock’s work strongly supported that visual project and his signed portrait of W. Sidney Pittman graced the front cover of the August 1909 issue. The NBLDC distributed

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<sup>117</sup> Samuel B. Hill, “Negro Business Enterprises Along 14<sup>th</sup> Street,” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 2 (May 1909): 1. Underdown’s portrait in the *Herald* appears uncredited, but nearby is Hill’s description of Daniel Freeman’s studio at 1833 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

<sup>118</sup> *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 9 (December 1909): 7.

the issue during the annual convention in Louisville that month giving Scurlock his first truly national exposure.

Addison Scurlock began taking photographs for his colleagues' businesses as early as 1904, when A.H. Underdown hired him to photograph his delicatessen.<sup>119</sup> (Figures 3 and 4) At first glance Scurlock's pictures of the store appear to be straightforward documents, even unremarkable. A sign for Coca Cola and packaged goods like Quaker Oats and Sauer's Vanilla Extract fill the sidewalk out front in *Underdown Family Delicatessen*.<sup>120</sup> An interior picture shows canned goods stacked neatly from floor to ceiling behind glass counters and cabinets.<sup>121</sup> Against the "lack of confidence" he ascribed to the black consumer five years later, however, Scurlock presented Underdown and his business space as clean and organized, possessing "adequate facilities" and "up-to date business methods." The exterior shot established Underdown as a property owner, and the advertisements promised African Americans inclusion in a growing mass consumer culture. Underdown and his wife posed with two young employees, creating the impression of a family and tying up a neat circle of consumption and middle-class domesticity that NNBL photographers would also reproduce in their photographs of black homes. By the logic of the NNBL, Scurlock and Underdown collaborated to produce an image that captured that high spirit of commerce and argued for their fitness as class leaders in Washington, DC.

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<sup>119</sup> A.H Underdown later joined the Washington league with Scurlock and would become Vice President of the organization. In 1906 Underdown addressed the annual convention in Atlanta, Georgia on the topic of groceries and dry goods. See Promotional Flyer, "Business League of Washington DC," 1913, reel 762, Booker T. Washington Papers; National Negro Business League, *Report of the Seventh Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Atlanta: National Negro Business League, 1906).

<sup>120</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, *Underdown Family Delicatessen*, ca1904, Series 1, Box 1.1.A2, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>121</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, *Underdown Family Delicatessen, Interior*, 1904, Series 1, Box 81, Scurlock Studio Records.

The *Herald* regularly published photographs similar to Scurlock's Underdown pictures, the very same kind of photographs that Washington and Fortune preferred for NNBL expos: images of storefronts and stock owned by African Americans that gave irrefutable evidence of their professional capability and success. Photographs of attractive goods and orderly facilities helped make an argument that African American businesses could provide services and product equal to their white counterparts. In the course of aiding that project, photographers aligned with the NNBL also implied that capitalism offered a viable means for racial progress and political empowerment. At the local level of the NBLDC, featured images of commercial ventures also helped to create desire amongst black consumers.

Though they had no real goods to sell, DC's African American white-collar professionals also used photographs of property in the *Herald* to demonstrate their ability. In September 1909, the *Herald* ran a feature on Dr. A.E. Gaskins, graduate and faculty member of Howard Dental School. (Figure 5) According to the *Herald*, Gaskins ranked at the top of all dentists because he "built for himself, independent of all other connection, a beautiful suite of rooms under one separate roof, which he devotes entirely to his profession."<sup>122</sup> Gaskins' office could be "conspicuously seen at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and T Streets," two blocks from Scurlock's home studio. For its part, the *Herald* printed

a view of [Gaskins'] own private office building as an object lesson, not only to the other men of his profession, but to other professional men of our race as well, from which inspiration may radiate and bring to the minds of those who are equally successful and ambitious the idea of doing something similar and equally as praiseworthy in the face of many critics, within and without the race.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "Success in Dentistry: Dr. A.E. Gaskins and his Office" *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 6, (September 1909): 6.

<sup>123</sup> "Success in Dentistry," 6.

Gaskins' personal temerity might be understood as the truly inspirational element in the *Herald*'s profile, but the "view" of his building served as the fulcrum that made his importance plain to readers and other black professionals. Though the photo was published without credit, Scurlock's life-long affiliation with the Howard Dental School, their proximity, and the fact that Scurlock made photographs for Dr. Gaskins' at least three times in 1911, all strongly suggest that Scurlock made the image of Gaskins' studio published in the *Herald*. In case inspiration did "radiate" from the photograph, Scurlock purchased an advertisement on the same page reading, "Scurlock: the Photographic Specialist. Prices Reasonable and Work Guaranteed."<sup>124</sup> The one other advertisement on the same page stated that, "it will pay you to advertise in the Negro Business League Herald," provided that you pay the newspaper first.

The *Herald*'s interest in property extended to home ownership and conjured the familiar elements of the middle-class domestic ideal. The August issue (bearing the Scurlock portrait on the cover) also included a lengthy profile by W. Sidney Pittman entitled "Fairmount Heights, DC, and Maryland: Negro Community near Washington, DC and Its Enterprising People." Pittman's article closely mirrored a national examination of "Negro Homes" published by Booker T. Washington in 1908, down to character assessments and photos of architectural details.<sup>125</sup> Washington wrote there that, in his experience, "a house is like a face: it is not difficult to perceive the subtle influences that find expression there, but it is hard to describe them."<sup>126</sup> While Washington indicates some difficulty in translating both homes and faces, he professed a similarity between the two kinds of façade. Washington suggests that exterior views of

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<sup>124</sup> "Success in Dentistry," 6.

<sup>125</sup> Booker T. Washington, "Negro Homes," *The Century Magazine* (May 1908): 71-79.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

houses represented the qualities of the people that lived there, in the same way that photographic portraits were thought to convey a subject's interiority. For members of the NNBL, images of homes conveyed class status, of course, but also moral righteousness, manhood, and fitness for leadership. As evidence of the quality of the Fairmount Heights community, the *Herald* article featured photographs of eleven buildings and three portraits; all taken by Addison Scurlock.<sup>127</sup>

Doing his duty as President of the Fairmount Heights Civic Association and Fairmount Heights Mutual Improvement Company, Pittman described Fairmount Heights as an outlying suburb (or “town”) just six years old and home to about four hundred people, all of them African American. Pittman’s profile focused less on specific business ventures than on a “home life” of middle class propriety and, especially, property:

Every family is a home owner and each home, as will be seen by the accompanying illustrations, is of a type rarely ever classed with the Negro race. They are large and spacious homes, comfortably planned, with architectural skill, and built with all the comforts that a community of this character can afford.<sup>128</sup>

The buildings also stood in as symbols of the many virtues possessed by the “builders and pioneers” of Fairmount Heights. Scurlock’s photographs helped to make Pittman’s case that the homes evinced the owners’ suitability as leaders of other African Americans and self-evident proof of the advancement of the race. Read from a local perspective, the Fairmount Heights piece made all of these claims while advertising a growing real estate development.

Scurlock’s photographs helped to create desire in the minds of readers looking to purchase a home outside of the city limits. All of the homes were large two-story

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<sup>127</sup> “The photos of Fairmount Heights in this Issue were made by Scurlock, 1202 T. Street Northwest – adv.” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 5 (August 1909): 23.

<sup>128</sup> W. Sidney Pittman, “Fairmount Heights, D.C. and Maryland: Negro Community Near Washington, DC and Its Enterprising People” *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 5 (August 1909): 10.

Victorian structures with wide porches and ornate woodwork. Scurlock exaggerated the buildings' size by shooting them from a position slightly below each building, and cropping the images so that the homes filled most of the frame. Captions identified all photographs of the houses by their owners, and Scurlock conspicuously posed the residents on the porch of their respective homes. Not only could viewers see that African Americans occupied and owned these homes, the images resonated with middle-class domestic ideals popular at the turn of the century. The important symbolism of black ownership would have been clear especially to Booker T. Washington who remarked in 1893 that even "a white man knows the Negro that lives in a two-story brick house whether he wants too or not."<sup>129</sup>

Alongside Scurlock's Fairmount Heights photos, Pittman described the suburb's residents by connecting their material accumulation with moral virtue and a feeling of "race progress." Glowing accounts of all persons stressed several common characteristics: thrift, industry, ambition, modesty, honesty, broad ideas, self-sacrifice, and uplift of the community. Pittman's neighbors were born hustlers, agreeably business-like, public-spirited, and "sincere advocate[s] of the success of the race" – the kinds of traits that Jacqueline Moore has identified as key to securing elite status in black Washington after 1900.<sup>130</sup> Pittman made clear that all of these virtues are rewarded in Fairmount Heights. In fact, ownership of homes and property satisfied as the sole examples of residents' good works and superiority. Mr. Charles Payne and his wife "labored incessantly to purchase...one of the most beautiful homes inside and out, of any

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<sup>129</sup> Booker T. Washington, "Speech at Hampton Institute, Nov. 18 1896," in *Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington*, ed. E. Davidson Washington (Garden City, NY, 1932), 43. See Mooney, "The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage," 54.

<sup>130</sup> Pittman, "Fairmount Heights," 10-14.; Moore, *Leading the Race*, 3.

in Fairmount Heights. Mr. Payne loves his home and all its surroundings.”<sup>131</sup> Mr. John F. Collins, an attorney in the District, “built for himself and his ambitious wife the beautiful home herein illustrated.”<sup>132</sup> Mrs. Alice Dorsey also possesses “ambition and thrift for home and independence”; she, “has made good [in the Treasury Department] as her beautiful home will show.”<sup>133</sup> Mr. T.N. Brown’s “heart is in his home and he is an untiring worker for its betterment.”<sup>134</sup> Pittman describes these and other tireless workers as being very community- oriented, but gives little detail about the work they actually perform in that capacity outside of improving their estates. Pittman’s description of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Crouse provides a most succinct example:

Their home is readily seen to be one of the most conspicuous and most desirable in points of interior and exterior beauty of the many others. Mr. Crouse is a hard worker and embodies all the principles of a public spirited man.<sup>135</sup> Pittman further stated that Crouse left constant striving for influence through social connections behind in Washington, and now looks to uplift his neighbors by acquiring things (making his home “conspicuous” and “desirable”). Pittman and his peers in the NNBL saw no apparent disconnect between Crouse’s dedication to his own personal gains and the interests of the collective. Pittman readily pointed out that all of his homeowners are “ready and willing to give [their] services in the uplift of the community at large.” In Fairmount Heights, as in the NNBL, individual wealth and community good were not seen as mutually exclusive. *Herald* editors intended Scurlock’s real estate pictures to stand as unquestioned evidence that the residents in the suburb possessed the qualities that made them fit to be “leaders of the race.” By demonstrating those “actual,

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<sup>131</sup> Pittman, “Fairmount Heights,” 11.

<sup>132</sup> Pittman, “Fairmount Heights,” 14.

<sup>133</sup> Pittman, “Fairmount Heights,” 14, 16.

<sup>134</sup> Pittman, “Fairmount Heights,” 15. Pittman might be referring to Mr. Brown’s family here as well as their physical domicile.

<sup>135</sup> Pittman, “Fairmount Heights,” 14.

tangible, visible results” of success by capitalism touted by Booker T. Washington Scurlock’s photographs served as clear evidence of NBLDC members’ own fitness for leadership, as much as any actual public demonstration of ethics, compassion, or political initiative.<sup>136</sup>

Taking pictures of peers’ real estate constituted a regular part of daily business for Scurlock, but he and other NNBL photographers exhibited their own strong impulse for property ownership. Daniel Freeman’s 1915 speech, “Art of Photography as a Business,” focused more on his financial concerns than aesthetics. Much of his colleague’s interest (and presumably Freeman’s own) lay in his property, commercial space, and comparative wealth. By the photographer’s summary, in twenty-years of operation he moved from a one- room shop to:

one of the most prosperous business streets in Washington DC; my studio building is four stories high with sixteen rooms; hot water heat with four other valuable pieces of property. Paying taxes on about \$30,000 worth of real estate in the District of Columbia...we have two automobiles.<sup>137</sup>

Freeman’s steady acquisition of commercial real estate reflects the importance of the studio space in the experience having one’s picture taken. Middle-class and elite African American consumers used their portraits to confirm their own class status and expected the photographers’ physical studio to work in concert with that project. By acquiring a professional space of his or her own, and outfitting it with the markers of respectability, a photographer could further tie class-based ideas of race progress, luxury, and pride to the act of sitting for a camera portrait. Per Freeman’s own advice, “the business of the studio is fully as important as the photographic end.”<sup>138</sup> Adding to or improving their studio

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<sup>136</sup> Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> Freeman, “Photography as a Business,” 213-216.

<sup>138</sup> Freeman, “Photography as a Business,” 216.

space proved one way for black photographers to create added value for their product, while speaking about it satisfied the NNBL's need to emphasize black property-ownership.

Addison Scurlock understood the appeal of a luxurious space when he aspired to move his studio to its own address in 1911. To make the move Scurlock relied on professional networks within the NBLDC. Dr. William Board, the membership chairman of the NBLDC, had a second floor to let above his drugstore at 9<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, a location that saw a good deal of foot traffic from people moving down U towards 7<sup>th</sup> Street. In April, Scurlock opened his fully outfitted studio on the second floor of 900 U Street, an important step in his professionalization. As detailed on the following chapter, the Scurlock studio became an important space for African Americans in Washington, DC to look at highly polished pictures of their neighbors, while imagining what their next portrait would convey about themselves.

### **Looking Ahead**

African American photographers just like Addison Scurlock flourished (and failed) in many American cities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Scurlock imprint came to be associated with success, ambition, and accumulation in the minds of black Washingtonians. While he hustled to earn a living with his camera, Scurlock attempted to use his photographs for community empowerment, demonstrations of good citizenship, and even political weapons. Scurlock believed in the power of photography's performative aspects and its potential to make his ideas of financial,

social, and moral fitness visible to Washington, DC *and* the nation. The Scurlock Studio grew into an institution in Washington, DC and Addison Scurlock continued to work behind the camera until his death in 1964.

As the Scurlock Studio excelled, however, the NNBL fell largely out of favor among African Americans. The Negro Business movement failed to achieve its broader goals of economic equality or political inclusion, or to substantively address the difficulties of everyday life for working African Americans. Scurlock's aesthetics of respectability remained popular, however, and he continued to rely on the relationships he built in the NBLDC. In time, many African Americans turned towards other political strategies such as the legal fight for civil rights employed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Even after Scurlock joined the NAACP in 1912 he remained committed to black capitalism.

Scurlock continued to strive for a spirit higher than "mere commercialism" which might be illustrated by a series of photographs he made for his neighbor, Freeman Morris Murray. Murray owned a printing business and a nightclub. An active member in the NBLDC, Murray spoke about advertising at local meetings and served under Scurlock on the annual fair committee in 1909.<sup>139</sup> Murray also worked as a lawyer and became active in the Niagara movement beginning in 1906. From his printing press on U Street, Murray published *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* and the *Washington Tribune*, both openly opposed to Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee machine. Scurlock photographed Murray's facilities about three times a year, in addition to annual portraits

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<sup>139</sup> F. Morris Murray, "The Value of Advertising," *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 2 (May 1909): 7; "Local Negro Business League: Report of the September Meeting." *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 7 (October 1909): 7.

for Murray's wife and grown children.<sup>140</sup> Murray utilized Scurlock's photography in *The Horizon* and Scurlock regularly brought print work to Murray, two sides of a mutually beneficial business relationship.

In 1925, Scurlock photographed the interior of Murray Brothers Printing, revealing a giant press that seemed to occupy an entire floor and required three men to operate.<sup>141</sup> (Figure 6) In *Murray Brothers Printing #103*, (Figure 7) taken outside on the same day one of the young printers stands with thirteen other men all dressed smartly in three piece suits sporting watch chains and pocket squares.<sup>142</sup> When Scurlock beckoned them to face his camera, they indulged him with confidence on their faces. In front of Murray's office, under the banner of the *Washington Tribune*, they convey a seriousness of purpose, as if there were more work to do that afternoon. Had Scurlock made this photograph ten years earlier these young men might easily have been at a meeting of the NBLDC. For Addison Scurlock, representing African American capability in business proved to be a project that reached well beyond his years in the NNBL. That Scurlock managed to extend his career long into the twentieth century testifies to the popular utility of his idealized images and his commitment to the respectability of his subjects. Moreover, his success points to Addison Scurlock's own "confidence" in the promise of black business, to his "creative ability" in the darkroom, and his "wide-awake" approach to the economic and political goals of black Washingtonians.

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<sup>140</sup> Addison Scurlock and Mamie Scurlock, "Studio Session Register, 1922-1928," Series 8, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>141</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, *Murray Brothers Printing #102*, 1925, Series 4, Box 618.04.87, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>142</sup> Addison N. Scurlock, *Murray Brothers Printing #103*, 1925, Series 4, Box 618.04.87, Scurlock Studio Records.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **900 “You” Street: Real and Imagined Spaces of the Scurlock Photography Studio, 1900-1930**

One evening in 1913 eight men joined Addison N. Scurlock for a dinner meeting in the reception room of his photography studio at 900 U Street NW in Washington, DC. (Figure 8) The group spread across two tables and passed around a few bottles to share as they ate. After dessert several gentlemen lit cigars or read the news from *The Washington Bee*. At some point in the evening, they casually perused the images of other African Americans on the walls behind them, hung by Scurlock to showcase his skill and to display the options available for purchase. When Scurlock beckoned them to face his camera, they indulged him with confidence on their faces. In the resultant photograph two of the men smile very faintly. Though dinner is over, and the window opened to let in the breeze, none of them have relaxed enough to loosen their ties or even roll up their shirtsleeves. Together they convey a seriousness of purpose, as if there were more work to do that evening.

Scurlock’s photograph cannot tell us what, exactly, these men met to discuss that night but it does locate their meeting in a specific space and place. These nine men (including Scurlock) convened after hours in a black-owned business on the famous “You Street,” a nationally known commercial thoroughfare catering to African Americans in

the increasingly segregated capital city.<sup>1</sup> Scurlock had occupied the second floor for just two years. In that time, the photographer filled his commercial space filled with domestic furnishings like a chandelier, tailored curtains, silverware, photo albums, and gilt picture frames. The gentlemen have dressed professionally and carry themselves with serious countenance, but they gathered socially over beer and pie. The camera reveals them in a semi-public room where other African Americans could go to pose for the same camera, and then purchase their own image within the space of a cabinet card or an 8x10 print.

Orienting the Scurlock Studio within a history of professional photographers' rooms illustrates how the spatial elements of the business lent themselves to the Negro business movement of the early twentieth century, while making class-based arguments for racial equality and uplift politics in general. Close examination of the studio exterior suggests how Scurlock's business fit into the physical geography of the city, but also the mental landscape of black Washingtonians. A walk through the comfortable domestic interior of the studio's reception room shows that in 1911 Scurlock created a safe space for African Americans to refute the racist images of American visual culture and to recognize themselves as part of a larger body of African Americans. Scurlock's studio arrangement simultaneously confirmed Scurlock's own middle-class bona fides, allowed him to sell even more portraits, and signaled the photographer's own evolving political interests. By dressing up his commercial venture like a domestic interior Scurlock made the studio into a politically potent "homeplace," giving it a utility that went beyond cameras and prints to create a community space suitable for meetings like that which

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<sup>1</sup> Though maps read "U" Street, the Scurlock Family usually wrote out the name as "You Street" in their ledgers, correspondence, and invoices. Writing out lettered streets phonetically was custom for Washingtonians to cut down on confusion; "T" Street became "Tea" Street, "P" Street became "Pea" Street, etc.

brought these men together in 1913.<sup>2</sup> Whereas bell hooks argues that living rooms, kitchens, churches, and beauty parlors were safe sites for the development of black cultural criticism, I would add that African American photography studios also bore a “radical political dimension....where one could freely confront...[and] resist the damaging social order.”<sup>3</sup> Studios like Addison Scurlock’s were spaces designed to produce and disseminate counter-representations of African Americans. In turn, the images produced in the studio space encouraged the creation of even more safe spaces.

The following two chapters examine the real and imagined spaces of black photography studios. Following Edward Soja’s analysis that accounts for the physical manifestations and the discourses surrounding space at the same time, I examine the Scurlock Studio as “thirdspace,” or a “space that is directly lived....that stretches across the images and symbols that accompany it, the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, these chapters undertake a close examination of the “front of the house”—public space that photographers, customers, and casual visitors occupied together—at two prominent twentieth century studios.<sup>5</sup> Both chapters look to exemplary recent scholarship

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41-49. I am arguing that African American photography studios deserve inclusion in the category of “homeplace.”

<sup>3</sup> hooks, “Homeplace,” 42.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Soja is largely pushing Henri Lefebvre’s work, and “thirdspace” is analogous to Lefebvre’s “spaces of representation.” In his work, Soja has been especially interested in the political potential of marginalized or peripheral spaces and sees these as “counterspaces” from which people might resist the dominant order. This chapter argues that, with certain limits, the Scurlock and Smith Studios fall under this category. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 67. See also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); see especially Chapter 3: “Regions and Region Behavior.” Goffman regularly looked at commercial ventures as examples of everyday behavior, dividing them using a theater model to “front” spaces (where a public performance must be maintained) and “back” spaces (where private work is performed and workers can be critical of customers or social relations). I think the line is not so clear in a photography studio, but I find the distinction helpful for this project. For my purposes, the “front of the house” consists of everything from the front sidewalk to the operating room; anywhere a customer could expect to be. “Back of the house” areas will be examined in later chapters looking more closely at daily work.

on black beauty parlors, barber shops, funeral parlors, and record stores. Recent work by Tiffany Gill and Joshua Clark Davis argues that these commercial enterprises were also “informal gathering places” that were crucial to making community.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, photography studios also served as spaces for the performance of what Davis calls a “black oriented, commercial public life.”<sup>7</sup> Photography studios proved to be unique among other black-oriented businesses in that they were spaces not only for the expression of how African Americans wanted to be seen, but facilitated the recording of those images into permanent and portable communicative objects.

Like all spaces, photography studios are historically contingent, with uses and meanings determined by social interaction and the contexts of environment, politics, and economy. To be certain, African American photographers worked professionally in nearly every locale where a population could support them. At the same time, African American photography studios shared some similarities across space and time. For the men in this 1913 photograph, and countless other visitors to African American photographers over the following decades, a trip to Scurlock Studio meant entering a space where customers might try on the dress and objects that prepared them as consumers and confirmed their respectability. However, the studio could also prove a restrictive space by reinforcing class and gender codes. To put this another way: the studio was a space for looking, imagining, and performing identity safe from whites, but

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<sup>6</sup> See Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Joshua Clark Davis, “For the Records: How African American Consumers and Music Retailers Created Commercial Public Space in the 1960s and 1970s South,” *Southern Cultures* 17, no 4 (Winter 2011) : 71-90; Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Douglas W. Bristol, Jr., *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Quincy Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barbershops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Davis, “For the Records,” 77.

it was also a space for African Americans to police their own looks and the values they encouraged. The Scurlock Studio, like the M. Smith Studio examined in the following chapter, served a middle-class and elite clientele during a time when Washington, DC functioned as an important site in African American cultural life. This chapter also looks to the studio spaces of a handful of photographers in smaller cities for comparative purposes.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, all new photographers could look to more than fifty years of precedents as they considered how to put their studio together. Photography's invention made the status-symbol of the portrait affordable and the popularity of daguerreotypes drew all manner and classes of people to have their picture made beginning in the early 1840s. Though the majority of Americans patronized picture "factories" known as "blue bosom operators," the upper classes sought an exclusionary space and used photographs to reaffirm class hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> Daguerreotypists sought a wealthier clientele, but also wanted to assert their own membership in the professional class. Shirley Teresa Wajda has illustrated that photographers satisfied these twin aims by turning their "rooms" into "parlors" through the adoption of furniture and objects familiar in Victorian domestic space.<sup>10</sup> The permanent architectural and semi-permanent

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<sup>8</sup> For the sake of comparison a few names will pop up, for filling in: Florestine Perrault Collins (New Orleans), Austin Hansen (NYC), James VanDerZee (NYC), Elise and Forrest Harrison (Charleston, SC), Allen Cole (Cleveland) Ernest Withers (Memphis), Wilhelmina Hall Allen (NYC), H.C. Anderson (Greeneville, MS), Wilhelmina Wynn (Columbia, SC), and Calvin Littlejohn (Fort Worth, TX).

<sup>9</sup> "Blue-bosom operators" gained that moniker because their quick and sloppy assembly line work caused sitters' white shirts to take on a blue tint. Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Shirley Teresa Wajda, "Social Currency: A Domestic History of the Photograph in the United States, 1839-1889," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992); Shirley Teresa Wajda, "The Commercial Photographic Parlor, 1839-1889," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, vol 6, Shaping Communities (1997): 216-230. "Before George Eastman perfected his Kodak System in 1888, which ushered in amateur photography, commercial daguerreotypists and photographers and their patrons had adopted an architectural code designating their aspirations and concomitant behaviors. Portrayal was first and foremost

decorative elements functioned as the “structuring structures” of the middle-class photography studio, as the social use of the space actively contributed to its meaning.<sup>11</sup> By 1844, numbers of “enterprising daguerreotypists were combining with their operating rooms picture galleries and elaborately furnished and embellished reception rooms in which visitors could be accommodated while waiting.”<sup>12</sup> Fine photography businesses settled into a fairly standard organization, and functioned as “theatres of desire” for subjects and casual visitors.<sup>13</sup>

The parlors of famous daguerreotypists like Mathew Brady in New York and Washington or Southworth and Hawes in Boston became important social centers where elites gathered to see and be seen.<sup>14</sup> Brady, as well as others, found that making photographs of celebrities – actors, actresses, authors, and politicians – leant great cache to his own imprint.<sup>15</sup> Portraits of notables suggested that the photographer could create a similar likeness for anyone, and implied a transfer of social status through a purchase at the gallery.<sup>16</sup> Napoleon Sarony of New York City became internationally famous for his photographs of celebrities and implementation of props, unorthodox poses, and a wide

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a business, and enterprising practitioners quickly converted bare rooms of commercial structures in inviting environments of contemplative repose.” Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 217.

<sup>11</sup> Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 217.

<sup>12</sup> Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 218. Because natural light was unpredictable, daguerreotypists had to rely on walk-in business, as appointments proved largely impractical. Thus, clients often ended up waiting for their turn in front of the lens.

<sup>13</sup> “Not a museum of natural history, however, but a theater of desire, the gallery had become a new kind of city place devoted to performance: the making of oneself over into a social image.” See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> “Photographers gained popular credence by aligning themselves as photographers of choice; for actors and actresses, and could produce the same results in a patron’s portrait. Warren’s Photographic Studio, of New York and Boston, was well known for its ‘Theatrical and Celebrity Department,’ which attended to the needs of the leading actors and actresses of the day’ requiring publicity photographs.” Wajda, “Social Currency,” 450.

<sup>16</sup> “Photographers, like portrait painters, sought likenesses of the celebrated to endorse their work. Implicit in this practice was the very real possibility of seeing appropriate people in the gallery.” Wajda, “Social Currency,” 405.

variety of backdrops. Displaying a Sarony celebrity print or a Brady portrait in one's home showed not only that one travelled in the rarefied air of parlor society, but aligned the owner with a narrative of success.

Visitors to the 19<sup>th</sup> century photography parlor were expected to adhere to behaviors commensurate with the domestic parlor, distinguishing themselves by exhibiting physical control and refined opinions about prints and other patrons. Etiquette guides could be explicit:

If you are visiting a picture gallery or an artist's studio, do not meddle; make no loud comments; do not seek to show superior knowledge in matters of art by gratuitous criticism. If you are a connoisseur of art, you will seek modesty of expression; while if you are not, you will only give publicity to your ignorance.<sup>17</sup>

Only those customers who could conduct themselves properly were deemed to belong among the denizens of the parlor, or truly worthy to have their portrait made.<sup>18</sup> For the operator aiming at the middle class, the parlor justified charging higher prices, and created a competitive advantage against others selling at a lower price point.<sup>19</sup> As much as the photographic print, Wajda argues, bourgeois portrait sitters were purchasing status: "The proof was now no longer solely in the object, but in the circumstances surrounding its production."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Prof. Walter R. Houghton, A.M. et al., *American Etiquette and the Rules of Politeness* (Indianapolis: A.E. Davis, 1882), 124-25. Quoted in Wajda, "The Commercial Photographic Parlor," 222.

<sup>18</sup> In effect, part of the parlor's "purpose" was "to test and cast out pretenders who did not know how to negotiate that space, and to welcome visitors whose right demeanors allowed them entrance and participation in the ceremony of the space." Wajda, "Social Currency," 388.

<sup>19</sup> So important proved the photographic parlor, that some itinerant camera workers shipped temporary photo parlor setups on trains and riverboats as they moved from town to town. Wajda, "Commercial Photographic Parlor," 222.

<sup>20</sup> Wajda, "Social Currency," 377. "Parlors provided an especially effective strategy when cheap operators could produce likenesses that compared favorably to those produced by upscale photographers. The proof of Romantic consumption, never found solely in the goods, was to be found in the sensory and performative circumstances surrounding acquisition." Wajda, "The Commercial Photographic Parlor," 223.

Among the first generation of African American photographers a few earned national recognition for their talents in spite of racial prejudice and the specter of slavery. Jules Lion, born in France, worked in New Orleans and Augustus Washington in Hartford, Connecticut, both to some acclaim.<sup>21</sup> James Presley Ball, born free in Virginia in 1825, found success on the second try with his “Daguerrean Gallery of the West” in Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>22</sup> An 1854 profile of the gallery in *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* placed the photographer in the same superlative class as his patrons, and predicted that his business would increase exponentially.<sup>23</sup> Descriptions of Ball’s establishment provide great detail about a foundational space in African American photography, but also serve as an example of the standard style and arrangement expected of an elite photography parlor in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ball’s Gallery in Cincinnati occupied the three top floors of the building and consisted of two operating rooms, a workshop, and an 800 square foot gallery.

During photography’s first decades, urban parlors necessarily occupied the upper floors of buildings, in order to receive better natural light. Street-level displays of images under glass drew potential clients up several flights of stairs to have their portraits made. As a first impression, even the decoration of the staircase proved important for

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<sup>21</sup> For Jules Lion see Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Back: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 4-5, 15-17, 39-44; Margaret Denton Smith and Mary Louise Tucker, *Photography in New Orleans: The Early Years, 1840-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). For Augustus Washington see Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 4-5, 9-11, 18-19; Ann M. Shumard, *A Durable Memento: Portraits by Augustus Washington African American Daguerreotypist* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, 1999). See also Deborah Willis-Thomas, *Black Photographers, 1840-1940: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> For close to a full account of Ball’s career see Deborah Willis, *J.P. Ball: Daguerrean and Studio Photographer* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> “Daguerrean Gallery of the West,” *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, 6 (3) (Apr 1, 1854): 208. “As for the enterprising proprietor, he is the very essence of politeness – nor are his brothers less tinctured with this sweet spirit of human excellence and a disposition to please everyone who patronizes them. No wonder then that there is daily such a rush for this gallery! No wonder that its throng of fashion and beauty is so dense!”

“characterize[ing] the caliber of the establishment.”<sup>24</sup> Customers then passed through the reception room to another sitting area where attractive objects and distractions served the “special role of inducing the sitter to relax, unwind, and prepare a self-image.”<sup>25</sup> While Ball strategically located his gallery “in the very heart of the city, where the busy din of commerce and the rolling of carriages are heard from morning till night,” clients found sonic relief on upper floors.<sup>26</sup> Should any noise drift up from the street a piano was on premises to soothe clients. Photographers of Ball’s class intended their establishments to be oases, free from notions of work and toil, even as they engaged explicitly in commerce. At a proper parlor, as in Ball’s Gallery, clients were shielded from the labor of photography, and never saw those responsible for development or retouching.<sup>27</sup>

Advice manuals and popular profiles like that in *Gleason’s* encouraged photographers to outfit parlors with books, paintings, engravings, musical instruments, and even songbirds for distraction.<sup>28</sup> A description of Ball’s interior is worth quoting at length:

The North wall is ornamented with one hundred eighty-seven of Mr. Ball’s finest pictures. Babies and children, young men and maidens, mothers and sires look you in the face. Jenny Lind, with other distinguished personages, and five or six splendid views of Niagara Falls are among the collection.... Every piece of

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<sup>24</sup> Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 219.

<sup>25</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> “Daguerrean Gallery of the West,” 208.

<sup>27</sup> “Mr. Ball’s Daguerrian [sic] Gallery is situated in the very heart of the city, where the busy din of commerce and the rolling of carriages are heard from morning till night; and the streams of visitors that are continually pouring into his spacious saloons, show how wide spread is his reputation and how successfully he has worked himself into popular favor. Mr. Ball employs nine men in superintending and executing the work of the establishment. Each man has his own separate department, and each is perfect in his peculiar branch. We are so well aware of the indomitable industry displayed by the proprietor, that it is no conjecture of ours but our fixed opinion that it will not be very long before Mr. Ball will be obliged, from the great increase of his business to have rooms twice as large as he now occupies. His fame has spread, not only over his own but through nearly every State of the Union; and there is scarcely a distinguished stranger that comes to Cincinnati but, if his time permits, seeks the pleasure of Mr. Ball’s artistic acquaintance.” See “Daguerrean Gallery of the West,” 208.

<sup>28</sup> See Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 217; Marcus Aurelius Root, *The Camera and the Pencil; or the Heliographic Art* (Philadelphia: M.A. Root, 1864.)

furniture in this gallery is a master-piece of mechanical and artistic skill. The very seat on which you sit and the carpet on which you tread seem to be a gem culled from the fragrant lap of Flora; all of these reflected by two bright mirrors in the east end, present you a scene replete with elegance and beauty – to cap the climax, there is a noble piano by whose sweet notes you are regaled, while the skilful [sic] operator is painting your face with sunbeams on the sensitive yet tenacious mirror.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the very furnishings of Ball's Gallery fused the “mechanical” and “artistic,” the same two qualities that made photography so unique among visual representations for contemporary thinkers. Ball displayed nearly two-hundred daguerreotypes which enabled an imaginative association with the “distinguished personages” on the wall, be they neighbors or celebrities. By sitting for portraits and conversing with other patrons, visitors to Ball's gallery participated in an additional “ritual of status consumption.”<sup>30</sup>

*Gleason's* made no mention whatsoever of J.P. Ball's racial identity, nor that of his nine employees.<sup>31</sup> Among the very first generation of African American photographers, Ball was also locally active as an abolitionist. A year after the visit from *Gleason's*, the photographer published *Ball's Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States Comprising Views of the African Slave Trade, of Northern and Southern Cities, of Cotton and Sugar Plantations, of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Susquehanna Rivers, Niagara Falls, Etc.*<sup>32</sup> Ball meant the text to serve as guide to a panorama of “600 yards” on display in his gallery depicting the violence of slavery throughout the United

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<sup>29</sup> “Daguerrean Gallery of the West,” 208.

<sup>30</sup> Wajda, “The Commercial Photographic Parlor,” 338.

<sup>31</sup> “Daguerrean Gallery of the West,” 208.

<sup>32</sup>J.P. Ball, *Ball's Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States Comprising Views of the African Slave Trade, of Northern and Southern Cities, of Cotton and Sugar Plantations, of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Susquehanna Rivers, Niagara Falls, Etc.* (Cincinnati: A. Pugh, 1855) .

States.<sup>33</sup> In his introduction, Ball (speaking in third person) described his success explicitly in the context of his own racial identity:

had Mr. Ball been a white man, this triumph would not be remarkable, but when we remember that in addition to his poverty, he has had to struggle against that prejudice of the American people; that degrades deeper and more permanently, than poverty, his rise is worthy of remark.<sup>34</sup>

Ball photographed white and black clients, many of whom loyally helped him to rebuild his studio when a tornado struck Cincinnati in 1860. Moving West, Ball continued to find success by establishing studios in Minneapolis, Helena, Montana, and Seattle, Washington. Ball's connections across racial lines might have protected him and given him the confidence to advocate for abolition so prominently. Still, Ball's use of his studio for political ends, using visual representations in particular, provides an early example of a photographer's studio as a space to foster black political consciousness.

Through the second half of the nineteenth century making photographic images became less expensive, and at least in theory, infinitely reproducible.<sup>35</sup> Following George Eastman's invention of the Kodak System in 1888 and as subsequent hand held cameras brought photography into countless homes, the need to create added value for the professionally produced photograph became ever more acute. With cheaper photos and more photographers flooding markets, enterprising photographers who could not make a living on volume alone increased the luxury of their establishments and sought new ways to distinguish themselves. Many photographers presented themselves as an "artist-

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<sup>33</sup> Ball, *Ball's Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour*, 7. See also, Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ball, *Ball's Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> About the same time that Ball's Gallery of the West began to get off the ground, the wet-plate collodion process of photography became more popular nationally. The daguerreotype, ambrotype, and tintype processes all produced unique, singular images printed as direct positives. The collodion process created a negative image on glass, which could then be printed as a positive image on many different surfaces. In 1854 Andre Disdéri patented the carte-de-visite, the popular, tradeable prints on paper that were soon followed by a craze for larger cabinet cards, peaking in the 1880s.

photographer,” using improved technology and studio props to shape the outcome of the image. Sitting for a portrait became a more deliberate collaboration between subject and operator, and consumers took the skills and tendencies of individual photographers into consideration.<sup>36</sup> “Taste” on the part of the photographer made for a successful portrait, and the name of a photographer who could demonstrate that taste proved, “a viable commodity, [as] someone who provided the customer with a unique vision.”<sup>37</sup>

As portrait photographers embraced the artist ideal, the language by which people referred to their workspace changed as well. “Galleries,” like J.P. Ball’s, referred primarily to the viewing areas for photographs and paintings. By the 1870s, however, the “studio,” was understood to refer to the operating room where pictures were taken, and the darkroom where prints were developed and retouched. By the 1880s, operators and customers expanded the concept of the photography “studio” to include all of the photographer’s rooms for viewing, printing, and office work.<sup>38</sup> The shift in language, aligning photography with the idea of an “artist’s studio,” previously reserved for painters and sculptors, reflected a changing estimation of photographic possibility.<sup>39</sup>

In the 1880s, as Sarah Burns has illustrated, American painters filled their own workspaces with antiques, curiosities, and foreign art objects. Artists adopted an “aesthetic of overload” in tandem with developing department stores like Wannamaker’s and Macy’s “where merchants learned to concoct an atmosphere of rich, evocative

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<sup>36</sup> As “studio” became the preferred nomenclature, “the language used to describe aspects of the studio experience increasingly concentrated on the photographer’s and the patron’s role in the deliberate production, and not a mere reception, of not a mere likeness but a photographic representation of character; on other words, a physiognomic portrait.” Wajda, “Social Currency,” 442.

<sup>37</sup> Hirsch, *Seizing the Light*, 186.

<sup>38</sup> Wajda cites the first use of the term “studio” in reference to a photography establishment in 1852. See Wajda, “Social Currency,” 432.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Burns, “The Price of Beauty: Art, Commerce, and the Late Nineteenth Century American Studio Interior,” in *American Iconography: New Approaches to Nineteenth Century Art and Literature*, ed. David Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 211.

display to tempt the consumer.”<sup>40</sup> Though Burns’ study largely ignores photographers, they too stocked their studios with such an enthusiasm that studio props developed into a distinct support industry.<sup>41</sup> Ornate columns, reproduction antique furniture, and a huge variety of painted backdrops were mass-produced and could be ordered by mail, not to mention the hand-held objects sitters used to signify profession, education, and recreation.<sup>42</sup> L.W. Seavy of New York City became the largest merchant of photographers’ props in the world, selling throughout America and Europe.<sup>43</sup> Painters, merchants, and photographers during this period created “domain[s] of desire, speaking in a vivid language of images and contributing thereby to the construction of a modern national subjectivity centering more on outward appearances than inner character.”<sup>44</sup>

One African American photography firm that weathered changes in the field better than most was the Goodridge Studio of Saginaw, Michigan. Glenalvin Goodridge began the family business in York, Pennsylvania in 1847 before his younger brothers William and Wallace Goodridge steered the studio through a move to a new city, several studio fires, the Kodak revolution, and into the 1920s.<sup>45</sup> The Goodridge Brothers took care to keep their business up-to-date and fashionable. Following an 1872 fire, the photographers moved from a third floor studio into a small building on the street level.<sup>46</sup> In publicizing their new space the Goodridges boasted that they modeled their studio

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<sup>40</sup> Burns, “The Price of Beauty,” 209, 214.

<sup>41</sup> Heinz K. Henisch and Bridget A. Henisch, *The Photographic Experience 1839-1914: Images and Attitudes* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 20; “While the available means of controlling light were limited, in the control of ambiance, a great deal could be attempted with backdrops and studio props, and the fabrication of such items became a secondary industry in its own right.”

<sup>42</sup> Henisch and Henisch, *The Photographic Experience*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> John Vincent Jezierski, *Enterprising Images: The Goodridge Brothers, African American Photographers, 1847-1922* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Burns, “The Price of Beauty,” 211.

<sup>45</sup> Jezierski, *Enterprising Images*. Wallace and William O. Goodridge opened the studio in Saginaw about 1864.

<sup>46</sup> The 1872 fire destroyed all of the Goodridge Studio negatives to that point, as well as a piano kept in the studio for entertaining clients.

after that of celebrity photographer Napoleon Sarony.<sup>47</sup> Biographer John Vincent Jezierski suggests that one of the Goodridge brothers may have visited Sarony's studio in New York, but they would certainly have been familiar with his studio space and technique from trade publications like *The Philadelphia Photographer* and *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*.<sup>48</sup>

An 1879 self-portrait by two of the Goodridge Brothers shows, in part, their creative capacities as well as the eclectic portraits their studio was prepared to create. Posed with a "Happy New Year" greeting and their studio Dalmatian, William and Wallace Goodridge stood amidst vines, winter bushes, and a rough-hewn log bridge. Though the brothers wore smart suits and bowler hats, they surrounded themselves with customized props and backdrops evocative of the Michigan timber boom. In the lower left corner of the frame, they have displayed a portrait of actress Miss Effie Ellsler, available for purchase just like Sarony's celebrity portraits. "Increasingly during the 1870s and 1880s," Jezierski writes, the Goodridges served all of Saginaw with photographs to "document an achievement, record a special event, or simply for the joy of it."<sup>49</sup> The brothers' 1879 portrait offered an image widely divergent from the domestic finery common in Eastern portraits (which the Goodridge Studio could also create) but provides a strong example of the extent to which they were prepared to create a world within the frame. When the Goodridge studio caught fire again in 1908, the business lost

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<sup>47</sup> Jezierski, *Enterprising Images*, 64, 114.

<sup>48</sup> During the first decades of photography when exposure times tested sitters' patience and physical control, photographers relied on different apparatuses for subjects to lean against or hold to stay still during an exposure. As to the Goodrides' sources for stadium arrangement Jezierski also states that, "more likely their information came from articles in professional photography journals like *Humphrey's* or the *New Philadelphia Photographer*, both of which were then popular and influential. Whatever their source, it is clear that of all Saginaw Valley photographers it was the Goodridge brothers who were most carefully attuned to the latest developments in the profession at this time." Jezierski, *Enterprising Images*, 62-65.

<sup>49</sup> Jezierski, *Enterprising Images*, 168.

fifteen different backdrops in the blaze, suggesting that the firm routinely offered a wide variety of experiences in its studio.

Continued attention to the studio remained an important way to appeal to customers, though attitudes about the proper way to outfit a studio fluctuated in advice columns and trade publications like *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*. Whether columnists favored elaborate or more austere decoration in the studio, they were unified in the idea that there was a right way to arrange the studio's front of house, and that "too much care [could not] be bestowed on the reception room."<sup>50</sup> In addition to the gallery or parlor, photographers were encouraged to care for smaller dressing rooms and especially the staircase, as this was the very first chance to "inspire confidence" in customers.<sup>51</sup>

As photographers attempted to recreate middle-class domestic space in their studios, they brought along attendant ideas about gender and labor. In *Wilson's* in 1901, C. Barnes urged the daily cleaning of the studio but maintained that only "a woman's hand" would suffice. Barnes argued that even the most "domestically inclined" young men could not achieve the level of tidiness of "an average woman or girl," and that "if there be no wife handy let one of the young ladies on the premises do the duty."<sup>52</sup> Barnes' assumptions about gender and labor diminished the varied work that women performed in turn of the century photography studios, reasserting the gendered power relations that structured the domestic parlor in the first place by writing them into the daily operation of the studio. Despite sexist stereotypes about their abilities, many African American women worked in photography studios. Though outnumbered by men behind the camera,

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<sup>50</sup> *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, May 1901, 168.

<sup>51</sup> "Appearances in the Studio," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, May 1901, 198.

<sup>52</sup> C. Barnes, "Inside the Studio," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, August 1901, 315.

women performed a variety of tasks, working in positions that ranged from receptionists to operators and owners.

When it came to the proper arrangement for a studio, advice columns in photographer's trade publications could vary monthly, and even within the same issue. In August of 1901, *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* urged its readers to be indulgent when stocking "Studio Accessories:"

The photographer must please his clients...upper class persons living in homes richly furnished require a portrait photograph in harmony with such surroundings, desiring works having the air of wealth of luxury and it is thus in the interests of trade to meet the demand. In doing so the photographer violates no principle of pictorial representation.<sup>53</sup>

Just a few pages later commentator "C. Barnes" urged that only "ordinary tables and chairs" be included in the photographic space. Barnes quipped, "Why a photographic gallery at first sight should remind one more of an old curiosity shop or the storeroom of a collector of bric-a-brac and antiques than anything else I am puzzled to discover."<sup>54</sup> Such were the tensions over studio arrangement that just one issue of *Wilson's* delivered very mixed messages.

African American photographers had to make studio decisions in a market greatly complicated by race. Prior to segregation, white clients sat for the most prominent black photographers in the north and west, like J.P. Ball, the Goodridge brothers, and Augustus Washington. As Jim Crow customs became entrenched as laws, it appears that even northern black photographers saw steadily decreasing business from white customers.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Studio Accessories," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, August 1901, 294.

<sup>54</sup> Barnes, "Inside the Studio," 315.

<sup>55</sup> In southern and northern cities white customers had little problem visiting black businesspeople in service positions – i.e. cutting hair or preparing food – even as they practiced more stringent segregation. Many African Americans in service businesses even refused to serve other African Americans because it would cost them their white clientele. In some industries, like bartering, white trade groups eventually made moves to freeze out black businesses by passing new regulations or employing racist rhetoric against

Black businesses managed to reap some benefit from the concentration of an African American consumer base, which also contributed to a greater number of African American photographers. Never a wholly separate economy, though, African Americans continued to patronize many white photographers even at economic disadvantage and facing mistreatment.<sup>56</sup> In competition against white studios for the patronage of middle-class and elite African American consumers then, black photographers had to offer a studio experience similar to the finest white photographers.

Segregation limited the scale of many African American businesses.<sup>57</sup> However humble African American studios appeared in comparison to the palatial galleries of New York or Washington, a fixed studio space proved integral to success for photographers operating at the turn of the twentieth century. Photographers in the National Negro Business League, explored in Chapter One, boasted broadly about the physical structure of their studios as a means to exhibit their success and fitness for leadership.<sup>58</sup> Attention to the studio environment reflected the centrality of real estate and property to the NNBL's uplift politics, but also underlined the importance of the studio space in a consumer's experience of having one's picture taken.

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African Americans. African American photographers might have seen a quicker exodus of white customers because clients viewed photography as more "skilled" or involving more of a sense of vulnerability on the part of the subject. See Bristol, *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom*.

<sup>56</sup> In many cities, including New York and cities where NNBL photographers operated, black customers would continue to visit white photographers to have portraits made, for a number of reasons. At the very turn of the century, some African Americans had ingrained those same racist ideas that African American photographers were incapable of producing quality portraits (see Chapter One). More pervasive, were attitudes that visiting a white studio carried more prestige, and thus was more deserving for patronage on special occasions.

<sup>57</sup> Access to a small fraction of a minority of the entire spending population limited the chances for black entrepreneurs, as did institutional racism of white banks and trade groups. Despite repeated efforts, attempts by African Americans to form cooperative ventures achieved limited success. African Americans were largely cut out of the age of incorporation that lifted many white-owned businesses and industries. See Chapter One of this dissertation; Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*.

<sup>58</sup> A consistent preoccupation with real estate in NNBL testimonials reflected uplift ideals equating property ownership with moral righteousness and thus defending the class hierarchy.

During his speech to the NNBL in 1917, Knoxville's H.M. Brazelton invited conference attendees to visit his brand new building filled with two-thousand dollars' worth of modern equipment.<sup>59</sup> Trained at his home by a German instructor, Brazelton aimed for his physical storefront to elevate him above the status of an amateur photographer. Given the mistrust Brazelton faced from African American customers, including one woman who feared that Brazelton would "spite" her, Brazelton's acquisition of an impressive studio gained added significance for its ability to push against stereotypes of inferior black businesses. In addition to the quality of his photographs, Brazelton directly credited his success over thirteen years to being "regular at [his] place of business."

Similarly, George Burt's establishment of a regular studio and gallery in the all-black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi virtually ensured his "plodding but continued and sustained industry."<sup>60</sup> As "the only 'picture man' with a fixed and permanent location for miles around," Burt differentiated himself from itinerant photographers offering quick photos produced without a studio finish.<sup>61</sup> Mound Bayou booster Aurelius P. Hood wrote that,

[Burt] has made a reputation for honest work that assures a constantly increasing volume and gives to his establishment all the elements of permanency. Prof. Burt has a very nicely arranged studio in which he carries attractively displayed an exceptionally pretty exhibit of photographs and views, the product of his own handicraft.<sup>62</sup>

Burt's finely decorated studio advertised his work with the camera and demonstrated his reliability and trustworthiness. Every new customer could imagine themselves as part of

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<sup>59</sup> Brazelton, "Photography as a Business," 85.

<sup>60</sup> Hood, "The Negro at Mound Bayou," 25.

<sup>61</sup> Hood, "The Negro at Mound Bayou," 25.

<sup>62</sup> Hood, "The Negro at Mound Bayou," 25.

Burt's "exceptionally pretty exhibit," the kind of draw described by visitors to Ball's Gallery decades earlier. According to Hood, Burt's ability to turn a fixed space for commerce specifically towards making African Americans feel good about themselves gave the photographer "a secure place in the affections and regards of the people of the town of Mound Bayou and the surrounding country."<sup>63</sup> By locating Burt in the "surrounding country," specifically in an all-black city in the middle of Jim Crow Mississippi, Aurelius Hood even suggests the important place Burt's studio occupied in the mental landscape of rural African Americans throughout the state.

Addison Scurlock's D.C. competitor Daniel Freeman introduced his own 1915 speech at the NNBL convention under the title "Art of Photography as a Business." Freeman focused primarily on his experience creating an environment conducive to the sale of images, especially by acquiring and improving studio space. By Freeman's own summary, in his first twenty years in business he moved from a one- room shop to:

one of the most prosperous business streets in Washington DC; my studio building is four stories high with sixteen rooms; hot water heat with four other valuable pieces of property. Paying taxes on about \$30,000 worth of real estate in the District of Columbia [sic].<sup>64</sup>

Freeman also boasted that he and his wife owned two automobiles, the kind of conspicuous consumption that defined elite status in black Washington in 1915.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Hood, "The Negro at Mound Bayou," 74.

<sup>64</sup> Freeman, "Photography as a Business," *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Conventions of the National Negro Business League* (Boston: National Negro Business League, 1915), 213-216.

<sup>65</sup> Sandra Heard 's doctoral dissertation ably illuminates the many ways that white *and* black elites policed the consumption habits of Washington's black middle and working classes. Washington's African American elites developed a critical double standard in which buying and driving automobiles was viewed as acceptable when practiced by one of their own, but irresponsible when laborers and working class African Americans got behind the wheel. For discussion on the importance of automobiles see especially Chapter Two, "Colored Chauffeurs: Negotiating Stereotypes While Working and Cruising," in Sandra Heard, "The "Bad" Black Consumer: A Study of African-American Consumer Culture In Washington, DC, 1910s-1930s," (PhD diss., George Washington University, 2010).

Freeman's speech echoed the concerns of his peers who, by that point, had been trumpeting his impressive studio space for several years.

Freeman implies that the popularity of his photographs made it possible for him to expand his studio operation in recognizable ways, and that an improved studio with additional services increased his popularity in turn. An earlier profile of Freeman, published in *The Negro Business League Herald* gave more detail about how he arranged his studio:

The entire first floor is given over to the work of the photographer. The first room is the reception room, the next the gallery, the office, the designing room, the developing room, then the operating room, that is most spacious and well-lighted. Across from this is the charmingly arranged dressing room.<sup>66</sup>

Customers at Freeman's studio would find a familiar space: a gallery for viewing and discussing pictures, well-appointed rooms to relax and prepare to face the camera, and workers busy developing prints behind closed doors. This description also called attention to the available dressing room, attended by Freeman's wife, where customers could prepare their dress or choose the costume that best expressed their self-concept on the day of their portrait.

Freeman concluded his 1915 address by suggesting that a studio separated the successful professional photographer from the talented amateur. Per Freeman's own advice:

the business of the studio is fully as important as the photographic end. The ability to make a good picture does not imply the ability to sell it for its real value, or even to impress the public with the fact of your existence as a good photographer.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>*Negro Business League Herald* 1, no 2. (May 1909): 1.

<sup>67</sup> Freeman, "Photography as a Business," 216.

Here, Freeman tacitly acknowledges that his customers are purchasing more than a portrait by engaging in a ritual of status consumption. Freeman implies that no matter how creative or technically proficient, aspiring camera-workers will fail if they neglect the “business of the studio,” which Freeman articulated as encompassing both the physical location and the range of activities that took place in the physical studio.<sup>68</sup> Freeman understood that an impressive photography studio evinced a photographer’s skill as much as any particular image, and became part of the commodity for sale, or what gave the photograph its “real value.” Like visitors to many of the elite parlors of the nineteenth century, customers at studios of Freeman’s caliber purchased status in addition to an actual print.

Addison Scurlock began his photography career in Washington not on 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW with Freeman, but as an apprentice for Moses Rice on Pennsylvania Avenue. In the Capital, Pennsylvania Avenue hosted the most fashionable white photography rooms, anchored initially by Mathew Brady. By 1907, Scurlock had hung his own shingle outside his newly purchased home at 1202 T Street NW, but clearly understood the appeal of a permanent and independent commercial space.<sup>69</sup> In 1911, Scurlock approached Dr. William L. Board, membership chair in their chapter of the NNBL about the vacant second floor above his drugstore. Another League member, W. Calvin Chase announced Scurlock’s move in his newspaper *The Washington Bee* on both March 4th and 11<sup>th</sup>, to let Washingtonians know that

Mr. Addison N. Scurlock, the well-known maker of fine photographs, has leased from Board & McGuire the entire part of their building at Ninth and U streets not

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<sup>68</sup> Salesmanship, social connections, business acumen, and diversification proved important elements for working photographers, as subsequent chapters will illustrate.

<sup>69</sup> Trescott, “Love of the People, Control of the Craft.”

used by the drug store. Special alterations are being made, and when finished it will be one of the best-equipped photographic studios in the city.<sup>70</sup>

The number of weekly advertisements that Board purchased in the *Bee* likely encouraged Chase to mention the Scurlock's new landlord by name, but in the process Chase linked the fledgling studio with a well-established business. In their own advertisements, Board & McGuire touted the social scene outside their drugstore more than prescriptions and nicknamed the intersection of 9<sup>th</sup> and U Streets: "Lookout Corner, where everybody meets everybody."<sup>71</sup> Another advertisement claimed that the "seasons may come and go, but the crowds go on forever" at Board and McGuire.<sup>72</sup> If we take Board and McGuire at their word, seeing and being-seen constituted a major pastime for black Washingtonians on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and U Streets. Self-serving though it might have been, Chase's name-dropping let readers know to "Lookout" for the Scurlock studio on a popular corner.

Moving to 900 U Street placed Scurlock in the midst of abundant daily foot traffic at the center of black commercial life in the District described in the previous chapter. U Street and perpendicular 7<sup>th</sup> Street (two blocks away) offered entertainment and shopping aimed at middle and working-class clientele, respectively. Scurlock's new studio straddled an imaginary border between those zones and anyone whose errands drew them across that mental border had to pass by Scurlock's front door on their way.<sup>73</sup> Locating the studio above the drugstore made his work accessible to the elites looking to confirm their own class status, and to working class Washingtonians in search of more

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<sup>70</sup> "Addison N. Scurlock, Photographer, to Have New Studio," *Washington Bee*, March 4, 1911. The article continued: "Mr. Scurlock has engagements in Atlanta and Nashville which will take him out of Washington from March 19 to April 15. The new studio will be occupied immediately after his return." Already in 1911, Scurlock's business had a national profile that carried him to other cities for work.

<sup>71</sup> "This Week in Society," *Washington Bee*, April 1, 1911, 6.

<sup>72</sup> This was a common phrase tied to Board & McGuire in advertisements and used in the *Washington Bee* Society column to describe the drug store. *Washington Bee*, December 2, 1911.

<sup>73</sup> The distinction between both streets proved more superficial than actual, as black Washingtonians of both classes spent money and time on either street with regularity.

aspirational images. Beyond casual foot traffic, moving to 900 U Street also kept Scurlock near the institutions that would become his major clients over the next several decades. Howard University sat two blocks from Scurlock's front door, and professors and other African American professionals around the university made LeDroit Park prime real estate. In 1911 Washington, DC boasted a large African American population and segregation of a lesser violence than the many cities further south. Addison Scurlock had a choice of streets on which to locate his studio, including becoming neighbors to Daniel Freeman on 14<sup>th</sup> Street just five blocks west.<sup>74</sup>

African American photographers opened their studios on blocks and in neighborhoods coded "black" to be near their customers and because segregation severely limited their choices in many cities. Ernest Withers, for example, chose Beale Street in Memphis for his location in order to be close to what he called "the black side of life...good times and money."<sup>75</sup> Though Withers changed his address often, he counted at least nine of these on *the street* for African American commerce and nightlife in Memphis. In Greenville, Mississippi Nelson Street became known as a zone for black business. It was there that H. C. Anderson looked to open his studio in 1948, alongside the life insurance office that his brother managed.<sup>76</sup> For Greenville and the surrounding counties, writes Clifton L. Taulbert, Nelson Street "was a small respectable business district, [which] by night...became an intoxicating dreamland, infused with the sound and

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<sup>74</sup> Green, *The Secret City*; Ruble, *Washington's U Street*; Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington*; Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*; Cary, *Urban Odyssey*.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Daniel J. Wolff, "To Make a Shining Light," in *Pictures Tell the Story: Ernest C. Withers Reflections in History*, eds. F. Jack Hurley, Brooks Johnson, Daniel J. Wolff (Norfolk, VA: Chrysler Museum of Art, 2000), 113.

<sup>76</sup> H.C. Anderson, "Pictures Made Any Time, Any Place, Any Size," in *Separate, But Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson*, ed. Shawn Wilson, (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 20.

the smell of the blues.”<sup>77</sup> A Greenville native, Taulbert remembered that all classes patronized the butcher, beauty parlors, grocers, and restaurants on Nelson Street, but it was the proprietors of these businesses that made up Greenville’s black middle class, and primarily Anderson’s own clientele. While Jim Crow limited African American photographers’ freedom to locate their studios where they chose, good business sense meant they landed near other African American institutions and in turn solidified black business districts as both real and imagined spaces.

Though avenues like Nelson, Beale, or You Streets might have been understood as catering to the “black side of life,” white landlords owned most of the buildings there. Black business owners had to appeal to whites in order to rent space at a favorable address. Florestine Perrault Collins operated several studios in and around the Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans. Her first listing in a city business directory was on St. Peter Street in 1923, then at 601 North Claiborne, both in the city’s Fifth Ward.<sup>78</sup> At these locations Collins secured herself within a network of friends and family, catering largely to the light-skinned and middle-class Creole community. In 1934, however, she relocated to South Rampart Street and “[took] her business to midtown, to the heart of the African American commercial district, and expand[ed] her customer base to black people from all walks of life.”<sup>79</sup> Beholden to a New York frame of reference, the Federal

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<sup>77</sup> Clifton L. Taulbert, “As If We Were There...Remembering Greenville,” in *Separate, But Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson*, ed. Shawn Wilson, (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 51.

<sup>78</sup> “[Collins’] first listing in the city directory as a photographer came in 1923, after she had moved her studio and household - which included her husband and eighteen-year old Jeannette - to the combined commercial and residential space on North Claiborne in the city’s downtown Fifth Ward.” Arthé A. Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans: A Creole Photographer’s View of the Early Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 54.

<sup>79</sup> Even during the Depression, Rampart Street offered a “lively urban black district, home to a variety of respectable businesses –including three photography studios - as well as seamier venues.” Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 7, 87.

Writer's Project described South Rampart at the time as "the Harlem of New Orleans. For a distance of several blocks it teems with a great variety of shops catering largely to the Negro population."<sup>80</sup> Even though Collins wanted to move into a black business district, she was uncertain if a white landlord would rent her the space. Collins recalled bringing her "very light-skinned" friend along to sign the lease, in the hopes that the landlord might assume both women were white.<sup>81</sup> Just to gain a footprint in the Rampart Street corridor, and cater to customers of her own race, Collins had to carefully negotiate the complicated relationship between race and class in a city notorious for color-consciousness.

One of the most successful means by which photographers asserted themselves into the daily life of a city and African Americans' mental maps was through displays of their work in front of the studio. For upper story studios, display cases on the ground floor served as a crucial form of advertising to draw customer up the stairs from the first days of the daguerreotype parlor. Placing photographs in the front window or outside the door extended the imaginative space of the studio into the physical space of the street. In Washington, the display case on the sidewalk to the right of the Scurlock's front door proved similarly important for their business, but also to the sense of place shared by those that frequented U Street. (Figure 9)

Oral histories suggest that the Scurlock window display featured a selection of nationally known figures and everyday clients. George Scurlock remembered that

Our father would put photographs of famous people and not so famous people out there, and people saw this nice display and just walked in and asked if you could make them look as beautiful as the people in the case...there'd be a picture of

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<sup>80</sup> Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *New Orleans City Guide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 343-344.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 87.

somebody's cousin there, and they would say, "Hey, if you can make him look that good you can make me look better."<sup>82</sup>

Scurlock indicated that the quality of photographs on display had great power to draw in clients. Scurlock also illustrated how their display window relied on local connections and social networks as a sales tool. If a passer-by saw "someone's cousin" who they recognized in the display, they might be more prone to purchase from the Scurlocks themselves (though Scurlock joked that vanity had something to do with that thought process). The studio's display window showed off their wares, but also tied them socially to the surrounding Shaw neighborhood in Washington.

The exact date when Addison Scurlock added his display window remains unclear, but it certainly existed by early 1919 when Scurlock photographed Lieutenant John Fearing and Sergeant Robert Fearing (Scurlock relatives through his wife's family). Next to their names in his ledger Scurlock scribbled "window display" meaning he would display copies of those prints in the case facing U Street at the bottom of his stairs.<sup>83</sup> During World War I, African American photographers in many cities saw an increase in business from soldiers and their families in need of portrait keepsakes.

A proud, dignified portrait displayed in his showcase helped to draw other men in uniform up Scurlock's steps, but Scurlock likely saw his portraits of soldiers as much more than promotional devices. Scurlock served as a founding member of the District's chapter of the NAACP. He also worked closely with W.E.B. Du Bois on *The Crisis*, where Du Bois published his poem "Returning Soldiers" and its trenchant promise, "We return from fighting / We return fighting" in 1919.<sup>84</sup> Thus, Scurlock understood the sense

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<sup>82</sup> Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 20.

<sup>83</sup> Scurlock and Scurlock, Studio Session Register, 1911-1922.

<sup>84</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *The Crisis* XVIII (May 1919): 13.

of pride that public display of African American men in uniform engendered amongst his own people, not to mention the work such pictures performed as an argument for full African American citizenship. Historian Michael Andrew Fitzpatrick has argued that during the racial violence that broke out in Washington in July 1919 black soldiers based their defense against a white mob on U Street by erecting a barricade at 7<sup>th</sup> and T Street because African Americans felt a pride of place about U Street.<sup>85</sup> Located just two blocks away (for nearly a decade at that point), Scurlock's studio and display case played a significant role in fostering that shared sense of place on You Street. By the end of WWII, the black press mentioned "Scurlock's Photo Studio" by name as the anchor at one end of the "perpetual parade of sepia Washington" moving down U Street between 9<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> streets.<sup>86</sup>

Checking out the Scurlock display window became part of the regular activity on U Street, and for some, a destination. Vivian Woods Scurlock commented that

On Sunday afternoons, we would take a stroll down to U street and look in the window and see whose pictures were in there...everyone would look to see if their picture was in the window...during the war, I went in one day to have my picture taken, and George made a portrait of me...so the next couple of weeks I went past the studio and looked in the window and there was my beautiful picture, so that was quite thrilling to know that I had made the window.<sup>87</sup>

As Robert Scurlock's wife, making the cut for the display window might have been a foregone conclusion for Vivian. Still, she indicated a sense of pride at finding her portrait on display. Having your portrait selected for the Scurlock display also carried prestige,

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<sup>85</sup> Fitzpatrick, "A Great Agitation for Business."

<sup>86</sup> "Washington's You Street," *Newspic: The Complete News Picture Magazine*, April 1946, 5, Series 9, Box 7, Folder 4, Scurlock Studio Records. Addison Scurlock's father, George C. Scurlock, kept a law office in the 1100 Block of U Street. Addison and Mamie Fearing Scurlock made their first home a few blocks away at 1202 T Street. See Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," 40.

<sup>87</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History and Identity," 89.

and conferred some status on the honoree.<sup>88</sup> Alice Davis, a student at Howard University, concurred: “you had arrived if your picture was inside the window. Of all the brides that he photographed in any one particular month, you were looking to see which ones he had picked to be in the window.”<sup>89</sup> On the former “Lookout Corner” the Scurlock display window widened the imaginative space of the studio down onto the sidewalk and by encouraging a weekly ritual of public viewing, changed how people experienced U Street.

It should also be noted that the Scurlock window display promoted a rather specific vision. Markers of middle class respectability were more likely to place a portrait on display. Allen E. Cole’s Cleveland, Ohio practice also centered on the professional class, businesses, fraternal organizations, and religious groups. Cole’s large display case in front of his home studio privileged these subjects, and he “understood that the validation of middle-class clients, especially those with influence such as clergy, business leaders, activists, and politicians would bring other customers.”<sup>90</sup> Cole put up his photo display in the front yard in 1924, and by the mid-1930s added his famous slogan: “Somebody, Somewhere, Wants Your Photograph.”<sup>91</sup> By implication, Cole tied desire to images of wealthy black professionals of a certain class, in front of his fine two-story home at 9904 Cedar Avenue, itself a sign of class status. Those images provided clear goals for Clevelanders, in keeping with the uplift politics of Cole and his peers. By privileging the markers of middle-class status, however, Cole’s window display made a

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<sup>88</sup> Fearing, “African American Image, History, and Identity,” 85. “It became a sign of status to sit for a Scurlock portrait, and the greatest status was accorded those whose portraits were featured in the window of the studio.”

<sup>89</sup> Fearing, “African American Image, History, and Identity,” 85.

<sup>90</sup> Samuel W. Black and Regennia N. Williams, *Through the Lens of Allen E. Cole: A History of African Americans in Cleveland Ohio* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>91</sup> Black and Williams, *Through the Lens of Allen E. Cole*, 36.

specific argument about the kinds of photographs of African Americans that “somebody, somewhere, wants.”

Not all portraits in studio display cases led to positive outcomes. In her oral history of Florestine Collins’ life and practice, Arth  Anthony includes an anecdote told by Jeanette Warburg Altimus about an incident at the studio in the 1920s when

an enraged father objected to a portrait of his teenage daughter, Nettie George, appearing in Bertrand’s Studios Showcase for any passerby to see. He was very upset that the photograph had been put on display.<sup>92</sup>

Altimus summarized that Collins had displayed a test shot of Ms. George, wherein the teenager wore a drape slightly below the crest of her shoulders. Protective of his underage daughter, Mr. George’s insistence on the picture’s removal reminds us that the public display of photographs also created occasion for the policing of sexuality and gender. Still a young photographer herself, Collins learned about “customer satisfaction” and “getting permission” but also that there were limits on the kinds of images that the public deemed socially acceptable. In particular, this incident at Collin’s studio illustrates one way that African American men could turn the photographic display window into a means to control how African American women presented their own bodies.

For customers drawn into the studio by a fine display on the sidewalk, they soon encountered the proprietor or other staff. At the Scurlock Studio, a customer’s first point of contact was often Mamie Fearing Scurlock, who joined her husband to schedule appointments, order supplies, and act as business manager soon after Scurlock moved in 1911.<sup>93</sup> Mamie Scurlock’s influence on the Scurlock Studio might be seen in the sheer volume of labor she performed from the beginning. The day-to-day operation of the

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<sup>92</sup> Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 74.

<sup>93</sup> Mamie Scurlock’s studio records are the sources that fully illuminate what a dynamic space the Scurlock Studio could be even during that first decade.

Scurlock studio will be considered in a subsequent chapter, but it is important to point out here that Scurlock studio bustled with activity six days a week. Based on Mamie Scurlock's records, the studio completed at least 9,882 jobs between 1911 and 1922.<sup>94</sup> Clients generally paid a deposit at their sitting, returned to view their proofs and pay their remaining balance, and then returned to pick up their final prints. Often, the same customers returned in a few weeks to order additional prints for friends and family. Though Addison Scurlock (and his sons Robert and George) pulled the shutter on the camera, Mamie Scurlock would be a continual point of contact when a customer ascended the studio stairs. The precise and clean arrangement of the studio reception areas described below might also be credited to her supervision.

Many African American women shaped the space of the photography studio without ever seeing their names on the sign out front. Wilhelmina Wynn reflected that her mother, Wilhelmina Williams, shaped the Columbia, South Carolina studio of her father, Richard Roberts, when she joined the business in 1902:

I think it was in meeting the people who came there, they had confidence in her and I think they were then able to be more relaxed when Dad would take pictures. Also, she was the one who designed a little dressing room area and kept it supplied with things that people would use to comb and brush their hair when they came in. And in the waiting room she of course would want to see that it was inviting.<sup>95</sup>

While she might have confirmed some stereotypes about "women's work," Williams also oversaw a conscious blending of domestic and commercial elements that helped their

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<sup>94</sup> These numbers are based on my own ongoing count and cataloging of Scurlock Studio Registers.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Wilhelmina Wynn, n.d., Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe Manuscript Research Collection, 1984-1985, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center, hereafter, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection.

studio to sell photographs by making it a comfortable space.<sup>96</sup> As social relations comprise the very mechanisms that give space meaning, encounters with the staff greatly influenced how one experienced the space. *Wilson's* columnist Alfred Wilkes wrote in 1901 that "the ability to take a sitter out of his painful self-consciousness is one of a photographer's most valuable assets."<sup>97</sup> As "front of house" staff, Wilhelmina Williams and Mamie Scurlock contributed greatly to that capacity in their daily interactions with clients and management of business affairs.

Given Addison Scurlock's reputation as a spirited but strict personality, Mrs. Scurlock likely provided some balance in terms of the Studio's public face. Mamie Scurlock described her husband as, "an unusual man in every way. Full of life, flexible, always ready to participate in whatever activity. But photography was his happiness."<sup>98</sup> Other accounts diverge from her assessment of "flexible," especially due to Addison Scurlock's serious, exacting demeanor while in the studio. Scurlock's nephew described his experience under the lens as common:

There was a certain touch that [Addison Scurlock] had...a certain method...of positioning the head of the individual...I remember Uncle Ad...would position my head, then he would go to the camera and say, "Wait a minute, Arthur, you moved your head. I want [your] head to be in this position." And he would come back and turn my head to just the position he wanted and said, "Now, don't move." And if I moved that position, he would not snap the picture until it was there.<sup>99</sup>

Jeffrey John Fearing, also a Scurlock relative, corroborates this account. He surmised that so few of Scurlock's portrait subjects faced the camera directly because few people were

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<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Wilhelmina Williams more than likely participated in all aspects of the Roberts Studio. When the family moved to Columbia from Florida in 1920, Roberts took a custodial job at the Federal Reserve, leaving to open the studio in the afternoon. Wilhelmina Wynn not only had control of the studio as a physical space, she kept the business running on a daily basis.

<sup>97</sup> Alfred Wilkes, "Photography at Customers' Homes," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*, May 1901, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft."

<sup>99</sup> Gardullo, et al., *Picturing the Promise*, 30.

brave enough to resist Addison Scurlock's "autocratic" nature, and the photographer's insistence on doing things his way.<sup>100</sup> Ellsworth Davis, *Washington Post* staff photographer, remembered that Addison Scurlock carried himself with an "an air of importance – he knew what he was and what he could do."<sup>101</sup> Addison Scurlock's comportment reflected his efforts in the black business movement and more generally the trope of the New Negro: a projection of confidence, personal expertise, and pride. Davis also stated that both Addison and Robert (Bobby) Scurlock could be "friendly, yet distant," and difficult to work for.<sup>102</sup> Both men took an intensely serious approach to camerawork, which likely contributed to the impression of them being overly particular or aloof. When sons Robert (Bobby) and George Scurlock officially joined their father in the business by the late 1930s they brought another set of personalities into the studio.<sup>103</sup> Their participation at 900 U Street also contributed to their image as a family business, adding to the class and domestic connotations carried by the Scurlock Studio moniker.

Customers entered the Scurlock studio through a side door that opened onto U Street. (The first floor drug store fronted on 9<sup>th</sup> Street.) Climbing a flight of stairs, customers turned left into the reception area and gallery. (Figure 10) Though accounts of the Scurlocks' interior space are few, photographs taken between 1911 and 1913 reveal a space that would have been somewhat familiar to any elderly patrons that had visited a

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<sup>100</sup> "The Scurlock subject was rarely photographed with their eyes looking directly into the camera, so rare in fact that I infer that the subjects whose eyes do burrow into the camera had succeeded in over-ruling the autocratic Addison Scurlock with the sheer strength of their will." Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 146.

<sup>101</sup> Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," 41.

<sup>102</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 168.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Scurlock insisted that he joined his father in the studio very early on: "From the time I was 10 I had to help out in the studio. By 15 I was an expert in negative re-touching but what was most important at the time was that the work put some jingle in my pocket." See Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft." George Scurlock maintained that neither of them joined the studio full time until they had graduated from Howard: Robert in 1937 and George in 1940. See Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 97.

daguerreotype parlor long ago even though trends in interior design had changed. Moreover, customers entering the studio in 1911 would find that Scurlock's business space more closely resembled their own living rooms than it did any of the other shops they might enter that day. Scurlock regularly produced photographs of home interiors commissioned by Washington's African American elites, just as he took photographs of commercial space for his peers in the NNBL and NAACP. Scurlock's clients employed the photographer to make photographs of their own homes and living rooms, to demonstrate their mastery of a domestic ideal and linked that ideal to an African American identity. Moreover, commissioning and sharing home photographs underlined their status as property owners, as "photography of domestic spaces was a way to miniaturize and possess one's interior world."<sup>104</sup> Thus, Scurlock was familiar with the popular trends in the arrangement of homes, offices, and market spaces. Scurlock's business depended on his ability to ensure patrons' comfort and confidence, while meeting their expectation for a first-class studio. To achieve these goals, Scurlock needed to create the impression of a domestic interior in a commercial space.

Scurlock decorated his new space at 900 U Street in the simple but elegant fashion newly popular at the turn of the century, and developed out of the arts and crafts design movement. Directly inside the door visitors to the studio found a small desk, presumably used by Mamie Scurlock to make appointments, receive payments, and turn over prints to happy customers. A few office supplies including an inkwell, stamps, and ledger books sit on the desk under a fine stained glass table lamp, also in the craftsman style. A woven carpet bearing a geometric pattern and floral accents sat in the middle of

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<sup>104</sup> Sarah Anne Carter, "Picturing Rooms: Interior Photography, 1870-1900," *History of Photography* 34, 3, (July 2010): 254.

the room over dark hardwood floors. The walls were covered with bead board of a medium finish running up to a picture rail in a dark stain, to match the floor boards. The reception area boasted a high ceiling, perhaps twelve to fourteen feet tall, and decorated with a stenciled border of vines running around the room. Further into the room, towards the end where the 1913 dinner meeting took place, Scurlock placed a large drafting table in the middle of the floor, and a dark wooden server against the wall. (Figure 11) Conservative plaid curtains draped the two floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto 9<sup>th</sup> Street at the far wall. A single, simply carved “North Wind” style chair sits in the corner. Two footed metal bowls (most likely spittoons) have been placed under the table and on the server, but otherwise there are no vases, sculptures, or other objects d’art. One consistency throughout the rooms is a great variety of framed photographs on the wall, between fifty and sixty on the interior walls alone. Mostly single portraits, the images come in all sizes with different frames and styles of matting. On the far wall between two windows, Scurlock installed a wall-mounted folio where he could hang even more photographs and then flip through the leaves like a giant photograph album. A normal-sized album, essential to the middle class home from the 1890s, lay open on the drafting table in a second photograph taken “about 1912.”<sup>105</sup>

Another photograph of a Scurlock studio interior, made into a postcard no earlier than 1907, shows a more ornately decorated space. (Figure 12) The back of the postcard reads, “This Studio is a representation of the highest development of ‘Portraiture by Photography’ and was awarded a Gold Medal by the Jamestown Exposition 1907.”<sup>106</sup> The exact location of this room remains unclear, but the earlier date and the same “North

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<sup>105</sup> One copy of this photograph is noted in Robert Scurlock’s handwriting, “About 1912.” See Series 1, Box No1.1.A18, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>106</sup> Series 1, Box No1.1.A18, Scurlock Studio Records.

Wind” chair present in the 1912 photo strongly suggests that the postcard shows a room Scurlock used as a waiting area while he still operated out of his home at 1202 T Street NW. Scurlock decorated his home-studio reception in a more distinctly Victorian style including an ornately carved mantle, reproduction classical sculpture, several vases, piano with lace runner, and velvet sash curtains.<sup>107</sup>

Scurlock put his 1907 reception room on a postcard for much of the same reasons that his clients hired him to photograph their homes and businesses: to document their skill in arranging a home, for a sense of possession, and to share that image with others.<sup>108</sup> Odd perhaps that a portrait photographer would choose his waiting room for a postcard advertisement, yet, that room stood in as a “representation of the highest development[s]” in photography in a way that might have been more quickly legible to consumers than a stranger’s portrait. Showcasing his studio’s fine interior attracted the middle-class clients that Scurlock wanted to serve and repeated the sorting function of the nineteenth century parlors. Upon moving to U Street, Scurlock photographed his new studio for similar reasons, though the photographs sent some slightly different messages.

Scurlock’s method when outfitting his studio would have adhered to his 1909 essay for *The Negro Business League Herald*, in which he stressed a “progressive approach” in all aspects of commerce. Scurlock encouraged the use of “all possible means” because “attractive surroundings, adequate facilities, [and] wide-awake methods are potent factors at inviting patronage and instilling confidence.”<sup>109</sup> Entrepreneurs, Scurlock continued, should not deny themselves funds to “equip” their firms in these

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<sup>107</sup> That this kind of style suited the Scurlock’s personal preference at the time is confirmed by other photographs of them in their home.

<sup>108</sup> My thinking here has been greatly influenced by the work of Sarah Anne Carter in “Picturing Rooms.”

<sup>109</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7.

regards because “the exercising of creative ability, quickness and sagacity in putting forth ideas is the progressive spirit that characterizes the prosperous firm.”<sup>110</sup> Scurlock’s recommendations for business success were contemporary with desires expressed by both white and black Americans to establish proper middle-class homes in order to achieve respectability.

Domestic concerns could be especially important for African Americans attempting to refute racist stereotypes and demonstrate their status as citizens and consumers using class-based arguments. Architectural historian Barbara Burlison Mooney has traced the use of a domestic iconography in black print culture from the early twentieth century as speaking to those anxieties, stating that, “images of homes in black journals conveyed aspiration, accomplishment, and (by implication) assimilation.”<sup>111</sup> Discussed at length in the previous chapter, the *Negro Business League Herald*’s 1909 story on housing development in Fairmount Heights, MD, with photography by Addison Scurlock provides a choice example of the dynamic connection between architecture and African American strategies for empowerment. Additionally, Mooney argues for connection between progressive politics and “contemporary interior design,” evinced in part by a 1920 cartoon in *The Crisis* “supporting women’s suffrage, [wherein] the college-educated heroine sits in a fashionable Craftsman-style chair,” not unlike those installed in the Scurlock studio.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7.

<sup>111</sup> “Although differences in editorial styles reflected fissures in African American political ideology, certain goals and methods did unify these journals: they all sought to combat the rampant racist image of the African American in white popular culture, and they employed photography to this end. Similar to photographs used to counter physical and occupational stereotypes, photographs of prosperous black dwellings confronted the negative images of African American domestic architecture in the white-owned media. Images of homes in black journals conveyed aspiration, accomplishment, and (by implication) assimilation.” Mooney, “The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage,” 55-56.

<sup>112</sup> Mooney, “The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage,” 58-59.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the decoration of home interiors was part and parcel of how one demonstrated their class bona fides, by showing how closely they adhered to a domestic ideal. Interior design manuals expressed significant anxiety about putting a room together correctly and used photographs to illustrate dos and don'ts. Choices in home furnishings could be crucial not just to shore up class status, but were understood as important for physical health and the growth of children. The successfully outfitted home reflected active choices by its occupants; "Domestic advice books warned of accidental arrangements caused by hand-me-downs and unarticulated aesthetic and practical goals."<sup>113</sup>

For African Americans of means, choices in furniture, art, and other objects also became part of a racial argument about ability and sophistication. Madam C.J. Walker, for instance, used architecture and interior furnishings in her New York homes to promote her system of hair-care products, but also make a statement of racial pride. According to historian Tara Dudley, in Walker's mind "the growing sophistication of the style and interior decor of her homes reflected her socioeconomic progression as a black woman."<sup>114</sup> Photographs of her homes and their interiors allowed Madam Walker to disseminate an argument about the capability of African American women to a wider audience. In addition to her social and political goals, Walker also knew that images of her homes served as advertisements for her brand, as images of success and financial uplift might encourage other African American women to enroll in her beauty schools or

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<sup>113</sup> Carter, "Picturing Rooms," 260.

<sup>114</sup> "Through the program, interior design, and furnishing of her various residences, Walker's increasing knowledge of cultural and design matters and her use of architecture to promote her business and personal goals are evident. Her agenda was more an expression of racial pride than personal vanity: the growing sophistication of the style and interior decor of her homes reflected her socioeconomic progression as a black woman." Tara Dudley, "Seeking the Ideal African American Interior: The Walker Residences and Salon in New York," *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, v 14, n 1 (Fall-Winter, 2006-2007): 80.

adopt her products.<sup>115</sup> Scurlock's studio photographs served intertwined functions as an argument about African American ability and a sales pitch.

Scurlock's preference for simplicity might be seen as well in the furnishings and prop objects he used in the studio. In some of the earliest extant Scurlock images the photographer merely positioned clients in front of a wall of floral wallpaper. Some early full length and family portraits feature a backdrop of what biographer and descendant Jeffrey Fearing described as a "pastoral scene" but might more closely be described as an "Italian Garden" scene, with vines, weeping willows and an arcade entrance.<sup>116</sup> (Figure 13) Photographic evidence suggests that Scurlock quickly grew to prefer a plain, dark-colored background without pattern or design.<sup>117</sup> As Scurlock favored a closely framed half-length or bust-length portrait with a very shallow depth of field, a busy or specific backdrop would have been wasted in the majority of his work. (Figures 14 and 15)

So standardized were Addison Scurlock's photographs that nearly the only embellishment a client might bring into the portrait space would be their clothing. Even then, Scurlock had expectations. Fearing recalled that Addison Scurlock

wanted [clients] to appear to be successful, no matter how true that may have been. It is easy to conclude that the typical Scurlock subject was from the African American upper class, and many of them were, which is why Scurlock went out of his way to ensure that his subjects at least conveyed the appearance of having been important, as they assuredly were to their loved ones.<sup>118</sup>

Visitors to H.C. Anderson's Mississippi studio after World War II participated in a similar ritual, as "Greeneville's parents and grandparents dressed their children in their

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<sup>115</sup> "Madam C. J. Walker understood the prestige that her residence could add to her social and career status." Dudley, "Seeking the Ideal African American Interior," 82.

<sup>116</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 141.

<sup>117</sup> "A dark background was most typical in a Scurlock portrait." Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 90.

<sup>118</sup> Fearing "African American Image, History, and Identity," 148.

Sunday best – short suit-sets, ruffled dresses, and well-shined shoes.” Unlike Scurlock however, Anderson posed children alongside “modern amenities that symbolized middle-class American success.”<sup>119</sup> Some of Scurlock’s earliest clients brought theatrical costumes that ranged from Shakespearean to Vaudevillian, but these were outliers. Scurlock portraits quickly trended towards the conservative. In his insistence on formal but plain dress and close framing such that many individual flourishes are absent, Scurlock forwarded a standardized and specific image of class aspiration. When in the studio Addison Scurlock also disdained the use of props, furniture, and architectural elements, preferring to concentrate on the body and countenance of his customers.<sup>120</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, few photographers of the early twentieth century used quite so many props and studio decorations (in quite so many combinations) as Addison Scurlock’s contemporary James VanDerZee. The Harlem photographer stocked an array of furniture, stock columns and architectural pieces, domestic objects like telephones and books, a variety of vases and decorative elements, and a dressing room full of formalwear and costumes.<sup>121</sup> VanDerZee excelled at combining looks and objects to create a desirable symbolism. His collection of backdrops aided in this endeavor and the choices available included

The ‘villa garden’ backdrop …used when the desired effect was to create the feeling of the dwelling space of aristocratic gentry. However, if the mood was to be more romantic, the ‘villa garden’ was replaced with ‘moon over water.’

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<sup>119</sup> Taulbert, “As If We Were There,” 38.

<sup>120</sup> There were exceptions to this, as family portraits required furniture for an even arrangement of people.

<sup>121</sup> “Into these background settings Victorian chairs and Edwardian tables, vases filled with flowers, leather bound books, a grand piano, and other paraphernalia were carefully placed. These rooms, fabricated in the studio, unsurprisingly were congruent with the real interiors of actual Harlem homes where VanDerZee frequently had portrait assignments.” Rodger C Birt, “A Life in American Photography,” in *VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886-1983*, ed. Deborah Willis-Brathwaite, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 46.

Neither of these backdrops would do for family groups. In these instances the “gothic window” was used as the rear wall of the pictorial space.<sup>122</sup>

VanDerZee offered his clients a wider array of looks than any other contemporary African American neighborhood photographer. Addison Scurlock never approached the experimentation or decoration of VanDerZee, opting instead for a standardized but highly polished look. VanDerZee’s creativity with objects and backdrops (to say nothing of his retouching work) made him popular for a time, but also made him unique among his peers. When discussing VanDerZee’s use of backdrops Deborah Willis wrote astutely that, “we would have to look far and wide for a photographer who pushed it so far as to have a model warming herself before a picture of a fire,” referring to his famous nude portrait.<sup>123</sup>

On one level, Scurlock’s move towards a more streamlined design aesthetic in the public space of his studio paralleled the development of Addison’s technique into the tightly focused and refinished but minimally accessorized style for which he became known. James VanDerZee on the other hand, kept the props, fantastic backgrounds, elaborate furniture, and detailed patterns of his initial success as part of his studio design long after his move to 272 Lenox Avenue in the 1940s. Without detracting from VanDerZee’s mastery, one can say that his style evolved very little as those Victorian-era embellishments fell out of favor after World War II. Likewise, once Addison settled on “the Scurlock Look” he proved reluctant to change anything about his technique for the remainder of his career (even resisting color film). However, when Scurlock sold the studio to his sons in 1963, they took over a thriving business and an imprint for portraiture that remained popular into the 1980s. VanDerZee, on the other hand, faced

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<sup>122</sup> Birt, 46.

<sup>123</sup> Willis, *VanDerZee*, 20.

eviction continually through the 1960s before being “rediscovered” by white audiences as an art photographer. If it is a stretch to say that bad taste in decorating bankrupted James VanDerZee, it seems less so to suggest that that the objects and arrangement in VanDerZee’s studio encouraged the reproduction of an iconography that became harder and harder to sell to African Americans. At the same time, a studio environment that felt home-like but with touches of modernist design positioned Scurlock’s as a progressive studio as the New Negro movement gathered momentum.

The uncluttered arrangements in the first photographs of his studio interior around 1911 signified that Scurlock was up-to-date with contemporary interior design trends. The clean and bold lines of the fixtures and American Craftsman-style furniture expressed a sense of stoicism and sobriety, exhibiting refinement without being opulent. Understandably, such a space proved attractive to the “smart-set” of Washington D.C. black business elites, intelligentsia from Howard, and influential African Americans holding federal positions. Turning back towards the photograph of Scurlock’s 1913 dinner meeting, we can begin to speculate more closely about what these men gathered to discuss. Very possibly, these men had formed a camera club and gathered to discuss the merits of each print in the folio on the wall. Given Scurlock’s wide involvement in African American social and political groups in the District, and meetings that were known to have occurred in the studio, it is more than likely that the 1913 meeting concerned much more than photography.

One of the groups that Addison Scurlock opened his studio to was the local chapter of Mu-So-Lit Club, a national organization dedicated to showcasing the musical, social, and literary achievements of African Americans. Close to debutante societies in

terms of social status and the Bethel Literary and Historical society in terms of intellectual rigor, the all-male Mu-So-Lit brought together a number of concerns and strategies in black cultural politics at the time. As inferred by the name, the group focused attention on cultural achievements and Scurlock photographed activities like poetry readings and appearances by athletes. Interest in the arts, however, did not mean they eschewed more traditional political activism. For instance, at a Lincoln-Douglass day banquet in 1931, member performed a satirically critical skit entitled “An Afternoon with the Republican National Committee” for an audience of two hundred that included Congressman Oscar De Priest.<sup>124</sup> At their first meeting of 1913-1914, after a violin performance, Mu-So-Lit members debated and took a collection for the NAACP, indicating that their efforts to “aid colored race uplift” extended beyond the cultural front to the world of civil rights litigation.<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, the Washington chapter of Mu-So-Lit organized and governed itself like a business. Members formed a Board of Governors and Executive Committee and officially incorporated in 1920. In addition to monthly dues, potential candidates were required to purchase *at least* one share of stock in the club for seventy-five dollars, which could be sold back upon resignation.<sup>126</sup> Minutes from the spring of 1920 reveal some of the reasons the Mu-So-Lits needed substantial cash reserves. During that month, membership made Addison Scurlock the Permanent Chairman of the Board of Directors (sometimes referred to as Board of Governors, alternately as the Permanent Quarters

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<sup>124</sup> “Mu So Lits Josh Depriest, Lynn, Wickersham,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 21, 1931, 2.

<sup>125</sup> “Club Decided to Aid Colored Race Uplift: Members of Musolit Association Addressed by Dr. Buckner and Kelly Miller,” Unidentified Press Clipping, Mu-So-Lit Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection, Howard University.

<sup>126</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, October 7, 1919; Minutes of the Board of Governors May 25, 1920; Mu-So-Lit Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection, Howard University.

committee) which consisted of nine individuals, the same number in attendance at the 1913 dinner meeting. Mu-So-Lit leadership met at the Chairman's request, and numerous times often in his studio space at 900 U Street. On top of program planning the most important topic of discussion set down in the minutes was the securing funds to purchase a permanent clubhouse for the group.

When Scurlock called the Permanent Quarters committee to meet in March of 1920 they spent some time discussing the proper loans to acquire, contractual language, and how to squeeze their own funds from delinquent stockholders/members. On one hand, the meeting of the Permanent Quarters committee reflects the same preoccupation with property that Scurlock's colleagues in the business movement expressed in their newsletters and speeches. Owning their clubhouse would be a point of pride for the Mu-So-Lits, adding to their status among Washington's black middle class and carving out their space in the neighborhood, as opposed to renting a room at the YMCA for programs. A similar sense of pride might be seen as newly established urban churches held services to burn their paid off mortgages, symbolizing a class move up from rented storefronts or community rooms.

These minutes reflect Scurlock and his peers trying to carve out their own spaces in their city, space that they owned and could define as they wished. At the same time, the Mu-So-Lits varied interest in cultural programming, electoral politics, and class based uplift reflected a multi-pronged approach to race progress, with room for a number viewpoints. The minutes from Mu-So-Lit meetings that Scurlock hosted in his studio reflect the political potential for studio space beyond its daytime function. In this one instance, Scurlock brought together a group of men of different occupations (likely of the

same class) who were entertaining themselves and their community, but also trying to “do something for the race.”

## **Chapter 3:**

### **“The Smartest Place for People Who Like To Pose”: The M. Smith Studio in Harlem**

It is annoying to report that they are eligible bachelors. They are six footers, two hundred pounders, handsome in a rugged sort of way, charming in a wonderful sort of way. They know their way around and when you sink into one of their eighteenth century chairs, the feeling comes that this is the type of thing you've always read about in the smart slick papered magazines. Their repartee, their decorating taste, the food they serve, the music they play – oh well let us carry on with the interview.<sup>1</sup>

-Leighla Whipper, *The People's Voice*

When Leighla Whipper wrote her profile of Morgan and Marvin Smith for Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s newspaper, she gave the impression that she nearly swooned over her typewriter. Whether dramatic or sincere (or both), Whipper's enthusiasm establishes that the M. Smith Studio was an extraordinary space, featuring luxury above and beyond any regular neighborhood shutterbug. The Smiths' work appeared regularly in New York's black press during the 1930s and '40s, described in reverential tones much like Whipper's above. While she exaggerates in places (there were no chairs circa 1700), other elements – framed paintings, catered meals, soft jazz - were very much part of the Smith studio atmosphere. Morgan and Marvin Smith created an environment for photography that they considered in keeping with the high style of Harlem. If entering the M. Smith studio felt like stepping into the pages of the "smart slick-papered magazines"

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<sup>1</sup> Leighla Whipper, "It's Nice Work, and They've Got It," *The People's Voice*, July 19, 1947, 22, Box 1 Folder 3, Morgan and Marvin Smith Papers, 1931-1999, Schomburg Center, hereafter, M. Smith Papers.

that was no accident. By the 1940s it was very likely that magazine you were holding had an M. Smith photograph inside. (Figure 16)

Twin brothers born in Kentucky in 1910, the Smiths moved to New York to study art in 1933, carrying with them ideas about Harlem gleaned from the music, art, and literature of the New Negro Renaissance. The Smiths embraced their new neighborhood, and capitalized on their location next to the famous Apollo Theatre to build a studio business that celebrated black exceptionalism against the backdrop of significant poverty. The Smiths prioritized images of African Americans that were polished, glamorous, and performative. In practice the Smiths were busy connecting the images of the New Negro to a new turn in the photographic representation of African Americans and Harlem in particular, actively contributing to Harlem's continuing evolution as a "place."

The realities of life in Harlem during the first half of the twentieth century – especially for working people in rented rooms – made public and semi-public spaces important for conducting the business of everyday life. Not unlike the Scurlock Studio, the M. Smith Studio served as a "third place," somewhere that was neither home nor work, where people gathered to sort themselves and discuss the issues of the day. Examples of these places include coffee shops, bars, barber shops, beauty parlors, and even the corner store. That the brothers incorporated photography as part of a broader artistic practice lent their studio space a sense of hybridity: simultaneously a home, business, music club, and art salon. This is not to say that the Smith studio was necessarily egalitarian. Indeed, it primarily served Harlem's middle class and elite into the 1960s. However, the Smiths' relationships with artists and celebrities and their own prominence in the neighborhood helped make their studio into an important Harlem

social hub. Many black photography studios served double duty as meeting or social space. The extent to which the Smiths excelled in creating an environment conducive to creative exchange makes their studio unique, or maybe even “hyper-typical.” This chapter explores the mission and vision of Morgan and Marvin Smith, primarily through consideration of their studio space. Focusing inward through New York, Harlem, and 243 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street helps to position their work and lives in both a physical place and historical context. For the Smiths their studio gave them a livelihood and an outlet for their creativity while binding them to Harlem. For friends and customers with the means, Harlem offered the chance to have a portrait taken at the M. Smith Studio.

### **Leaving Home, Visualizing Harlem**

Morgan and Marvin Smith exhibited their creative aptitude early on by experimenting with several kinds of visual arts. Born outside of Lexington, Kentucky, as teenagers they became friends with a white photographer in town who bought them a camera and taught them the basics of photography.<sup>2</sup> Marvin Smith expressed that to this point in their lives photography remained a “hobby” and secondary to their drawing and painting.<sup>3</sup> Though the twins were fortunate to find some mentors, Lexington’s racial climate severely limited their professional opportunities in the arts. Marvin Smith stated

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<sup>2</sup> That photographer’s name, somewhat improbably, was Art Deacon. Timeline Typescript, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>3</sup> The need to make a living sublimated both painting and photography to secondary pursuits: “Photography was like a hobby. It was never thought of as a profession or to make money. We both liked to draw, and some people that I would have liked to have drawn they didn’t have the time, so I would make a picture...it was sort of a side issue...we had to have jobs, and the jobs were working for other people as the chauffeur and the house boy...we both did...they kept you busy...[with white people] always.” Interview with Marvin Smith by James Briggs Murray, June 30, 1998, Moving Picture Division, Schomburg Center, hereafter, Murray Interview.

that at the time, “there was no art for blacks in Kentucky.”<sup>4</sup> In search of education and creative work then, the Smith brothers joined the movement of millions of African Americans out of the rural South to Midwestern and northern cities in search of opportunity and freedom during the course of the Great Migration. Initially intent on Cincinnati as a new home, the Smiths changed course when an actor named Horace Hicks convinced them to join him on his way to New York City in 1933.

Among northern cities New York and Harlem in particular had a special draw for black migrants in search of a better life. Just the word “Harlem” conjured many different meanings, all tied tightly to its definition as a place:

Negro Harlem, into which are crowded more than a quarter of a million Negroes from southern states, the West Indies and Africa, has many different aspects. To whites seeking amusement, it is an exuberant, original, and unconventional entertainment center; to Negro college graduates it is an opportunity to practice a profession among their own people, to those aspiring to racial leadership it is a domain where they may advocate their theories unmolested; to artists, writers and sociologists it is a mine of rich material; to the mass of Negro people it is the spiritual capital of black America.<sup>5</sup>

Behind the art and literature of the 1920s and the popular culture of the Jazz Age, Harlem gained near-mythical status as a playground in the minds of many African Americans, rivalled only perhaps by Chicago. The Smiths arrived in Harlem in search of art and carrying ideas about Harlem that were largely informed by the neighborhood’s most vibrant exports. Morgan Smith knew about jazz performers and the venues and clubs

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<sup>4</sup> Morgan Smith and Marvin Smith, *Harlem: The Vision of Morgan and Marvin Smith* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999 ), 6. Marvin Smith recounted that his employer, a white woman who also taught him art, suggested that he and his brother leave Kentucky: “I worked for a woman who was 76 years old and I was sort of chauffeur and handyman...I waited tables and I cut the grass and she taught me drawing, mixing of colors, and guided me until to the point where she thought she couldn’t teach me anymore and she suggested that I should leave Lexington because art was not available for me, for black people. And either go to New York or Pennsylvania or Boston.” Interview with Morgan and Marvin Smith by Louis Draper, August 18, 1982, M. Smith Papers, hereafter, Draper Interview.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration, *New York City Guide* (New York: Random House, 1939), 257.

where they became famous. Smith stated that, “what I thought Harlem would be like was from music...The Cotton Club, Connie’s Inn, Small’s Paradise, the Alhambra, the Apollo. It was most exciting.”<sup>6</sup> The Harlem that the Smiths found in 1933 proved to be more complicated.

Harlem’s ascendancy as the “spiritual capital of black America” began just three decades before the Smith brothers stepped off their bus. Black New Yorkers began to move into the area of Harlem in large numbers following the efforts of Phillip A. Payton and the Afro-American Real Estate Company to lease apartments in the area of West 134<sup>th</sup> Street to black tenants after 1903.<sup>7</sup> White residents initially resisted the integration of Harlem housing, but eventually moved due to racial animus and to and assessment policies that marked “black” neighborhoods as undesirable thus causing property values to dip.<sup>8</sup> A number of African American businesspeople and institutions followed Payton’s

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<sup>6</sup> Smith and Smith, *Harlem*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> See Roi Ottley and William Weatherby, eds., *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History* (New York: New York Public Library, 1967), 183-185. For more on the career of Phillip A. Payton see Booker T. Washington, *The Negro in Business*, (Chicago: Afro-Am Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> On white fears of black neighbors James Weldon Johnson wrote: “In the eyes of the whites who were antagonistic, the whole movement took on the aspect of an ‘invasion’ – an invasion of both their economic and social rights. They felt that Negroes as neighbours [sic] not only lowered the values of their property, but also lowered their social status. Seeing that they could not stop the movement, they began to flee....The presence of a single coloured family in a block, regardless of the fact that they might be well bred people, with sufficient means to buy their new home, was a signal to precipitate flight....then prices dropped; they dropped lower than the bottom and such coloured people as were able took advantage of these and bought. Some of the banks and lending agencies that were compelled to take over for the mortgages they held refused for a time to either sell or rent them to Negroes. Instead, they proposed themselves to bear the carrying charges and hold them vacant for what they evidently hoped would be for a temporary period. Prices continued to drop. And this was the property situation in Harlem at the outbreak of [World War I] in Europe.” Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 150. A decade later Claude McKay concurred: “Negro property is put in a special category in New York’s real estate. It is taboo to the large professional firms....mortgages are expensive and banks are not cooperative, because black houses have a lower value than white houses. It is an inexorable law of real estate that as soon as Negroes move into a building or a block, which was formerly white, the value depreciates. The property may not immediately deteriorate, but the landlords insure themselves against that eventuality by enormously increasing rentals as soon as Negroes take over.” Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1940), 88. In his seminal 1964 history, Gilbert Osofsky wrote that during the 1920s rents in Harlem “skyrocketed in response to unprecedeted demand created by heavy Negro migration and settlement within a restricted area.” See Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro in New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1996), 136.

lead and purchased buildings to keep them out of white landowners' grasp and then rent apartments to other African Americans.<sup>9</sup> Making a small foothold, and with little choice for quality housing elsewhere in Manhattan, black New Yorkers streamed into Harlem. One way to contextualize the influx of people of African descent to Harlem during the 1920s is to note that whites were leaving Manhattan for outer boroughs at such a clip that the total population on the island declined 18% over the decade while Manhattan's black population increased by 106%.<sup>10</sup>

Harlem's black population boomed as Jim Crow drove southern African Americans north and the growth economy of World War I drew people from even farther afield. Describing the rush, Claude McKay wrote that, "Harlem is the queen of black belts, drawing Aframeicans together into a vast humming hive. They have swarmed in from the different states. From the islands of the Caribbean, and from Africa."<sup>11</sup> The 1930 US Census counted 54,754 "foreign Negroes" living in New York City, of which roughly 73% had settled in Manhattan.<sup>12</sup> By 1930, about 165,000 black New Yorkers, or "about 72 percent of Manhattan's Negro population lived in Harlem."<sup>13</sup> As more packed into the neighborhood, people spoke of Harlem as a place unto itself where black people could make a home, earn a living and express themselves freely and largely outside of the white gaze.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The majority of Harlem's housing, however, remained in the hands of white landlords, who took advantage of high demand beginning around World War I to gouge tenants with rents significantly higher than those asked for comparable space elsewhere in Manhattan. See Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 16. Hailing from a plethora of nations and colonies in the Black Atlantic, new arrivals gave the neighborhood a diversity unappreciated by whites and other outsiders.

<sup>12</sup> "In 1930 54,754 foreign Negroes lived in the city – 39,833 of whom resided in Manhattan." Osofsky, *Harlem*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 130.

<sup>14</sup> In real time, of course, institutions like the New York Police Department still aggressively restricted freedoms, and factors like poverty and school inequality limited opportunities.

During the 1910s and 1920s, life for African Americans proved increasingly bleak, even dangerous. In the context of this nadir of black life in America, however, Harlem offered a bright spot of cultural energy and political promise. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL), both founded in New York, advocated for equal opportunities and protection under the law for black Americans. Both organizations operated locally, often through highly visible events like the NAACP's 1917 silent march to protest lynching which originated in Harlem. Group publications like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and A. Phillip Randolph's *The Messenger* used photography by the Smiths, the Scurlocks and other black photographers to help illustrate their missions. Beginning in 1916, Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) filled Harlem with fervor of pan-African, nationalist pride. In Harlem Garvey selected James VanDerZee as the official photographer for huge rallies and parades of UNIA members. While the UNIA's major ventures eventually failed, and the United States deported Garvey back to Jamaica in 1927, many of his adherents stayed committed to his tenets of self-sufficiency and pride in a shared diasporic history. A framework for political organizing set by national groups in the 1920s enabled individual and grassroots efforts during the Great Depression as well as a "widespread, activist political culture in Harlem."<sup>15</sup>

The opportunity Harlem promised after World War I drew large numbers of "younger Negro artists who create," as well as writers, musicians, actors, dancers, and scholars.<sup>16</sup> *Opportunity* magazine organized an awards banquet in 1924 to reward their

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<sup>15</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, "Or Does it Explode?:" *Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *Nation*, June 23, 1926, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/360.html>.

creative efforts, out of which Alain Locke edited a subsequent issue of *Survey Graphic* under the title “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” announcing a collective effort by African Americans to take control of their art and identity.<sup>17</sup> The exact timeframe of the New Negro Renaissance, its relative success, dependence on white patronage, and whether a movement existed at all have been the subject of much debate.<sup>18</sup> Between roughly 1925 and 1935, writers and visual artists in Harlem attempted to redefine the black image and resist racist caricature. They sought to honor folk and rural traditions while aspiring to “High” art, to interrogate connections with an African past while taking a progressive approach to an American future. An activist black press and the popularity of New York jazz spread the news of Harlem nationally. The culture and nightlife of the New Negro Renaissance, Johnson wrote in 1930, had been “proclaimed in story and song” and become Harlem’s most celebrated aspects.<sup>19</sup> Morgan and Marvin Smith travelled east with these ideas in mind. According to friend and colleague Gordon Parks their motivation came from a desire “to zero in on what was left of the social and cultural enrichment of Harlem’s Renaissance. They found mostly poverty, strangely coiled within the structure of a black bourgeoisie.”<sup>20</sup>

If the jazz age and the New Negro Renaissance provided one of the most attractive popular conceptions of Harlem as a place, the 1920s also produced a vision of

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<sup>17</sup> Alain Locke, “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.” *Survey Graphic* (March 1925).

<sup>18</sup> See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, rev. ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race In American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Smith and Smith, *Harlem*, ix.

Harlem that was less enchanting but equally pervasive. Historian Gilbert Osofsky asserts that the most fundamental development in Harlem of the 1920's was the neighborhood's "emergence as a slum. Largely within the space of a single decade Harlem was transformed from a potentially ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems called 'deplorable,' 'unspeakable,' 'incredible'."<sup>21</sup> Looking back, conservative author George S. Schuyler remarked in reference to Harlem that, "the reason why the Depression didn't have the impact on the Negroes that it had on the whites, was that the Negroes had been in the Depression all the time."<sup>22</sup>

During World War I people moved to Harlem so rapidly that housing stocks strained to accommodate them.<sup>23</sup> Overcrowding and neglect by absentee landlords hastened the deterioration of available housing in the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> Many Harlemites had to pay exorbitant rents on low salaries through the first half of the twentieth century. Even during wartime New York lacked the large number of manufacturing jobs found in other Northern cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland.<sup>25</sup> For migrants from the rural south with little education or training, service industry jobs or manual labor were most often the only employment available. McKay compared Harlem to the "glorified servant

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<sup>21</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Osofsky, *Harlem*, 149. See also George S. Schuyler, *The Reminiscences of George S. Schuyler* (New York: Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1960), 232.

<sup>23</sup> "Between 1910 and 1920 the Negro population of the city increased 66 percent (91,709 to 152,467); from 1920 to 1930, it expanded 115 percent (152,467 to 327,706)." Osofsky, *Harlem*, 128.

<sup>24</sup> "The consequently overcrowded apartments made some Harlem blocks among the most densely populated in the city, and contributed to rates of disease and death that exceeded dramatically those of the city's whites. New York City offered few opportunities to shake free of that situation. With only a small number of manufacturing jobs available, and barred by unions and employers from skilled jobs, most blacks ended up in low-paid, dead end service work." See, Stephen Robertson, et. al, "This Harlem Life: Black Families and Everyday Life in the 1920s and 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 98.

<sup>25</sup> Trade unions and city government units exhibited discriminatory hiring practices, or only opened the most menial positions to African Americans.

quarters of a vast estate,” in part because “because the majority of Aframeicans are domestics, who live in imitation of their white employers although upon a lower level.”<sup>26</sup>

To ease the high cost of living in Harlem many apartment dwellers let out spare rooms to family members or strangers, a practice that only increased during the heightened unemployment of the Depression.<sup>27</sup> Even in the most “respectable” sections of Striver’s Row and Sugar Hill taking in roomers often became a necessity.<sup>28</sup> Even there, McKay wrote that, “excepting the privileged few, the majority of families [live]...packed together like sardines. Prohibitive rent makes the unit of private family life the rarest thing. Almost all families take in lodgers. All available space must be occupied. Rooms, Rooms, and more rooms to let.”<sup>29</sup> These strategies for addressing steep rents proved beneficial for family budgets, but led to overcrowding that further degraded housing

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<sup>26</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> In less “desirable” sections of Harlem, some rooming houses infamously rented out a “hot bed” shared by two or more people (usually young, single men) who worked and slept in shifts. Another, more celebrated, strategy used by Harlemites to make ends meet was to host a “rent party.” At a rent party, hosts charged friends and neighbors an admission of 25 or 50 cents for some food and drink, with the expectation that the favor might be returned in the future. Writers for the Federal Writers Project included an typical invitation to a rent party: “There’ll be brown skin mammas/High yallers too/ And if you ain’t got nothing to do Come on up to/ Roy and Sadie’s, 228 West 126<sup>th</sup> St, Sat Night, May 12<sup>th</sup>/ There’ll be plenty of pig feet/ And lots of gin/ Jus ring the bell/ And come on in.” Osofsky, *Harlem*, 139; Ottley and Weatherby, *The Negro in New York*, 249-250.

<sup>28</sup> McKay described Strivers Row thusly: “...a few blocks are slightly more desirable than the rest of Harlem. The best result is the block of buildings in 139<sup>th</sup> street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> avenues, which was designed by the celebrated Stanford White. The houses are private, and when the whites decided to move out in 1920, a colored group banded together to buy them and keep the section exclusive. The tree-shaded block still retains some of its quiet air of respectability....The Negroes rent rooms there as they do in every other block in Harlem.” In *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, Morgan and Marvin Smith contributed a photograph of Striver’s Row, in addition to several others. The caption reads: “Striver’s Row: Where the exclusive of Negro Respectability reside: the famous architect Stanford White’s row of houses in 139th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenue. Nicknamed Striver’s Row because of its smartness and desirability when Negroes first took over in the early nineteen-twenties.” McKay, Plate 3; Sugar Hill bore a reputation as where the elites of Harlem resided, including professionals and successful performers. Sugar Hill, McKay wrote, “has the reputation of being the romping ground of the fashionable set. But the vast majority of its residents are resident are also ordinary Harlemites like those living under the hill....the houses on the hill are more modern, but rents are exorbitant. Sugar Hill faces the problem of any other fairly desirable residential quarter of Harlem. The fashionable set cannot keep it exclusive, for it is infinitesimal. Families double up in apartments as elsewhere in Harlem. And racketeers of clandestine professions also set the pace. They are the people who can afford the extortionate rents without caring.” McKay, *Harlem*, 23, 26.

<sup>29</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 27-28.

stock.<sup>30</sup> Yet, McKay wrote after a decade of Depression that migrants “still are coming in spite of the grim misery that lurks behind the inviting facades. Overcrowded tenements, the harsh northern climate and unemployment do no daunt them. Harlem remains the magnet.”<sup>31</sup>

People continued to make their way to Harlem in part because life there offered even the least privileged black residents the chance for employment, social connection, cultural enrichment, and leisure.<sup>32</sup> Morgan Thompson, for instance, arrived from Montserrat via Panama in 1917 and worked in construction.<sup>33</sup> Thompson spent much of his leisure time socializing with other migrants from the Caribbean at the Victorian Society or an Anglican Church a few blocks from his home.<sup>34</sup> Perry Brown joined the Grand Protective Order of the Elks, one of hundreds of fraternal and mutual aid societies in Harlem.<sup>35</sup> Group membership gave Brown and countless others access to clubhouses “with bars, halls, offices, and orchestras and bands, and weekly meetings to attend,” and

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<sup>30</sup> “High rents and poor salaries necessarily led to congested and unsanitary conditions.” Osofsky, 136.

<sup>31</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> The historians behind the *Digital Harlem: Everyday Life, 1915-1930* project have asserted that much of the historical scholarship on Harlem has fallen into two modes: Renaissance studies that privilege artists but fail to capture the texture of everyday life and “Ghetto” histories that can obscure individuals behind statistics and social science. In an effort to illustrate the everyday lives of Harlem’s working class and underemployed in the 1920s and ‘30s, the same historians have pulled together case studies based in census data and rich probationary records that illustrate how a life in Harlem could be bearable and even enjoyable under difficult conditions. See Stephen Robertson, et. al., *Digital Harlem: Everyday Life, 1915-1930*, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://digitalharlem.org/> and Robertson, et. al., “This Harlem Life,” 98.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson maintained a stable (and sizeable at four rooms) home on 144<sup>th</sup> Street, along with his wife (who worked as a domestic) and two children. Robertson, et. al., “This Harlem Life,” 101.

<sup>34</sup> Robertson, et. al., “This Harlem Life,” 101-102. In 1928, the time of Thompson’s infraction, one in five Harlemites hailed from the West Indies, and three quarters of the residents in Thompson’s apartment building shared that origin. The Victoria Society was a social club for Caribbean New Yorkers located on West 137<sup>th</sup> Street.

<sup>35</sup> According to Cheryl Greenberg, “over two thousand social political and mutual aid societies flourished in Harlem, including the United Aid for Peoples of African Descent, the Tuskegee Alumni Association, Iota Phi Lambda (a sorority for business women), the King of Clubs (half of whose members were black police officers), the Hampton Alumni Club, the Bermuda Benevolent Organization, the Southern Aristocrats, the Trinidad Benevolent Association, the New Englanders, the Hyacinths Social Club, the Montserrat Progressive Society, St. Helena’s League and Benefit Club, and hundreds of others.” Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 195.

provided a financial safety net during the Depression.<sup>36</sup> Seeking a different kind of respectability, evinced by luxury and consumption, Frank Hamilton arrived in Harlem in 1926. Hamilton found his social connections, “in private apartment bridge parties and cocktail parties...but also rent parties, where blacks of different classes mingled, [as well as] cabarets and nightclubs.”<sup>37</sup> For young black Harlemites with the means, even domestic space could become an ideal “setting for a Jazz Age life.”<sup>38</sup>

For many in Harlem, however, quality of life depended greatly on public and semi-public spaces. Because Harlem was so “congested”, McKay wrote, “the street corners and bars provided an outlet as forums and clubs.”<sup>39</sup> In overcrowded conditions where families and lodgers might share cramped quarters or even a bed, “the surrounding streets and stores functioned as part of their home; restaurants and chop suey joints were their dining rooms, speakeasies, billiard halls and movie theatres their parlors and sitting rooms.”<sup>40</sup> Langston Hughes’ fictional everyman and Harlem native Jesse B. Semple (known better as Simple), once proclaimed that he spends so much time in bars as an adult because he grew up in a tiny apartment with many relatives and “no place just to set and think.”<sup>41</sup> For people of all classes in Harlem, public and commercial spaces served as an important arena. People depended on places like bars, theatres, and even photography studios as venues in which to relax, solve problems, and cultivate social networks. Even

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<sup>36</sup> “The Elks were Harlem’s largest fraternal order, attracting professionals and working-class men who shared [Brown’s] aspirations to respectability and leadership. A secular organization, the Elks emphasized educational programs and community service, and offered insurance benefits, help finding jobs and housing, and entertainment, such as organized boat rides and parties.” See Robertson, et. al, “This Harlem Life,” 104.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson, et. al, “This Harlem Life,” 108.

<sup>38</sup> Robertson, et. al, “This Harlem Life,” 108.

<sup>39</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Robertson, et. al, “This Harlem Life,” 115. Robertson, *et al.* do note that conflicts arose when probationary officers saw money spent on leisure as excessive, while their clients saw a need to spend down time out of small rooms and living spaces that were often shared.

<sup>41</sup> Langston Hughes, “Feet Live Their Own Life,” *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 7, *The Early Simple Stories* (Columbia: University of Missouri, Press, 2002), 22.

street corners and front stoops served as “third places” where people sorted through the business of everyday life.

### **Settling in Place: Making a Studio for Harlem**

Arriving by bus, Morgan and Marvin Smith disembarked in Midtown Manhattan, and while impressed by the bright lights of Times Square, “decided [they] must go and look for the black folk” and thus “straight to Harlem.”<sup>42</sup> Moving through Manhattan, Morgan and Marvin Smith likely noticed a demographic shift similar to that described by James Weldon Johnson in 1930. Once north of Central Park, Johnson wrote,

anyone travelling up either Lenox Avenue or parallel Seventh Avenue would see more and more Negroes, walking in the streets, looking from the windows, trading in the shops, eating in the restaurants, going in and coming out of the theaters, until, nearing One Hundred and Thirty-fifth street, ninety per cent of the people you see, including the traffic officers are Negroes. And it is not until you cross the Harlem River that the population whitens again, which it does as suddenly as it began to darken at One Hundred and Tenth Street. You have been having an outside glimpse of Harlem, the Negro metropolis.<sup>43</sup>

When Malcom X arrived in Harlem for the first time he witnessed a similar phenomenon. Known as Malcolm Little in 1943, he rode north from Pennsylvania Station in a taxi, watching as “white New York passed by like a movie set, then abruptly, [leaving] Central Park at the upper end, at 110<sup>th</sup> Street, the people’s complexion began to change.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *M&M Smith: For Posterity's Sake*, directed by Heather Lyons (Little City Productions, 1995), VHS, (New Day Films, 1997). Hereafter, *For Posterity's Sake*.; In an interview with Louis Draper, the Smiths explained “that was September 1933...we did come straight to Harlem. We got off the bus in midtown. At that time there was an underground bus terminal. We came up to the street level and were amazed at times square...[and] saw an advertisement for The Emperor Jones with Paul Robeson.” See Draper Interview.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Haley and Malcom X, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 75. For a more thorough examination of Malcom X through the frameworks of space and place see James Tyner, *The Geography of Malcom X: Black Radicalism and the Remaking of American Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

“Black Harlem” had grown from Payton’s first building on 134<sup>th</sup> Street to cover an area that stretched up from the top of Central Park north to 155<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>45</sup>

Morgan and Marvin Smith first rented an apartment at 7th Avenue at 140th Street with Horace Hicks, their traveling companion from Cincinnati.<sup>46</sup> Morgan and Marvin jumped into Harlem’s community of artists by enrolling in Augusta Savage’s free art classes in her basement on 143rd Street, and later the Harlem Community Art Center.<sup>47</sup> Both brothers also participated in the “306 Group,” a collective of writers, artists, and performers supported by the WPA Federal Arts Project out of Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn’s 141st Street studio. Regulars at 306 included Savage, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jacob Lawrence, Gwendolyn Knight, Norman Lewis, and Alston’s cousin Romare Bearden.<sup>48</sup> The Smiths improved their painting during this time but also plugged into a social circle of artists and political leaders that would frequent the M. Smith studio in just a few years.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson described Harlem in 1930 as: “roughly drawn...one hundred and tenth street on the south, on the east Lenox avenue to 126<sup>th</sup> St., then Lexington avenue to the Harlem river, and the Harlem river on the east and north to a point where it passes the Polo Grounds, just above One Hundred and Fifty-Fifth street; on the west, Eighth Avenue to One Hundred and Sixteenth Street, then St. Nicholas Avenue up to a juncture with the Harlem River at the Polo Grounds. To the east of the Lenox Avenue boundary there a score of blocks of mixed Colored and White population and to the west of the Eighth Avenue boundary there is a solid Negro border, two blocks wide, from One Hundred and Sixteenth Street to One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street.” Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 146.

<sup>46</sup> Draper Interview.

<sup>47</sup> Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 165. Free art classes at the Harlem Community Arts Center (HCAC) proved wildly popular and were expanded to fifteen locations in Harlem. The HCAC was located at 290 Lenox Ave at 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Savage also organized the Harlem Art Workshop at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library.

<sup>48</sup> “In essence, ‘306’ was a microcosm of the rich artistic life of Harlem that flourished during the depression.” Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life & Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1990), 82.

<sup>49</sup> During their first years in Harlem, Morgan and Marvin Smith were also introduced to collectivist politics through the Harlem Artists Guild and the American Newspaper Guild. In 1935 Savage and other more established artists organized the Harlem Artists Guild in order to secure more work for “those young Harlemites ... spurred by the creative spirit.” Claude McKay explained, “Harlem artists, like other American Artists, were groping under the pall of the depression. They were youngsters compared to the writers. Five of the more mature decided to organize a group in 1935. They were Charles Alston, Henry Bannarn, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, and Augusta Savage. Their purpose was to band all the Harlem

After obtaining relief work as laborers, Morgan and Marvin were promoted within the WPA as a mural painter with the Federal Arts Project (FAP) and a gardener/landscape designer, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Still, the young artists needed additional income and soon turned to photography. An early business card for “The Smith Twins,” offered Home Portraits at 2400 7th Avenue, Apartment 43, suggesting that the Smiths initially either made house-calls or invited clients to their apartment. Things accelerated when, according to Marvin Smith, “one Sunday we were out on 7th avenue and [Morgan] took some pictures...and through taking those pictures [we] submitted some of them to the *Amsterdam News*...that was sort of the beginning of [our] photography here in New York.”<sup>51</sup> Both men had a long working relationship with the black press, and Morgan became staff photographer for the *Amsterdam News* in 1937. Throughout their career they shot both press and studio photographs under the imprint “M. Smith,” in part to get around exclusivity agreements and sell their images more freely.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the moniker has made identifying which brother took any specific picture difficult.<sup>53</sup>

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artists together in a cultural group. Their immediate object was to obtain jobs and relief for artists of the Negro Belt.” See McKay, *Harlem*, 241.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Alston supervised all of the Federal Arts Project (FAP) muralists working in Harlem out of “306,” adding to the bustle of activity surrounding that particular space. The FAP began under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration from its inception in 1935. According to Cheryl Greenberg, “the number of New Yorkers on federal relief rolls peaked in 1935. By the end of that year almost a fifth of all New Yorkers received some sort of direct aid....the proportion of blacks on relief rolls was more than double the proportion of whites.” For many African Americans, the lowest wages offered by relief work could actually be better than what they could hope for from the market. As “skilled” but not “professional” level workers the Smiths likely would have earned between seventy-five and ninety-five dollars a month. Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 143-144, 152.

<sup>51</sup> In the 1998 interview with James Briggs Murray, Marvin Smith also claims that *Amsterdam News* paid less than five dollars per photograph upon publication. Obtaining newsworthy photographs required significant time scouting events that would be of interest (including celebrities arriving at the train station) and travel to and from the location. To cover more ground, a studio with two photographers could be an advantage – as one manned the shop and another went out on assignment. Though the Smith brothers both published photographs in black newspapers, they used the byline “M. Smith” to signify their joint ownership and participation in the creation of the image.

<sup>52</sup> For thorough analysis of Morgan Smith’s press photography see Melissa Rachleff, “Photojournalism in Harlem: Morgan and Marvin Smith and the Construction of Power, 1934-1943” in *Visual Journal*:

Demand for their M. Smith pictures rose quickly in the neighborhood.<sup>54</sup> For a short time, the Smith brothers also formed a short-lived press agency called “Melrah” (“Harlem” spelled backwards).<sup>55</sup> Though “Melrah” folded quickly, the Smiths also joined the National Negro Press and Advertising Association (NNPAA). Before long it became clear that the Smiths needed a studio to address their growing popularity and enable the brothers’ creative ambitions. Norman Lewis, another artist in the 306 group, offered them an available loft space at 141 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street and they opened the M. Smith Studio in 1939.

While shoppers flocked to 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the corridor represented for many a frustrating reality of commerce in Harlem. While the majority of people spending money in Harlem was black, whites owned and operated the vast majority of the businesses operating there. Harlemites saw little of the money they spent remain in the neighborhood in the form of salaries or investments; white merchants carried their profits home to other neighborhoods or boroughs.<sup>56</sup> On 125<sup>th</sup> Street, many white proprietors refused to hire black employees, and consumers complained of poor treatment by salespeople. On March

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*Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties*, eds. Deborah Willis and Jane Lusaka (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 15-60.

<sup>53</sup> The same might be said of writing about the Smiths and their work. In the minds of Morgan and Marvin Smith, every picture was a collaboration, a team effort, so using “M. Smith” made perfect sense.

<sup>54</sup> The Smiths actually moved their residence several times before landing on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Moving often was a common feature of working and middle class life in Harlem, because of life changes and financial hardship. Some of the Smiths’ new addresses were outside of Harlem, which complicates their account of embracing Harlem completely and straight away, but seem to have been made so that Marvin could be closer to his work in Central Park. Some of the dates and addresses are as follows: 120 W 3<sup>rd</sup> St. (Greenwich Village, 1934), 9 W 99<sup>th</sup> St. (Upper West Side, 1934), 43 W 66<sup>th</sup> St. (1935), 131 W 110<sup>th</sup> St. (possibly 231 W 110<sup>th</sup>, 1937). See “Timeline: Marvin and Morgan Smith”, Typescript, Box 1, M. Smith Papers, Box 1.

<sup>55</sup> Melrah consisted of Morgan Smith, Marvin Smith, Maurice Rowe, and Billy Rowe. See Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, in 1930 Black Harlemites spent an estimated thirty-five million dollars in 12,000 Harlem establishments; of these, only 391 were black-owned. By 1935 black business people operated 960 stores but posted only \$3,964 in sales on average and could only provide 793 jobs in addition to owners of said business. None of these numbers count businesses outside the mainstream economy, i.e.: home hair salons, unlicensed daycares, freelance seamstress work, numbers runners, etc. It is also likely that many of the smaller markets and drug stores counted were actually fronts for policy operations. Greenberg, 75-85.

19, 1935, not two full years after the Smiths arrived in New York, tensions boiled over in “a riot of alarming proportions” following rumors of police violence at a white-owned shop on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Claude McKay suggested that “the wrath of the populace was entirely directed against the stores. That was the striking feature about the rioting. All the recent trouble in Harlem had centered in the stores.”<sup>57</sup> Adam Clayton Powell’s “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign and competing efforts sought to secure jobs for African Americans in white owned stores after the riot 1935 with varying degrees of success.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, the Federal Writers Project could still observe in 1939 (the year the Smiths moved in) that 125<sup>th</sup> Street offered “many stores, movie houses, real-estate offices, banks and eating places, the overwhelming majority being owned and operated by whites”<sup>59</sup> Even major destinations on 125<sup>th</sup> Street like the Hotel Theresa and the Apollo Theatre were owned by whites.

Several African Americans and West Indian immigrants had achieved professional success as photographers in Harlem prior to the opening of the M. Smith Studio. James VanDerZee opened the first iteration of his Guarantee Photo Studio at 109 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street. In 1943 VanDerZee moved to 272 Lenox Avenue, in part to be closer to the action on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>60</sup> Walter Baker owned a studio at 426 Lenox Avenue that

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<sup>57</sup> McKay, *Harlem*, 208. Cheryl Greenberg concurs: “Rioters did not vandalize black stores or harass black police. Black passersby were not attacked, but whites were. The object of attack that night was whites; perhaps not white people, but certainly white power ....Store owners in Harlem agreed it had been a race riot and that their white-owned stores had been the explicit targets.” Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 212- 213.

<sup>58</sup> See Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, Chapter 5. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” protests, pursued by a number of different coalitions in New York, were models for similar campaigns in other cities, including Washington, DC.

<sup>59</sup> *New York City Guide*, 259.

<sup>60</sup> VanDerZee held several addresses in Harlem over the course of his career. He also worked in a handful of cities including his hometown of Lenox, Massachusetts, Hampton, Virginia and Newark, New Jersey.

he operated until his sudden death in 1926.<sup>61</sup> James L. Allen opened his studio for portrait and commercial photography at 213 W 121<sup>st</sup> Street in 1927.<sup>62</sup> One year later Winifred Hall Allen (no relation) came to New York from Jamaica and opened up her shop on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue near 141<sup>st</sup> Street, one block from where the Smiths rented their first apartment. Austin Hansen, born in the U.S. Virgin Islands, opened a home studio on 116<sup>th</sup> Street before World War II, and then settled at 232 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street after his service in the U.S. Navy.<sup>63</sup> The 1935 *Classified Directory and Diary of Negro Business and Professional Men and Women of New York City* listed four more studios within ten blocks of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue.<sup>64</sup> In order to support themselves with portrait and news photography, the Smiths had to carve out their own niche in an established market.

Less than a year after the M. Smith Studio opened at 141 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street, a secretary of the NNPA wrote to the brothers requesting their presence at a last-minute meeting before the president of the organization left the country. Members would gather at 243 W 125<sup>th</sup> St, the address of NNPA President, James Carl “Hamtree” Harrington. An actor and comedian, Harrington also worked as a photographer and had made his studio (and NNPA headquarters) next to the Apollo Theatre.<sup>65</sup> Soon thereafter,

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<sup>61</sup> “Walter Baker Dies After Short Illness,” *New York Tattler*, January 2, 1927, 13 in The Deborah Willis Research Collection, Schomburg Center.

<sup>62</sup> Camera Dia Holloway, *Portraiture & the Harlem Renaissance: The Photographs of James L. Allen* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Austin Hansen, August 6, 1986 in Moving Image and Recorded Sound, Schomburg Center. See also Austin Hansen Papers, 1946-1985, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center. Hereafter, Hansen Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell’s Studio (2313 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue), Mittoo Photo Studio (2010 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue), Radio Photo Studio (422 Lenox Avenue), Vernon King (135 W 135<sup>th</sup> Street). See *Classified Directory and Diary of Negro Business and Professional Men and Women of New York City* (New York: National Negro Progress Association, 1935).

<sup>65</sup> Leroy Collins to Morgan and Marvin Smith, August 11, 1939, Box 1, M. Smith Papers. The handwritten letter from “Ex-Secretary” Collins is addressed to the Smiths at 141 W. 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Collins asks to adjust the date of an upcoming meeting because Harrington was leaving town for Jamaica. Though

Harrington vacated his studio completely to take roles in New York and Hollywood. In 1940 Harrington informed the landlord, Apollo Theatre owner Frank Schiffman, about two young photographers who could take over the lease. By the Smith's account, Schiffman sent an assistant to inquire and they immediately moved down the block to take over the space from Harrington, "who had setup this studio beautifully...especially the darkroom."<sup>66</sup>

Marvin Smith remarked that 243 W 125<sup>th</sup> St was a "great, great location" in part because it allowed them to tap into the consumer fervor of "Harlem's chief business thoroughfare."<sup>67</sup> The Smith brothers had established themselves in a vibrant commercial space right before the wartime economy would boost African American spending power. Actress and singer Eartha Kitt attributed much of the Smiths success to their location. She remembered that, "it was not just the studio, it was that aura of 125th Street. If you couldn't afford to go in the Apollo you'd just go there [to the studio] and look at the pictures."<sup>68</sup> When the Smiths' moved in next to the Apollo, the theatre had overtaken the Lafayette Theatre as the premier venue for bands and shows in Harlem. Kitt, who began a friendship with Smiths during her rise to fame, located the studio securely within the mystique and excitement of the Apollo and suggests how the theatre helped to draw people to the studio. At the same time, Kitt's comment disrupts a nostalgic view of 125<sup>th</sup>

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the exact address from which Collins sent the letter is unclear, he wrote it on National Negro Press and Advertising Association letterhead, which lists Harrington Studio at 243 125<sup>th</sup> Street as headquarters.

<sup>66</sup> Murray Interview. Marvin Smith: "...so in '39, the demand was such that we opened a studio on 125<sup>th</sup> Street....141 West 125th Street....and we stayed there about a year and Schiffman's assistant Frankel came over and said there was space in the Apollo theater building, there had been a photographer there before by the name of \_\_\_\_\_ Harrington and he was in a Broadway show or something and no longer used the space that was available." Draper Interview.

<sup>67</sup> *For Posterity's Sake*, 1995; *New York City Guide*, 259. Marvin Smith named Lewis as their connection to the space in the Murray interview. It is not clear whether Lewis owned the space or sublet it to them.

<sup>68</sup> *For Posterity's Sake*, 1995.

Street by reminding us that many people “couldn’t afford to go to the Apollo” and had to settle for a glimpse at a headshot on the sidewalk.

The Smiths helped create that exceptional narrative and immediately contributed to the “aura” of 125<sup>th</sup> Street by installing rows of portraits in display cases on both sides of their doorway, intended to draw customers up the stairs. Often, the Smiths used the displays to showcase their work taking portraits of stage performers. Employee Dorothy Corinaldi remembered that, “they changed them regularly. And sometimes they’d have a large photograph of one person, or 8x10s of different subjects.”<sup>69</sup> Marvin Smith recalled that, “you couldn’t walk by this doorway here and not see the display. And from this display here many people decided, ‘I’m going up there and have my picture made, I like the work of the photographer.’”<sup>70</sup> The M. Smith display windows proved an effective advertisement, much as the Scurlock Studio display in Washington, Allen E. Cole’s in Cleveland, and countless other studios since the days of the daguerreotype.

The M. Smith portraits on view at the bottom of their stairs connected the studio to an important social space in Harlem (as in many large cities), that of the sidewalk and street corner. Seeing and being seen in public space constituted an enjoyable pastime for many Harlem residents. James Weldon Johnson likewise cited the streets as “places for socializing,” and Lenox Avenue in particular as a place to “stroll.” To stroll properly, Johnson wrote, “one puts on one’s best clothes and fares forth to pass the time pleasantly with the friends and acquaintances and most important of all, the strangers he is sure of

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<sup>69</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>70</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

meeting....This is not simply going for a walk; it is more like going out for adventure.”<sup>71</sup>

In an oral history, Nora Mair concurred that on Sunday mornings in Harlem, “everybody was dressed to the teeth.... They would say if you stood at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue, you would see every important person you ever knew.”<sup>72</sup> Malcolm X described the streets of Harlem during wartime as a “Technicolor bazaar” full of “Negro soldiers and sailors, gawking and young.”<sup>73</sup> In less dramatic fashion Dorothy Corinaldi also described the M. Smith portrait case as wrapped up in the flurry of posing and (especially) looking going on in the streets of Harlem in the 1930s and ‘40s, recounting the many “people stopping on the street...down on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and people would stop and look at the photographs.”<sup>74</sup> Given the studio’s proximity to the Apollo, famous black stars made up a significant part of the Smith clientele, and the Smiths used portraits of notables liberally in their display cases.<sup>75</sup> The brothers worked to associate their imprint with glamor, and their display worked to give their studio a thick gloss of celebrity. Famous faces on display at street level, also offered not-so-famous Harlemites the chance to imagine themselves as on par with the celebrities they might actually bump into on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

Regular encounters with famous black artists, political leaders, musicians and movie stars made Harlem a unique place in the eyes of many observers, and the Smiths’ public portraits contributed to an attendant sense of pride. Author and scholar Arthur P.

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 162-163. Also see Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 220-247.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Jeff Kisseloff, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890’s to World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 282.

<sup>73</sup> Haley and X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 78.

<sup>74</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>75</sup> During the summer Dorothy Corinaldi spent working for the studio she remembered that “many of [the] leading black stars were photographed by the Smith brothers. *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

Davis fondly remembered living in Harlem while just a student, when “one of the pleasures...was seeing celebrities. Just around the corner at 185 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street lived James Weldon Johnson. Next door to him lived Fats Waller...we often found under the famous Tree of Hope such artists as Ethel Waters, [Noble] Sissle and Black, Fletcher Henderson, and Miller and Lyles.”<sup>76</sup> When Malcolm X learned that performers frequented the bar at the Braddock Hotel he staked it out to see “such famous stars as Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Eckstine, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Dinah Washington.”<sup>77</sup> Even Langston Hughes’ fictional Everyman Jesse B. Semple boasted, “sometimes I run into Duke Ellington on 125th Street and I say, ‘What you know there, Duke?’ Duke says, ‘Solid, ole man.’ He does not know me from Adam, but he speaks. One day I saw Lena Horne coming out of the Hotel Theresa and I said, ‘Huba! Huba!’ Lena smiled. Folks is friendly in Harlem. I feel like I got the world in a jug and the stopper in my hand!”<sup>78</sup> Though fictionalized here by Hughes, Simple voices a sense of pride and enthusiasm borne of seeing notable figures in the public spaces of Harlem. In their ability to reproduce and promote that vision through celebrity portraits in their display window, the M. Smith studio participated directly in reinforcing Harlem’s unique sense of itself.

The Smith Studio participated in the excitement of celebrity encounter by leaking details about prominent individuals’ photo-appointments to friend and *Amsterdam News* gossip columnist Bill Chase. Chase’s “All Ears” columns gave his friends a little free publicity and also cemented their connection to 125<sup>th</sup> Street in the popular imagination. In

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur P Davis, “Harlem during the New Negro Renaissance,” *The Oracle*, (Summer 1971), 4.

<sup>77</sup> Haley and X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 76-77.

<sup>78</sup> Langston Hughes, “A Toast to Harlem,” in *Simple Takes a Wife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 40.

1942, Chase did his part by publicizing in advance a special date between Joe Louis and his wife Marva to visit the Smiths and have pictures made in his new Army uniform.<sup>79</sup> Chase wrote a similar announcement later that year when Lena Horne, “whose beauty hasn’t been caught by most photogs [sic], has a sitting with Morgan Smith today... who’ll probably do right by her.”<sup>80</sup> For regular customers, or just fans of Lena Horne, publicizing her appointment let them know when they might drop by the studio to catch a glimpse of the star or have their portrait made on the same day. Receptionist Sara Harris remembered that she “would know from one day to the other who was coming. Sometimes they were celebrities and sometimes they were just people from the community.”<sup>81</sup> Harris’ comment emphasized the breadth of customers that visited the Smith studio, but also that neighbors could anticipate running into celebrities when having their portraits made.

While an address on 125<sup>th</sup> Street proved beneficial in some ways, in Marvin Smith’s perception the M. Smith Studio also suffered because of their location and its racial connotations. Even in the 1940s black photographers in a black neighborhood carried less prestige than white photographers and fought against perceptions of lower status. Specifically, Smith recounted that entertainers

spent more money than [neighborhood customers] but not much more. We didn’t have the support from a lot of celebrities. We sought them out, we photographed them because we wanted to photograph them. My people. I hate to name out the people that you might think that we photographed, that we had to almost beg them to get pictures of them...there’s some people that never put their foot in our

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<sup>79</sup> Bill Chase, “All Ears,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1942, 8. “Marva Louis, because her train was late, just missed Joe by a matter of minutes, as he was on his way to Camp Upton. She has seen him on two occasions since (when he was in town for a broadcast and the sports dinner) and Thursday they have a date at Morgan Smith’s studio where they’ll be photographed. Joe in his new uniform, etc. The original coat that was given Joe was just a bit tight across the shoulders which he pointed out to Marva when she visited out at the camp over the weekend. Said Marva, ‘What did you expect Honey, an English drape?’ ”

<sup>80</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 10.

<sup>81</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

studio. I'd just as soon not [name them] because let's face it, there's a thing with us as a people...<sup>82</sup>

Though initially reluctant to state so, Smith expressed anger that many entertainers at the Apollo preferred to visit a white photographer. In an earlier interview, one of the Smith brothers (the transcript is unclear as to which) placed blame upon the white agents of black musicians for steering artists towards white photographers. Additionally, Smith claimed that a small number of celebrities came in to protest their agents' instructions to have photographs made "downtown."<sup>83</sup> African American photographers of an earlier generation would have been familiar with what Smith called a "hard truth": that many black consumers still chose white photographers for reasons of higher status and/or lower cost.<sup>84</sup>

Prejudicial preference for white photographers "downtown" was not unique to the people of Harlem. In Memphis after WWII, Ernest Withers recalled having trouble getting his studio business off the ground on Beale Street. Withers recalled when one woman told him that, "I don't need no neighborhood photographer. I'm not gonna dress my children up just to bring them right over here. If I dress my children up I'm gonna

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<sup>82</sup> Murray Interview.

<sup>83</sup>As he explained the reluctance of some black performers to visit black photographers, Smith's statement expressed some anti-Semitism, reflecting the long-simmering tension between Black and Jewish Harlemites: "This I think came about because a certain group of people are the agents of the black entertainers and you know who they are. They guided all the black entertainers that they could to whites. The black musicians and theatrical people came to us said that they came because they wanted to because their agent had advised them to go to this white photographer downtown. That was a problem." Without excusing their coded anti-Semitism, it is important to acknowledge the Smiths' resentment at being passed over for white camera-workers, and that some artists visited their studio explicitly because they had been instructed by management to go elsewhere. Draper Interview.

<sup>84</sup> To be fair, although Marvin Smith recalled some difficulty getting celebrities to make portrait appointments, their photographic record actually suggests that entertainers made up a large and regular portion of their clientele. At the same time, that could be a function of the selectiveness of the archive, i.e. if the Smiths saved their celebrity work in particular.

take them downtown to [white-owned] Blue Light.”<sup>85</sup> The woman’s comment casts Withers’ difficulties in explicitly spatial terms, by expressing preference by some black Memphians to have their portraits made downtown where white studios were located. Withers’ anecdote suggests that many black photographers not only had to work against the imagined superiority of white photographers, but against a spatial understanding that cast black business districts as less desirable than white commercial space. Given that people meant their portraits to commemorate important occasions, Withers’ experience suggests that an address in the “black” business area could also be a disadvantage for a studio photographer. As segregation limited the choices of black entrepreneurs and the physical spaces of any given town retained racialized meanings, ones address could have real impact on a photographer’s chances for success.

While the Smiths eagerly took over Hamtree Harrington’s shop on the second floor they felt trapped upstairs because of their race. During a 1982 interview with fellow photographer Louis Draper, Marvin Smith recounted that when the Studio expressed a desire to move their studio down to vacant space on the street level, Frank Schiffman allegedly refused to lease them a first floor space because of their race.<sup>86</sup> Smith lamented that, “Schiffman would never rent to a black on 125th Street, never. In Harlem. He’s a lifetime member of the NAACP. Doesn’t convince me of nothing.”<sup>87</sup> Where photographers previously selected upper floor rooms for available natural light or atmosphere the Smiths saw some value in putting their operation closer to customers at the sidewalk level, and closer to the actual foot traffic. In their case, however, their landlord’s discriminatory, if unofficial, rental policies trapped the M. Smith studio up on

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Hurley, Johnson, and Wolff, *Pictures Tell the Story*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>87</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

the second floor where they remained until they closed their studio in the late 1960s. In the 1935 riot, property destruction (and later looting) occurred throughout Harlem but originated out of 125<sup>th</sup> street, showing both the importance of the commercial district to the daily life of Harlem and a desire for more control of that space.<sup>88</sup> Another riot began in 1943 after an incident at the Theresa Hotel on 125<sup>th</sup> St, with similar but less severe results. Given the chance to alleviate some of that community tension by leasing the most accessible commercial space to a black business, Frank Schiffman declined to do so. Stuck on the second floor, the Smith's tried to use the staircase to their advantage, outfitting it with what Marvin Smith called "a touch of class."<sup>89</sup>

### **"This Entire Atmosphere": The Many Interiors of the Smith Studio**

To enter the studio customers and visitors followed a brass handrail up white marble stairs to the second floor, where the M. Smith Studio ran the entire length of the building. Their studio proper included a lobby area, office, reception room, photography range, and darkroom. On the third floor the Smiths kept an apartment at the rear of the building with another reception area, private quarters, and later a recording studio.<sup>90</sup> That the Smiths' rooms stretched over two floors gave them options for arranging their work space, decorating, and entertaining. In time, the studio proper and apartment became so

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<sup>88</sup> See *New York City Guide*, 259-260; Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 136.

<sup>89</sup> *For Posterity's Sake*, 1995.

<sup>90</sup> Details about the layout of the M. Smith studio are drawn from Gladys P. Graham, "Harlem's Successful Business and Professional People," *The African: Journal of African Affairs*, October/November, 1947, 6-7; Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden*, 112-114. In an undated press clipping Lillian Johnson describes a "four-room studio-apartment-office" but that seems reductive and inaccurate. Johnson also referred to Marvin Smith as "Melvin" throughout her profile. Unidentified press clipping by Lillian Johnson, "The Smith Twins Left Home for Art School, But on the Way There They Decided to Find Success in New York and They Did Just That," Box 1, M. Smith Papers.

permeable that it could be hard to tell where one ended and the other began. When Morgan and Monica Mais married and had a daughter in 1950, they made their home at the same address, in “very attractive, arty quarters that seem[ed] to wind in and about the recording studio and the photographic studio.”<sup>91</sup> Directly adjacent to the Smith apartment was a music teacher’s rehearsal space and at the very front of the building, Romare Bearden’s art studio. Friends from their time studying under Augusta Savage and the 306 Group, Morgan and Marvin Smith secured the third floor space for Bearden in 1940 after the landlord at his previous studio (33 W 125<sup>th</sup> St.) stopped heating the building.<sup>92</sup>

The Smiths wanted to make their studio a destination in and of itself, and Marvin Smith remembered that “you thought you were going someplace when you went up those steps.”<sup>93</sup> Dorothy Corinaldi had a specific place in mind when she climbed the steps for the first time, recalling that “it felt like perhaps you were in Hollywood.”<sup>94</sup> Corinaldi’s choice of “Hollywood” to describe the studio, while evocative, obscures the fact that those celebrities had come *to Harlem* to have their pictures made. If the Smith studio did not underline that Harlem served as the center of fame for African Americans, it could at the very least collapse New York and the capital of American film in the minds of clients. Eartha Kitt recalled that, before she was famous herself, she found the M. Smith studio welcoming precisely “because people on the wall were people [she had] seen in the

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<sup>91</sup> Unidentified press clipping, “Morgan Smith’s Studio Spinning Platters,” Box 2, M. Smith Papers. This clipping was likely published in 1951, as it lists Morgan Smith’s age as 41, and notes that Marvin Smith was studying in France.

<sup>92</sup> Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden*, 112-114. Romare Bearden’s mother, Bessye Bearden, actually approached the Smiths concerned for her son’s health. Norman Lewis, who found the Smiths their first true studio, was one of Romare Bearden’s best friends.

<sup>93</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>94</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

movies,” adding she felt like “a little doll in all of this world and this atmosphere.”<sup>95</sup>

Prominently displayed celebrity portraits call into question Marvin Smith’s claim that black celebrities generally went downtown for portraits, but at the same time illustrate how the photographers actively worked to foster an association with notable figures through their studio interior.<sup>96</sup> (Figures 17-19)

Features on the M. Smith studio in the black press often began in the lobby by listing the many portraits of notables on display. On the wall one could see a diverse cast including boxers Joe Louis and Jack Johnson, singers Dorothy Maynor and Marian Anderson, performers Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Billy Eckstine, artists Richmond Barthes and Romare Bearden and even scientist George Washington Carver.<sup>97</sup> A 1947 feature in *The African* punned on the racial identity of Smith clients by using a new film technology. In the lobby, Gladys Graham found “one of the largest collections of famous people in Kodachrome (color) in Gotham.” In that interview Morgan Smith indicated that he set up the “rotating exhibit” in order to introduce new products (that is to say, color printing) to “the community” of Harlem and presumably sell new portraits.<sup>98</sup>

Multiple photographs of the lobby focus on one wall stacked with portraits and headshots of models. Hattie Mc Daniel’s portrait in particular stands out from the top row. In one photograph a magazine stand full of issues of *The Crisis* sits in one corner, with issues featuring M. Smith pictures on the cover given pride of place. On occasions

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<sup>95</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>96</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>97</sup> The names listed here come from two accounts: Interview with Eartha Kitt included in *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995; Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People,” 6-7.

<sup>98</sup> Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People,” 6. Morgan Smith: “There are more pictures taken on natural color films these days than by any other method of color photography...in an effort to introduce the import of this method to the community as well as to establish a keen sense of appreciation as to the intricacies of photography, I have initiated here a rotating exhibit. My first one in color is in the Frazier Gallery one of the noted dining rooms of ‘Harlem’ the other in black and white prints has been installed at several outstanding places in this area.”

when actual celebrities, like their friend Joe Louis, stopped by one of the Smiths made sure to snap his picture admiring their very own wall of fame.<sup>99</sup> When actress Burnu Acquanetta visited, Smith positioned her beside the portrait exhibit and in front of a wall of mask sculptures made by Morgan Smith.<sup>100</sup> (Figure 20) While this might have been a one-off or throw-away image, it suggests a multiplicity of gazes in the studio, both alive and inanimate. For all the glitz and glamor that the Smiths tried to convey, they remained very serious about how they represented African Americans.

The masks hung in the lobby also remind the viewer that in addition to a photography business the Smiths used their space as working art studio. 243 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street sheltered a community of artists, with Romare Bearden on the third floor and the sounds of rehearsal at the Apollo bleeding through the walls during the day.<sup>101</sup> Morgan and Marvin Smith socialized with Bearden, painted with him, and participated in salons and criticisms in his studio as well as theirs. Their mutual friends from the Harlem Artists Guild and “306” frequented “243” both casually and at formal events like those detailed below. When Marvin Smith travelled to Paris in 1950 to study art and French under the GI Bill, he sailed with Bearden and poet Myron O’Higgins. Evolving relationships with Bearden and others ensured the Smiths’ continued thinking about art, in turn enabling their continued practice as painters and sculptors and in turn leading to a conscious blending between media throughout the Smith studio.

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<sup>99</sup> *Joe Louis Visits the Studio of Morgan and Marvin Smith, 1940*, Personality Series, Box 12, Morgan and Marvin Smith Collection, 1933-1968, Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black culture. Hereafter, M. Smith Collection (Photographs).

<sup>100</sup> The collection of masks that hung inside the door most likely were done by Morgan Smith, based on an earlier photograph of work completed in Augusta Savage’s art school and the film mentioned by Graham “How to Make Masks,” starring Morgan.

<sup>101</sup> Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden*, 114.

At least one account claimed that the Smiths' hung "comparatively few" photographs and privileged paintings and other media. Reporter Lillian Johnson actually noted that, "every room, including the kitchen, is literally papered with paintings," sculptures, plaques, and masks.<sup>102</sup> Graham's article in *The African* also noted a number of paintings and a home-made movie entitled "How to Make Masks" featuring Morgan Smith.<sup>103</sup> In another feature in the *Louisville Defender*, Gladys Graham listed photography last among the "creative arts" practiced by the twins, after painting, sculpture, moving pictures.<sup>104</sup> In that same piece Marvin Smith claimed to have donated a valuable collection of his own oil paintings (as well as their piano) to the Salvation Army Servicemen's Club on 124<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>105</sup>

The Smith Studio approached the combination of curiosity and extravagance that American painters pursued at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>106</sup> In her 1947 column, Leighla Whipper admired "the antique filled environs of their suite of studios [where] they relax and chat about their varied experiences in one of the most glamorous professions available."<sup>107</sup> Gossip columnist Jack Dalton of the *New York Age* compared the studio to a "small-sized edition of the Museum of Science."<sup>108</sup> Graham's account in *The African* focused on antiques that the Smiths (especially Marvin) acquired during their travels, but remarked that they also "constantly" received gifts from customers hailing

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<sup>102</sup> Again, Johnson's press account seems somewhat unreliable. Johnson's description of their "four-room studio-apartment-office" leans towards the domestic aspects of the space, and it remains unclear whether paintings or photographs dominated any particular room and if so for what reason. Johnson, "The Smith Twins Left Home for Art School."

<sup>103</sup> Graham, "Harlem's Successful Business and Professional People," 6.

<sup>104</sup> Undated clipping by Gladys P. Graham, "Talented Lexington, Kentucky Twins Set Precedent in Rare Photography," *Louisville Defender*, Box 1, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>105</sup> Graham, "Talented Lexington, Kentucky Twins."

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 2; Burns, "The Price of Beauty."

<sup>107</sup> Whipper, "It's Nice Work, and They've Got It."

<sup>108</sup> Jack Dalton, "The Tattler," *New York Age*, March 1957, M. Smith Papers.

from “the various continents.”<sup>109</sup> The total value of their antiques reportedly topped “several figures,” and complemented “elaborate furnishings from around the globe.” The Smiths filled their reception area with wing-chairs and a plush couch, along with an antique settee and end tables. All furniture is against the wall or corner, such that guests might sit down but the room could still accommodate a large number of people. The Smiths projected an image of cosmopolitanism and worldliness accessible to anyone who could climb the stairs to their studio.

That reception space also saw the photographers at work. One 1946 image of Morgan Smith, photographer Gjon Mili, and cartoonist E. Simms Campbell “looking [at] pictures for [a] Life magazine story.” The room is decorated in nearly the same manner, with the exception of a throw rug and an inlaid eight pointed star in the linoleum. Scattered around the room, however, all facing the camera lens and thus the viewer’s vantage are headshots of female models on large white mats. Campbell and Milli hold one of the large headshots together, while all three men consider a smaller, negative image held up to the light by Milli.

When customers prepared to sit for their portraits, they found a photo range that featured “attractive tropical props constructed by Mr. Smith and his assistants to create an illusion of either Occidental or Oriental atmosphere when needed as a background....as constantly requested.” The Smiths’ also used their own hand-painted backdrops.<sup>110</sup> In

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<sup>109</sup> See Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People,” 7.

<sup>110</sup> Wilhelmina Wynn remembered that her mother and father used a purchased backdrop for the majority of their portraits, with faux “stain glass windows and flower plants on one side.” Others painted their own like the Smiths. Many photographers constructed their own backdrops, including Joseph Coards of South Carolina, who received a letter from colleague Eugene Simmons in 1957. Evidently charged with some of the studio design Simmons wrote Coards in order to “suggest a trellis effect, done in flat oils... [with] roses around it” and to request money so that he might buy the necessary materials. Interview with Wilhelmina Wynn; Letter from W. Eugene Simmons to Joseph Coards, May 14, 1957, Box 1, Coards

one dramatic portrait (Figure 21) dancer Paul Meeres and a partner posed in fine evening wear, and the draped table, glassware and seltzer bottle create the impression that they are ready to enjoy an evening in one of Harlem's famous nightclubs. Taken during or after WWII, the portrait reveals Meeres and his companion as glamorous, confident, sexual, and self-possessed – one heel raised to signify that he was a dancer. The couple poses in front of a backdrop showing a vaguely Parisian alley, rendered in an angular and modernist style, identified en verso as painted by the M. Smith Studio. One or both of the Smiths painted a faceless black sailor on shore leave, signified by his white t-shirt and cap. The figure approaches a doorway filled by a well made-up woman of light complexion (perhaps white) wearing a beret and leaning suggestively as if she were inviting the sailor inside. Perhaps drawn from Marvin Smith's own tour in the US Navy, this particular background turns the portrait into a reflection on issues of about race, rights, sex, and nation coming out of the experiences of many African American soldiers during World War II. A clear selling point, unique studio settings gave the brothers yet another artistic outlet and even foreshadowed Marvin Smith's second career as a set designer for film and television productions.<sup>111</sup>

Among the “extras” included in the Smith Studio the most unique might have been its complete sound recording facility. After World War II, Morgan Smith built “a full-fledged professional recording studio in the rooms above the photographic studios.”<sup>112</sup> Morgan acquired recording equipment gradually, wired a sound mixing

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Studio File, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, hereafter Avery Research Center.

<sup>111</sup> Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People.”

<sup>112</sup> Unidentified press clipping, “A Surprise for a Twin: Morgan Smith’s Studios are Spinning Platters,” M. Smith Papers.

board, and soundproofed a room to “meet the standards of any first rate studio... Smith anticipat[ed] having a broadcasting studio.”<sup>113</sup> One account in the press dramatized (perhaps overly) Morgan’s building the recording booth as a surprise for Marvin while he in studied art in France under the auspices of the GI bill, even though Morgan had been collecting equipment for some time.<sup>114</sup> Unsurprisingly, the completed audio booth featured portraits in paint and photography displayed above a plate glass window into the sound-mixing room.

Morgan Smith used his recording studio to press records for Apollo performers, including his wife, singer Monica Mais Smith.<sup>115</sup> In one undated photograph, Eartha Kitt sits smiling in front of two large microphones in the recording studio while Morgan Smith looks on from behind the mixing board.<sup>116</sup> A series of [photographs] taken in 1954 captured a visit by W.E.B. Du Bois to the recording studio. In one picture in particular, Du Bois studiously prepares to read from a script into the microphone. Influential black filmmaker Carlton Moss looks over Du Bois’ shoulder, while holding a reel of audio

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<sup>113</sup> “A Surprise for a Twin,” M. Smith Papers.

<sup>114</sup> As the Smith brothers were breaking up their studio, they donated equipment from the recording studio to Kentucky State College. On January 31, 1967, Morgan Smith wrote Mr. William Goodwin at Kentucky State College to offer a donation of the equipment so that it “might be used in the training of students who are interested in sound recording such as is employed in synchronous motion picture making, record making and radio broadcasting.” They enclosed a list of equipment available for donation, that included: “Fairchild Sync Generator, Fairchild Portable Record Cutter, Prototype Playback Amplifier for Turntable; Meisner AM/FM Tuner, four position mixer with master and meter attenuator, Pultec Program Equalizer, Magne-Tech Compressor Amplifier, Langevin Playback, Fairchild Equalizer, Fairchild Disk Cutter amplifier, Line Amplifier, Microphone Preamplifiers (4), W.E. Type Patch Panels (2), Headphones, Permaflux (2), Altex 633 Microphones (3), 630 Altec Microphones.” Letter from Morgan Smith to William Goodwin, January 31, 1967, Box 2, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Morgan Smith also pressed records for singers: “He has made a number of recordings for orchestras and vocalists and instrumentalists who need a record to promote themselves. Among these are recordings by Paul Meares, Jr., Three Chimes, Eva Jessye Choir, Stuff Smith, Dan Burley, Al Sears, Duke of Iron, Billy Banks, Eunice Davis, Ben Smith Quartet, Ed Snead and Artie Simms. He handles all the recorded material for the Apollo Theatre. On a couple of these records a whisk broom brushing over a piece of paper is used to give the effect of drums.” See “A Surprise for a Twin.”

<sup>116</sup> *Eartha Kitt in M&M Smith Recording Studio*, Box 5, M. Smith Collection (Photographs).

recording tape.<sup>117</sup> (Figure 22) Du Bois' face suggests studied reflection. Though all of the recordings have been lost, it seems safe to assume that Morgan Smiths' recording set-up captured a variety of influential African American voices speaking on important issues of the day.<sup>118</sup> The M. Smith Studio also used their audio equipment as a direct supplement to camera work, to “[make] acetates of singers, musicians in conjunction with photographs –sometimes they would make a record of something like that, or a wedding,...[produce] a record to go along with the wedding.”<sup>119</sup> On some level then, Morgan Smith justified his experimentation in sound recording technology as a means to bring more income to the studio while doing wedding photography.<sup>120</sup>

Built as it was “above the photographic studios,” the sound booth further blurred the boundaries between the Smiths’ work, commercial, and domestic spaces. By Morgan Smith’s assessment, the “spacious private quarters” served a “three-fold purpose” as “residence...guest reception center, and for the posing of shots in which a family or interior-home setting was required [sic].”<sup>121</sup> Though the photographer acknowledged some private space Morgan Smith also expected his home to aid in the function of the Studio’s business. In 1945, with Marvin overseas, Morgan renovated and expanded, such

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<sup>117</sup>Carlton Moss was a pioneering African American director, actor, and playwright, who administrated a unit of the Work Progress Administration’s Federal Theatre Project (FTP) during the late 1930s. In 1944 Moss made the film “The Negro Soldier” for the Office of War Information to help boost morale amongst African Americans and as a training film for enlistees both black and white. In the *Chicago Defender* Langston Hughes called “The Negro Soldier” “the most important film of Negro activities yet brought to the screen.” Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 147-149, 155-156.

<sup>118</sup> Box 3, Folder 8 (SC-CN-94-0162, SC-CN-95-0140), M. Smith Collection (Photographs).

<sup>119</sup> Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>120</sup> When the M. Smith Studio dissolved in 1967 Morgan Smith embarked on a second career as a sound engineer for television, a switch made possible at least in part by his self-education in audio technology.

<sup>121</sup> Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People.”

that their home/studio became “quite the smartest place for folks who like to pose.”<sup>122</sup>

Winding throughout the studio and home quarters (and crucial for entertaining) was “a custom-built radio which [carried] music to every part of the studio... controlled in a large built-in especially constructed closet in [the] private reception center.”<sup>123</sup> The “custom built radio” that carried music throughout the two floors also enhanced the living space connected to the studio occupied by Morgan and Monica Smith and their daughter.

Studio photographers of all races chose to combine their home and business under one roof, but rarely with such an eye to make their studios suitable for entertainment or hosting events. For Florestine Perrault Collins of New Orleans, operating a studio out of her living room on St. Peter Street in the 1920s countered the objections of a domineering husband who did not want her working outside of the home.<sup>124</sup> It allowed Collins to work within the restrictive social mores meant to control the mobility of women in early twentieth century New Orleans. Collins would have been looked down upon by the Creole middle-class as a married woman doing commercial work in public. A home studio meant that clients had to come to her and she managed to pursue her craft in a space deemed appropriately feminine.<sup>125</sup> Unencumbered by gender restrictions, Arthur P. Bedou also chose to operate out of his home in New Orleans upon returning from a short stint as the official photographer of the Tuskegee Institute. In 1920, Bedou took out an insurance policy on his home at 1935 Bienveille St. In addition to home furnishings the

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<sup>122</sup> “Morgan Smith’s Studio at 243 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street has had its face lifted and its size changed – and it is quite the smartest place for folk who like to pose.” Thelma Berlack Boozer, “New York Chatter,” *New York Age* ([Month Obscured] 23, 1945), M. Smith Papers.

<sup>123</sup> Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People.”

<sup>124</sup> Arthé Anthony suggests that Collins (then Florestine Bernard) was forbidden from working outside of the home by her first husband. Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 41, 54.

<sup>125</sup> Anthony concurs that “the vast majority of [Collins’] work was confined to her studio, which suggests [the extent to which] gender and race shaped her career in the 1920s.” Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 69.

policy also covered all screens, wash-basins, electric light apparatus, and other elements that suggest that Bedou rolled his studio and home into one insurance policy for financial purposes.<sup>126</sup>

Photographers also maintained home studios for the comfort of clients and themselves. Juanita Williams had just built a home in Houston in 1962, when she decided to “go on and open up for business” in her “sitting room.”<sup>127</sup> Morris Crawford, Jr.’s father ran his studio out of their home in Austin, while he also photographed a number of events on site. For debutante composites, though, Crawford remembered that sorority members would,

come right here to the house and [Morris Crawford, Sr.] would have his backdrop on paper or sheets or screens and special trick lenses. There would be a real assembly line with the number of girls in the house. They filled all the bedroom and came through in line. The girls were chattering and being nervous, and he tried to make them feel at home and at ease to get the pose and get their personality to really show up on the paper.<sup>128</sup>

For young middle-class African Americans in the South, a neighbor’s home similar to their own provided a safe, comfortable space to prepare their physical appearance, to try on an adult identity, and participate in the social rituals of the black middle class. That large jobs like that described above required an effort by all of the Crawford family likely increased the feeling of comfort while further reducing overhead costs.

Other photographers made homes in their studios out of financial necessity or during personal hardship. Remembering when a friend showed up at his Fort Worth, Texas studio late one night with an emergency job, Calvin Littlejohn said that “I always

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<sup>126</sup> Insurance Policy from Leon Irwin & Co. to Arthur P. Bedou, February 25, 1920, Box 1, Arthur P. Bedou Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>127</sup> Juanita Williams Interview in *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas*, ed., Alan Govenar (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 181.

<sup>128</sup> Morris Crawford, Jr. Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 35.

slept in my studio to make ends meet.”<sup>129</sup> In his studio Littlejohn slept on a cot, and “put a blanket over it when customers came in.”<sup>130</sup> Less than a mile north of the M. Smith Studio, photographer Winifred Hall Allen often slept in the “back of the store” on a cot, according to employee Bernadine Wesley. Allen might have been going through a divorce, claimed Wesley, in addition to being “very pre-occupied, very concerned about how to make the next rent payment or pay on her equipment.”<sup>131</sup> Winifred Hall Allen’s studio occupied one long rectangular room with “three sets of partitions....curtains between the front and the rear, dark room curtains” rather than walls separating rooms. Allen’s sales floor, workspace, and living area could be nearly indistinguishable to Wesley, who allowed that she “never could understand where one ended and the other began.” Having one’s picture made at Allen’s studio constituted a very different experience from the M. Smith studio, while underlining the very thin line photography studios walked between success and insolvency.

Wesley worked behind a sales counter in Allen’s studio, which she routinely referred to as a “store.”<sup>132</sup> “In the front,” Wesley recalled, “we had this thing here this automatic machine, [with] a big sign on the window come in and get your picture taken six for a quarter.”<sup>133</sup> Wesley described the photo-booth as “the kind like in the subway,” and her job included taking the patron’s quarter and then convincing them that a small portrait would look nicer and last longer (The majority of photo-booths made pictures through direct positive processes, as opposed to producing negatives which could be

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<sup>129</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 100.

<sup>130</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 98.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Bernadine Wesley, Box 2, Winifred Hall File, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection, hereafter, Wesley Interview.

<sup>132</sup> Wesley estimated that the sales room measured about sixteen feet by ten feet and had a large window facing 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Wesley Interview.

<sup>133</sup> Wesley Interview.

retouched, tinted, and reproduced). Wesley surmised that the photo-booth created a chance to upsell new customers, or “a way to attract people inside so that [Allen] could get a chance to practice seriously, when she could.”<sup>134</sup> At the same time, putting a quick and inexpensive option for pictures in her studio gave Harlemites an accessible option for pictures when portraits by Smith or VanDerZee seemed impossibly expensive. While the Smiths claimed to provide “while-you-wait” pictures, these were quickly taken passport style photos made with a negative, as there is no indication that there was ever a photo-booth in the M. Smith Studio.<sup>135</sup>

Allen’s business suffered in the 1930s and ‘40s because clientele “in the neighborhood had very little money.” Even so, Wesley continued, “a picture to send your mother back down South was important...to show her you’re doing alright. And so that meant there was always some business no matter how hard it was for them to come up with twenty-five cents.” Freshly arrived in Boston from Michigan, Malcolm Little “took three of those twenty five cent sepia-toned, while-you-wait pictures” in his new Zoot suit, hat, and watch chain.<sup>136</sup> He gave two of these to his friends in Boston, but the third picture Little “autographed and airmailed to [his] brothers and sisters in Lansing, to let them see how well [he] was doing.”<sup>137</sup> Instant photo booths proved enormously popular in this regard, and thus could even be asset both to the professional photographer and the neighborhood they served.

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<sup>134</sup> Wesley Interview.

<sup>135</sup> Draper Interview. A decent percentage of Scurlock business also consisted of “passport” or “civil service” prints for identification purposes, as recorded in their studio ledgers. This will be considered more closely in the following chapter.

<sup>136</sup> Haley and X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> Haley and X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 54.

In some cases, an instant photo-booth could even foster a sense of community within the studio. Florestine Collins also put an instant photograph booth in her New Orleans studio to offer a less expensive option on South Rampart Street. Strips of photographs cost ten cents apiece and Collins would hand paint the strips for an additional fee. At times the machine proved troublesome because it required specialized service. Collins remembered:

When I think of the trouble that thing gave us...We'd have customers there waiting, and the darn machine would break down. We'd have to take the machine out, take the film out, and put the film in a box and go over to this man's house and have him work on the machine. The customers seemed not to mind. They'd wait until we came back.<sup>138</sup>

Despite a tendency to malfunction, Collins' photo-booth proved popular and her customer's willingness to wait indicates their need or desire for inexpensive images. Instant prints from the booth proved a big hit amongst the teenagers in the area, and Collins encouraged them to spend time in her studio on weekends contributing to a relaxed atmosphere.<sup>139</sup>

In Harlem, not every photography studio could be such a pleasant place to spend ones time. Of course, the Smiths excelled at creating a luxurious studio environment. James VanDerZee also filled his Lenox Ave. studio full of "Victorian chairs and Edwardian tables, vases filled with flowers, leather bound books, a grand piano" and other accoutrements familiar to the homes of Harlem's elites.<sup>140</sup> More common, however, might have been the experience of Langston Hughes' Simple. In "Picture for Her Dresser," Hughes' narrator and Simple happen by the "Harlem De-Luxe Photography

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<sup>138</sup> Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 7.

<sup>139</sup> Anthony, *Picturing Black New Orleans*, 98-100. Some of the young women who spent time at the studio also became Collins' employees. Phanella Perez commented, "you know we were these little teenage girls, sixteen and seventeen years old, and she was looking after us too."

<sup>140</sup> Birt, 46.

Studio" (Slogan: "If You Are Not Good Looking We Will Make You So") while walking north on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Simple shares the story of his previous visit when his girlfriend Joyce asked him to have his portrait made.

Simple first notices a number of terse signs selling services and setting the rules: "Retouching Done," "Colored to Order – Expert Tinting," "If You Move, You Lose, If You Shake, No Re-Take!" To have his portrait made, Simple entered a booth with "a kind of sick green light blazing" and a photographer interested primarily in upselling him into retouching, tinting, and additional prints. The photographer barks instructions at Simple, greeting him with the words "Pay in advance." By Simple's account, the sitting only took a few minutes, but was an altogether unpleasant experience. All of the signage at Harlem De-Luxe foregrounded the transaction that was about to take place, more like the picture "factories" of the nineteenth century than somewhere to relax and take a proper portrait in keeping with the beauty and fashion standards of the black press. Hughes sought to stress issues of color consciousness amongst African Americans here, but the overall impression remains of a generally cold, impersonal financial transaction.

While Simple found many of his life experiences frustrating, and favored hyperbole when telling a story, details from this fictionalized account strike the reader as different from anything that might happen in the M. Smith Studio. From the moment the photographer pops from the booth to say, "Next," Simple is treated as an object to be worked on. Simple cares about the picture he has purchased because he wants something nice for Joyce's dresser. When Simple leaves the studio however, he takes away some doubts about what exactly his seven and a half dollars have purchased: if the portrait will come in a frame or if it will even look like him. The Smiths (and VanDerZee) strove to

create the opposite impression through their studio, and likely did not handle their clientele in such a rough manner. Realistically, however, many Harlemites found studios the caliber of M. Smith unaffordable, and would have found Simple's experience in front of the lens a familiar one.

### **“A stop-off place”: The Social Life of the M. Smith Studio**

Morgan and Marvin Smith strove to be the polar opposite of Harlem De-Luxe, and made their studio so attractive that their address became something of a social destination, useful above and beyond the sale of photographs. Marvin Smith called it “a stop-off place” for people with errands on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, somewhere for passers-by to “lounge and see us and chat.”<sup>141</sup> Monica Smith (wife of Morgan Smith) concurred, indicating that “people just dropped in. It was sort of like a meeting place for people, they would all come just to say ‘Hello.’”<sup>142</sup> Full of art and antiques, equipped with a sound-system, piano, and an atmosphere cultivated to encourage vamping and posing, the Smith Studios offered an ideal combination of comfort and professional atmosphere. Communal gathering space served an important social function in the everyday lives of Harlemites, and the Smith studio proved exemplary in this regard, even serving as a “third place” for friends and neighbors to spend their free time.

One of the studio “regulars” was Lester B. Granger, Executive Secretary for the National Urban League and special consultant to the Department of Defense (DOD) following WWII. In a 1948 recommendation letter written on Marvin Smith’s behalf

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<sup>141</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

<sup>142</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

Granger claimed to have visited the studio “regularly for a number of years – as a customer, as a social visitor, and to engage one or both of the brothers in friendly table tennis competition.”<sup>143</sup> Granger’s recommendation mentions Marvin’s military service and continued education as a Navy photographer as being of special interest because of Granger’s work with as an advisor to the DOD. However light-hearted Granger’s social visits, or however competitive their ping-pong games, it seems likely that their conversation would turn towards their respective work and the goals of the Double V campaign. Similarly, the aforementioned recording session by DuBois, or regular sittings by A. Phillip Randolph, created opportunities for discussion that ranged from the importance of an upcoming election to plans for a family vacation. Though Granger’s letter does not illuminate any specific conversation he had with Marvin Smith it does provide a glimpse into the ways that the social side of the studio facilitated the formation of political consciousness and at times work as an incubator for activism.

The Smith brothers also exhibited an early willingness to put their studio space to use organizing or raising money for social causes. On June 10, 1939 they hosted a combination benefit party and performance at their initial address of 141 W 125<sup>th</sup> Street. (Figure 23) Fifty cents at the door gained one admission to the “cool, comfortable, windswept Harlem studios of Marvin and Morgan Smith” with all proceeds going towards the New York Committee to Aid Agricultural Workers.<sup>144</sup> The party invitation featured selections from John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Common Sense* (1776) by Thomas Paine. The first passage highlighted mistreatment of laborers by

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<sup>143</sup> Recommendation letter for Marvin Smith from Lester B. Granger, June 16, 1948, Box 1, M. Smith Papers. Granger continued: During all of my visits – and in fact during the whole period of my acquaintance with him - I have never known Marvin Smith to be otherthan a hard-working, honorable, and reputable member of his community.”

<sup>144</sup> Party Invitation/Flyer, Box 1, M. Smith Papers.

California agricultural conglomerates, and the combination drew a direct line between contemporary efforts to protect workers and workers directly to principles underlying the American Revolution. Under these epigraphs, left-leaning artist Ad Reinhardt contributed a cartoon of a dancing man in a tuxedo holding a martini glass and with drunken “X’s” where the eyes should be. A handwritten note from “Sue” to the brothers on one copy expressed a genuine “hope we really make this a gala event.”

Comedian Jack Gilford and Billie Holliday received top billing as performers for the benefit party, indicating that both Gilford and Holliday performed often at “Café Society” in Greenwich Village. Including the performers’ regular venue served as more than an advertisement. Owner Barney Josephson opened Café Society a year prior as the first downtown music club to openly allow integrated audiences.<sup>145</sup> Several of Harlem’s most famous clubs remained segregated, permitting white audiences and only black performers.<sup>146</sup> Other dance halls, like the Savoy, welcomed white patrons but never in large numbers. Quite possibly, organizers mentioned Café Society by name to appeal to white New Yorkers unaccustomed to socializing in Harlem. Regardless, referencing Café Society in 1939 signified a commitment to racial progressivism, underlined by the announcement that Holliday would sing “Strange Fruits On Southern Trees” [sic]. Abel Meeropol’s vivid anti-lynching ballad (correctly titled “Strange Fruit”) might not be high on any set-list crafted to lighten party-goers moods. However, explicit mention of Holliday’s version of the song suggests that the organizing rights of agricultural workers and the legal protection of African Americans in the South were part of a connected set of

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<sup>145</sup> Terry Trilling Josephson and Barney Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*, (Urbanna: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>146</sup> The Cotton Club is perhaps the most famous example of a club in Harlem catering only to whites, although it had moved to midtown Manhattan after the 1935 riot.

social justice concerns. The details of the benefit underline the idea that social functions and political activism were by no means incongruous, but were even reinforcing. The invitation also listed party co-hosts that included authors, lawyers, and activists aligned with the political left.<sup>147</sup> Guests that came “to Dance, Eat, Drink and Be Entertained” did so in the knowledge that their good time contributed to these movements at least in spirit and at most as a financial contribution. At a time when interracial social mingling was not always permitted, the Smith Studios constituted an African American-controlled space where people of different backgrounds could mingle without policing from hostile ownership or passers-by.

Like the Smiths’ portrait sessions for Harlem’s elites, word of their parties and benefits became copy for the black press. In the *Amsterdam News* Bill Chase also used his “All Ears” column to express high expectations for the 1939 Agricultural Workers party, predicting that “just about everybody” would attend.<sup>148</sup> After the Smiths’ moved their studio down the block to 243 West 125<sup>th</sup> St, they hosted similar benefits which also got Chase’s attention. In the first week of March in 1940, Leadbelly performed and Laura Duncan took a turn singing “Strange Fruit” at another “star-studded” benefit at M. Smith studio, this time for the “Harlem Unit of the Sharecroppers Aid Committee.”<sup>149</sup> At the end of May that year Henrietta Lovelace brought her singing group the “Chocolate

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<sup>147</sup> Names listed on the flyer: Roger Baldwin (founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)), Millen Brand (author), Heywood Broun (journalist, organizer) , Walter Frank, Arthur Garfield Hayes (lawyer with the ACLU), Arthur Kallet (consumer rights activist, founder of Consumer’s Union), Margaret Lamont, Ernest Meyer, Isobel Walker Soule (social worker, editor and journalist), and Leane Zugsmith (writer and labor activist). Of these, Heywood Broun might have been the most likely connection to the Studio through Morgan Smith. Broun began the American Newspaper Guild in 1933 to organize journalists for higher wages. Morgan Smith worked for the *Amsterdam News* as a photographer during employees’ efforts to unionize in the mid-1930s. *Amsterdam News* journalists received a Union contract in 1936, the same year that the Newspaper Guild affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. See Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 111.

<sup>148</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 17.

<sup>149</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 21.

Eclairs” to the studio to perform a recital benefitting victims and families affected by an infamous nightclub fire in Natchez, Mississippi that killed 209 people.<sup>150</sup> Though public attention soon shifted from relief and social justice to support for the American war effort, regular mentions in Chase’s “All Ears” column suggest that the Smiths’ regularly offered their studio as an in-kind donation to causes of their choice.

At times, events held at the Smiths’ studio occurred simultaneously with others in the same building, increasing the chance for interactions within and across different social groups. Before Romare Bearden left for Army duty in May 1942, his mother (journalist and Club Woman Bessye Bearden) threw a party at Bearden’s studio, one floor above the Smiths’ at 243 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street. “Naturally,” Chase wrote, “no such party could be anything other than a success considering the interesting personalities one would certainly find among those present,” a crowd that included fellow artists Charles Alston (Bearden’s cousin) and Marvin Smith (Bearden’s downstairs neighbor).<sup>151</sup> Bearden’s guests mingled with another party going on at “just about the same time (maybe a little later)” in the Smith photography studio downstairs. There, singer Jimmy Daniels was throwing a birthday party for socialite Clinton Moore. It seems interesting that Daniels, a regular host and performer at the Hot Cha Club on 132<sup>nd</sup> Street, and Moore, whose buffet flats were important centers of the social scene of Gay Harlem, would choose the Smith studios over those locations for their celebration. The Smiths’

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<sup>150</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 11, 17. The Natchez benefit also received mention in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 1, 1940, 3. During a performance at the Rhythm Club in Natchez, MS on April 23, 1940, decorative Spanish moss acted as an accelerant during a fire. Of 700 people inside, many were trapped because of unsafe conditions and over 200 died. The tragedy made national news in the African American press and was commemorated in a number of blues songs.

<sup>151</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 8.

central location – next to the Apollo, under Bearden’s art studio – made it an ideal venue for social events, the popularity of their cameras simply added to the allure.

Bessye Bearden’s guests included men and women of the professional class: several doctors, a number of married couples and Romare Bearden’s peers in art. Daniels invited a variety of younger guests, including artists and literati, with likely overlap in Harlem’s gay community. Though George Chauncey, in his foundational study *Gay New York*, has indicated the status of middle class gay men like Daniels and Moore was open knowledge, the black press generally refrained from airing their sexual preferences in print. When they did list their attendance at known events in the gay social calendar, they generally listed middle class men with other celebrities or elites presumed to be straight. Chase’s addendum, “maybe just a little bit later” could have been an addition meant to protect the propriety of Bearden’s more conservative guests. In such a busy neighborhood, overlapping social networks could create a dynamic atmosphere, one in which the Smith studio contributed fully. Chase offered an understated estimate of the twinned parties’ success: “Shall it suffice to say that it was tres, tres, tres gay?”<sup>152</sup> As evinced by tone raucous night in 1942, the Smith studio functioned as a kind of hub for Harlem social networks that have often been considered completely disparate.

To the extent that parties held in the M. Smith Studio garnered attention from the black press, the Smiths continued to build on their celebrity cache. When the Smiths threw a party for Joe Louis in their “cleverly decorated studio,” the “bevy of beauties” and “eligible swains” in attendance enjoyed “the delicious baked ham sent the frères by their parents Mr. and Mrs. Charles Smith of Lexington, Kentucky.” The commentator continued to say that, “it was a very nice party and everyone seemed to have a nice time.

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<sup>152</sup> Chase, “All Ears,” 8.

Maybe Joe had a good time, too, but it's hard to tell because he doesn't talk very much except with his fists."<sup>153</sup> Counting someone like Louis, arguably one of the most famous Americans in the world in 1942, as a friend gave the Smith a remarkable sales pitch but it also bound their studio closely with the idea of Harlem as somewhere for black people to see and encounter their heroes.

### A Changing Angle of Vision: Harlem in Photographs

The Smiths arrived in New York during an exciting time for photographers, amid ongoing debates about what photographs of Harlem photographs revealed to neighbors and outsiders. The 1930s brought a "Leica Revolution" which made cameras much more portable, inexpensive and user-friendly.<sup>154</sup> Thirty-five millimeter roll film threatened the prospects of many studio photographers while hand-held cameras boosted New York street photography. Harlem did boast a tradition of studio photographers, exemplified by James VanDerZee and James Latimer Allen's austere portraits of New Negroes. Black photography during the Harlem Renaissance stressed respectability and uplift politics, ideals that the Smiths strove to portray in time. With the rise of the black press in the 1920s came greater opportunity to visualize performers and leaders, or rather, black exceptionalism. Harlem had also become a rich source for documentary and social reform photography. The social realist images, although often meant to help alleviate racialized urban poverty, could reinforce perceptions of Harlem as a hopeless slum. Work by

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<sup>153</sup> Unidentified Press Clipping, "Joe Doesn't Talk Much, Even at a Party In His Own Honor," M. Smith Papers.

<sup>154</sup> Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

government photographers of the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s depicting hardship, or the artistic efforts of the New York Photo League constructed Harlem as a place of poverty and crime in the national imagination.<sup>155</sup>

In a sense then, photographers echoed and helped to reinforce two of the main conceptions of Harlem's identity discussed above. Sara Blair writes that by the 1940s, all manner of photographers had framed an "iconic Harlem at once metonymic of America's modernity and revelatory of its social failings."<sup>156</sup> African American photographers, Blair also states, approached these poles with a "twin burden of America's image archive and the ongoing imperative to represent the race," essentially focusing their lens from behind the veil of double consciousness. Morgan Smith understood clearly the approach that they would take as photographers, stating that, "I think I and Marvin more or less had our own ideas about what we going to photograph and what was a picture that he'd like to take. We didn't just shoot, you know...Tobacco Road type of stuff or derelict, drug[s] or naked kids urinating or doing something and all that sort of thing that some photographers were taking."<sup>157</sup> Photographs in the black press and new glossy magazines during the 1930s and 1940s increasingly emphasized celebrity, and while the values remained firmly middle class, the notion of respectability was expanded to include accumulation and achievement in the white world as much as gentility. The Smiths arranged and operated their studio in a manner that confirmed these ideas for their middle

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<sup>155</sup> On one hand, photographs of black poverty reinforced stereotypes of African Americans but Gordon Parks and other Work Progress Administration photographers could also perform activist work in the tradition of Jacob Riis and other social reformers. Photographers Aaron Siskind, Roy DeCarava, and others consistently photographed poverty in Harlem while actively questioning the definitions of "documentary" and "art." See Chapter One: "Documenting Harlem: Images and Afterlives," in Blair, *Harlem Crossroads*; Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Document: Photographs 1932-1940* (Providence: Matrix Publications, 1981); Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1955).

<sup>156</sup> Blair, *Harlem Crossroads*, 5.

<sup>157</sup> Draper Interview Transcript.

class clientele and allowed their clients to perform identities associated with the glamor and celebrity associated with Harlem.<sup>158</sup> The Smiths eschewed a “realist” view of Harlem, choosing instead to explore affirmative images and African American beauty, not unlike their photographic forebears. Though photojournalism took the Smiths out into the streets with their cameras, occasionally to picture a crime scene or degradation, their studio interior helped frame a decidedly optimistic view of Harlem’s possibility.

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<sup>158</sup> “More so than the photograph itself, the means by which that object was acquired endorsed one’s status, and placed proprietor and patron on the same rung of the social ladder. The galleries and reception rooms (most often called parlors) of enterprising photographers did not simply reflect certain Americans’ desires; rather these spaces taught a specific worldview and confirmed behaviors through the display of images and adherence to a certain set of values.” Wadja, “Social Currency,” 48.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Frame By Frame: Daily Business in the African American Photography Studio**

For studio photographers, the portrait constituted the basic unit of business or the object most often traded, though African American photographers in the first half of the twentieth century could *still* find themselves at pains just to convince black consumers to spend their money “within the race” when buying portraits. Some photographers claimed advantage by learning to use film technology designed specifically for white faces in ways that made African Americans feel good about how they looked. The most successful portraitists, like Addison Scurlock, considered contemporary trends in popular photography to appeal to customers even developing a kind of “visual brand.” Many photographers took jobs outside the studio to meet demand. Many black photographers contracted to produce group photographs for African American institutions like fraternal groups, social clubs, and churches. This connection to institutions extended to educational entities that ranged from segregated public schools to trade schools to historically black colleges and universities. For some photographers, especially in the South, school contracts became the bulk of their business; a reliable stream of income that dried up after integration. Other studio photographers prone to hustling took up nightclub photography, or as Ernest Withers described it “table work.” In the process of

selling quick shots to revelers, they documented leisure time in black-controlled social spaces.<sup>1</sup>

Between World War I and the 1950s, studio photographers balanced all of these modes of work, both to meet their own economic needs and to serve their clients. They were *able* to pursue several different kinds of photography, because the black press and segregated schools concentrated a need for their services, and because African American consumers still desired professional photography in significant numbers.

### Shooting for Profits

As detailed in Chapter One, photographers in the National Negro Business League (NNBL) saw photography as a promising field for financial gain at the start of the twentieth century. Aesthetic concerns were only expressed in the sense that mastery of the craft enabled them to make more money selling photographs and thus made them models of success. Though Addison Scurlock aspired to a “spirit higher than mere commercialism” that did not lift him above preoccupation with the economics of the studio.<sup>2</sup> Scurlock saw personal profit as an essential element for community uplift making his work a “civic duty.”<sup>3</sup> Reference materials kept in the Scurlock Studio reflected a concern for business success. Scurlock’s own *Handbook of Photoengraving*, which included diagrams for darkroom arrangement, made clear a studio’s *raison d-être*: “Primarily, the business is carried on for profit. If no profit exists, there can be no

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<sup>1</sup> Many professional African American photographers also took pictures for the African American press either on staff or a freelance basis. Considered briefly in Chapter Three, the role of studio photographers in the black press during its height bears further examination elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7. See Chapter One.

<sup>3</sup> Scurlock, “Creating Business,” 7.

continuing efforts on the part of the workers.”<sup>4</sup> Scurlock received *The Professional Photographer*, in which a column called “Straight Talk for Professionals” assured readers that “the careful study of these monthly capsule lectures will result in better photography and consequent [sic] greater profits.”<sup>5</sup> The author of the column made it clear that he would “never [concern himself] with writing about anything but saleable photography. I am not talking about so called exhibition work. It is my hope - and belief - that my readers are all practical photographers who, like myself, have to make portraits that please if they are to remain in business.”<sup>6</sup> Though Scurlock and the other photographers in this study balanced a variety of motivations for their daily work, financial incentive was never far from the foreground.

Commentators outside of the NNBL also encouraged young people to pursue the field. In a 1902 column in *The Colored American Magazine*, amateur photographer W.W.Holland found photography “so interesting, inspiring and of such financial worth” that he urged young African Americans to pursue it with fervor.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Holland encouraged young women to take up the camera in order to make a “good, paying business.”<sup>8</sup> Holland held to a gendered essentialism that women possessed an eye for detail that would aid them as photographers, and in the course of their work they would bring the “right” kind of moral pictures into the home, a different kind of “profit” that aligned with the moral policing of racial uplift.

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<sup>4</sup> N.S. Amsutz, *Handbook of Photoengraving*, 4, Series 9, Box 8, Scurlock Studio Records..

<sup>5</sup> Edwin A. Falk, Sr., “Straight Talk for Professionals,” *The Professional Photographer*, v. 84, n. 1743 (August 1957):44, Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>6</sup> Falk, “Straight Talk for Professionals,” 45.

<sup>7</sup> W.W. Holland, “Photography for Our Young People,” *The Colored American Magazine*, v. 5, n. 1 (May 1902): 5-9.

<sup>8</sup> Holland, “Photography for Our Young People,” 7.

Gladys Allen, a portrait photographer who began working in Los Angeles in the late 1940s recalled pointedly that her primary motivations were financial. Asked in an interview what she liked most about being a photographer, Allen replied, “Oh, the profit and the people who are pleased with their pictures,” in that order, repeating the word “profit” five times in the course of her conversation with photographer Jeanne Moutousammy-Ashe. Equally suggestive of her approach, Allen cautioned young photographers against discounting their work, even for family because, in her words, “this is strictly a business...don’t give away your pictures.”<sup>9</sup> While Allen appreciated beauty in photographs and the pleasure they brought customers, Allen also understood implicitly that her photographs were the result of her labor, which demanded compensation.

Even for the most successful African American studio photographers the field did not lead to wealth. Benny Joseph of Houston, Texas recalled that he did not see photography as a “get-rich gimmick,” but made what he called a “decent living.”<sup>10</sup> Marvin Smith responded with sarcasm when a 1998 interviewer suggested that their prime studio location in Harlem surely created profits: “The goldmine you speak about, [we] took two proofs for five dollars.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Calvin Littlejohn reflected that in Fort Worth he “was the only black photographer in this area... [and] was the only one who elected to starve and make a job out of it.”<sup>12</sup> Hyperbole notwithstanding, Littlejohn’s quip illustrates that even while money drew photographers into the business, making it pay could be difficult. Some photographers could only afford to work in their studios part-

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Gladys Allen, c. 1984, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 196.

<sup>11</sup> Murray Interview, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 100.

time. Richard S. Roberts' main employment, for instance, was as a custodian at the Federal Reserve in Columbia, SC.<sup>13</sup> Though James Vane Der Zee is now perhaps the best known of all African American studio photographers, the photographer faced eviction and bankruptcy just as he was “rediscovered” in 1969.<sup>14</sup>

With such low margins, photographers had to focus their time and resources on making photographs that they knew they could sell. Calvin Littlejohn of Fort Worth, Texas allowed that,

my prime concern was just making a living. I had to sell it, you understand. I didn't go out and document it unless somebody employed me... With the ongoing work of making a living, I [did not] have much time to turn back what's not actual money.<sup>15</sup>

Littlejohn's comment underlines the fact that he had to focus on making photography that he could sell, and focused on making photographs with clients (“actual money”) behind them. Benny Joseph, of Houston, also maintained that as a photographer his “primary interest was in making a buck.”<sup>16</sup> Though he preferred portraits Joseph had to, in his words, “had to do it all to survive.”<sup>17</sup> In a limited market, African American photographers regularly took on all the paying work they could find including event, nightclub, and school yearbook photography. For studio photographers, though, the portrait remained at the center of their working lives.

African American photographers offered an alternative to the racist caricatures and violence against the black body that pervaded American visual culture during the first half of the twentieth century. As Kevin Gaines points out, African Americans

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Wilhelmina Wynn. See also Willis-Thomas, *Black Photographers, 1840-1940*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Haskins, *James Van DerZee: The Picture Takin' Man*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991), 193-252.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 192.

realized the camera's utility in disrupting stereotypes and confirming their own self-worth. Gaines identifies "an intense concern with projecting a positive image."<sup>18</sup> The resulting images were "studio portraits of uplift and respectability – depicting black families with attributes of cleanliness, leisure, and literacy [that] found expression in the sitters' posture, demeanor, dress and setting."<sup>19</sup> The "intense concern" that African Americans displayed for positive representations found companion expression in the meticulous care and labor of the photographers tasked with making such images a reality. To meet this imperative and insure their neighbors' patronage, photographers like Addison Scurlock took the responsibility of providing portraits very seriously.

Even with a strong demand for positive images, African American photographers continued to struggle against intraracial distrust of black merchants and competition from white photographers well into the twentieth century. Some photographers had trouble breaking into the field and had to find ways to build a constituency. Calvin Littlejohn expressed difficulty supporting himself as a photographer not merely because he started his Fort Worth, Texas Studio during the Great Depression. When he opened shop in 1934, Littlejohn recalled that he "was the only professional black photographer that had been in Fort Worth that anyone could remember. People were not orientated in going to a black photographer. Only thing they wanted was just some little old snapshot or stand up against a wall and shoot. And that's it. But it was hard for me to get them to understand that you could pay more than fifty cents for the professional end of it."<sup>20</sup> Littlejohn implies that he had to convince some African American consumers that a polished studio

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>19</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 98.

portrait offered more value than an everyday snapshot. Littlejohn undertook his efforts at education to encourage consumers to meet his price point. Littlejohn's belief that black consumers were not yet "orientated [sic]" to an African American operator suggests that those consumers obtained pictures from white photographers who, perhaps, could offer pictures more quickly and cheaply than Littlejohn was willing or able.<sup>21</sup> His comments can also be seen as emblematic of general attempts by black business-owners to convince black consumers to spend in their establishments even, in the words of Du Bois, "at some slight disadvantage."<sup>22</sup>

The Scurlock Studio benefitted from several demographic factors, including a sizable black middle class in Washington, DC at the turn of the century. Black professionals at Howard and Freedmen's Hospital, Federal employees, and educators in the city's vaunted public school system were the kind of clientele with money to spend that photographers in every city would covet. Addison's father George C. Scurlock practiced law and taught at Howard University. His uncle taught teaching at Howard Medical School. Through his family young Addison Scurlock had ready contacts within the District's established class of black elites. While some members of the elite class had previously disdained African American commercial and community establishments for the status of white social connections, Scurlock began working at a time when racial lines hardened in the city and the black upper classes recognized a common position with working African Americans. Nationally recognized advocates of African American solidarity like Carter G. Woodson, Judge Robert and Mary Church Terrell, and Professor

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<sup>21</sup> Littlejohn's trade might also have been hampered by an idea, described in the previous chapter, that white photographers "downtown" carried a special sense of status that black consumers desired when buying pictures for special occasions.

<sup>22</sup> DuBois, *Negro In Business*, 50.

Kelly Miller Smith all called Washington home. Addison Scurlock called them all his clients.

Addison Scurlock also began his career as the first waves of what has been known as the Great Migration. From 1900 to 1920 the African American population in the city increased 16 percent from 86,702 to 109,966.<sup>23</sup> Without significant manufacturing or industry, Washington did not prove as strong a draw to southern black migrants as cities like Pittsburgh and Chicago, nor did it achieve the level of cultural cache that Harlem later claimed. For many, Washington, DC served as an important way station for migrants bound for larger or more industrialized cities. While the Wilson administration officially segregated federal facilities in 1913 and made skilled positions for African Americans more difficult to obtain, World War I necessitated a significant expansion of the federal workforce. The federal government did constitute a significant and steady source of employment in the district.

. Available employment and increased income during the war years would give more people the means to do so. African Americans who came to the city for work or other opportunities likely contributed to the growing clientele, though a direct correlation between migration and a rise in Scurlock portrait business is not so definitive. The Scurlock Studio's connection with the black middle class seems to suggest that newly arrived workers or poorer transplants would choose a photographer at a lower price point.

Within the first decade at his U Street address, Scurlock also benefitted from the arrival of World War I. Scurlock studio ledgers reveal a noticeable boost in business

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<sup>23</sup> The Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Volume 1, Population of States and Territories, Sex, General Nativity and Color, table 9, 483, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov); The Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Volume 3, Population: Number and Distribution of Inhabitants, District of Columbia, table 1, 178, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

during the war years of 1917 and 1918, tallying 917 and 1,335, respectively.<sup>24</sup> Based on a rough count available from the 1911-1922 ledger these were back-to-back record years for the Scurlocks. Compared to the four years prior to US entry in WWI (1913-1916) the Scurlock Studio saw an approximately 68% increase in portrait customers during the period of 1917 to 1920. Stepping back even further, the Studio experienced a 43% increase in the number of portrait sittings made during the first half of the decade (1911-1915) to the second half (1916-1920).<sup>25</sup>

One hundred twenty-five names recorded in the ledger between 1917 and 1920 list a military rank, usually Lieutenant or Sergeant. Among these were brothers

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<sup>24</sup> Mamie Scurlock began keeping a ledger in 1911 and used the same book as a record until the first weeks of 1922. Based on Mamie Scurlock's records, the studio completed at least 9,882 jobs between 1911 and 1922. That first edition contains only names and a number for each job. (It is unclear whether these numbers indicate order or negative number, though "copy" and "dup." in the ledger indicate these might be numbers attached to unique jobs.) Rarely, Scurlock recorded a year next to the customer's name, and this occurred most often in the case of a sports team or student group taking an annual photo. By sorting all of the entries according to their sequential numbers, it is possible to gain some sense of time based on those years, but temporal notes were so scarce as to make a scientific count impossible. With some parameters established to make a general estimate, the 1911-1922 Ledger shows that the Studio made approximately 602 in-house portraits in 1911. Totals rose and fell in alternating years until bottoming out at approximately 569 in 1915. As World War I accelerated United States industry and the Great Migration grew in volume, so did the Scurlock's business. In 1917 when the US entered the war, the Studio counted approximately 917 sittings. Business peaked for the decade in 1918 with 1,335 jobs before settling at just under one thousand in 1920. However, putting the entries from Ledger 1911-1922 into a spreadsheet and ordering them by number does offer a few ways to get at a rough count by year. There are a few ways to do this, but I have chosen to count the entries between the first appearance of a year and the first appearance of the subsequent year. Between the first time 1911 shows up in an entry and the first appearance of 1912 there are 602 entries, or: the Studio completed roughly 602 jobs in 1911. (Alternately, there are 1,212 numbered entries before the Scurlocks used the date 1911 as part of an entry. It seems reasonable that many of these entries correspond to sittings made prior to 1911 and then entered in the Ledger during that year. Most of the low negative number entries were made by the same hand and using the same pen. If we count everything before "1912" as listed as part of an entry, the total number of jobs for the year 1911 comes to 1,814 which far outpaces each of the next five years by more than one hundred percent and higher.) Based on this counting method the Scurlocks photographed the following numbers in subsequent years: 1912 – 883; 1913 – 639; 1914 – 745; 1915 – 569; 1916 – 659. In 1917 their work rose sharply to 917 jobs, likely corresponding to US engagement in World War I. Numbers in this ledger peaked in 1918 with 1,335 entries before dropping to 1,146 in 1919, 977 in 1920, and 841 in 1921. (All of these numbers can be considered low estimates, as negative numbers that had been damaged, illegible, or incorrectly written were omitted from my counts. Given that such occurrences were spread out across the alphabet, rather than centralized around a specific time, this unscientific poll considered that they might be spread across all ten years in fairly equal measure. The total number of job entries left out was one hundred thirty-nine unique sittings or copies.) See Studio Session Register, 1911-1922.

<sup>25</sup> From 1911 to 1915 the Scurlocks made at least 3,348 unique entries in the ledger. From 1916 to 1920 they recorded no less than 5,034. See Studio Session Register, 1911-1922.

Lieutenant Robert and Sergeant John Fearing. In early 1919, Addison Scurlock wrote “window display” in parentheses beside their entry in the studio ledger, meaning he would display copies of those prints in that window facing U Street. Scurlock understood the potent symbolism African American men in military dress. The public display of his in-laws in uniform would have inspired pride for passers-by, and perhaps, other soldiers to come in for a portrait.

Other photographers found military conflict to be good for business. James VanDerZee described World War I as a boon because, “the boys used to have their pictures made before they went over, and then their mothers and fathers and girlfriends would have their pictures made and send them to their boys.”<sup>26</sup> Louise Martin, who photographed in Houston, TX, said that “anytime there’s a war, there’s two things you can count on – a lot of babies and a lot of picture-making.”<sup>27</sup> From her own experience, Martin described World War II as “a time when a photographer who really knew [her] business could have really gotten rich because soldiers were constantly having pictures made to send back home.”<sup>28</sup> During WWII VanDerZee benefitted from the placement of a bus stop in front of his Lenox Avenue studio, where a steady stream of African American soldiers caught the bus to Picatinny Air Force Base in New Jersey.<sup>29</sup> While they waited for transportation soldiers and their families had portraits taken by VanDerZee. When Robert Scurlock enlisted, he would have his own portrait made in uniform at the Scurlock Studio.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Haskins, *James Van DerZee*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Louise Martin, interview with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, c1985, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection, hereafter, Louise Martin Interview.

<sup>28</sup> Louise Martin Interview.

<sup>29</sup> Haskins, *James Van DerZee*, 205.

Into the 1920s the number of customers visiting the Scurlock Studio remained fairly steady. Orders recorded in the ledger dipped below one thousand in 1921 but rose again to average nearly 1,200 ledger entries a year through the end of the decade. In 1925 Mamie Scurlock recorded 1,039 names and in 1930 wrote out 1,023 customers. Though some months were busier than others (June and December being the busiest) Scurlock photographed an average of about 85 separate studio jobs a month during this period. Numbers increased 55% from 1930 to 1935 when the ledger shows 1,555 unique photograph jobs. In 1935 the studio averaged a very busy 130 jobs a month in-house. Such an increase, in the very middle of the Depression decade, illustrates the importance of Scurlock's services for black Washingtonians but a closer look suggests that Scurlock adapted by taking on smaller, less expensive orders that were in higher demand.

When Addison or Mamie Scurlock wrote down a subject's name, address, and negative number in the studio ledger they also recorded a shorthand version of what that customer ordered. A large number of the item entries in the Scurlock registers read "cs." Photographs marked "CS" are 5x7 plate negatives that had been taped to split the negative into two 3 ½" x 5" exposures. In 1925 Scurlock recorded 101 "cs" orders; in 1930 there were 207 "cs" entries in the ledger. In 1935 Scurlock filled 612 requests for some manner of "cs" pictures for customers.

The "cs" notation might correspond with another notation for photos intended for "civil service." The civil service designation would suggest that these photos were to be appended to applications for federal employment, including relief work. "Cs" negatives do resemble identification photos, subjects face forward rather than the creative posing of Scurlock's fine portraits. Still, negatives marked with "cs" bear elements of Scurlock's

more formal portraits, including diffuse lighting and most interestingly, retouching. Other orders more definitively intended for identification were marked ‘passport’ or ‘taxi’ photographs. These identification photos, completely utilitarian, that would be stapled, glued, or shuffled into a file folder, still get attention from Addison Scurlock’s retouching pencil. While the front and profile poses evoke the ultimate disciplinary use of the camera – the mugshot – Scurlock might be seen as softening the camera’s absolutism here both literally and figuratively. On the one hand, Scurlock’s work on identification photos insists that his camera be used only to flatter African Americans, and it also refuses the tyranny of the police mugshot as an archive through which Americans viewed black faces, if only subtly. Moreover, the “cs” and “taxi” photos also provide a view of Scurlock customers who were not necessarily of the elite class. Subjects in these photographs do not always wear formal attire, which could reflect the informality of the portrait sittings but also stands as evidence that the Scurlock studio served some clientele across economic classes. Part of the way that the Scurlock Studio kept relevant during the Great Depression was by meeting the demands of a cross-section of black Washingtonians.

### **Making Race Pay**

In many places, African Americans had their portraits made by white photographers because there were no black photographers where they lived. Other African Americans actively chose to patronize white photographers. Still more African Americans felt that photographs made by white photographers did not represent their likeness satisfactorily. In 1923 W.E.B. DuBois wrote:

The average white photographer does not know how to deal with colored skins and having neither sense of their delicate beauty of tone, nor will to learn, he makes a horrible botch of portraying them. From the South especially the pictures that come to us, with few exceptions, make the heart ache.<sup>30</sup>

Vastly more travelled than the majority of African Americans at the time, Du Bois announced in *The Crisis* that photographers *could* portray darker skin tones with nuance and beauty, and expressed pessimism about white photographers' ability to do so. In part, Du Bois echoed Frederick Douglass's 1849 claim that "Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hand of white artists."<sup>31</sup> Speaking specifically of engravings Douglass surmised that white artists always unconsciously expressed racist stereotypes of the black body.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Du Bois implied that white photographers' negative feelings about black subjects meant that they would not treat "colored skins" with care in the darkroom. Moreover, Du Bois suggests that white photographers could not even be bothered to learn how to photograph people of color correctly. The solution, he continued, was for "more young colored men and women take up photography as a career." Were they to do so, neophyte photographers needed to distinguish themselves and their product against white competitors given the limitations on black businesses. One way that African American photographers could attract customers was to portray darker skin tones in a flattering manner.

In competition with white photographers, the ability to represent a full spectrum of skin tones could provide a photographer with a real advantage amongst black consumers. In places with multiple black photographers the delicate portrayal of complexion constituted the baseline of necessary skill. Daniel Freeman stressed in 1915

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<sup>30</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "Photography," *The Crisis* (v26 n26) October 1923, 249-250.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Douglass, "A Tribute For the Negro (Review)," *The North Star*, April 7, 1849.

<sup>32</sup> As perhaps the most photographed African American of the nineteenth century, Douglass surely knew that camera operators could also shape the outcome of an image.

that he had to work with “a variety of colors of faces, ranging from white, brown, black, etc., [and] many of these wearing white costumes which increase the contrast.”<sup>33</sup> In order to be successful as a photographer in Washington, DC. Freeman needed to satisfactorily represent a multiplicity of skin tones. African American portrait photographers had to remain cognizant of how different colors of clothing and skin could cause problems on film because, in the words of photographer Marvin Smith, “of course we come in various shades.”<sup>34</sup>

Black photographers also had to accommodate the particular preferences African American customers had about how they wanted their skin to look.<sup>35</sup> Black Americans, photographers and subjects, were concerned about having the “right” skin tones in their portraits often based on the prejudices about color and class prevalent in their time.

Wilhelmina Wynn recalled that her mother, born in 1883 and practicing photography with her husband Richard Roberts after 1902, expressed a great preference for lighter skinned African Americans. Wynn stated that for Wilhelmina Pearl Selena Williams, “there was always a personal thing about black....she thought it was not beauty...now my mother was trying very hard to become more educated and move away from slavery and I think it was important to her how people looked.”<sup>36</sup> Though its intensity varied across time and place, several African American photographers and subjects described a preference for lighter skin in their photographs in the first half of the century.

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Freeman, “Photography as a Business,” National Negro Business League, *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League* (Boston: National Negro Business League, 1915), 215.

<sup>34</sup> Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Lorna Roth quotes Phillips Video Camera Designer, Jan Van Rooy: “Skin tone reproduction is not just science, it has to deal with the psychology of how people WANT to look.” (Roth’s emphasis.) Lorna Roth, “Looking at Shirley, The Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity,” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, v34, n1, (2009).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Wilhelmina Wynn, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection.

Consequently, negotiation over how light or dark one's skin looked in the prints was ongoing (if implicit) in the African American photography studio. Morgan Smith concurred that the Smith Studio reached its height in Harlem during the 1940s, "a time when black wasn't popular and a lot of people they didn't want to look their color. It was a shame but it was so."<sup>37</sup> Langston Hughes' reflected that idea when his fictional everyman Jesse B. Semple stepped into the "Harlem De-Luxe Photography Studio." "Simple" asked his partner Joyce, "What color do you want me to be?" Joyce replied that she would like Simple, "a little lighter than natural. I will request the man how much he charges to make you chocolate."<sup>38</sup> Even if the end result was a less-than "natural" image, photographers had to address their customers' desires for how they wanted to look which included accommodating requests to be lightened or darkened. An understanding of African American color consciousness was another advantage that black photographers could exploit over white competitors, and the kind of insider knowledge that black customers could expect a black photographer to understand implicitly.

Black studio photographers recognized the frustration the Du Bois and other African Americans felt when it came to their portraits. Morgan Smith recalled of the 1920s and 1930s, "back in those days most photographers who were photographing people of color, they had no color. You could see their lips and their eyes and their skin tones were not there, as far as I remember. In a sense it was sort of ghostly."<sup>39</sup> Given that popular black photographers working in New York during that time – James VanDerZee or James Allen, for instance – were not selling "ghostly" portraits, it seems fair to

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<sup>37</sup> Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Langston Hughes, "Picture for Her Dresser", *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 7, *The Early Simple Stories* (Columbia: University of Missouri, Press, 2002), 214.

<sup>39</sup> Draper Interview, M. Smith Papers, 9.

surmise that Smith was referring to white photographers inexperienced with darker complexions. Even in the late 1970s, journalist Viveca Galt asked the photographer Louise Martin about handling “many different colors” of skin because, “a lot of white photographers can’t deal with that. All of us have seen pictures of ourselves or of other people who have come out as just a little black spot in a picture of white.”<sup>40</sup> In her study of color and film technology Lorna Roth highlights some of the most common issues faced by African American consumers: “reproduction of facial images without details, lighting challenges, and ashen looking facial skin colors contrasted strikingly with the whites of eyes and teeth.”<sup>41</sup> Groups of people with widely varied complexions proved especially challenging for photographers unaccustomed to shooting faces that needed different levels of exposure at the same time. Film historian Richard Dyer anecdotally attests to “school photos where either the black pupils’ faces look like blobs or the white pupils’ faces have theirs bleached out.”<sup>42</sup>

Part of the reason photographers, black and white, had difficulty representing African American skin tones was that photographers had to work against technology that was optimized for the capture of white skin. Photographic apparatuses, film stock, and chemical processes were developed in such a way that the white face became the standard and ideal measure, even for black-and-white film. Although Richard Dyer primarily treats motion pictures, he states that both the popular techniques and technology of all film “assume, privilege and construct whiteness. The apparatus was developed with white people in mind and habitual use and instruction continue in the same vein, so much so

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<sup>40</sup> Viveca Galt, interview with Louise Martin, c. 1975, transcript for “Women on the Move,” Box 2, Folder 14, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection.

<sup>41</sup> Roth, “Looking at Shirley,” 117.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 89.

that photographing non-white people is typically construed as a problem.”<sup>43</sup> Though we presume film to represent the world naturally, or to mimic it scientifically, those technologies (from glass plates, to acetate negatives and cellulose roll film) reflect the culture in which they are developed.<sup>44</sup>

At the most basic level, the chemical emulsions developed for popular film stocks were calibrated to privilege lighter shades, in part because scientists never imagined people of color as consumers, viewers or subject of photographs.<sup>45</sup> Brian Winston points out that as Kodak developed its color film stock, it used exclusively white female models for research trials. In evaluations, film prototypes that most accurately represented “Caucasian” skin tones were abandoned in favor of stock that exaggerated their whiteness. The result being color film technology that captures white skin tones “[not as they are], but rather as they are preferred – a whiter shade of white.”<sup>46</sup> Though Winston focuses on the development of color film, his point might stand for the broader history of photography: that film technologies developed to approximate an idealized whiteness have not, historically speaking, been “readily manipulated to give good black skin tones.”<sup>47</sup>

Bias in printing photographs extended further in the 1950s, when Kodak distributed its “Shirley Cards” to guide newly independent printing labs in calibrating

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<sup>43</sup> Dyer, *White*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Both Dyer and Brian Winston have influenced my thinking here directly., though the practice and outcomes of photography can be said to be technologically determined, that technology was culturally determined in keeping with the hierarchies of power prevalent in the society that created it. See Brian Winston, “A Whole Technology of Dyeing: A Note on Ideology and the Apparatus of the Chromatic Moving Image,” *Daedalus*, v114 n4 (Fall, 1985): 105-106.

<sup>45</sup> Roth, “Looking at Shirley,” 116.

<sup>46</sup> Winston, “A Whole Technology of Dyeing,” 121.

<sup>47</sup> Winston, “A Whole Technology of Dyeing,” 121.

their equipment when printing Kodak color photos.<sup>48</sup> Nicknamed for Shirley Page, the first model (and Kodak employee) who posed for the cards, subsequent versions all showcased a fair-skinned white woman with contrasting hair or dress. Because the Kodak system was so ubiquitous, “Shirley’s skin became an industry standard in North American photo labs.”<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, if negatives of an African American subject were developed and printed using the standard of the Shirley card, they often came out poorly. Author and photographer Syreeta McFadden writes that, “unless you were doing your own processing, you took your roll of film to a lab where the technician worked off a reference card with a perfectly balanced portrait of a pale-skinned woman.”<sup>50</sup> Kodak first distributed a “multi-racial” reference card in 1995.<sup>51</sup> For most of the twentieth century then, even African American home photographers were limited by the available technology.

To overcome these limitations African American studio photographers could not look to manuals and professional literature, which approached blackness as a problem to be solved.<sup>52</sup> Portraiture instructions, including lighting, exposure, and darkroom settings invariably assumed that white faces were standard and used white people as illustrations.

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<sup>48</sup> The United States Government intervened in 1954 to break up Kodak’s monopoly on printing Kodacolor film. Prior to 1954 Kodak was the only firm that could develop Kodacolor and the price to do so was built into the cost of the film. Found guilty of violating the Sherman Antitrust Act, Kodak agreed to license outside developers.

<sup>49</sup> Roth, “Looking at Shirley,” 116

<sup>50</sup> Syreeta McFadden, “Teaching the Camera to See My Skin,” Buzzfeed.com, April 2, 2014, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/syreetamcfadden/teaching-the-camera-to-see-my-skin#.do5JrzJ9A>.

<sup>51</sup> Roth, “Looking at Shirley,” 122. For more on Kodak and Shirley Cards see “How Kodak’s Shirley Card Set the Skin-Tone Standard,” Mandalit Del Barco, *Morning Edition*, aired on November 13, 2014, on NPR, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/13/363517842/for-decades-kodak-s-shirley-cards-set-photography-s-skin-tone-standard>; “Light and Dark: The Racial Biases that Remain in Photography,” Syreeta McFadden to Celeste Headlee, *Tell Me More*, aired April 16, 2014, on NPR, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/04/16/303721251/light-and-dark-the-racial-biases-that-remain-in-photography>.

<sup>52</sup> Dyer, *White*, 94.

Surveys by Dyer and Winston of published photography manuals found that not until the 1950s did writers begin to acknowledge a wider variety of shades and skin tones as something for the photographer to consider.<sup>53</sup> Even then, advice primarily acknowledged the color “flesh” as ranging from white to peach to tan. When people of color did appear in early to mid-century photography manuals, they were presented as an interesting puzzle, such as how to effectively light a dark-skinned woman’s face against a white background.<sup>54</sup>

The existing reference materials owned by the Scurlock family illustrate the ways in which published photography instruction generally took the white face as standard.<sup>55</sup> Some of these titles, including *Lighting for Photography: Means and Methods* (1948) and *Negative Retouching and Print Finishing* (1941) from the “Little Technical Library” were used as part of a reference library at Robert Scurlock’s Capitol School of Photography and kept for use in the studio once the school closed. *Lighting for Photography*, in particular, included only pictures of white models as example plates. While the author Walter Nurnberg advised readers on how to consider lighting different color clothing against various backgrounds, skin color went unremarked upon because it was not treated as something the professional photographer (read: white) could expect

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<sup>53</sup> Winston, “A Whole Technology of Dyeing,” 109.

<sup>54</sup> Dyer lists a series of manuals and guides for portraiture and lighting that only have white faces. Dyer, 143-144.

<sup>55</sup> The Scurlock Collection includes several reference works that do not feature any Scurlock images and are largely technical in nature, printed prior to Addison Scurlock’s death in 1964. These works include: N.S. Amstutz, *Handbook of Photoengraving* (1907); Walter Nurnberg, *Lighting for Photography: Means and Methods* (New York: Focal Press, 1948); J. Caroll Tobias, *A Manual of Airbrush Techniques* (Boston: American Photographic Publishing Co., 1941); Ernest E. Draper and Norris Harkness, *Negative Retouching and Print Finishing* (Little Technical Library), (New York: Ziff Davis Publishing Company, 1941); *The Professional Photographer*, August 1957 v84 n1743; *Journal of the Photographic Society of America*, November 1946, v12 n10. See Series 9, Scurlock Studio Records.

much variation on. Nurnberg imagined the reader was to understand “flesh” as only within the range of “white” skin colors.

Trade journals kept by the Scurlocks prior to 1960, though few remain, exhibit a similar default position of white faces in nearly all examples, demonstrations, and critical articles featuring photographs. Though the Photographic Society of America described itself as an “active, progressive group” “open to all who are seriously interested in photography” in the November 1946 Journal issue, only two photographs featured people of color. “Mammy’s Little Rose,” part of a feature on a salon held in the Mississippi Valley, featured a young dark-complexioned African American girl sleeping under a white sheet and on two white pillows.<sup>56</sup> Without specifying the racial identity of the photographer the editors included the picture for its technical merit, i.e. successfully portraying a dark subject against bright background and foreground. Here, as Dyer and Wilson suggest, blackness only appears in the trade publications as a challenge: “the ‘problem’ of dark-skinned people.”<sup>57</sup>

Excluded from the professional literature, African Americans learned to photograph other African Americans well through personal exploration and learning from their peers. Louise Martin studied photography at the University of Denver, but claimed her expertise photographing people of color through a combination of her own racial identity and willingness to learn through trial and error. When asked how she developed the knowledge to effectively photograph a range of skin tones Martin replied:

Being black myself, I felt that I could best handle that by learning the various contrasts, after practicing with various chemicals and so forth, using various lenses to photograph different people of different colors and especially mixed

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<sup>56</sup> *Journal of the Photographic Society of America*, v. 12, n. 10 (November 1946), Series 9, Box 4, Folder 1, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>57</sup> Dyer, *White*, 94.

groups, then I learned my own technique....to not make a person too black or too light or what, especially when they're grouped together. That's a technique you must develop yourself. And you can do a very good job. That way, the person who's supposed to be a certain skin tone, he's not too black and the one that's white should not be too white, so you have to learn to blend them together to make a good picture.<sup>58</sup>

Martin cited the particular challenge of getting the right exposure for everyone in a group, where different complexions would reflect light to varying degrees. Martin does not claim that her racial identity gave her any innate ability to photograph other African Americans. By starting from that subject position, however, Martin makes clear that her identification as “black” determined some of her priorities as a portraitist and in turn led her to teach herself how to better photograph other people that might identify as “black.” Martin also expressed a sensitivity to African American color consciousness through an implicit understanding of why it was important “to not make a [customer] too black or too light.” As detailed below, Martin indicated that she would not doctor photographs to achieve an unnatural complexion, but her answer in this instance shows that she remained cognizant that satisfying her customer’s expectations when it came to skin tone required some finesse.

In her recollection Martin also highlighted the unique challenge of shooting “mixed groups” with different skin colors in one exposure. Making sure that everyone in such a group photographed well depended on understanding light and especially how any given face reflected available light. A few years after Martin’s interview, Morgan and Marvin Smith spoke about the same problem and how to ensure the correct exposure on all faces throughout the frame. Smith intimated that not all [white] photographers in the 1940s and 1950s were prepared to deal with that challenge, and also shared how simple

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<sup>58</sup> Viveca Galt Interview with Louise Martin.

consideration of light helped them photograph groups of varied complexions successfully. “In the days we were doing photography,” Smith said, “you had these blacks in various shades, you should always place the darker ones up front, because of the light source and you lose it as you [stand further away.]”<sup>59</sup> Since darker faces absorbed more light, Smith reasoned, they should be posed closer to the light source to reveal their features clearly, while lighter faces in the back row would return more light from farther away. This seems like a simple solution to ensure that subjects did not get washed out or underexposed, but the Smiths’ discussed this idea as if it were specialized knowledge, or not common practice, in New York during the first half of the twentieth century.

Art photographer Earlie Hudnall, Jr. worked under Herbert Provost as a student at Texas Southern University, taking “portraits, school-day pictures, group photographs, social events, weddings.” Provost also taught Hudnall that important lesson of “how to arrange large groups; how to put lighter people in the background, darker people up front.” Hudnall described Provost as somewhat singular in his focus, because he “stresse[d] lighting, lighting, lighting.”<sup>60</sup> Since light makes photography possible and can be an obsession for photographers, such a statement might seem unremarkable. Working against film stock optimized for only the most reflective skin, however, African American photographers needed to “turn up” lighting in order to reveal facial details for many of their subjects. For instance, African American cinematographer and director Ernest Dickerson urged “reflective make up” for African American subjects, stating that “a light sheen from skin moisturizer is essential, not a lot, just enough to enhance [the

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<sup>59</sup> Draper Interview, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Earlie Hudnall, Jr. Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 247.

skin's] reflectivity" through the 1980s.<sup>61</sup> Conversely, Syreeta McFadden criticized the application of reflective makeup and moisturizers as "poor advice" from "white photo instructors" because it treated black skin as the problem, rather than the poor dynamic range of film stock.

Most African American photographers eschewed the use of additives to their subjects' skin, but still tried to optimize the use of light whenever possible. When called to people's homes or weddings to take pictures, Louise Martin had to make sure to bring additional portrait lights and staff to operate them.<sup>62</sup> Morgan and Marvin Smith reportedly amassed over \$10,000 worth of equipment for their studio, all of which they insured for "quite a pretty penny."<sup>63</sup> A portion of that total included specialized lighting. When the Smiths dissolved their studio in 1967 they donated unsold equipment to Maryland State College. In addition to one camera, five enlargers, and darkroom supplies the Smiths contributed two 2000 Watt Vents Photoflood lights, a 750 Watt Barwell McAllister Spotlight with Barn doors, a 500 Watt Spotlight, and 1000 Watt Barwell McAllister Spotlight.<sup>64</sup> Of their lighting and darkroom setup Morgan Smith stated in 1947 that, "these machines have been assembled over a period of years. Due to the rapid progress in our field some are discarded for newer speedier and more modern ones."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Linda Lynton, "School Daze: Black College is Background," *American Cinematographer*, v. 59, n. 2 (February 1988): 67-70.

<sup>62</sup> Louise Martin Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 218.

<sup>63</sup> Graham, "Talented Lexington, Kentucky Twins."

<sup>64</sup> Morgan S. Smith to Dr. J. T. Williams, Maryland State College, January 30, 1967, M. Smith Papers. An enclosure listed the photography equipment they would be donating to the College: 2000 Watt Vents Photoflood Lights and Stands (2), 750 Watt Barwell McAllister Spot Light with Barn doors & stand; 500 Watt Spotlight with Snoot, 1000 Watt Barwell McAllister Spotlight with stand, 8x10 Elwood Enlarger, 5x7 Elwood Enlarger, 4x5/5x7 Solar Enlarger Film Holders (2), 8x12 Contact Pointer, 4x5 Speed Graphic Camera with lean, 16x20 Trays for developing, processing, extra bulbs for some of the lights, extra flash reflectors, lamp for a bank of flash photos, larger group work, paper cutter, Easel [sic] for printing up to 11x14 prints, roll film tanks for 35 mm or 120 rolls (3).

<sup>65</sup> Graham, "Harlem's Successful Business and Professional People."

Though the Smith brothers worked initially in black and white, they also branched into color film, Kodachrome in particular, and needed the equipment to light and develop those pictures properly.

At the Scurlock Studio, the photographers used strong but diffuse light to reveal details without becoming harsh. Said George Scurlock:

The lights we would use mostly, before we used Speedlight were banks of fluorescent tubes. They produced a softer light than incandescent lights. Eight forty inch tubes or six would comprise the directional light, a smaller one opposite the other one for the relief light, for the reduction of the shadow created by the directional light.<sup>66</sup>

George Scurlock adopted the scheme described above after the teaching of his father. Addison Scurlock worked most with his major light source (George's large bank of fluorescent tubes) set up to the right of the sitter, with the smaller on the opposite side. Occasionally Scurlock would use a Rembrandt light or other dramatic effects to set the sitter apart from the dark background he preferred. The Studio preferred this setup of fluorescent lights because it could imitate the soft and diffuse natural light that a window would produce, while reducing shadows. In the same city where Daniel Freeman cited "a variety of colors of faces" Addison Scurlock shot in black-and-white his entire career, using light and judicious retouching to sensitively render African American skin tones in grayscale.

Additional light could also be crucial for black photographers in order to capture dark hair, especially in a way that revealed texture or patterns. Naturally, men and women who had spent money at the barber or beauty shop prior to their photo appointment would want their photographer to highlight their investment. For African

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<sup>66</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 90.

American customers, however, precise representation of their hairstyle had important cultural and political significance. The idea of what constituted “good hair” for African Americans was never static, but how one wore their hair constituted an important marker of class, racial background, and respectability throughout the twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> The ability to fully and effectively represent black hair proved an important selling point for African American photographers. Robert Scurlock stressed the use of a designated “hair-light” or spotlight arranged above the sitter and aimed downward in order to “accentuate that shine texture and pattern of the hair.”<sup>68</sup> The M. Smith Studio used, among other equipment, Fink-Roselive spotlights “for high-lighting color and texture of the hair.”<sup>69</sup> (Figure 24) All photographers used hair-lights to ensure that dark hair stood out from the background. However, given the importance that African Americans placed on hairstyle as a loaded signifier, properly lighting hair in a way that conveyed texture and detail could be a very important element of black photographic portraiture.

Through experience, African American photographers found the combinations of available photo-material that they thought made their clients look the best. Curtis Humphrey stated that when he “first started [he] made bromide prints.” “Bromide” specifies the kind of photo-sensitive chemical emulsion coating the paper used to print the picture. With time however, Humphrey came to find his results on bromide paper unsatisfactory. Humphrey told Alan Govenar:

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<sup>67</sup> For more on the relationships between African American hair, beauty culture, class, and respectability politics see Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky), 2007; White and White, *Stylin'*; Angela Davis, “Afro-Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia” in *Picturing Us; Good Hair*, directed by Jeff Stilson (HBO Films, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Fearing, “African American Image, History, and Identity,” 141.

<sup>69</sup> Graham, “Harlem’s Successful Business and Professional People.” Graham quoted Morgan Smith, who referred to the lights as “Fink and Roselive, Baby.”

One time I went to a supply place to buy some paper. They didn't have the type I asked for and I said, "You know I can't use bromide on us." And he laughed and asked, "Why?" I Said, "Because it makes us too white and y'all too black." I've learned this from experience.<sup>70</sup>

In this recounting Humphrey was not explicit about the type of printing paper he did want, only that in his experience he found that strictly bromide based photo-paper did not yield skin tones true to reality. Based on Humphrey's pronoun usage the white paper dealer did not recognize the problems that bromide paper posed for the photographer of black skin. More than likely, Humphrey disliked bromide papers because of their lower contrast. Greater sensitivity to blue light as opposed to warmer colors (like orange and red) also meant that bromide papers produced cold tones and performed poorly when printing darker colors like brown, even in grayscale. The alternatives to bromide papers were coated with emulsions of chlorobromide and chloride, among others. These papers generally required slower printing speeds but produced warmer tones.

Papers that produced delicate skin tones were important to African American photographers, although all expressed individual preferences. For portraits, Benny Joseph liked paper with a matte finish and "always used a cream-colored fiber paper," because its "black tones are deeper and more subtle."<sup>71</sup> Herbert Provost used Opal G Paper because he "found out that it had an olive tone and it would not give [him] black black." Provost boasted that, "we were always able to get tone in our pictures instead of a white white and a black black."<sup>72</sup> Eastman Kodak produced Opal G paper along with many other varieties and was the dominant manufacturer serving American photographers. Louise Martin preferred Kodak papers and especially liked the "Charcoal Black" line.

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<sup>70</sup> Curtis Humphrey Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 112.

<sup>71</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 196.

<sup>72</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 232.

Martin liked that particular paper because its high grain gave it a texture “like velvet,” and “because with that paper [she] could make black folks look prettier.”<sup>73</sup> All photographers had what Martin called a personal “secret to making great prints,” and for the photographers listed here those secrets included knowledge of which printing papers best showed off the diverse skin tones of African Americans.

Photographers could also control the outcome of their prints by retouching their negatives. Using special pencils, photographers could alter the way that a negative imprinted as a positive image on paper essentially by altering how light could pass through the negative. Most often photographers used retouching to smooth out wrinkles, remove imperfections, or correct shading. Photographers could also use retouching to lighten a person’s skin; the more light blocked by pencil shading on the negative, the lighter the positive image. Louise Martin recalled that some of her customers insisted on extensive retouching to lighten the subject’s skin. Speaking generally, Martin described her reaction to such demands:

I [said], ‘Leave it to me.’ I did the retouching and tinting. It depended on the complexion of the person. Someone might say, “My child’s not that black. I don’t want this.” Well, I wouldn’t let them get away with that. If he was black, he was black. I didn’t overdo it. I would give the picture the desired amount of light to make it look presentable.<sup>74</sup>

Though Martin claimed that she “didn’t overdo it,” she suggested that she would engage in some retouching to make the customer happy. Furthermore, she illustrates that her customers knew that a portrait subject’s skin could be lightened with retouching pencils.

For their part, Morgan and Marvin Smith claimed that they opposed heavily retouching skin tone and “making people look like they didn’t look. We were very much

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<sup>73</sup> Louise Martin Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 217. Martin might have been referring to Charcoal Black paper from the manufacturer Dassonville.

<sup>74</sup> Louise Martin Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 218.

against that....We didn't do that." White shirts appeared white and "your skin would be brown or whatever tones between brown and black or white, 'cause you had all colors in the race." Given their artistic commitments perhaps the Smith brothers did obey a strict policy of not lightening skin tone, and it remains possible that their clients in New York did not test that line. At the same time, their regular work for models, performers, and musicians would suggest seem need to meet those subjects' demands to look the way they wanted to look in photographs using either makeup or the retouching pencil.

The Smiths' interviewer in 1982, fellow African American photographer Louis Draper, realized that such inflexibility might have been bad for business. Draper asked the brothers about any potential "public relations problem[s]" and how they might have "handle[ed] that when somebody said for instance the picture's too dark?" The Smith brothers claimed that their clients liked their product, and did not express any color consciousness when it came to Smith portraits. Draper, perhaps in deference to the elder camera men, demurred and changed the subject. If the Smiths' missed a regular concern for lighter skin tones amongst African American customers – which they acknowledged existed – or refused to address it entirely, then this might be one way in which their photography practice differed from that of photographers working in smaller towns, with less artistic ambition, or with no other income and more directly beholden to the customers preferences.

### **Creating a Look**

Finding the kind of portraits that customers wanted could be an ongoing concern for photographers. Benny Joseph remembered some frustration with would-be customers

at the beginning of his career and described that disconnect in terms of both race and aesthetics. Joseph wanted to produce highly stylized portraits but had difficulty convincing people to buy them. Joseph recalled:

I got kind of discouraged because I didn't think black people really cared anything about the art of photography. I can recall when I used to want to use a Rembrandt lighting on people, they complained that one side was too dark. So the creativity I had about lighting just began to disappear. You just gave them flat lighting and the seemed to be more satisfied and that's what sold them. I think they were not educated about photography. They didn't want to know why one side was dark and the other was not. They just wanted it to look the same.<sup>75</sup>

Specifically, Joseph encountered resistance when he tried to embellish his portraits where his customers wanted straight-on likenesses. Given African Americans' frustration with poorly lit photographs, a preference for full lighting might have been predictable in that regard. Still, Joseph felt stifled creatively at the outset of his career. Though Joseph unfairly placed his discouragement squarely upon "black people," his recollection illustrates the experience of a new photographer searching for aesthetic patterns and models that his subjects were willing to buy.

Addison Scurlock might be considered exemplary amongst African American studio photographers of his generation in having his finger on the pulse of photographic trends and then creating a sought after visual style. Though he became closely tied to a specific set of visual conventions and repetitive in his use of them in portraits, Scurlock offered his customers many different visual products. In the 1913 *Sherman Directory and Ready Reference of Colored People in the District of Columbia*, Scurlock listed the breadth of work he could perform, including "enlargements and copying, portraits in sepia and mezzotint, locket portraits, interior and exterior views, [and] flashlight work."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 194.

<sup>76</sup> *Sherman Directory*, 372.

The Scurlocks' in house portrait-work ranged from quickly taken identification photos to formal sittings with several poses worthy of placement over the mantle. Although the Scurlock Studio was exceptional for its breadth and longevity, the photographer's example might give some indication of how lesser-known photographers established their own portrait style while satisfying customer concerns. Like Calvin Littlejohn and Benny Joseph above, the elder Addison Scurlock rarely, if ever, made photographs without a customer lined up.<sup>77</sup> If such practicality limited the freedom to experiment, it also led photographers to work hard to determine what sold the best. Scurlock focused his energy on contracted pictures and channeled his creativity into perfecting his technique. (Figures 25 and 26)

Addison Scurlock strove to meet consumer desire by adapting a number of visual elements referred to after the photographer's death as "the Scurlock Look."<sup>78</sup> Addison taught the technique to his sons Robert and George Scurlock when they came into the business in the late 1930s. The younger Scurlocks described the "Look" as a combination of posing, lighting, retouching, and composition.<sup>79</sup> Jeffrey Fearing added "judicious use of soft focus portrait lenses" to the list of techniques most associated with Scurlock portraits.<sup>80</sup> Whether or not the aforementioned elements were acknowledged as an eponymous "Look" by customers during Addison Scurlock's lifetime, the photographer did develop a cohesive aesthetic that he stuck to nearly religiously until the end of his career. Addison Scurlock excelled at posing his subjects precisely, hand-retouching,

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<sup>77</sup> Scurlock's photograph *Waterfront, Washington, DC* (1915) being a notable exception. Gardullo, et. al, *Picturing the Promise*, 60.

<sup>78</sup> To this point, I have not found use of this phrase contemporaneous with Addison Scurlock's own career behind the camera. The phrase achieved wide usage in exhibition catalogs, local press coverage, and the limited scholarship of the studio beginning in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>79</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 90, 140.

<sup>80</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 140.

employing soft focus and shallow depth of field, but he was not unique among photographers in combining these elements. (See Figures 14 and 15)

Many of the aesthetic elements Addison Scurlock favored initially became popular through the influence of pictorialism at the very beginning of the twentieth century. Closely aligned with the Arts and Crafts movement, pictorialism emphasized the camera's artistic possibility, favoring natural settings and soft focus to produce ethereal and emotionally evocative images. The amateur photographers (meaning, not commercial) that developed pictorialism used time-consuming hand-processing methods, rejecting the industrial "picture factories" of the late nineteenth centuries. Working portrait photographers on the other hand had little motivation or time to experiment with the artifice that attracted pictorialists. Indeed before the first decade of the twentieth century the goals of pictorial photographers diverged greatly from those camera workers bound to meet their subjects' demands for sharply realized portraits.<sup>81</sup>

Addison Scurlock completed his apprenticeship under Moses Rice just as the once rigidly separate realms of professional and pictorial photography began to blend through interaction of their practitioners at camera clubs and judged salons. Trade groups like the Photographers Association of American (PPA) invited heavyweights of art photography like Alfred Steiglitz to address their annual conventions.<sup>82</sup> As adherents of the Arts and Crafts movement integrated elements of artistic design into everyday spaces and objects, consumers of photographs desired images that were beautiful as well as useful. Christian

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<sup>81</sup> My thinking here is guided by Christian Peterson's analysis of Harry K. Shigeta, a Japanese-American professional photographer who managed to cultivate a significant artistic practice. Peterson writes that "the professional photographer of the time stood in stark contrast with the pictorialist. Professionals, by definition, made their living with the camera, and consequently, had to please their customers – not themselves – to stay in business. Commerce, not aesthetics, motivated professionals, who made pictures that were sharply focused, realistic, and easily identified." Peterson, "Harry K Shigeta of Chicago," 183.

<sup>82</sup> Peterson, "Harry K Shigeta of Chicago," 183.

Peterson writes that after 1910 customers grew dissatisfied with unimaginative photographs, forcing professionals to handle their subjects with greater creativity.”<sup>83</sup> Professional photographers strove to demonstrate some artistic intervention within the frame. Peterson writes that “portrait photographers especially, adopted pictorial devices, such as relaxed poses, natural settings and soft-focus effect.”<sup>84</sup> Scurlock, like many others, favored the modernist leanings of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic and thus eschewed props and Victorian domestic finery for clean composition and an uncluttered background. Identifying the artistic devices that Scurlock put to use in his portraits is not to diminish his exceptionalism, but rather, to emphasize how in-step he was with contemporary trends in popular photography.

Addison Scurlock was far from the only African American photographer to employ elements of the pictorial style in his portraits. As viewers often brought their own ideas to an image, the manipulation of different trends allowed photographers to appeal to different constituencies. William Bieze has illustrated that the emphasis on naturalism and hand-production in Arts and Crafts design found a powerful devotee in Booker T. Washington, who embraced these themes in his own portraits and commentary on home design. Bieze argues that Washington chose C.M. Battey to be one of his official photographers in part because the photographer “insisted on producing lavish photo gravure prints and pictorialist idealism, countering the cheap, mass produced stenographs and other forms of parlor entertainment.”<sup>85</sup> In Battey’s own words he strove to make “Rare types of old character studies that keep alive in our minds and hearts the high

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<sup>83</sup> Peterson, “Harry K Shigeta of Chicago,” 183.

<sup>84</sup> Peterson, “Harry K Shigeta of Chicago,” 183.

<sup>85</sup> Bieze, *Booker T. Washington*, 104.

moral ideals of the old-time Negro.”<sup>86</sup> While Battey’s aesthetics (and ad copy) trapped African Americans in an idealized rural frame Washington found that soft-focused, pictorial views useful when promoting Tuskegee University to white benefactors. In 1909, Addison Scurlock wrote Washington’s Executive Secretary Emmett Scott on studio letterhead bearing the slogan “Representative of Pictorial Photography.”<sup>87</sup> Scott did not take Scurlock up on his offer to provide photographs of a commission to Liberia. However, in 1910 Scurlock did make a portrait of Booker T. Washington in his home studio at 1202 T Street NW. Many African Americans found the artistic embellishments of pictorialism attractive because they elevated their images well above demeaning caricatures of popular culture or anthropological photography. It should also be noted that none of the elements associated with pictorial photography, nor any meaning therein, were necessarily fixed. In New York in the 1920s, photographer James Latimer Allen took an artistic approach to portraiture and exhibited some of the same idealism as Battey. Allen however, strove to represent the creative and political progressivism of the New Negro movement. The photographer grew especially popular with the intellectual and cultural elites in Harlem during the 1920s and received a Rosenwald Fellowship for his photography. Cameron Dia Holloway writes that,

To commission a portrait from Allen was a deliberate decision to acquire an image most consistent with the Harlem elite’s sense of itself. Allen’s patrons desired images by an artist who shared their world view. Through his lens, they became what they were – serious, creative, and talented human beings, equal and black. Although all would sit for a variety of photographers both white and black, no other black photographer consistently recorded as many members of this intellectual elite.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Advertisement in Bieze, *Booker T. Washington*, 104.

<sup>87</sup> Addison N. Scurlock to Emmett J. Scott, March 12, 1909, *Booker T. Washington Papers*.

<sup>88</sup> Holloway, *Portraiture & the Harlem Renaissance*, 12. For more on James L. Allen see Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 44.

While Allen operated a commercial studio at 231 121<sup>st</sup> Street, the photographer's personal tastes ran towards art photography, a sensibility that endeared him to the creative class that paid for his portraits. Though some of his work his work might bear similarity to the soft-focus views favored by Washington, Allen positioned his photography very different politically. Though younger than Battey and without the artistic aspirations of Allen, Addison Scurlock proved to be very much their peers in both ability and popularity.

Jeffrey Fearing described the photographer's most common portrait setup in his 2005 dissertation, based largely on oral histories. Though Scurlock did make full-length portraits, the majority of his subjects sat in front of the camera for half or bust portraits. Scurlock levelled the camera roughly six inches below his subject's chin which, in Fearing's estimation "allows the subject to peer out of their photograph from a superior position, permitting them to exude self-confidence, self-assuredness, and contentment with their station in life."<sup>89</sup> Fearing estimates that "almost always" Scurlock positioned sitters such that their shoulders faced to the camera's right, their head squared to the lens, but sitters were instructed to turn their eyes to the left of the camera (or to the subject's right side).<sup>90</sup>

Not everyone found the Scurlock "look" attractive. Robert McNeill, who trained under Scurlock and worked as a photographer for the WPA recalled that "everything look[ed] so posed, so unreal. [Scurlock] was so busy making sure that the pictures were flattering, that everything looked like everything else."<sup>91</sup> McNeill's objection to Scurlock

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<sup>89</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 146.

<sup>90</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 146.

<sup>91</sup> Nicholas Natanson, "Robert McNeill and the Profusion of Virginia Experience," in *Visual Journal*, 100.

portraits centers on the near mechanical reproduction that Scurlock achieved in his work, and suggests that in doing so the photographer sacrificed creativity or personality.

McNeill raises the question of whether due to Scurlock's meticulous commitment to one kind of flattering picture, his African Americans subjects sacrificed some of their individuality behind the visual markers of the mainstream (white) middle class. In Washington, DC, it should be stated, McNeill found himself in the minority as Scurlock Studio portraits proved enduringly popular across several generations.

Committed as he was to his signature visual "brand," Addison Scurlock kept upgrade costs to a minimum by continuing to use the camera he learned on late into his career. For portraits the Scurlock Studio used a large format camera that took 5x7 sheet film even after roll film became standard. To the front Scurlock affixed the equivalent of a 300 mm portrait lens, double the size of what would have been standard for a camera of that size.<sup>92</sup> Scurlock used such a large lens to achieve soft focus and a shallow depth of field while making portraits that could also be extremely detailed. Full 5x7 negatives could produce direct prints of the same size, or be enlarged into 8x10 prints if the customer desired. Most often, Scurlock photographers split a 5x7 negative horizontally using masking material and used one negative sheet for two unique exposures. Using this strategy, the Scurlock's sold two poses to their customers while saving a little money on film stock. Though each exposure came out at 3 ½" x 5", that size was still large enough to allow for retouching and enlargement in print without losing too much clarity.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> The use of such a large lens was unique. A 50 mm lens is normal for 35 mm cameras, 120 mm for 4x5 and 180 mm for the large-format 5x7 camera the Scurlocks used. Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 148.

<sup>93</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 90

Part of the reason Addison Scurlock continued to use his large format camera was that large format negatives made it possible to retouch the negatives extensively before printing. Scurlock used special pencils to manipulate his photographs, drawing and shading directly onto the surface of the negative. Writes Fearing,

[Scurlock] could eliminate unwanted wrinkles, crows-feet, blemishes or spurious reflections or refracted light on the eyeglasses....The skill came in making the tell-tale signs of re-touching invisible to the naked eye, and he passed on this skill to both of his sons.<sup>94</sup>

For Addison Scurlock retouching could be less about altering a sitter's complexion than correcting what he saw as imperfections.

### **From Pose to Print: Working in the Studio**

When photographers developed a signature "look" like Addison Scurlock, the popularity of a single studio name could obscure a system of production that required many more people than just the shutter operator to get photographs into people's hands. Photographers, office staff, production assistants all worked toward meeting a set of challenges familiar to other black-owned businesses described in previous chapters. As with many small businesses, family members provided the closest and most readily available source of labor for studio photographers. Male photographers of Addison Scurlock's generation often worked alongside their wives. Scurlock's peer Daniel Freeman stated that his wife took photographs for his studio as well.<sup>95</sup> Fellow NNBL

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<sup>94</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 95.

<sup>95</sup> Freeman, "Photography as a Business," 214.

member H.M. Brazelton called his wife a “factor in [his] business...from the beginning” and credited her skills in prizes won at the Jamestown Exposition in 1907.<sup>96</sup>

Wilhelmina Williams Roberts, born the same year as Addison Scurlock, worked alongside her husband Richard S. Roberts in Florida and Columbia, SC. According to her daughter Wilhelmina Wynn, Roberts would take portraits if Mr. Roberts was away but generally kept up with bills and maintained appointment and payment ledger books.<sup>97</sup> By Wynn’s account, Wilhelmina Roberts made her most important contribution to the studio as an assistant interacting with customers. Even when they worked with their partners, male photographers often adhered to gendered ideas of work, leaving women to perform domestic or reception work around the studio. Marvin Smith remembered an employee named Sara Lou Harris during the 1940s, stating “during that time a receptionist was many times the retoucher and also the makeup person. They did many things but they were nice young ladies.”<sup>98</sup> Though Smith granted Harris additional responsibilities, these also adhered to a gendered hierarchy of labor behind the scenes in the studio.

In their public face, the M. Smith Studio’s public face also reproduced ideas of gender-specific photographic labor. As minor Harlem celebrities the Smiths garnered contemporary coverage in the black press which stressed that the brothers primarily employed young women. In 1945 the *New York Age* announced that “Miss Inez Tyler” would serve as Morgan Smith’s assistant over the summer before her junior year at Shaw

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<sup>96</sup> “At the beginning I did not mention my good wife as a factor in my business as a photographer a success (*Applause*). She has worked with me from the beginning, heart and hand. We won the Silver Medal together on our beautiful collection of Carbon Prints at the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition in 1907. In 1913 we won together a certificate on best Photograph and water color work at the National Conservation Exposition at Knoxville Tenn, and now entering on my thirteenth year in business we are still working together.” Brazelton, “Photography as a Business,” 84-86.

<sup>97</sup> In an interview Wynn remarked as an aside, “I wish we could find those ledgers because a lot of my mother’s handwriting was in those ledgers...these are appointments and that kind of thing.” Her comment underlines how special it is that the Scurlock ledgers still exist. See Interview with Wilhelmina Wynn.

<sup>98</sup> *For Posterity’s Sake*, 1995.

University.<sup>99</sup> Ernie Dunham's column, "Breezing Thru the Bronx," called out that "pretty Dorothy Newby Corinaldi's taking photography courses at NYU and doing a daily stint for ace shutterbugger Morgan Smith. Needless to mention Dottie attracts more of a crowd than many picture exhibitions when she lines up with the press photogs to shoot."<sup>100</sup> Though Corinaldi handled a camera herself, emphasis was placed on her attractiveness. When Morgan Smith guest wrote the "All Ears" column for Bill Chase, he name-dropped their staff as well. (In fact, most of Morgan Smith's "gossip" seemed culled from photography jobs that the two brothers had done.) Morgan Smith noted that Dorothy Corinaldi and her husband "make their good looks pay" as studio models. Smith named Eunice Walker as their "retouching artist" and assistant, and publicly scolded two of their "telephone girls" for "failing to keep appointments."<sup>101</sup> Though Morgan and Marvin Smith might have treated their female employees with dignity and enabled them as photographers, the brothers' attitude in the society pages of the African American press served to diminish their employees' contributions and reinforced negative tropes about the kind of photographic work women should (or could) perform.

Popular stereotypes notwithstanding, African American women regularly owned their own studios and worked behind the camera. The number of professional female African American photographers rose from forty-one in 1910 to 101 in 1920, a number which in actuality might have been higher given the number of women taking photographs under their husband's names.<sup>102</sup> When Addison Scurlock expanded to the

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<sup>99</sup> Boozer, "New York Chatter."

<sup>100</sup> Ernie Dunham, "Breezing Thru the Bronx," Unidentified Press Clipping, Box 1, M. Smith Papers.

<sup>101</sup> Chase, "All Ears."

<sup>102</sup> The Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Volume 4, Occupation Statistics, table VI, 428-429, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov); The Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Volume 4, Occupation Statistics, table 5, 356-357, United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

space at 900 U Street, his wife Mamie Estelle Fearing Scurlock left a teaching career to join her husband in what would become the family business. Mamie Scurlock (Figure 27) scheduled appointments, ordered supplies, and acted as business manager that oversaw the day-to-day operation of the studio.<sup>103</sup> Clients generally paid a deposit at their sitting, returned to view their proofs and pay their remaining balance, and then returned to pick up their final prints. Often, the same customers returned in a few weeks to order additional prints for friends and family. Though Addison Scurlock (and his sons Robert and George) pulled the shutter on the camera, Mamie Scurlock would be a continual point of contact when a customer ascended the studio stairs.

For nearly three decades Addison Scurlock worked as the sole photographer in the studio, with occasional assistance from a cousin named Nobel Saunders.<sup>104</sup> Robert and George joined the studio officially after graduating from Howard in 1937 and 1940, respectively.<sup>105</sup> While Addison Scurlock excelled with a high school education, his sons pursued degrees in economics (Robert) and business administration (George) to complement their photographic training. When Robert served during World War II, George Scurlock handled the majority of off-site and event photography. George Scurlock remembered that the arrangement proved beneficial to his father:

I was at Howard university probably every day for quite a few hours and then during commencement period I was on the campus nine hours a day, taking class reunions... graduation banquets and the like for all the schools: engineering, medical, dental school, law school....But it was also good for [Addison Scurlock] because there were many graduates who wanted to have their portraits in caps and

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<sup>103</sup> Mamie Scurlock's studio records are the sources that fully illuminate what a dynamic space the Scurlock Studio could be even during that first decade.

<sup>104</sup> The Scurlocks' first son, Addison F. Scurlock, also helped carry equipment for offsite jobs. Addison F. was born in 1914 but died of scarlet fever in 1931. Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 97.

<sup>105</sup> Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft."; Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 97.

gowns, so while I was on the outside doing the University Community work, he's on the inside doing the graduation portraits.<sup>106</sup>

Under this division of labor Addison Scurlock, who turned sixty in 1943, avoided longer working hours. During World War II then, Addison Scurlock began to cede camera work to his sons, especially off-site work, but maintained close control of portraits and photo-processing until his retirement two decades later. Pictures taken by all three Scurlocks and later, employees outside the family, received the same studio mark of "Scurlock, Washington, DC" or "Scurlock Studio" which can make it difficult to definitively attribute photographs taken after the 1940s to a single photographer.<sup>107</sup>

Over the life of the studio the Scurlocks employed a number of non-family members in various positions. During the 1950s Addison Scurlock worked alongside William J. Scott, who continued to work as a photographer after Addison's retirement. Payroll records for October 1965 (the earliest definite date available) list nine employees other than the Scurlocks across both shops. Based on payroll summaries and apprenticeship forms (from the Veterans Administration and Urban League) a number of men and women moved through short-term employment with the Scurlock Studio during the 1960s and 1970s. These workers shared space on the payroll with long term employees Scott, Helen McIntosh, Walter Harris, and Cordell Bragg.<sup>108</sup> Existing payroll summaries list at least forty-eight different different employees during the 1960s and

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<sup>106</sup> Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 98.

<sup>107</sup> "Scott Engdahl alluded to code signatures, by which Scurlock Studio insiders could tell whether the 'Old Man' had signed it or not. In "Scurlock Photo" the horizontal leg of the L in Scurlock would extend under the 'o' in Scurlock and in 'Photo' the capital H would overlap with the enclosed portion of the capital 'P.' Meanwhile the two lower case 'o's in 'photo' would be written as above, but instead of a D' period 'C' period, the 'D' and the 'C' would have a single vertical dash beneath each letter." Fearing, "African American Image, History, and Identity," 139.

<sup>108</sup> According to Fearing, James Marceron, Walter Scott, and George Scurlock worked in the Studio at 900 U Street, and Raul Aramayo, Scott Engdahl, and Robert Scurlock maintained Custom Craft at 1813 18<sup>th</sup> Street.

1970s, some appearing for only one two-week pay period but others for decades.<sup>109</sup> Raoul Aramayo and Scott D. Engdahl continued to work for the Scurlock Studio through the 1980s, long after Metro Construction forced the closure of 900 U Street and Robert Scurlock consolidated the businesses under one roof.

A job description drafted by Robert Scurlock for a new hire gives us some idea of the duties that a production assistant in the Scurlock operation might expect to perform. For this position, the Scurlock's employee would be responsible for daily operation when Robert Scurlock was away, including opening the shop at 8:30 AM and closing after 5:30 PM. Written after Custom Craft and Scurlock Studio were consolidated under the Scurlock moniker, this position entailed maintaining a "working liaison with the Studio," meaning overseeing coordinating printing work from the studio at 900 U Street while coordinating resources in material and manpower across the two divisions. This particular position involved the overseeing of other employees, and in particular office assistant Helen McIntosh, who packaged prints into completed orders for customers. Prints that dried overnight had to be flattened before they could be mounted or put in an envelope. Film negatives processed the day before would be given to a retoucher (a separate position) along with instructions about how to correct the image. Since Custom Craft primarily handled print work for Scurlock and other studios, this particular position required minimal interaction with the general public.

In Houston, Texas a photographer named A.C. Teal ran the best known African American photography business during the first half of the twentieth century. Teal owned two studios, and his wife Elnora Teal oversaw one while he managed a combination studio and photography school. Elnora Frazier and Juanita Williams, photographers in

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<sup>109</sup> Payroll Summaries, Series 8, Box 57, Scurlock Studio Records.

their own right, worked for the Teals during the 1940s in a number of capacities. Frazier described herself as a “daily worker” with the Teals for fifteen years, starting off in the darkroom mixing chemicals, developing film, handling reception duties, and moving up to printer.<sup>110</sup> Frazier also helped Mr. Teal set up lights and load cameras. Williams worked for Mrs. Teal from 1941 to 1951 doing similar work. She also hand-tinted photographs for the Studio after taking a course given at the Teal photography school.<sup>111</sup> In all, Williams estimated that the Teals employed six to seven people consistently. The Teal and Scurlock Studios were similar in that they were the most successful in their respective markets and both eventually expanded beyond one shop. For black studio-owners of their stature, expansion meant training and overseeing employees doing work similar to that described by Frazier and Williams.

### **Picture Day: School Photography During Segregation**

Not unlike the manner in which racial segregation concentrated a market for black businesses in the early twentieth century, segregation in education also coalesced, in a sense, African American students as consumers of photography. In Southern cities and smaller towns (including those without a sizable black middle class) African American photographers turned racially segregated student bodies into a source of potentially repeating customers. Though grossly underfunded and physically neglected schools for African American children could be sites of great pride for their communities, and photographers could enhance that feeling with quality pictures. Arkansas photographer

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<sup>110</sup> Elnora Frazier Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 170.

<sup>111</sup> Juanita Williams Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 180.

Geleve Grice told folklorist Robert Cochran that, “kids in the black schools knew that kids in the white schools had prom photos and graduation pictures, and they wanted them too. Same with the parents. I knew if I didn’t do it nobody else would.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, the relationships between African American photographers and schools were mutually beneficial. In the act of keeping their businesses afloat, photographers contributed an important service for students and families. Still, when southern municipalities integrated their school systems (some years after the Supreme Court’s 1954 decree) African American photographers became an unintended casualty of the struggle for racial equality in public education. Much like African American educators who lost their jobs as schools were consolidated, many black photographers lost their school contracts to white photographers, squeezed out after decades of committed work.

When a photographer arrived at a segregated African American high-school they entered an affirmative space where black students learned from black educators and administrators. Often, principals and teachers imbued the students with a class-specific vision of uplift. Photographers on campus to take pictures of students dressed in their finest or touting their achievements fit neatly into the respectability politics at play. Herbert Provost remembered his own success as a school photographer as closely intertwined with schools’ efforts to teach students uplift and self-mastery. From the late 1940s to 1950s, Provost said:

We had built an organizational structure. We had a department in the high schools with access to come and talk to the seniors and tell them about business. They used us as role models, and we were very professional. We had good equipment; we had good cars; we dressed with real quality; and everybody on the staff was knowledgeable and knew just exactly what we were doing and knew how to handle all the customers. We made the high school seniors feel important, and

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Robert, *A Photographer of Note: Arkansas Artist Geleve Grice* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 47.

there was no competition. Nobody could run up and compete against us. They tried, but it wouldn't last. We understood the market and we had the kind of equipment it takes to produce a quality picture.<sup>113</sup>

Here, Provost sees both the products he sold and his own professionalism as exhibits of self-sufficiency. Not only did he build students' self-esteem by making them look good, Provost intimates that their presence in the schools paralleled the narrative of success that educators wanted their students to grasp in the 1950s.

Even photographers that owned their own studios relied on selling yearly individual and class pictures to high school students. In Greeneville, Mississippi H.C. Anderson called Coleman High School his "first real big job" when he successfully bid on the yearbook in 1949, after which he photographed Coleman events for the next decade.<sup>114</sup> Calvin Littlejohn recalled that he specialized in school pictures because newspaper work in Fort Worth did not pay much, and school photographs proved more consistent than things like wedding portraits.<sup>115</sup> Also in Texas, Herbert Provost and Benny Joseph relied heavily on school contracts from the 1930s to the 1950s. Joseph stated, "I made my money doing school pictures, [they were] eighty-five to ninety percent of all my work."<sup>116</sup> The Scurlock Studio performed occasional work for Washington, DC's Dunbar High School, and continually photographed undergraduates, graduates and faculty at Howard University. In Charleston, South Carolina, Walter Boags' studio letterhead listed his specialties in "Senior Portraits, Groups, Candids, [and]

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<sup>113</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 232.

<sup>114</sup> H.C. Anderson, *Separate, But Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 20-21.

<sup>115</sup> Calvin Littlejohn Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 100.

<sup>116</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 196.

Yearbook Photography” although he (as well as those mentioned above) performed all manner of photographic work.<sup>117</sup>

For rural photographers taking school pictures in the mid-twentieth century working life often resembled that of the itinerant photographer fifty years earlier, even though they might own a brick-and-mortar studio. In search of sales volume African American photographers from cities and small towns in the South often travelled great distances to take portraits for schools. In Texas, Herbert Provost studied under A.C. Teal of Houston, perhaps the most prominent African American photographer in the state prior to World War II. Teal’s first lesson was “how to canvas Texas,” and build clientele from town to town. Provost claimed that his business “touched eighteen schools between Houston and Texarkana,” a distance just under three-hundred miles.<sup>118</sup> Provost also listed schools on the route to a half-dozen other towns including Port Arthur and Galveston. Taking school pictures could be difficult and time consuming work. Even with a team of three photographers, Provost described their schedule as “grueling,” adding that “we would do 350 to 500 students and be through by about two o’clock that day.”<sup>119</sup> Curtis Humphrey, of Tyler, Texas (southeast of Dallas) claimed a similar range prior to 1960, when he “used to work in all the black schools in a two hundred and fifty mile radius.”<sup>120</sup>

Photographers in smaller states further east also logged miles rapidly for school portraits. Walter Boags worked in schools on Charleston, South Carolina’s outlying island communities, north towards North Carolina, then southward in Beaufort and St. Helena, SC, both ninety minutes from his home. If a photographer could not finish in a

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<sup>117</sup> Walter N. Boags to Charles Rock, May 26, 1969, Boc 39, Walter N. Boags Papers, Avery Research Center.

<sup>118</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 230.

<sup>119</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 232.

<sup>120</sup> Curtis Humphrey Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 112.

day's time, recalled Geleve Grice, they had to stay overnight in a hotel (or guest house if none were available to African Americans) which cut into any potential profits. Grice knew about long-distance travel for school work. Based in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Grice would take a four-and-a-half hour journey to shoot portraits at a school in Tyler, TX.<sup>121</sup>

In their travels, small town African American photographers engaged in the same processes of network building as their urban-based peers, albeit at greater geographical distances. Successful school portraits could entice older family members into the studio even if they lived several towns away. However a photographer made contacts across the region they became a resource that people could reach for in times of need or crisis. In May of 1955, for instance, vigilantes murdered Reverend George W. Lee in his car for working to register black voters in Belzoni, Mississippi. Distraught activists sought a photographer to record the violence but the real fear of further violence led several local photographers to turn them down. H.C. Anderson, who lived nearly an hour away in Greeneville agreed to take the pictures, although he recalled not knowing fully what the job would entail:

They tried to get photographers from Jackson, a number of places, but all the [other] photographers refused to accept the job. They picked me up I guess about 10 or 11 o'clock the night that he got killed. I didn't know what kind of pictures I would make when I got there....I was really afraid. I was shaking. The first place we went was the home of Reverend Lee, where they shot him as he was returning home. We made a picture of Mrs. Lee that night, ill, she was in bed. And we went to the funeral home, made pictures of Reverend Lee in the casket. We made pictures of a number of cars that had been shot through the windshield, shot into the car.<sup>122</sup>

In an environment where Benzoni's white sheriff "identified the buckshot in Lee's face as tooth fillings that had shaken loose in the crash," and witnesses feared reprisal for

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<sup>121</sup> Cochran, *A Photographer of Note*, 47.

<sup>122</sup> Anderson, *Separate, But Equal*, 132-134.

testifying, Anderson's photographs provided irrefutable evidence of racial terrorism.<sup>123</sup>

Anderson joined a tradition of African Americans using the camera as a witness to violence. That practice reached its perhaps its most forceful moment just months after Lee's death, when Mamie Till-Bradley insisted on an open casket funeral for her son Emmett who was murdered just an hour away from Greenville in Money, MS. The regular networks African American photographers built in the South through school pictures and other professional work could be just as extensive as those of their urban colleagues, even if they were less visible.

Alonzo Jordan of Jasper, Texas served perhaps the most widely dispersed collection of schools amongst those discussed here. Jasper's rural location and small size led the photographer outward for sales opportunities. Into the late 1960s Jordan worked in not less than sixteen high schools outside of Jasper.<sup>124</sup> The distance from Jordan's home studio to each school he worked in averaged just under sixty miles.<sup>125</sup> Based on the photographer's correspondence, Jordan made his longest regular journey to Ralph Bunche High School in Crockett, Texas, a drive of over two hundred miles round-trip. In the spring of 1965, Jordan noted that forty-seven students would sit for portraits at

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<sup>123</sup> Mary Panzer, "H.C. Anderson and the Civil Rights Struggle," in *Separate, But Equal: The Mississippi Photographs of Henry Clay Anderson* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 123.

<sup>124</sup> This number is based on a count of named schools and location names on invoices and notes requesting school package orders in Jordan's personal correspondence. My count includes: CH Daniels High School (Center, TX), East Liberty High (Center, TX), Chester High School (Chester, TX), Ralph Bunche High (Crockett, TX), E.J. Campbell High (Nagadoces, TX), G.W. Carver High (Groveton, TX), Thomas-Johnson High (Hemphill, TX), West Kirbyville High (Kirbyville, TX), Kerr High (Newton, TX), Bryant High (Pineland, TX), Waldo Mathews High (Silsbee, TX), J.H. Rowe High (Unknown Location), North High (Unknown Location), Crosby High (Unknown Location), Unnamed School (Trinity, TX), Unnamed School (Huntersville, TX), Unnamed School (Orange, TX). Box 1 (3C2), Folder 1, Alonzo Jordan Studio Photograph Collection, c1947-c1978, Texas African American Photography Archive, Documentary Arts, Inc. Dallas, Texas, hereafter Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>125</sup> Based on calculation performed using Google Maps, September 20, 2015.

Bunche High.<sup>126</sup> By the following August of 1965, only twenty-two students had purchased photo packages from Jordan.<sup>127</sup> Just over fifty miles from Jasper, Waldo Mathews High School in Silsbee, TX gave Jordan the chance to snap forty-five Seniors that same Autumn. None of those students promised guaranteed sales, though they could add up. At such long distances, driving to rural schools with lower student populations, photographers like Jordan Jordan had to move quickly to visit as many schools as possible.

Rural school photographers worked at such a feverish pace in part because they had to lower their regular prices outside of the city to meet the market. Geleve Grice put a finer point on that necessity. Grice stated that African American poverty in rural Arkansas made it difficult to earn a living in those schools, stating, “those people didn’t have much money anyway – I’ve still got hundreds and hundreds of little wallet-size prints people ordered but never paid for.”<sup>128</sup> Herbert Provost’s experience reflected that of Grice. Provost remembered, “You can’t go in a school at the very beginning,” Provost said, “like those little schools in Nacogdoches, Henderson...and ask for top dollars for your picture.”<sup>129</sup> However, Provost also credited Teal with teaching him how to “upgrade a school,” meaning gradually increase their prices after making inroads with school administration. Provost remembered, “we started a school with fifty cents a student...and then three or four years later, we got them paying a dollar and a half, two dollars a picture.”<sup>130</sup> If rural customers would balk at prices photographers might charge in the

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<sup>126</sup> Jordan’s Notation, T.J. Shephard to A.W. Jordan, February 18, 1965, Box 1, Folder 1, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>127</sup> T.J. Shephard to A.W. Jordan, August 1, 1965, Box 1, Folder 1, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>128</sup> Cochran, *A Photographer of Note*, 47.

<sup>129</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 231.

<sup>130</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 231.

city, it could take some time before photographers could raise prices so they were truly profitable.

With so many schools to photograph, Benny Joseph suggested that photographers processed school photographs with less finesse than other work. Joseph stated that, “you can do [retouching] when you do school pictures, but you don’t put into it like you would with sitting coming into your studio.”<sup>131</sup> On the other hand Walter Boags in Charleston, South Carolina promised schools that he would produce studio-quality pictures on site by bringing the whole range of his expertise to bear:

I attend workshops in the photographic arts, attend conventions and read the latest books, periodicals and magazines of the trade. I want to remain qualified to produce the very best in portrait photography...My customers and patrons deserves [sic] no less. I furnish a variety of poses and props to compliment my subjects. I also furnish the best retouching, color-correction and texturizing available...Add to this thirty years of experience. I am a professional photographer- not a camera snapper. As for seniors, I feel that after twelve years in school they are entitled to a quality portrait made by a professional photographer.<sup>132</sup>

Boags touted his abilities in fine portraiture to sell his services to local schools. Whether or not Boags put in the amount of post-processing he claimed for school pictures remains unclear. That he made such a sincere sales-pitch, however, suggested that at some point Boags faced some competition from a crowded marketplace.

Photographers undertook difficult school work without any guarantee on sales. After visiting a school and collecting deposits from students, photographers returned marked proofs from which students made selections often by selecting packages that included a number of different size prints. Even when students paid a deposit for their portraits, completing the sale could take some effort. Geleve Grice recalled that,

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<sup>131</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 192.

<sup>132</sup> “Studio Portraits Taken at School,” Typed Draft, n.d., Box 38, Walter N. Boags Papers, Avery Research Center. Hereafter, Boags Papers.

“sometimes [students would] pay part of the cost when I took the pictures and send me the rest later. Sometimes it took months – then I’d get a letter with a three dollar-money order, send them the prints. I did a lot of C.O.D. business in those days.”<sup>133</sup> In December 1959, Helen McKeithen sent Alonzo Jordan a money order for three dollars, and a promise to pay the remaining balance the following month.<sup>134</sup> Valarie Spells of Cainhoy High School in South Carolina wrote Walter Boags a year after her sitting to finally purchase her prints.<sup>135</sup> Though photographers generally worked on speculation, meaning they were paid when portraits were completed, chasing unpaid student balances seems to have been a common experience for photographers working school accounts. When photographers worked in distant schools, the transactions necessarily took place through the mail which slowed the process further.

Alonzo Jordan’s correspondence with faculty illustrate both the frustration involved in selling to students, but also the maintenance of relationships at African American schools. Mrs. Ruby Mae Thompson in Silsbee, Texas wrote Jordan in 1959. The photographer trusted Thompson to distribute print packages and return collected balances. In this instance, Thompson returned to Jordan \$132.00 on a total bill of \$180.53. Thompson singled out one student in particular, “that girl Anna Marie Fulton that ordered the large amount of pictures,” for being “one of the main people that [had not] paid.”<sup>136</sup> In this, photographers shared some of the same concerns as educators, teaching their students to be good, responsible consumers. The 1965 Senior Class at M.B.

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<sup>133</sup> Cochran, *A Photographer of Note*, 47.

<sup>134</sup> Helen McKeithen to Helen Jordan, December 31, 1959, Alonzo Jordan Collection. McKeithen addressed her note to “Mrs. Jordon” [sic] because she did not know Alonzo Jordan’s full name. Helen Jordan did work alongside her husband during portrait sessions and in the darkroom.

<sup>135</sup> Valarie Spells to Walter Boags, n.d., Walter Boags Papers, Avery Research Center.

<sup>136</sup> Ruby Mae Thompson to Alonzo Jordan, May 29, 1959, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

North High School in Orange, TX, voted together to extend Jordan an invitation to make their portraits.<sup>137</sup> One C.L. Simon let Jordan know that if he did not receive deposits from students in short order, those students would lose their chance to buy pictures.<sup>138</sup> On at least one occasion, Alzon Jordan's students flexed their prerogative as consumers by expressing their displeasure with the product. In 1964 an unnamed "Secretary, Senior Class" wrote Jordan that all but three of the senior class demanded a "retake" of the portraits. Presumably, Jordan could return to the school or lose potential sales from that particular school. In Jordan's defense, the Secretary expressed that this was the first time Jordan's work had been judged unsatisfactory.<sup>139</sup>

Jordan regularly took pictures for Ralph Bunche High School in Crockett, Texas and maintained positive correspondence with educator Reverend T.J Shephard. In 1965, the same spring that Jordan travelled to photograph just forty-seven students, Shephard wrote that "the situation [had] almost gotten out of control." Very few Bunche high seniors ended up buying pictures from 1964 because, according to Shephard, "the year before last some smart student broke in the school and stole most of the pictures to give out to the rest. And they are waiting for that break which they won't get" because Shephard moved the prints to safety in his home.<sup>140</sup> Jordan continued to make portraits for Bunche seniors despite those difficulties. Shephard clearly cared for Jordan's work, because he refused other photographer's proposals and agreed to take a three dollar deposit to encourage full payment on the part of the students. In 1967 Shephard wrote

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<sup>137</sup> Bettie J. Curtis to Alonzo Jordan, February 8, 1964, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>138</sup> C.L. Simon to Alonzo Jordan, n.d., Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>139</sup> Secretary Senior Class to Alonzo Jordan, October 16, 1964, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>140</sup> Reverend T.J. Shephard to Alonzo Jordan, February 16, 1965, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

that it had been “most pleasing” to work with Alonzo and Helen Jordan.<sup>141</sup> In subsequent years, despite returning nearly one hundred dollars in unsold photographs to Jordan, Shephard insisted that his students at Ralph Bunche High School eagerly anticipated their portraits for 1969 and wanted to know the earliest date when Jordan would next be available to visit Crockett.<sup>142</sup>

Nothing made the market place more challenging for African American photographers than school integration. Similar to the experience of many black educators, jobs they once saw as secure were given to white professionals. Benny Joseph continued to photograph schools until 1968, but by then,

Things had changed. Kickbacks were asked for. Then integration killed it. I used to shoot all of these little country schools, go out south main, Beaumont highway, and then they integrated all the black high schools with white students. They made junior highs out of the black high schools and the white principals wouldn’t hire me.<sup>143</sup>

Not only did white administrators steer contracts away from black photographers, white photographers saw the prices that Provost and others had “raised” for black students in Texas and took advantage. Provost looked back on concentrating all of his work in schools as a “mistake,” because he did not foresee that he might be cut out by white photographers after integration.<sup>144</sup> Geleve Grice concurred that integration “pretty much cut me out of the school picture business – white photographers got it all.” Yet, Grice insisted on the very important point that he “was all for integration anyway, of course.”<sup>145</sup> If he missed out on income from school pictures, Grice felt, that was a small price to pay

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<sup>141</sup> Reverend T. J. Shephard to Alonzo Jordan, May 31, 1967, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>142</sup> Reverend T. J. Shephard to Alonzo Jordan, January 14, 1969, Alonzo Jordan Collection, TAAPA.

<sup>143</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 196.

<sup>144</sup> Herbert Provost Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 232.

<sup>145</sup> Cochran, *A Photographer of Note*, 48.

so that African American children could (in theory at least) attend equally funded schools.

Walter Boags expressed some of the frustrations borne by African American photographers facing the loss of black school contracts they had previously looked upon as secure. Charleston public schools had finally, nominally, been desegregated in 1963, but Burke High School was for decades the primary public high school for African Americans in the city. In a letter to Charles Rock, President of the Burke High School Junior Class in May of 1969, Boags made a sales pitch in the context of the ongoing Charleston Hospital Workers Strike.<sup>146</sup> Initiated by nurses at University of South Carolina's Medical College Hospital protesting racially discriminatory working conditions, the movement galvanized Charleston's black working class and attracted the participation of Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy, Local 1199 union and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Beginning in March of 1969 a series of marches and pickets were marked by violence and the involvement of the National Guard. Boags opened his letter by reminding Rock that he had marched alongside Burke High students on May 11<sup>th</sup> and asserting that "this March was for much more than a march for Hospital Workers, or Poor People, but a march for Black Freedom and Black Opportunities." Boags framed their marching together as a moment of racial solidarity between himself and the students of Burke.

Boags contention was that in spite of their shared activism, the Junior Class recently voted to give their "photographic work to one of two photographers (BOTH WHITE) [sic]." The photographer chastised the students for their choice:

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<sup>146</sup> Walter Boags to Junior Council – Burke High, May 26, 1969, Box 39, Boags Papers.

You have seen Mr. McKenzie and me around Burke many times – you know us by sight and by name. I personally have made three trips to your school concerning photographic work for the class of 1970. I do not feel that you should hire M. McKenzie or me merely because we are Negros [sic] as You [sic]; but we do expect to be given some consideration when you start voting on a photographer.

Boags (and presumably Mr. McKenzie) felt genuinely slighted that they had been overlooked for white photographers, in direct contradiction to the feelings of racial unity that filled the streets in the preceding weeks. While Boags does not ask for preferential treatment, he does go on to cast doubt on the (non-specific) bid that he imagines the white photographers have made. Boags arguments seems almost ominous (“Beware of those who will give you something for nothing”) in an attempt to turn business his way. Boags also attempts to guilt the students into changing their minds, counseling them that in their future careers “YOU WILL EXPECT YOUR OWN RACE TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE.”<sup>147</sup>

### **Working Out: Event Photography in Black Leisure Space**

Photographers also distinguished themselves by catering to the needs of specific constituencies within the African American population that they could depend on to make their work lucrative, a pattern that Margaret Olin has identified in the career of James VanDerZee. Neighborhood photographers built relationships with school groups, church congregations, fraternal and political groups. Though ongoing, the relationship between a studio photographer and a social group might be strictly professional. VanDerZee’s connection with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)

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<sup>147</sup> Walter Boags to Junior Council – Burke High, May 26, 1969, Box 39, Boags Papers.

proved to be coldly transactional. Though many people found Garvey a compelling figure, VanDerZee claimed, “I never attended any of the lectures of any of the meetings. I used to go there and make the pictures. And as soon as I accomplished what I came there for, I was out and back to the studio.”<sup>148</sup> Less a participant-observer than professional contractor, VanDerZee’s relationship with the UNIA suggests how a studio photographer’s connection to his customers could prove impersonal.

At the same time, in the process of making money studio photographers helped these different groups constitute themselves as a whole. In the same sense that Benedict Anderson saw newspapers allowing subjects to imagine the concept of a nation, photographs allowed African Americans to conceive of a number of communities visually.<sup>149</sup> Olin goes so far as to describe studio photographers as “always involved in community development,” meaning that the photographer consistently allowed customers to define the boundaries of their particular group visually. Olin argues, and I would second, that this sort of “community development” extended beyond specific in-group work to encompass more general portraiture. Olin posits that African American studio photographers could “help an individual client feel a part of the community to which he or she aspires, such as the middle class.”<sup>150</sup>

Memphis-born Judge D’Army Bailey described photographs made at social affairs as a performance of racial and class solidarity:

We had our portraits made to reinforce our own stereotypes, which were positive. We saw ourselves as sharp. Our shoes were shined, our pants were pressed, and we were very well presented. We had a lot of self-pride, and pictures provided an

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<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Jim Haskins, *James Van DerZee*, 141.

<sup>149</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 1983).

<sup>150</sup> Margaret Olin, “James VanDerZee: Putting Down Roots in Harlem” in *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 105.

affirmation of how clean we were in our own mind. We weren't sending messages to white people. We were sending messages to each other, sharing evidence of our vision of ourselves to our friends and family and carrying those visions forward to prosperity...photography provided an extension of ourselves at our best.<sup>151</sup>

Writing about the *Memphis World*, Deborah Willis noted that, “community members were enthusiastic about having their images published in the local and regional papers. They supported their local photographers, who became prominent fixtures on the social circuit.”<sup>152</sup> Withers photographed many social events including seasonal formals, weddings, concerts and weekend club traffic; images of vibrant social life that were often printed in the *World* and *Defender*.<sup>153</sup>

During segregation African Americans also cultivated places for recreation largely outside of white surveillance and control. Restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and music halls constituted vital social spaces where African Americans could gather after working hours. Revelers about the business of having a good time often wanted to commemorate their evenings. Before 35 mm handheld cameras became ubiquitous, enterprising photographers recognized the opportunity and sold photographs to patrons. When Ernest Withers (Figure 28) set out for music clubs in Memphis to take pictures for people enjoying themselves he had a singular focus, stating, “I was there being seen, making pictures. You’re always out to make money. I used to make forty, fifty, sixty dollars a

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<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Deborah Willis, “Photographing Memphis: The *Memphis World*” in *Photographs from the Memphis World, 1949-1964*, comp., Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, intr., Maria Pacini (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 13.

<sup>152</sup> Willis, “Photographing Memphis,” 11.

<sup>153</sup> Withers’ collected prints certainly represent a wide scope of Memphians contracting him for different kinds of work both inside and outside his studio. A ledger book kept by the Hooks Brothers Studio, in competition with Withers, also reveals a wide array of customers. For example, over a few weeks in 1964 they made portraits that included a number of grandchildren, the local Teamsters chapter, radio celebrity Rufus Thomas, the men’s basketball team at Manassas High, the Elks executive board, and a wedding reception. The entries are meticulous and include the client, orders, payment and often a little bit about what they looked like, where the picture was taken, and what the finished product looked like. Hooks Brothers Collection, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

night. Maybe a hundred.”<sup>154</sup> At a dollar and a half per portrait then, Withers expected to make pictures for approximately twenty-five to seventy-five club-goers.<sup>155</sup> Always eager to sell more photographs, Withers also took candid shots of performers in the hope of selling them to promoters and agents later.<sup>156</sup>

Because nightclub photography could be so lucrative, many established studio photographers took up what Withers’ called “table work,” producing professionally done pictures with a snapshot quality. Ernest Withers leisure photography provides a powerful example of how important the photographer’s camera could be outside the studio. Like many of the photographers discussed in this chapter Withers “did it all,” from passport photos to wedding albums. Withers also contributed regularly to the black press during the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. (Figure 29) While his status as a “participant-observer” in the Movement has become controversial, during the 1950s and 1960s Withers’ photographs were central to black Memphians’ ability to view images of themselves.<sup>157</sup> Posing for and looking at Withers’ nightclub photography offered African

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<sup>154</sup> Ernest Withers and Daniel Wolff, *The Memphis Blues Again: Six Decades of Memphis Music Photographs* (New York: Viking Studio, 2001), 9.

<sup>155</sup> Daniel Wolff cites that Withers charged between five and nine dollars for an 8x10” print of larger parties. *Pictures Tell the Story*, 124.

<sup>156</sup> Withers recalled: “I had gotten the ability to take people in action, semi-action something like that,” whereas other photographers posed their subjects. See *True Story Pictures: The Arts Interviews, Series One: Ernest Withers*, directed by Joann Self (True Story Pictures, Inc., 2006), DVD.

<sup>157</sup> In September 2010 the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* published a story alleging that Withers worked for the FBI as an informant, observing the movements and activities of Civil Rights organizations. While that secret does nothing to change what we know about how Memphians understood Withers’ work at the time, it does complicate our understanding of Withers as a photographer and, subsequently, how we understand his images as contemporary viewers. See Marc Perrusquia, “Withers Secretly Gave FBI Photos of Martin Luther King’s Staff, Spied on Memphis Movement,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 2013, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/withers-secretly-gave-fbi-photos-of-martin-luther-kings-staff-spied-on-memphis-movement-ep-362223345-326794351.html>, accessed July 15, 2016.; Robbie Brown, “Civil Rights Photographer Unmasked as Informer, *New York Times*, September, 13, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/14/us/14photographer.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/14/us/14photographer.html?_r=0), Accessed July 15, 2016.; Whitney Johnson, “The Double Life of Ernest C.. Withers, *The New Yorker*, Septermber 15, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-double-life-of-ernest-c-withers>, Accessed July 15, 2016.

Americans a chance to celebrate their leisure culture under the visual regimes of segregation.

Towards the end of his long career, Ernest Withers claimed that “I don’t deal in relaxation music, I deal in news.” On one level Withers description of his own photography references the fact that when he began his career white newspapers in Memphis rarely covered events in black communities and published photographs of African Americans even less frequently. Withers conflated ‘relaxation music’ and ‘news’ because, in his words, “anything that you chronicled or recorded was always news” for the black community.<sup>158</sup> By collapsing his work as a journalist and as a photographer of pleasure Withers’ remark also suggests how two seemingly disparate photographic subjects could both carry political meaning. Withers’ work was part of the way that “relaxation music” and “news” came to represent similar sets of concerns for black Memphians. Withers’ comment also points us towards how, in fostering a collective political consciousness, leisure space can be seen as connected to the more traditionally recognizable political activism of the Civil Rights era.

Ernest Withers was born in North Memphis in 1922. His father worked for the U.S. Post Office and his step-mother as a seamstress. Withers volunteered for the Army in 1943, attended Photography School at Camp Sutton, NC, and then served with an Engineering Unit in Saipan.<sup>159</sup> When he returned home Withers leased studio space in his North Memphis neighborhood where he made a commitment to document what he called

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<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Withers, *The Memphis Blues Again*, 7.

<sup>159</sup> Withers sold portraits to other soldiers using extra supplies he obtained by trading his beer allowance with Air Force photographers: “[Soldiers] had learned of me and the battalion photo lab to come and get their picture taken and we’d make 5 or 6 pictures and they would come out and get them and they’d mail them back home. And we were being paid American money....we had to bargain with the man in the Air Force photography lab for film, paper, and developer, and supplies. We traded beer for supplies.” See *True Story Pictures*.

“the black side of life.”<sup>160</sup> By the end of the 1940s, Memphis boasted a competitive marketplace for African American photographers that included studios owned by R. Earl Williams and the Hooks Brothers. Such was the competition, to get a boost in 1952 the Hooks Brothers Studio (Robert and Henry) advertised a Christmas “Gift Shoppe” selling pressure cookers, wallets and jewelry in their regular *Tri-State Defender* advertisement. In the same edition Ernest Withers’ also branched out from portraits in his advertisement: “What’s Happening? Get Your Newspapers and Magazines from Ernest Withers. All Negro Publications Available Each Week.”<sup>161</sup> Withers’ worked continually on a freelance basis for black newspapers during the Civil Rights Movement. The *Tri-State Defender* first contracted Withers to cover the Emmett Till murder trial in 1955 for \$35 a week.<sup>162</sup> Withers made famous photographs of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike in 1968, among other events.

Withers launched his career in an environment where former Mayor Edward H. Crump went to great lengths to control how African Americans could see and be seen. Public segregation ordinances extended into theatres by prohibiting mixed race performances and audiences. Censor Board Chairman Lloyd Binford regularly cut footage of black performers from Hollywood films, and prohibited some films with black

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<sup>160</sup> Withers quoted by Wolff, “To Make A Shining Light,” 113.

<sup>161</sup> *Tri-State Defender*, November 8, 1952. Soon after The *Tri-State Defender* began publication in 1951, the paper routinely coupled their coverage with advertisements purchased by Withers, alongside ads for the *Defender*’s own Photography Service. The *Memphis World* (1931-1973) counted at least 15 different professional photographers.

<sup>162</sup> Privately, Withers collaborated with writer Raymond Tisby to produce a narrative pamphlet, “Complete Photo Story of Till Murder Case,” which sold thousands nationwide for \$1 apiece. The preface read: “...we are not only depicting the plight of an individual Negro, but rather life as it affects all Negroes in the United States...in brief we are presenting this photo story not in an attempt to stir up racial animosities or to question the verdict in the Till Murder Case, but in the hope that this booklet might serve to help our nation dedicate itself to seeing that such incidents need not occur again.” Ernest Withers Collection, Panopticon Gallery, Inc., Boston, MA.

casts and romantic leads to be screened within city limits.<sup>163</sup> Nonetheless African Americans built their own commercial spaces in Memphis, the most famous of these being Beale Street.<sup>164</sup> Memphis historians Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenall have written that, even as whites owned a number of establishments on Beale Street, “Beale...remained a symbol of escape from white prejudice and arrogance” through the 1950s.<sup>165</sup> Memphian Ruby Harder described the attraction of black social space growing up in the later 1940s:

So we didn’t want to go [to white clubs] anyway when I was coming on, cause we enjoyed Currie’s [Club Tropicana], the Flamingo, the Hippodrome, and wherever else we wanted to go. Club Paradise when it opened. So, it was more fun being by ourselves, you know. It didn’t matter to us.<sup>166</sup>

While patrons on Beale, South Main, or in North Memphis could be more concerned with pleasure rather than openly challenging authority, Robin D.G. Kelley asserts that blues halls and dance clubs “enabled African Americans to take back their bodies, to recuperate, to be together...[and that] these events were resistive, though not consciously.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Through the first half of the twentieth century Memphis’ two white newspapers, like many in the South, remained reluctant to publish pictures of African Americans. Laurie Green has demonstrated the control exerted by Censor Board Chairman Lloyd Binford, who became nationally notorious for removing images of African American performers that did not conform to a white supremacist imaginary from Hollywood films. Laurie Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Chapter 5.

<sup>164</sup> Information on segregated leisure spaces in Memphis drawn from Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America’s Main Street* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Louis Cantor, *Wheelin’ On Beale: How WDIA-Memphis became the Nation’s First All-black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992); Laura Helper, “Whole Lot of Shakin’ Goin’ On: An Ethnography of Race Relations and Crossover Audiences for Rhythm and Blues and Rock and Roll in 1950s Memphis” (PhD diss., Rice University, 1997). See also Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*; Withers and Wolff, *Memphis Blues Again*.

<sup>165</sup> McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 88.

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Helper, “‘Whole Lot of Shakin’ Goin’ On,” 164.

<sup>167</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South” *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 84. See also *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

Seeing and being seen were part of the pleasure of a night out, and photographs could extend that enjoyment. In this, Memphis was not unique. African American photographers across the country worked to meet peoples' demand. Austin Hansen, discussed above, actually began his photography career when he realized how well people paid for nightclub shots. Arriving in New York in 1928, Hansen played drums in small jazz bands, working consistently but earning only three to five dollars a night. At one gig Hansen recalled seeing a photographer work the room while he played:

A young man came in with a camera and started taking pictures all over the hall. Snapping as he went along. And after the dance I went to the manager and I says' 'What's this guy doing here, taking all these pictures?' He says he takes these pictures and he charges a dollar a piece....He made about sixty shots that night. I was making five dollars. I got to thinking that I'll have to try this thing out. I went to the door [at a hall on Eighth Avenue]. I said 'I'm a photographer I take pictures all around and I mail it to the people.' He says go ahead. I made twenty-four shots in an hour! And then, you see, now I'm going into making this money...it's a business now.<sup>168</sup>

Few would say that the photographer were more integral to the dance hall experience than the drummer. From Hansen's perspective however, his labor had more value behind the camera than on the riser. Though he learned to use a camera as a boy in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Hansen only fully devoted himself to photography when he learned he could turn his interest into a paying business.

In California photographer Chuck Williams took a different strategy. Over the course of his career, Williams also ran a charm school for female models, a photography school, and during World War II a nightclub in Los Angeles. According to Williams nightclubs provided social spaces for defense workers with disposable income who "wanted to break down that feeling of remorse at the war and all of those stories. So they

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<sup>168</sup> Austin Hansen, Interview by James Briggs Murray, August 6, 1986, VHS, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, Schomburg Center.

would dress up and go out” to clubs, theatres, and lounges.<sup>169</sup> Due to war-time diversion of manufacturing industries, home cameras and snapshots could be hard to come by. Williams remembered that “the only way that people could get pictures was in the nightclubs,” which we might better understand to mean that only professional photographers had (semi)reliable access to photography materials. Filling that void, Williams made photography a central part of the experience at his establishment, and indicated that other proprietors did the same.

In particular, Williams hired a team of “Camera Girls” to work in his nightclub six nights a week. Williams described the “Camera Girls”’ duties in several steps. First, the “Camera Girl” would:

shoot pictures of people who wanted to show their new girlfriends or their family or just their friends...She would take the film that she had shot back to the darkroom, darkroom man would process it, give it back to her. Then her main job, was to go back and sell the pictures. Show it to them around the table and see how many they wanted to buy.

Williams indicated that he valued speed and sales ability in his employees, and hired women exclusively to snap the pictures. Indeed, while he wanted his staff to take quality pictures, Williams emphasized maximizing the number of prints sold. Rather than collect payment immediately after clicking the shutter, “Camera Girls” were instructed to leave the transaction open. Then, Williams reasoned, if a Camera Girl returned to the table with prints showing different configurations of patrons to “convince them to buy more pictures than just the one that they had ordered.” This strategy helped the photographers as well, as they received a commission of five to twenty-five cents per print over and above a

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<sup>169</sup> Chuck Williams, interview by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Los Angeles, October 23, 1984, Transcript, Moutoussamy-Ashe Collection, hereafter Williams Interview. Portions of the interview were published in *Viewfinders*, 78-83.

base salary of five dollars per evening. The photographers sold prints in Williams' club for \$1.25 apiece right up until last call at 2:00 AM, six days a week.<sup>170</sup>

Williams simultaneously insisted that "people did not see [a "Camera Girl"] as a sex figure," and said he purposefully recruited young women who were "nice looking, had a nice personality.... As long as she was personable and had a nice looking – an attractive face and smile." He described a complex environment, normatively heterosexual, where men might treat their dates to photographs. In Williams' recollection, patrons were preoccupied with their companions and "Camera Girls" worked too quickly to spend time flirting. Yet, Williams clearly considered the physical appearance and personality of his female employees to be important because the photographers were leveraging those traits into higher sales. Williams recalled, "most of the girls that I trained had never had a camera in their hand before." Once the "Camera Girls" learned how to take a good photograph in the poorly lit conditions of the nightclub, "the most important part of their job was to sell those pictures after they were made." Unfortunately missing from Williams' assessment (and admittedly, this analysis) is a real accounting of how the female camera workers in Williams' club felt about their work, the ways they found to sell more portraits, and how they tried to improve as photographers.<sup>171</sup>

Though Williams underplayed the role of gender and sexuality in the work of the "Camera Girls," the fact that he never hired "Camera Boys" reveals something about how he viewed the transactions. Williams' reasoning was that "a man would never sell any photographs to speak of, for the simple reason that the other men there would be jealous"

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<sup>170</sup> All quotations in the paragraph from Williams Interview.

<sup>171</sup> All quotations in the paragraph from Williams Interview.

of the attention paid to the photographer.<sup>172</sup> This would have come as news to Hansen, Withers, and other male nightclub photographers who found success by hustle and sometimes gimmicks. After his Army service Dallas, Texas photographer George Keaton said,

I used my speed graphic and I had to have a motorcycle in those years. And what I would do is to go to a club, park it out front and come out and let people have their pictures taken on it, like they were riding it. I'd take their name and a number down and deliver the pictures to them the next day.<sup>173</sup>

Likewise, Benny Joseph would just show up at a venue, “just on a hustle. [He] could walk into the El Dorado and they’d say, ‘Mr. Joseph, do you got your camera?’ And I’d say ‘yeah its down in the car.’”<sup>174</sup> During and after World War II, demand for after-hours pictures in African American leisure space remained consistent, and photographers found different ways to take advantage of that desire.

Ernest Withers table work offered working and professional class Memphians a chance to represent their best ideas of themselves via the photographs he sold in nightclubs. Unlike the quickly returned portraits made by the Camera Girls, Withers negotiated to send patrons a print later.<sup>175</sup> A photograph of two unnamed couples in the Flamingo Room enjoying the Phineas Newborn Family Showband is a prime example of Withers’ table work. (Figure 30) Another photograph taken in Club Paradise shows similarly dressed subjects with “set-ups,” whiskey, cigarettes, and money on the table.<sup>176</sup> (Figure 31) Because of their generic similarity to snapshots, Withers' table photography

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<sup>172</sup> Williams Interview.

<sup>173</sup> George Keaton Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 79.

<sup>174</sup> Benny Joseph Interview in *Portraits of Community*, 194.

<sup>175</sup> Hurley, Johnson, and Wolff, *Pictures Tell the Story*, 54. Conversations with Tony DeCaneas at Panopticon Gallery confirmed Withers’ practice, also indicating that Withers might only make one print if and when the subject agreed to pay, and often throw out the negative after a short time.

<sup>176</sup> Withers Collection, Panopticon Gallery, GT 67, GT 99B. See also, Withers and Wolff, *Memphis Blues Again*, 51.

foregoes some of the symbolic markers of whiteness or class pretension utilized by some African American portrait photographers.<sup>177</sup> Though made primarily in the interest of a quick sale, leisure photographs represented Withers' subjects without the repetitive stoicism of a Scurlock portrait, but with no less self-regard.

Robin Kelley has suggested that "seeing oneself dressed up helped construct a collective black identity based on something other than wage work."<sup>178</sup> Ruby Harder remembered:

You were dressed up. The black people on Beale Street dressed up and went to clubs. If

you were going out you were really going out in style – you didn't go out with your work clothes on.... Actually, you didn't know whether you had a white collar job or you was a dishwasher, because when you went out everybody dressed the same...And whether you was a farmer, or a politician...you couldn't identify, and people didn't really make that an issue.<sup>179</sup>

Going out not only offered release from the drudgery of work, but Harder indicates that the rituals of dressing up could erase some of the markers of class. While different neighborhoods, dance halls, and musical genres carried specific class connotations, they also allowed for some freedom of movement, and a chance for different groups of black Memphians to see themselves together in one room. Nat D. Williams -- history teacher, *World Columnist*, and WDIA disc jockey -- remarked that although middle and upper classes were assumed to avoid Beale, "you'd be there jumping to yourself and look over in the corner and there's another friend doing the same thing."<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, fraternal and benevolent groups often rented out clubs for private events, further blurring the

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<sup>177</sup> On the power of snapshots see bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, (New York: The New Press, 1994), 43-54; See also Richard K. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>178</sup> Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem," 86.

<sup>179</sup> Helper, "Whole Lot of Shakin' Goin' On," 159.

<sup>180</sup> McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 35.

meanings ascribed to any particular space. Purchasing prints from Ernest Withers that documented Friday and Saturday nights allowed people to remember and extend the real (if unspoken) political discourses of leisure time, albeit with the potential for a number of contradictory readings.

Withers also captured performances, moments of free expression largely outside the surveillance of Memphis whites, ownership of venues and regular police presence notwithstanding. In a photograph from an “Amateur Night” at the Palace Theatre in the late 1940s a young singer in a uniform calls to mind ideas about citizenship and equality not far removed from the Double V campaign of WWII. The Palace audience (not to mention Withers) surely understood the violent repercussions visited on many black veterans for lesser bodily displays.<sup>181</sup> This photograph is a bold example, but if we acknowledge the potential for pleasure culture to involve assertive behavior, places like the Palace Theater become recognizable as rehearsal spaces for the attitudes that could crystallize into (demonstrative) recognizable political activity during the Civil Rights era.

By the early 1960s, Ernest Withers had become integral to the way that black Memphis encountered itself visually. Memphians articulated a relationship between Withers’ photography and the freedom struggle in a number of ways. Events in June of 1961 laid this bare when Memphis police arrested Withers while photographing a sit-in demonstration at a downtown Walgreen’s Drug Store. The *Tri-State Defender* put Withers’ portrait on the front page and described his arrest as an abridgement of press freedoms that directly deprived readers of demonstration imagery: “The *Defender* would have had some pictures of that parade but the photographer we had assigned to that event

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<sup>181</sup> File No. LV-104B, Ernest Withers Collection, Panopticon Gallery, Inc. See also Withers and Wolff, *The Memphis Blues Again*, 26.

was arrested.”<sup>182</sup> The lead editorial complained that the arrest prevented Withers from making a living, no small dispute in a city with a significant history of African American labor struggles.<sup>183</sup> The weekly gossip column even urged a test case to protest the fine.<sup>184</sup>

In hindsight, Withers might have appreciated the publicity. If people purchased from Withers because he photographed recording stars, Memphians who supported integration might choose his camera because of his notoriety as a “participant-photographer.” In the weeks on either side of Withers’ arrest the *Defender* carried his photographs of a police brutality victim, children barred from a fishing contest because of their race, a full page spread of insurance heiress Patricia Walker’s wedding, and an Alphabette Club luncheon held at the Flamingo Room.<sup>185</sup> In September of that year the *Defender* reported on a surprise party thrown for Withers by his wife Dorothy, describing the hundreds of attendees as “victims” of Withers’ own lens; a joke to be sure, but one that acknowledged Withers’ power to make black Memphians visible to each other.<sup>186</sup>

African Americans in Memphis associated Withers’ practice with the pleasures of looking at a wide range of images. As much as the *Defender* framed its objections to Withers’ treatment in the legal language common to Civil Rights coverage, anxieties surrounding the arrest also reflect a concern that opponents of integration had moved against someone who enabled freedom in black Memphis’ everyday looking habits.

When Withers was beaten and arrested while covering Medgar Evers’ funeral in 1963 he

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<sup>182</sup> “Still Marching,” “Tables Turned; Photog Arrested,” *Tri-State Defender*, July 8, 1961, 1.

<sup>183</sup> “A Test Case Is In Order: A Man Has A Right to Earn A Decent Living,” *Tri-State Defender*, July 8, 1961, 8. For more on the history of African American labor in Memphis, see Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*.

<sup>184</sup> “Left Side Down Front,” *Tri-State Defender*, July 8, 1961.

<sup>185</sup> “Café Dancer is Beating Victim,” June 10, 1961; “Entered Fishing Contest But Kids Kicked Out of Derby Because of Race,” June 17, 1961; “Patricia Walker, Harold Shaw Married in Brilliant Nuptials,” June 24, 1961; “Hundred s Pack the Flamingo for Alphabette Champagne Luncheon,” November 4, 1961.

<sup>186</sup> “Photographer Honored on Club Assignment,” *Tri-State Defender*, September 1, 1961.

made a self-portrait while posed in his bloodied shirt and jacket, looking down solemnly at a broken camera and two rolls of film.<sup>187</sup> Response to Withers' initial arrest and this portrait both reflect an understanding of the importance of camera workers to the goals of the Movement. While Withers and other Memphians would not misunderstand the most pivotal events of the Movement in terms of their citizenship, they also saw their ability to view photographs freely as tied up in the outcome of those developments.

Putting Memphis' black leisure places at the center of a long Civil Rights story, though, complicates the entire popular narrative of the Movement. For instance, while Withers' demonstration photographs document black efforts to occupy white-controlled public space, his photography of leisure space exposes areas of relative black control where white Memphians are interlopers. Withers' claim that he "never shot a total of a hundred white people in a whole five years back then" proves hyperbolic, but white Memphians are largely on the margins of these photographs. The white Memphians that do appear in photograph from the 1950s are celebrities like Dewey Phillips or Elvis; or they are working in the background for radio station WDIA at concerts.<sup>188</sup>

Taken together , Withers' photos illustrate a fundamental tension in black cultural politics during the post-war period between the impulses for integration and racial collectivism.<sup>189</sup> In a 1962 *Defender* column, Nat D. Williams chastised black social groups for renting out traditionally white venues while the clubs they had formerly used deteriorated for lack of business.<sup>190</sup> Beale Promoter Robert Henry claimed that, "when

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<sup>187</sup> File No. CR 1121-3, Ernest Withers Collection Panopticon Gallery, Inc.

<sup>188</sup> Withers and Wolff, *The Memphis Blues Again*, 7.

<sup>189</sup> Waldo E. Martin, Jr. *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics and Postwar America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 49-50.

<sup>190</sup> Nat D. Williams, "Dark Shadows: Must We?," *Tri-State Defender*, May 5, 1962.

integration came the Beale Streeters went everywhere, and it kilt this place.”<sup>191</sup> Ruby Harder asserted that many clubs were torn down to discourage racial mixing.<sup>192</sup> Withers’ photographs of Memphis nightlife show the gradual achievement of integrationist goals but at the same time, mark the dissolution of black-controlled leisure space and the physical redevelopment of Beale Street. Without belittling the very real progress achieved during the Civil Rights era, some black Memphians of Withers’ generation questioned whether they lost the cultural and commercial base that inspired Withers’ very practice. Vibrant environments containing the professional and institutional structures of the “black music world” that framed the collective efforts of the Civil Rights Movement disintegrated.<sup>193</sup> As debates turn about how we historically evaluate the Civil Rights Movement – its duration and sites, its legacies and successes – the images of black neighborhood photographers like Ernest Withers offer us new insight into that history.

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<sup>191</sup> McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black & Blue*, 7.

<sup>192</sup> Helper, “Whole Lot of Shakin’ Goin’ On,” 186-192.

<sup>193</sup> Nelson George writes, “While civil rights legal activism developed those in the black music world found a way to operate within the confines of a segregated society. They helped build what would become the post-war R&B world, and in the process they also nurtured a sense of black community and pride that would be essential to the civil rights movement.” George also problematically locates in this process the dissolution of “authentic” black music. George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 17.

## **Chapter 5:**

**“We’re competent, well equipped, minority owned and strictly business”:<sup>1</sup>**

### **The Scurlock Studio in Transition**

On April 9, 1939 Robert Scurlock left the studio to photograph Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Monument in front of an audience of 75,000. Infamously, Anderson had been refused the stage at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) on the basis of her race. Later in his life, Scurlock remarked that, “I liked to get around... [so] news photography appealed to me.”<sup>2</sup> As an aspiring photojournalist Robert Scurlock captured the symbolic importance of Anderson’s performance. Anderson’s concert effectively consecrated the Lincoln Monument as a powerful site for civil rights activism.<sup>3</sup> As a black Washingtonian Scurlock likely understood the position of the DAR as an expression of both American racial animus and local segregationist practices.<sup>4</sup> Just short of two decades later, Robert Scurlock “was selected to photograph Mamie Eisenhower in color for the DAR.”<sup>5</sup> Eisenhower posed in front of the seal and flag of the DAR, and Scurlock’s portrait graced the front of a 1958 pamphlet for the DAR National Society Genealogical Library. (Figure 32) Other color

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scurlock to Marriot Hotels, September 20, 1985, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Levey, “The Scurlock Studio,” 52.

<sup>3</sup> See Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movements, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” *Journal of American History* vol. 80, no.1 (June 1993): 135-167; Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert That Awakened America* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Seth Feman has insightfully located the photographer in this historical moment and while his article is entitled “Marian Anderson’s Presence,” it might well have been “Robert Scurlock’s Presence.” His thinking here has been instrumental. See Seth Feman, “Marian Anderson’s Presence,” *American Art* vol. 28, no. 1 (Spring 2014):104-117.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Biographical Sketch,” c1975, Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records.

photographs taken that day suggest that Scurlock experienced free movement on the DAR grounds – capturing older (white) Daughters in the library and the exterior of Memorial Continental Hall. Robert Scurlock was proud enough of his DAR portrait of Eisenhower that he posed for his own self-portrait *holding* the same picture of the First Lady that appeared on the front of the DAR genealogy brochure in 1958. (Figure 33) Later, he included the commission as a notable career accomplishment in autobiographical statements he wrote for exhibitions of his family's photography.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Scurlock also commented in 1989 that he “wasn’t ever an advocate of anything,” and “more or less following the normal routine of business” led him to take photographs of politically important moments like Anderson’s concert or the New Negro Alliance’s “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” picket lines.<sup>7</sup> (Figure 34) Although Scurlock might not have seen himself as an activist, one could argue that his “normal routine of business” constituted an advocacy of its own. Consider the space between the two moments detailed above – in 1939 Scurlock photographed a concert to protest the DAR’s racial intransigence in the hopes of selling some of those images to African American newspapers. Just two decades later Scurlock undertook a paid commission from the DAR to make a portrait of a prominent member, a portrait the DAR used to advertise the kind of archival authority that undergirded the organization’s ideas of racial nationalism and exclusivity. Scurlock’s notion of the “normal routine of business” differed from what many African American photographers of the previous generation envisioned, and certainly varied from the everyday business of his father, Addison Scurlock. Though never without self-interest, Robert Scurlock ran the family business in

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Biographical Sketch.

<sup>7</sup> Levey, “The Scurlock Studio,” 52.

way that insisted that the African American professional photographer could find some success in the mainstream consumer economy.

This chapter looks at some of the challenges and opportunities Robert Scurlock confronted as an African American photographer working after World War II in Washington, DC. Specifically, it considers Scurlock's efforts to make a career in photography outside of his father Addison Scurlock's shadow by taking advantage of broadening opportunities for African Americans while continuing to serve the community that had supported his family's business for decades. First, I look at Scurlock's establishment of The Capitol School of Photography (CSOP) in 1948 as an effort to teach new photographers while profiting from post-war spending. CSOP materials reveal how Robert Scurlock saw the field of photography and opportunities for African Americans to be changing after WWII. When the CSOP closed in 1952, Scurlock established Custom Craft Studios, Inc. to pivot towards an area of the industry he thought would be the most profitable – color printing for corporations, the US Government, and other photographers. Second, this chapter considers Scurlock's efforts to develop Custom Craft Studios, Inc., initially moving away from U Street even as he remained connected to that community and the concerns of black Washington.

While residents of Washington, DC were seeing their city change rapidly after World War II, “black Americans...began to see themselves and their world through a lens of ever-greater hope and possibility.”<sup>8</sup> Waldo Martin cites “a determined black mood spawned by World War II and the lingering residue of its hopeful rhetoric” that accelerated the black freedom struggle but also shaped it into what we now recognize as

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, *No Coward Soldiers*, 5.

the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>9</sup> Martin traces a dialectic between “assimilation” and “revitalization” in African American expressive culture, and I would argue that we might read a similar dialectic in Robert Scurlock’s photography ventures as a statement in that conversation. Whereas Addison Scurlock worked in a largely segregated economy, and might not have imagined the possibility of reaching white consumers, Robert Scurlock (part of the hopeful post-WWII generation Martin identifies) chose to strike out for the integrated marketplace as the African American community in Washington underwent a period of significant change.

Robert Scurlock “entered apprenticeship in photography” under his father Addison Scurlock in 1937 after graduating from Howard University with a degree in Economics.<sup>10</sup> When he began to draw a paycheck the Scurlock Studio was a decidedly neighborhood operation. In 1935 the vast majority of Scurlock customers still gave addresses in close proximity to the studio in Northwest Washington. Robert Scurlock returned to the family business following his discharge from the US Army in 1946. In 1948, he opened the Capitol School of Photography at 1813 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Though the Capitol School closed in 1952, Robert Scurlock quickly transitioned to open Custom Craft Inc. at the same location. Robert and his brother George Scurlock bought the Scurlock Studio from their father Addison Scurlock when he retired in 1963. The following year Robert Scurlock incorporated both enterprises under the Custom Craft umbrella.

Some of Robert Scurlock’s work as a young photographer suggested his ambition to pursue photography outside of the studio. In 1937 that impulse led him to contribute

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<sup>9</sup> Martin, *No Coward Soldiers*, 10-15.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Began,” Typewritten Notes, n.d., Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records.

photographs to a new magazine called *Flash!*. Published in Washington, DC but with national distribution, *Flash!* was a “race enterprise” that privileged photographs of a positive nature.<sup>11</sup> The magazine’s editors claimed that “our propaganda is the joy of living [and] our fight is against pessimism and despair,” and photographs included in its pages reflected that outlook.<sup>12</sup> Robert and Addison Scurlock both contributed pictures of Howard University to *Flash!*. Robert Scurlock’s own portrait, however, was featured as a “Personality About Town.”<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere he was described as the “debonair” President of the “What Good Are We Club,” and the subject of a “very weighty crush” from one Helen Miller.<sup>14</sup> As a contributor to and subject in *Flash!*, it seems, “Bobby Scurlock” the photographer emerged as something of a public figure with an image in keeping with the respectability politics of the magazine.

After his service in World War II Robert Scurlock continued to pursue photography as an intervention in the public sphere. In 1946, the Howard University Gallery of Art hosted a solo exhibition which consisted largely of landscape photographs Scurlock took during his service in Europe.<sup>15</sup> Also included in that show were photographs of African American officers in Scurlock’s 332<sup>nd</sup> “Red Tail” Fighter Group in the Air Corps Reserve.<sup>16</sup> Photographs of African Americans in uniform, which proliferated in the black press during World War II, held a clear political symbolism that

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<sup>11</sup> Robert McNeill worked as a staff photographer for *Flash!* and the magazine accepted submissions from other photographers. The magazine also awarded monetary prizes for a weekly amateur photo contest judged by a panel that included none other than Addison Scurlock. “New Flash! Picture Contest,” *Flash!*, April 17, 1937.

<sup>12</sup> “Editorial,” *Flash!*, April 10, 1937, 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Personalities About Town,” *Flash!*, March 27, 1937, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Rivero and Sewall, “The Undertone,” *Flash!* March 27, 1937, 12; “The Undertone,” *Flash!* April 17, 1937, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Exhibition Guide, “Modern...[sic] Photography by Robert S. Scurlock,” March 1-15, 1946, Howard University Gallery of Art, Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>16</sup> The exhibition included photographs of Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Capt. Armour G. McDaniel, and Maj. Lee Rayford that Scurlock took in Europe.

powerfully argued for full African American citizenship. Scurlock's inclusion of officers' portraits ensured that his exhibition was not merely viewed as pretty pictures of the Italian countryside. In the short guide Scurlock announced his "plans to continue the practice of photography both as a professional and as a contributor of pictorial photography to the art world."<sup>17</sup>

Sometime between 1947 and 1953, Robert Scurlock compiled and annotated a collection of photographs for either a portfolio of saleable images or perhaps a slideshow. His selections, grouped by subject, offer some insight into how he viewed his community and prospects going forward. Scurlock annotated photographs under the headings of: Personalities, Dunbar High School, Miner Teachers College, Cardoza High School, social scenes, Bureau of Engraving, and a short play staged by Howard University Drama Students. Several pages reflect a concern for civil and economic rights, like "Slum Series," "Segregation and Civil Rights," and "Interracial Apartment Dwellings." The exact purpose of these drafts has been lost, but Scurlock's focus on empowerment and integration remains clear.<sup>18</sup>

In this draft Scurlock made a distinction between "Old Line" and "Young Business Men."<sup>19</sup> Of the former he included restauranteur Robert H. Harrison who "accumulated goodwill in the community" over thirty years and described his own father as a "photographer of notable American Negros [sic] for many years."<sup>20</sup> Of the younger set, Scurlock described Barrington Henry's fuel company as "competing with big white

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<sup>17</sup> Albert J. Carter, Artist's Introduction, "Modern...[sic] Photography by Robert S. Scurlock,"

<sup>18</sup> All of the titles referenced in this paragraph are from drafts still unprocessed in the Scurlock Collection. Robert Scurlock, Handwritten and Typed Manuscript Pages, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Scurlock, "Old Line Business Men," Handwritten Manuscript, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records; Robert Scurlock, "Young Business Men," Handwritten Manuscript, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Scurlock, "Old Line Business Men."

companies” while Henry Letcher’s art displays were “in demand from teachers all over the country.”<sup>21</sup> The “Segregation and Civil Rights” series focused on the first African American students at Georgetown University Law School and the resident physicians at a white hospital.<sup>22</sup> Photos of the Bureau of Engraving and Federal Security were captioned so as to emphasize equal treatment in “the more liberal agencies.”<sup>23</sup> Overall, the descriptions Scurlock wrote for these photographs emphasize achievement and highlight instances of progress on civil rights issues.

On the other hand, text meant to accompany photos of “slum conditions” suggests photographs that diverged from the idealized images normally associated with the Scurlock name and towards a more overt political activism, even locating them “where Congressmen can almost look from their office windows and see the real habitat of the unfortunate.”<sup>24</sup> The exact photograph that accompanied this caption is not definite, though it most likely was one of a series showing African American children playing in a trash-filled alley, with the Capitol Dome visible in the background.<sup>25</sup> Addison Scurlock very rarely, if ever, turned his lens away from the black middle-class towards the reality of poverty and hardship that many African Americans faced in Washington. Some of the photographs that Robert Scurlock annotated for this package, whatever the end goal, reflect his ability as a documentarian and photojournalist. At the same time, Scurlock’s nuance in this instance indicates that even as he imagined more possibilities as a

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Young Business Men.”

<sup>22</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Segregation and Civil Rights,” Handwritten Manuscript, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Federal Security,” Handwritten Manuscript, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Slum Photos,” Handwritten Manuscript, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>25</sup> See Gardullo, et. al., *Picturing the Promise*, 114.

photographer and a business owner, he remained ambivalent about the prospects for American racial equality.

Robert Scurlock took photographs and developed film in a city that was changing demographically, spatially, and politically. Washington's African American population climbed steadily through the first half of the century. Through the Great Depression decade the number grew from 132,000 to 187,000 in 1940. By 1950 that total jumped fifty percent to 281,000 and "by 1960 412,000 African Americans lived in the District."<sup>26</sup> Many of the new arrivals hailed from the Carolinas and were largely poor and working-class, which is to say that they were outside of the customer base that most supported the Scurlock Studio. Initially many of these new arrivals settled in Southwest DC, straining already poor housing stock and further depressed living conditions. During this period, urbanist Blair Ruble writes, Washington "concurrently became darker and poorer, with African Americans constituting 70 percent of its population by 1970."<sup>27</sup>

After WWII, as planners and politicians turned their attention towards revitalizing American cities, Washington, DC "provided the first test of congressional will on the procedures that ultimately became institutionalized under Title I of the National Housing Act of 1949."<sup>28</sup> By the 1960s the status quo for redeveloping cities became known as "urban renewal," or a combination of local efforts and federal funds to clear blight and poverty from inner city areas. Often, and notably in the case of Southwest Washington, "urban renewal meant evicting tens of thousands of people and razing neighborhoods flat

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<sup>26</sup> Spencer R. Crew, "Melding the Old and the New: The Modern African American Community, 1930-1960," in *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, DC*, ed. Francine Curro Cary (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 208, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Ruble, *Washington's U Street*, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, DC* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 155.

before trying to rebuild.”<sup>29</sup> During this “experiment” in redevelopment “99% of the buildings in Southwest were torn down,” and the District’s most vulnerable residents were permanently displaced from their homes.<sup>30</sup> Refugees from the Southwest Redevelopment Project, described by Ruble as “thousands of desperately poor residents who were ill prepared for urban life” settled east of the Anacostia River and in neighborhoods that bordered the U Street corridor.

Neighborhoods in Northwest could absorb new residents because the quadrant’s own demographic changes led to some open housing. Inez Browne, who lived on the 1700 Block of T Street remembered

Many of the people in these large houses here – S Street, especially Swann Street, T Street, U Street - had bought [their] homes. Their children had grown and moved away, and they were finding the houses too large for them and they sold them, and they were becoming rooming houses.<sup>31</sup>

Browne dated her neighborhood’s transition from single family homes to rooming houses and apartments in the 1940s. That shift likely accelerated after 1948 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelley v. Kraemer* that racially restrictive housing covenants violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Increasingly in the 1950s “members of the black middle class moved to less crowded neighborhoods recently opened to them” outside of the Shaw area.<sup>32</sup> “Traditional middle-class African American neighborhoods like LeDroit Park deteriorated,” and many of those families moved further from the city center and into Maryland.<sup>33</sup> While the growth of the federal government during and after the war created

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<sup>29</sup> Zachary M. Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 197.

<sup>30</sup> Gilette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 163-164.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Mara Cherkasky, “For Sale to Colored: Racial Change on S St, NW” *Washington History* vol. 8, no. 2 (Fall Winter 1996/1997), 40-57; quote on 57.

<sup>32</sup> Kathryn Smith, “Remembering U Street,” *Washington History* vol. 9, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1997/1998): 28-53.

<sup>33</sup> Ruble, *Washington’s U Street*, 177-178.

more middle-class jobs for African Americans, the recipients of those positions no longer chose to make their homes in the Shaw area.<sup>34</sup> Business owners in Shaw felt these shifts acutely, “as the U Street commercial district began to deteriorate as its more well-heeled clientele moved elsewhere.”<sup>35</sup> Many of the oldest businesses on the corridor moved outward with their patrons or simply closed up shop. During the post war years, Washington’s traditionally African American neighborhoods saw consistent and drastic transitions.

All of these changes occurred in tandem with increasingly more visible and effective civil rights activism. Washingtonians had a front row seat for the legal efforts of Charles Hamilton Houston and faculty at the Howard University Law School to win equal protection through the federal courts. Locally, African Americans understood equal access to employment and commercial markets as part of the freedom struggle. In the early 1930s the New Negro Alliance’s “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign used pickets in an effort to force businesses that benefitted from black spending to hire African American workers.<sup>36</sup> (Figure 34) In 1950 Mary Church Terrell organized the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of the D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws in an effort to desegregate lunch counters in downtown department stores.<sup>37</sup> Through a combination of pickets and litigation, the Coordinating Committee achieved their goals in 1953 when the Supreme Court ruled that the District’s nineteenth-century anti-discrimination statutes would stand. These two efforts stand out as moments when

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<sup>34</sup> “By 1950 the Federal Government had become the city’s largest employer of black men...[and] the second largest occupational category among African American women in the 1950s. These employment patterns continued for at least a decade.” Crew, “Melding the Old and the New,” 216.

<sup>35</sup> Ruble, *Washington’s U Street*, 178.

<sup>36</sup> Ruble, *Washington’s U Street*, 116-119.

<sup>37</sup> Marvin Caplan, “Eat Anywhere!,” *Washington History* vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 24-39.

African Americans in Washington expressed their desire for full citizenship as rights to spend and make money freely. While many African Americans saw the full integration of the commercial sphere as an ultimately positive development, some black business owners foresaw a loss of customers when African Americans had more choices available to them. It seems likely that Robert Scurlock predicted that unfortunate turn, and adapted his own approach to the business of photography to reach an integrated clientele himself.

### **“A Photographer’s Paradise”: The Capitol School of Photography**

Initially, when Robert Scurlock returned from his World War II service he rejoined his father and brother in the studio. At the time, there were three African American photography studios in addition to Scurlock: Brown (405 T Street NW), Powell (915 U Street NW), and University (1839 Seventh Street NW).<sup>38</sup> All three businesses were within a half-mile radius of Scurlock’s, and Powell Studio was in the same block on U Street. Presumably, Robert Scurlock saw the local market as saturated. Before long, he manifested an ambition to branch out beyond small studio operations. In 1948, Scurlock purchased the building at 1813 Eighteenth Street NW.<sup>39</sup> Robert Scurlock’s new address sat on a border of sorts, between Shaw and the Dupont Circle neighborhood. In the early decades of the twentieth century Dupont was known as an enclave for wealthy white professionals, as well as the location of several foreign embassies. Eighteenth Avenue, however, was the western edge of the “Strivers’ Section” so nicknamed for the African American elites that lived there like Judge Robert Terrell,

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<sup>38</sup> James Carter and John H. Hurd, *The Official-Classified Negro Business Directory, 1947: Washington, D.C.*, (Varsity Printing Co.: Baltimore, MD, 1947), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Gardullo, et.al., *Picturing the Promise*, 90.

Mary Church Terrell, and the family of Charles Houston.<sup>40</sup> By the 1940s Dupont Circle was home to “two very separate black and white communities whose social worlds did not mix.”<sup>41</sup> Dual neighborhood associations underlined the racial divisions, with the Dupont Circle Civic Association serving whites and (after 1939) the evocatively named Midway Civic Association for the “Strivers.”<sup>42</sup> African Americans who lived in Dupont still went shopping on U Street, while white commercial activity centered on Connecticut Avenue to the south. At 1813 Eighteenth Street NW, approximately *midway* between the two zones, Robert Scurlock opened the Capitol School of Photography (CSOP) in 1948.

In promotional material, Scurlock wrote that the CSOP would be “a vocational school whose purpose is to train both beginners and advanced workers for careers in professional photography.”<sup>43</sup> The school was “owned and operated under the personal direction of Robert S. Scurlock, and George H. Scurlock.”<sup>44</sup> The elder Robert designed the curriculum, and both men taught at the school. George Scurlock assisted primarily in the evening so that he could continue to work at the Scurlock Studio. Scurlock described a “modern four-story building in the heart of the city.” The pamphlet boasted of “an up-to-date library which enables the student to augment regular class assignments with

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<sup>40</sup> For a history of Dupont Circle and the Strivers Section see Linda Wheeler, “Dupont Circle,” in *Washington at Home: An Illustrated History of Neighborhoods in the Nation’s Capital*, ed. Kathryn Schneider Smith (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 179-195; Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria R. Goodwin, *The Guide to Black Washington: Places and Events of Historical and Cultural Significance in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1999), 177-178.

<sup>41</sup> Wheeler, “Dupont Circle,” 186.

<sup>42</sup> Wheeler, “Dupont Circle,” 186.

<sup>43</sup> “The Capitol School of Photography,” Recruitment Brochure, Series 1, Box 1.1.A18, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>44</sup> “The Capitol School of Photography,” Recruitment Brochure.

outside reading.”<sup>45</sup> Illustrative photographs showed off portrait sets, a darkroom with enlargers, and a retouching work room.

Robert Scurlock’s intentions in opening the school were mixed. On one hand, the CSOP was a calculated financial venture.<sup>46</sup> Scurlock’s fellow servicemen were returning home to the promises of the GI Bill, and many wanted to spend their benefits for higher education or career training.<sup>47</sup> CSOP promotional literature stated that the Veterans Administration had approved the school “for the training of Veterans under Public Law 346 and Public Law 16.”<sup>48</sup> On the single-sheet application for admission to the CSOP prospective students answered questions about veteran status, branch, date of discharge, and serial number before sharing their education level, photography experience and references.<sup>49</sup> The majority of CSOP students were veterans, and Scurlock diligently recorded the numbers on the vouchers for their bi-monthly tuition payments. Of 180 student attendance records, only ten are designated “Civilian.” Scurlock took advantage of returning service members and their benefits as a revenue stream. Teaching other veterans a trade did not preclude Robert Scurlock benefitting financially.

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<sup>45</sup> “The Capitol School of Photography,” Recruitment Brochure. Some of the books available to CSOP students, as well as signed check-out cards, remain in the Scurlock Collection.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Fearing writes that Robert Scurlock explicitly opened the school “in order to take advantage of the GI bill program and its vast pool of eligible students.” Fearing, “African American Image, History, and Identity,” 99.

<sup>47</sup> Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, Public Law 346, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess. (June 22, 1944); The Act Providing for Vocational Rehabilitation of Disabled Veterans, Public Law 16, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess. (March 24, 1943). See also Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, “Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Public Law 347, 78<sup>th</sup> Congress, June 22, 1944) with Amendments Prior to August 11, 1948 and The Act Providing for Vocational Rehabilitation of Disabled Veterans (Public Law 16, 78<sup>th</sup> Congress, March 24, 1943) with Amendments Prior to August 11, 1948 (Washington: U.S Government Printing Office, 1948), accessed January 20, 2016, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100717935>.

<sup>48</sup> “The Capitol School of Photography,” Recruitment Brochure. Scurlock was referring to the laws referred to colloquially as the G.I. Bill.

<sup>49</sup> “Application for Admission – The Capitol School of Photography,” Series 8, Subseries 5, Box 79, Scurlock Studio Records.

Notably, the Capitol School of Photography was a racially integrated school, and the brochure included white and black students working in the same groups. (Figure 35) Though Robert Scurlock served in an all-black unit of the Air Corps, President Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981 had since ordered the desegregation of the US military. Although the majority of CSOP students were African American, the fact that Scurlock welcomed all students might be understood several ways. From a business perspective, more students meant more tuition so it was in Scurlock's best interest to recruit across racial demographics. Moreover, as his school mirrored the changing culture of the military, the CSOP reflected Scurlock's own hopeful orientation to race relations. As shown below, Scurlock wanted to train photographers for jobs in an idealized, integrated marketplace. Finally, his father Addison Scurlock learned the trade from a white photographer so perhaps teaching camera work across racial lines no longer caused the kinds of anxieties present in other lines of work.<sup>50</sup>

The Capitol School offered a General Course in photography that included five units: Fundamentals, Advanced, Portraiture, Commercial, and Retouching.<sup>51</sup> Students in the Advanced Course went on to learn Natural Color Photography, Photo Journalism, Advanced Portrait photography and oil coloring. Full-time students attended class for twenty-five hours a week and the General and Advanced courses took forty-seven and forty-two weeks, respectively.

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<sup>50</sup> Though beyond the scope of this chapter, photographers' experiences in the military during World War II might also be related here. Photographic evidence in the Morgan and Marvin Smith Collection shows Marvin Smith teaching white soldiers how to use cameras and work in the darkroom.

<sup>51</sup> For each unit Scurlock described examples of specialized photo sub-genres a student would learn. For example, Portraiture included: "fashion, character, high key, low key, classic, glamor, full figure, three quarter and bust, child and baby, bridal, group and home portraiture." Commercial photography counted "documentary, interior, exterior, architectural, publicity, news and feature work, fashion, illustration, and sports action photography." A variety of pictures accompanied the course description, including a still life of a tea set, portrait of an African American woman, and the Lincoln Memorial.

Veterans completing the General course logged 1100 hours coursework over a year or more, although many did not complete their studies. Graduates of the general course paid the CSOP as much as \$930.62 in vouchers. Subsequent classes in Retouching and Oil Coloring and the Professional Course could take 180 and 972 hours, respectively.<sup>52</sup> Among veterans, training was often interrupted for unspecified reasons. Others, like Earl R. Hopkins had their cards marked “Entitlement Exhausted.” Unfortunately Hopkins’ benefits ran out in May of 1951 when he had completed 1023 hours of the General Course, falling just shy of completion.<sup>53</sup>

Students’ military enlistment records suggest that they were generally between twenty-two and twenty-nine years of age while enrolled at the CSOP. Milton E. Worrell, born in 1926, did not complete high school and worked as a baggage porter in Washington, DC before the war.<sup>54</sup> Worrell completed the General Course in November 1949 and moved onto the professional course before his training was interrupted the next year.<sup>55</sup> Warren G. Fisher, a white Virginian, also had his professional course interrupted in 1951.<sup>56</sup> A high-school graduate, Fisher’s pre-war occupation was listed under “semiskilled chauffeurs and drivers (bus, taxi, and tractors).”<sup>57</sup> Charles R. Moten, “Negro” of Washington, DC, had completed three years of college before enlisting in

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<sup>52</sup> Schedules, coursework hours, and tuition payments are based on the full collection of CSOP attendance cards. Series 8, Box, 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>53</sup> Attendance Card for Earl R. Hopkins, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>54</sup> “Milton E. Worrell,” National Archives and Records Administration, *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*, Ancestry.com, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.ancestry.com/inst/discoveries/PfRecord?collectionId=8939&recordId=2563619&language=en-US&ahsht=2016-05-23T17:14:14&ahsh=989112972f88ef55d4bcb470f026af6b>

<sup>55</sup> Attendance Card for Milton E. Worrell, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>56</sup> Attendance Card for Warren G. Fisher, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>57</sup> “Warren G. Fisher,” National Archives and Records Administration, *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*, Ancestry.com, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.ancestry.com/inst/discoveries/PfRecord?collectionId=8939&recordId=5022673&language=en-US&ahsht=2016-05-23T17:08:39&ahsh=cdde134373dbb6f2372ea5a69c74bffb>

1943.<sup>58</sup> At the CSOP he completed the General Course, Retouching, and most of the Professional portion.<sup>59</sup> Other students' enlistment records list pre-war occupations like doorman and filing clerk. Many of these veterans attended the school to learn a vocation and, presumably, move beyond semi-skilled and unskilled employment.

In addition to a desire to make money and help veterans, Robert Scurlock also understood his school as a place to pass on his photography skills. Promotional material for the CSOP reflected Scurlock's emphasis on professionalism, and his desire that all graduates could make a career in photography. Ellsworth J. Davis attended the CSOP from 1948 to 1949. A Washington native, Davis began his photography career with *Jet* and *Ebony* before becoming the *Washington Post*'s first African American photographer in 1961.<sup>60</sup> Davis remembered that, "[Robert] was very strict about attendance. He would give us little courses on how to write resumes...he prepared every guy who graduated from that school to go out and find jobs in the government or wherever in photography."<sup>61</sup> Clifton G. Cabell worked as a waiter before the war, but graduated from CSOP to become a photographer for the *Washington Afro-American* and other black newspapers.<sup>62</sup> Though casually phrased by Davis, encouragement to work as a photographer "in the government or wherever" actually illustrates Scurlock's expanding

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<sup>58</sup> "Charles R. Moten," National Archives and Records Administration, *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*, Ancestry.com, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.ancestry.com/inst/discoveries/PfRecord?collectionId=8939&recordId=7882343&language=en-US&ahsht=2016-05-23T17:11:52&ahsh=d7dd2c6513529bab8fa6bf0539d843b2>.

<sup>59</sup> Attendance Card for Charles R. Moten, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>60</sup> Emily Langer, "Ellsworth J. Davis, First Black Photographer for the Washington Post, Dies at 86," *Washington Post*, August 19, 2013, accessed January 28, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/ellsworth-j-davis-first-black-photographer-for-the-washington-post-dies-at-86/2013/08/19/89241e36-08de-11e3-b87c-476db8ac34cd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/ellsworth-j-davis-first-black-photographer-for-the-washington-post-dies-at-86/2013/08/19/89241e36-08de-11e3-b87c-476db8ac34cd_story.html).

<sup>61</sup> Gardullo, et. al., *Picturing the Promise*, 206.

<sup>62</sup> "Clifton G. Cabell," National Archives and Records Administration, *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*, Ancestry.com, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.ancestry.com/inst/discoveries/PfRecord?collectionId=8939&recordId=3754339&language=en-US&ahsht=2016-05-3T17:04:14&ahsh=22ec5a7e4cbd0bdff40601bf3f4bf58e>; "Died: Clifton Cabell, 59, Photographer," *Jet*, September 30, 1976, 16.

vision of the field. Training other African Americans at the end of the 1940s, Scurlock imagined opportunities beyond the racially delimited marketplaces in which photographers of Addison Scurlock's generation made their careers.

The exact number of students that became professional photographers remains unclear. Thomas L. Brock, Jr. graduated from Armstrong High School and worked as an office clerk before being drafted in 1944. Brock completed coursework at the CSOP, and his family even included "Scurlock's School of Photography" in his 2014 obituary.<sup>63</sup> Rather than a photography career, Brock served for decades as an offset pressman in the Government Printing Office and a freelance bartender. Without making any assumptions about Brock's employment choices, his training at the CSOP did not automatically translate into the vision of a career in photography that Scurlock sold in CSOP literature.

The Capitol School made an explicitly gendered effort to recruit female students, arguing that "photography offers an excellent opportunity for women. They have demonstrated exceptional skill in Child Photography, Fashion Work, Retouching and Oil Coloring."<sup>64</sup> In theory, Scurlock's encouragement for women photographers fell within parameters set by ideas of gender between children and fashion. Only four traditionally female names appear in student records, but women are present in photographs of school salons and social events.<sup>65</sup> Only male students were photographed working in the darkroom or retouching area, but the recruitment brochure features a woman handling a camera. Robert Scurlock claimed that Jacqueline Bouvier (later, Kennedy) enrolled at the

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<sup>63</sup> Attendance Card for Thomas L. Brock, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.; Obituary, "Thomas L. Brock, Jr.," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> "The Capitol School of Photography," Recruitment Brochure, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Attendance cards for Mary B. Jones, Carrie E. Williams, and "Scoggins Girls," Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

CSOP while working as a photographer for the *Washington Times-Herald*, but no records of her attendance exist within the archive.<sup>66</sup>

Robert Scurlock wrote another promotional brochure entitled, “Careers in Photography” but never had it printed. His draft aimed at potential students by touting the commercial prospects available in the industry after the War. “Careers in Photography” indicates, in part, how the photographer viewed himself professionally, what he thought it took to make it in the business, and why he thought photography was a worthwhile trade. Scurlock wrote a “Message from the Director,” worth quoting at length:

The photographic industry has grown with the general expansion of American business during the last decade, with the natural result that today there are at least ten positions for every two that existed prior to World War II. A career in photography is open to those with a genuine interest and the capacity to study and work toward this goal....The photographic industry is waiting for eager, young minds with fresh viewpoints and I am certain that those who are qualified will enjoy pleasant and profitable careers.

Scurlock suggested that because photography was difficult and competitive students who were less than serious need not apply. He aimed to flatter “eager, young minds” and “fresh viewpoints,” but maintained that those qualities needed the training and “hours of practice” that the CSOP could provide. Scurlock’s emphasis on vitality and creativity reflects his own efforts to push out from the boundaries of the neighborhood studio and furthers his message here about photography aligning with general upturn in American business.

Robert Scurlock described the field of professional photography circa 1950 as “open” and accessible, suggesting that success depended only on one’s dedication and preparedness. That message did not differ in tone from those of Du Bois or National

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<sup>66</sup> Jane Freundel Levey cites an interview with Robert S. Scurlock on January 6, 1989 for this information. Levey, “The Scurlock Studio,” 44.

Negro Business League (NNBL) boosters who argued prior to the Great Depression that photography could be a professional opportunity for African Americans. Indeed, Scurlock's pitch positions the Capitol School as an important step that would lead to personal success in the "business end," as much as the School could teach students to produce quality pictures. Taking a broader look, however, Robert Scurlock's vision differed in scope from what photographers of Addison Scurlock's generation might have imagined. Whereas that earlier generation saw opportunity in the black community, photographers of Robert Scurlock's generation were looking outward. In his writings and public advertising, Robert Scurlock implied that opportunities in photography were expanding for African Americans beyond private studios. Perhaps overly optimistic, Scurlock nonetheless attempted to turn students towards those jobs.

Describing the curriculum of the Photojournalism unit, Scurlock specifically named *Life*, *Look*, and *Coronet* as examples of magazine work that students might aspire to for their career.<sup>67</sup> Scurlock listed three of the most popular mainstream publications of their time to the exclusion of African American picture magazines that the Scurlocks contributed to in the 1940s, like *Flash!*, *Sepia*, or *Ebony*. Of course, using mainstream publications to appeal to potential white students would have been prudent. Yet, since the CSOP's student body, not to mention the community anchoring the Scurlock Studio was largely African American, Scurlock's citation of three mainstream titles as the standard to aspire to delivered a significant message. While that choice neglected the black press, Scurlock also signaled to his African American students that publication in *Life* was possible and that black photographers belonged there. Behind the groundbreaking work

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<sup>67</sup> Publisher Henry Luce's guidance of *Life*, beginning in 1936, in many ways pioneered the genre of the glossy photo-magazine and opened up careers for many photographers. See Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

of photographers like Gordon Parks and Robert McNeill, African American photographers were making spaces for themselves outside of the small studio and black newspaper.

The CSOP advertised a “Placement Service” that made “every effort” to find work in the field for graduates. Actual success in job placement remains unclear, but Scurlock prepared to feature “A Few Successful Graduates” in his drafts for promotional material. Mary B. Jones, a civilian student, completed all of the General, Advanced, Commercial, and Retouching courses. The testimony of an unnamed graduate who owned the private Banton Studio in Washington, DC reflected the kind of business Robert Scurlock grew up in. Covert L. Smith, who attended CSOP from June 1948 to June 1950, undertook “all types of general photographic work” professionally for Gem Photographers. According to Scurlock, student John L. Richards, Sr. went on to work as a photographer for the Federal Works Agency before its dissolution in 1949.<sup>68</sup>

In the years that followed Robert Scurlock remained committed to training both veterans and younger photographers. In 1956, Custom Craft Studio achieved certification from the Apprenticeship Council of the Government of the District of Columbia approving the studio to train one photographer with the assurance that they might be hired when they completed their training.<sup>69</sup> The Apprenticeship Council in DC operated under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor. As much as Robert Scurlock wanted

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Careers in Modern Photography,” Promotional Draft, Series 8, Subseries 5, Box 79, Scurlock Studio Records. The Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 established the General Services Administration and transferred many of the functions of the Federal Works Agency to the new branch.

<sup>69</sup> Gino J. Simi to Robert S. Scurlock, November 15, 1956, Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records; Certificate of Registration: Apprenticeship Standards, November 14, 1956, Series 8, Box 78, Scurlock Studio Records.

to help his fellow veterans and train new photographers, he would also benefit from the subsidies that paid for part of their labor in the studio.

Scurlock also suggested that not only was photography an avenue by which some economic boundaries could be overcome, but that Washington was a place that these opportunities were available. The back cover of the CSOP's printed pamphlet bore a large photograph of the US capitol building and the slogan, "the nation's capitol [sic]...a photographer's paradise."<sup>70</sup> (Figure 36) Scurlock meant to say that his city offered an abundance of views for the photographer to capture. Through the lens of education and employment, though, one also can read Scurlock as suggesting Washington offered photographers a "paradise" of opportunity. That the capitol building, a symbol of government largesse, loomed over that message might have foreshadowed Robert Scurlock's path after closing the CSOP in 1952.

### **Custom Craft Studio, Inc.<sup>71</sup>**

Scurlock started to organize his next venture in 1951. Custom Craft Studio began, in Robert Scurlock's words, as "an experimental venture in the field of color photography."<sup>72</sup> Custom Craft occupied the same building as the former CSOP at 1813 18<sup>th</sup> Street NW. Scurlock detailed the beginnings of Custom Craft to executives at the black-owned National Finance & Investment Corporation. Scurlock explained that he

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<sup>70</sup> "The Capitol School of Photography," Recruitment Brochure.

<sup>71</sup> Throughout Robert Scurlock's papers the name of his company appears as CustomCraft, Customcraft, and Custom Craft. I have chosen to use "Custom Craft" for the sake of consistency. At various times Scurlock also described the business as a studio, (color) lab, color service and a few other terms.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation, June 19, 1956, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

began to experiment with color photography as early as 1940 with research help from Eastman Kodak.<sup>73</sup> Scurlock justifies his choice to the bank by arguing that

the greatest expansion in the next twenty years would probably develop in the specialized branch of color photography. The motion picture industry, advertising, and publication industries were showing a great interest in the powerful appeal of color photography.<sup>74</sup>

Writing five years after his organization of Custom Craft, Scurlock professed confidence in making a significant foray outside of the African American marketplace that the Scurlock Studio had occupied for over forty years. Custom Craft's "original business formula" was made up of three elements: production of color photographs for commercial entities; color photo finishing for other professional photographers; and to "invade the field of mail order color finishing" for an "ever increasing army of amateur photographers...loading their cameras with color film."<sup>75</sup> Robert Scurlock surmised that to remain competitive he would have to embrace color film technology, which his father never did. The younger photographer also sought to branch out beyond the neighborhood studio to larger corporate entities in the hopes of earning profits.

Robert Scurlock provided financial statements to Eastman Kodak in order to maintain a line of credit, illustrative of the general state of affairs at the company early in its history. On August 18, 1955 Robert Scurlock counted \$1,200 in cash on hand and \$664.20 owed to Custom Craft as Accounts Receivable.<sup>76</sup> In addition, he counted \$810 worth of "orders in work," meaning photographs not yet completed or billed to

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<sup>73</sup> Writing in the third-person Scurlock stated, "He was ably assisted in the work by Mr. Lewis Marble, a former member of the Eastman Kodak Research Staff in Rochester. During this period, research and experimentation were fully exploited and many practical routines developed." Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation.

<sup>76</sup> Financial Statement to Eastman Kodak Company, August 18, 1955, Series 8, Box 73, Scurlock Studio Records.

customers. Scurlock claimed \$51,124 in assets and a net worth of \$30,380.10. From June 1, 1955 to July 31, 1955 Custom Craft counted \$3,405.60 in net sales against \$1,860.27 in operating expenses. Less the cost of the photographic materials sold, Custom Craft thus turned a net profit of \$1,092.70 over the selected two-month period.<sup>77</sup> An unspecified number of employees were paid \$977.80 during that time; “owners” did not receive a salary. Over the next year Custom Craft’s assets and liabilities both grew such that Scurlock’s next statement to Eastman Kodak revealed a net worth of \$34,430.22.<sup>78</sup>

In 1956, according to Scurlock, mail orders constituted only about one-third of Custom Craft’s annual gross sales volume of \$20,000. Most of their business came from what Scurlock called “major accounts.” Examples were International Business Machines (IBM), C&P Telephone Company, Woodward & Lothrop, the U.S. State Department, and the Department of the Interior. Custom Craft also completed the color finishing for several “leading” local studios, including Harris & Ewing, Robert Lautman (both white), and the Scurlock Studio.<sup>79</sup> Custom Craft employed a secretary and two full-time laboratory technicians, one of whom graduated from CSOP.<sup>80</sup> By Scurlock’s own account then, after five years of operation his new business had collected a significant list of clients and strong sales and could afford to retain a sufficient number of employees. Moreover, Custom Craft’s orientation towards mainstream corporations echoed the path he encouraged for his students at the CSOP. As a young African American photographer

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<sup>77</sup> Financial Statement to Eastman Kodak Company, August 18, 1955.

<sup>78</sup> Financial Statement to Eastman Kodak Company, May 3, 1956, Series 8, Box 73, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>79</sup> All figures and names in this paragraph found in Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation.

<sup>80</sup> In his 1956 letter Scurlock states that he trained Mr. John Swift. See also Capitol School of Photography attendance card for John E. Swift, Series 8, Box 23, Scurlock Studio Records.

and businessman, Scurlock's ambition exceeded what many of his father's generation imagined or could have hoped for before World War II.

Custom Craft required regular loans to address a challenge particular to their operation, specifically the gap between Custom Craft delivered finished photos and when the recipient paid. Extending credit to customers was not new to Robert Scurlock, as the Scurlock Studio generally only collected full payment upon delivering a completed set of prints. At Custom Craft, Scurlock wrote that the nature of their clients "necessitate[d] credit accounts of thirty to sixty and sometime ninety days in the case of slow government agencies."<sup>81</sup> At the time of this loan application, Robert Scurlock claimed \$1477.43 in Accounts Receivable and asked for a credit ceiling of \$1500 to maintain adequate capital during gaps in payment.<sup>82</sup> Large businesses and bureaucratic agencies, however, increased the scale of the problem at Custom Craft. Collection on delinquent accounts would be a continual challenge for Robert Scurlock in the decades that followed in both ventures.<sup>83</sup> Robert Scurlock regularly applied for business loans in subsequent years for a variety of reasons, some of which are detailed below. He most often received assistance from the black-owned Industrial Bank of Washington, located two blocks from the original Scurlock Studio.<sup>84</sup> Significantly then, while Robert Scurlock aimed for success beyond Washington's African American community his financial foundation remained firmly on U Street.

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Scurlock to National Finance & Investment Corporation.

<sup>82</sup> "Financial Statement of Robert S. Scurlock as of May 3, 1956," Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>83</sup> If National Finance & Investment Corporation extended Custom Craft Studio the credit requested, evidence of those transactions does not exist in the Scurlock archive.

<sup>84</sup> Industrial Bank began as Industrial Savings Bank in 1913 under the leadership of John Whitelaw Lewis. The second director, Jesse W. Mitchell, revived the institution as Industrial Bank of Washington in 1934 during the Great Depression. Another founder of Industrial Bank, Jesse W. Lewis, founded the aforementioned National Finance & Investment Corporation. Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *The Guide to Black Washington*, 167-168; "A Founder of Industrial Bank, Lewis Sr. Dies in DC," *Jet*, November 1, 1973, 17.

In 1956 Custom Craft Studio was still an unincorporated business held solely by Robert Scurlock.<sup>85</sup> Scurlock decided to incorporate in 1963, initially offering one thousand shares. Robert Scurlock established a Board of Directors consisting of himself, his father Addison and brother George.<sup>86</sup> That same year Robert Scurlock applied for a more significant loan of \$10,000 from Industrial Bank.<sup>87</sup> Scurlock needed the loan to buy the “business assets” of the Scurlock Studio from his father, with the intention of keeping the studio running as a “wholly owned subsidiary” under the umbrella of Custom Craft Studios, Inc.<sup>88</sup> Scurlock described a positive future for both entities to Industrial Bank. Together Scurlock Studio and Custom Craft would draw business from “the DC consumer population, the business community, Federal Government and nationwide mail order.”<sup>89</sup> As Addison Scurlock prepared to retire, Robert Scurlock brought his own entrepreneurial vision and his father’s together into one organization.

In June of 1969 Robert Scurlock applied for another significant loan through the United States Small Business Administration. Though his application claimed that Scurlock Studio sales had “doubled” between 1965 and 1969 after the introduction of color portraits, Robert Scurlock felt a need to take Custom Craft Studios, Inc. in a new direction.<sup>90</sup> To that end, Scurlock had purchased the building at 900 U Street outright, as well as the adjacent 1944 9<sup>th</sup> Street NW earlier in the year. His goal was to consolidate

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<sup>85</sup> Government of the District of Columbia Office of the Assessor Unincorporated Business Franchise License, Issued to Robert S. Scurlock, January 3, 1955, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.; Government of the District of Columbia Office of the Assessor Unincorporated Business Franchise License, Issued to Robert S. Scurlock, January 12, 1956, Series, 8 Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>86</sup> Articles of Incorporation of CustomCraft Studios, Inc., November 12, 1963, Series 8, Box 77, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Scurlock, Application for Loan: Industrial Bank of Washington, October 1963, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Scurlock to Industrial Bank of Washington, October 12, 1963, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Scurlock to Industrial Bank of Washington.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Scurlock, “CustomCraft Studios, Inc. Business History,” c. 1969, Series 8, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

operations at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and U Streets and to “install here a modern finishing plant and enter the field of economy services, while retaining the custom higher priced line.” Elsewhere Scurlock expressed dismay that they were losing income because customers preferred less expensive photofinishing to Custom Craft’s high-end prints. To complete the renovation, Scurlock requested a loan of \$16, 354.14, half of which would be put towards renovating the properties and \$2,000 to purchase more machinery and equipment.<sup>91</sup> The many applications for loans and draft proposals for new ventures Robert Scurlock wrote in the late 1960s suggest both his continued ambition to capture any profits he could, but also that Custom Craft was struggling in a changing environment in which Scurlock doggedly tried to adapt.

### **“Operating Under a Social and Economic Disadvantage”**

By the early 1970s Robert Scurlock’s feelings about Custom Craft’s prospects had dimmed from the rosy outlook he projected in loan applications during the 1960s. In a statement he drafted, Scurlock stated plainly that “Custom Craft Studios is operating under a social and economic disadvantage because of its inner city location.”<sup>92</sup> Scurlock claimed that because of rising crime in the District (“particularly ghetto areas”) “many old established customers and prospective new ones do not feel safe coming to shops and businesses located there.”<sup>93</sup> Scurlock described a discouraging environment surrounding his business. He also indicated, albeit indirectly, that Custom Craft and Scurlock Studio customers no longer lived in the neighborhood. By the time of this draft in the mid-1970s

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<sup>91</sup> Customcraft Studios, Inc., United States of America Small Business Administration Application for Loan, September 15, 1969, Series 8, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Social and Economic Disadvantages,” Filler Tablet Diary, 1973-1976, Unprocessed Materials, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>93</sup> “Social and Economic Disadvantages.”

the Scurlocks primarily depended on customers “coming to” their location from elsewhere. Scurlock cited a specific origin for the shift in his prospects, stating that the downturn “became acute after the 1968 disorder.”<sup>94</sup> Since that time, Scurlock argued the loss of former customers and inability to draw new ones put Custom Craft as a whole under stress.

Robert Scurlock was not exaggerating when he cited the “1968 disorder” as a traumatic breaking point for U Street. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington witnessed three full days of rioting, looting, and burning that centered on Fourteenth, U, and Seventh Streets NW. President Lyndon B. Johnson mobilized the National Guard, and by the time they decamped twelve days later “seventy-six hundred people had been arrested. More than twelve hundred buildings had burned, with property damage at \$24.7 million.”<sup>95</sup> While over six hundred housing units sustained damage, businesses were the most adversely affected. In the 1968 narrative account of the riots compiled by the *Washington Post* staff entitled *Ten Blocks from the White House*, Ben Gilbert wrote that “every conceivable type of business was hit,” while rioters tried to target white or Jewish owned establishments.<sup>96</sup> Like other black businesses the Scurlock’s tried to protect themselves by placing a “Soul Brother” sign in their window (described in detail in the conclusion below). Though these signs saved some buildings, including 900 U Street, they only minimized the damage. Wrote Gilbert, “All businesses located in the riot areas were hurt by the disorder. Even if a store wasn’t damaged, it suffered due to loss of trade, a broken water main, or a burned out electric line cause by a

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<sup>94</sup> “Social and Economic Disadvantages.”

<sup>95</sup> Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 169.

<sup>96</sup> Ben W. Gilbert, *Ten Blocks From the White House: Anatomy of the Washington Riots of 1968* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), 178.

fire next door or down the street.”<sup>97</sup> The negative effects for the community only rippled out, as the *Washington Post* estimated that approximately 2,500 jobs “vanished” when the riots were over.<sup>98</sup> The stigma of the violence hung over Washington, DC for some time, and by some estimates U Street never recovered.<sup>99</sup>

Robert Scurlock might have been writing “Social and Economic Disadvantages” to apply for a grant or loan program backed by the US Government, particularly geared to help minority-owned companies. Scurlock also described difficulties “generating new business among institutional and government agencies” because of his race. Scurlock felt that prejudice on the part of buyers continued to hurt their ability to secure contracts to print color photographs. “Both overt and subtle discriminations” persisted into the 1970s in ways that put Custom Craft at a distinct disadvantage in Scurlock’s estimation. Custom Craft was doing photographic print work for government agencies, companies of various sizes, and other photographers during this period. The number of times that Custom Craft was “victim of contract passover [sic]” due to race would be impossible to quantify, but in Robert Scurlock’s perception the occurrence was frequent. Given that one of the studio’s major pillars was print work for corporations and government entities, lingering racism on the part of white consumers or potential partners proved a significant concern for Robert Scurlock.<sup>100</sup>

Because they dealt with private companies and government entities, Custom Craft often had to pursue and bid on contracts to provide color printing. In the 1970s much of

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<sup>97</sup> Gilbert, *Ten Blocks From the White House*, 179.

<sup>98</sup> Gilbert, *Ten Blocks From the White House*, 213.

<sup>99</sup> See Dana Lanier Schaffer, “The 1968 Riots in History and Memory,” *Washington History* vol. 15, no. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2003/2004): 4-33; “The Inferno and the Aftermath,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 1988, SM22; William Raspberry, “Lessons of the Riots: Lessons of the Days of Rage,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 1988, A1; Richard Morin, “Many Here See a Society Still Divided,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 1988, A1.

<sup>100</sup> “Social and Economic Disadvantages.”

this correspondence reflected a federal mandate to hire more “minority-owned” firms for subcontracts, anticipation by private companies that they would be legally required to mirror those goals, and Scurlock’s own efforts to take advantage of minority set-asides as an African American business owner. In 1973, Scurlock replied to a call from C&P Telephone to be included in a directory “used by telephone company purchasing people to identify minority businesses” to patronize “as part of [C&P Telephone’s] pledge to the Affirmative Action program.<sup>101</sup> Scurlock replied positively three days after receiving the letter from C&P.<sup>102</sup> The next spring Robert Scurlock attended a “conference for minority suppliers” held by the Industry and Defense division of Westinghouse Electric Corporation.<sup>103</sup> Never averse to approaching companies unsolicited, Scurlock made his racial identity (or that of his business) a part of his pitch when it would be beneficial. In late 1977, he wrote to the Minority Vendor Program at the federally subsidized company Conrail to offer Custom Craft’s services. Appropriately, Scurlock established their “minority-owned” status as well as previous work with I.B.M., the Department of Commerce, and the National Portrait Gallery.<sup>104</sup>

Scurlock was fortunate in some regard because the US Government’s efforts to promote minority business originated in his backyard, and the city itself served as a laboratory to test out new programs. In 1973 for instance, the Department of Commerce awarded a grant to the Metropolitan Washington Business Resource Center to establish a “Minority Suppliers’ Sales Development Program.”<sup>105</sup> The Greater Washington Business

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<sup>101</sup>Anna Marie Lewis to Robert Scurlock, August 22, 1973, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>102</sup>Scurlock scribbled “Answered, 8-25-73” on the original letter.

<sup>103</sup>N.V. Petrou to Robert Scurlock, March 18,1974, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>104</sup>Robert Scurlock to Coordinator Minority Vendor Program, December 20, 1977, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>105</sup>Richard N. Hykes to Minority Businessmen, Press Material, October 12,1973, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

Center (GWBC), for instance, was another “non-profit management consulting firm dedicated to providing services to minority businessmen and women” also underwritten by the Department of Commerce through its Office of Minority Business Enterprise.<sup>106</sup> In February of 1977, the GWBC put on a three-day “Opportunity Fair” including a luncheon speech by Alex Haley and “special guest” Don King.<sup>107</sup> However, Scurlock saw an additional opportunity and quickly sent the GWBC a proposal for photographic services at the Opportunity Fair. Scurlock Studio would provide eleven hours of coverage over three days at forty dollars an hour. Afterwards, 8x10 prints cost three dollars apiece and a full set of slides ran to \$75.00.<sup>108</sup> Ever the salesman, we might see Robert Scurlock’s proposal to the GWBC as in line with the letters that photographers his father’s age sent offering to photograph annual conventions of the National Negro Business League.

In 1975 Custom Craft completed paperwork to participate in the US Small Business Administration’s Minority Vendor Program, designed to connect “major private corporations....interested in buying a product or service from a minority firm” with those businesses.<sup>109</sup> Four years later Scurlock registered Custom Craft Color Service as a contractor with the Minority Business Opportunity Commission under the government of the District of Columbia.<sup>110</sup> The Scurlocks’ efforts to take advantage of Affirmative Action opportunities extended outside of Washington, DC. For instance, the Studio

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<sup>106</sup> Promotional Material for Opportunity Fair ’77, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>107</sup> Invitation to Opportunity Fair ’77, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Scurlock to Stephanie A. Colbert (GWBC), February 16, 1977, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Scurlock to C. Mack Higgins, Associate Administrator for Minority Small Business, May 6, 1975, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records; U.S. Small Business Administration, “Minority Vendors Program,” Brochure, Office of Public Information, July 1973, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>110</sup> Robert Scurlock to Courtland Cox, Executive Director Minority Business Opportunity Commission, Series 8, Box 75, Scurlock Studio Records.

enrolled in The Johns Hopkins University Minority Vendor Program in 1978.<sup>111</sup> Looking outward, to Baltimore and beyond, reflected Scurlock's efforts to conduct business beyond the neighborhood, not unlike his move to mail-order finishing at Custom Craft. Robert Scurlock imagined his photography and business as a truly national enterprise.

In 1972, Custom Craft, Inc. operated in three locations: at 1813 18<sup>th</sup> Street NW, 1623 Connecticut Avenue, and the original Scurlock Studio at 900 U Street. Eleven people were employed across the company with an annual payroll of \$49,000. Total receipts for the company tallied \$101,000. The original studio at 900 U Street counted for the least amount of sales at \$20,000, with the remainder split nearly evenly across the two Custom Craft labs. In handwritten notes, Scurlock estimated that only twenty-five percent of their business consisted of portrait photography. Half of Scurlock receipts in 1972 came from developing and printing film for other photographers.<sup>112</sup>

While Robert Scurlock gave more of his time and attention to national contracts and printing service through the 1970s, he continued to make portraits and keep the neighborhood Scurlock Studio operational against decreased business. Repeatedly Scurlock conceived plans for galleries and exhibitions that would provide some income while also promoting his family's photography as historically and artistically significant. Scurlock's "Proposal for Establishment of the Scurlock Gallery of Photography," did not specify an audience for the plan, but the inclusion of an estimated budget for gallery's first year suggests that Scurlock prepared the document to solicit financial backing. Scurlock hoped that the gallery would be located at 900 U Street and expose his father's work to a younger generation and "be a positive achievement in the inner city, making a

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<sup>111</sup> C. Joseph Fornes to Scurlock Studio, March 2, 1978, Series 8, Box 73, Scurlock Studio Records. A note on the letter indicates that Scurlock returned the enrollment form on March 20.

<sup>112</sup> 1972 Census of Business, Filer's Copy, Series 8, Box 72, Scurlock Studio Records.

definite contribution to the community.” Free to the public and “operat[ing] on a non-profit basis,” the proposed budget included lines of \$15,000 and \$10,000 for the would-be Director (Robert) and Assistant Director (George). Scurlock hoped eventually to show work by other African American photographers and offer instruction for young people, subsidized by corporate donations. “Travelling exhibits...packages of reproductions, film strips, [and] slide shows,” perhaps like the one Scurlock prepared in the early 1950s, would be produced by the gallery for educational purposes.<sup>113</sup>

Many of these project proposals involve a perceptive appreciation of Addison Scurlock’s work that, unfortunately, Robert Scurlock did not live to see fully realized by scholars. Amongst the major projects that Scurlock hoped the Gallery would undertake were the publication of a book of photographs and an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. These last two were presented with some urgency, in order to provide “a special attraction to the millions of the visitors to the Capitol [sic] during the Centennial [sic]” in 1976.<sup>114</sup> This element of the plan helps dates the proposal, but it might also indicate Scurlock’s impetus in pitching the idea – to secure for the studio some of the funding intended for the national Bicentennial. Scurlock estimated the entire first year of the gallery would cost \$78,400.<sup>115</sup> Robert and George Scurlock could have arranged a gallery at 900 U Street (which they already owned and occupied) without chasing the money required to satisfy a distinct budget. In any event, Robert Scurlock’s gallery did not come

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<sup>113</sup> Quotations and figures in this paragraph from Robert Scurlock, “Proposal for Establishment of the Scurlock Gallery of Photography,” c. 1975, Series 8, Box 77, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Proposal to Publish A High Quality Portrait Book of Outstanding Beauty of Prominent Black Americans; ‘Historical Portraits and Photographs of Notable Black Americans’ From the Camera of Addison N. Scurlock,” Series 8, Box 77, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Scurlock, “Proposal for Establishment of the Scurlock Gallery of Photography.”

to fruition, in part because by the mid-1970s redevelopment projects on U Street threatened the physical location of the Scurlock Studio.

### The Green Line

Efforts to revitalize the neighborhoods adjacent to U Street took a bureaucratic step forward in 1966 when the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) created the Shaw Urban Renewal Area. The designation roughly covered the school zone for Robert Gould Shaw Middle School. Additional recognition by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development “linked the flow of federal funding to the new boundaries,” and solidified the neighborhood’s name as “Shaw” in the minds of Washingtonians.<sup>116</sup> Although welcoming of potential help, residents of Shaw were determined not to relive the violent displacement that African Americans in Southwest experienced. By the late 1960s, even the city government acknowledged mistakes in the redevelopment of Southwest that caused unnecessary trauma for residents and pledged to work more closely with residents to address their needs.<sup>117</sup> In turn, Reverend Walter E. Fauntroy, a pastor at New Bethel Baptist Church and veteran from the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) formed the Model Inner-City Community Organization (MICCO) to solicit community input and liaison with the myriad federal and municipal agencies at work in Shaw. Those institutions included the NCPC, the District’s

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<sup>116</sup> Ruble, *Washington’s U Street*, 186, 185-189.

<sup>117</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 210.

Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) or as it is known colloquially, “Metro.”<sup>118</sup>

MICCO and other groups gave Shaw residents a voice in the urban policy decisions that affected them, although a more democratic process often meant that those decisions took longer to implement. Fauntroy’s participation in Metro planning proved significant when in 1970 the city council approved his proposal to reroute the Mid-City (later, Green) Line along Seventh, U and Fourteenth Streets in an effort to boost recovery in the blocks most scarred by the 1968 riots.<sup>119</sup> In the case of Metro’s mid-city, or Green Line, planners’ desire for public input, bureaucratic inertia, construction delays, and budget cuts under the Reagan administration all combined to slow completion. Congress authorized the funding for Metro in 1969. The U Street Station did not open to passengers until 1991, a full fifteen years after the first section of the Red Line saw passengers.<sup>120</sup> During this long period the promise of Metro’s arrival frightened residents of Shaw wary of being priced out of their neighborhood and the WMATA frustrated U Street business owners who feared disruption of commerce during construction.

Robert Scurlock’s personal interaction with WMATA began in March of 1975 when the Office of Real Estate wrote Scurlock to let him know that the Authority wanted to purchase Square 361 – Lot 829, or 900 U Street.<sup>121</sup> Although Metro engineers tried to place tunnels under existing city streets (using a method called “cut and cover”), the length of the railcars required long and gentle curves in order to turn the trains safely.

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<sup>118</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 8-9, 96-103. Formally created in 1967 (although based on previous commissions) WMATA was the Authority tasked with overseeing the creation and maintenance of the mass transit system in Washington.

<sup>119</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 213.

<sup>120</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 217.

<sup>121</sup> John C. Brick to Custom Craft Studios, Inc., March 31, 1975, Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

Occasionally, “WMATA planners had to condemn corner buildings so they could dig cut and cover trenches through the cleared lots.”<sup>122</sup> The WMATA planned to curve the Green Line just under the Scurlock’s property. Thus began a long correspondence between Robert Scurlock and a number of WMATA officials, negotiations over payment, and a number of related disputes. When Robert Scurlock refused the initial offer as too low, the WMATA threatened to take the lot via eminent domain and then charge the Scurlock Studio rent until they vacated the premises.<sup>123</sup> Nearly two years later, the sides were no closer to resolution. Though he wanted the matter put to rest, Robert Scurlock found the WMATA’s offer of \$42,300 for the property “unacceptable” considering his asking price of \$60,000.<sup>124</sup> As a compromise, Robert Scurlock offered to sell the authority an easement so that they might move forward with construction. On July 6, 1977 Robert and George Scurlock sold WMATA a permanent underground easement for \$32,000.<sup>125</sup> The easement consisted of a total of ninety-nine square feet at the north east corner of their lot.<sup>126</sup> By the next July WMATA had torn down the building at 900 U Street.<sup>127</sup>

Notably, when Metro first contacted Robert Scurlock about acquiring the property in 1975 they wrote to him not on U Street, but at the Custom Craft office at 1813 Eighteenth St. NW and continued to do so throughout their correspondence.<sup>128</sup> In a sense, leaving 900 U Street continued the series of transitions that Robert Scurlock first began with the CSOP in 1948. When the Scurlocks vacated their property (at WMATA’s

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<sup>122</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 147.

<sup>123</sup> Nicholas J. Roll to Robert Scurlock, September 24, 1975, series 8, box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Scurlock to Richard Naylor, February 7, 1977, Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>125</sup> “Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority Offer to Purchase Easement (signed and notarized),”Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>126</sup> WMATA, “Project E001, Details of Right of Way,” Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Scurlock to Richard H. Wilson, July 24, 1981, Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>128</sup> The Scurlock Studio still operated in the building, but the brothers were making plans to rent the first floor to a grocer. John R. Pinkett to Robert Scurlock, May 12, 1975, Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

expense) it represented movement away from the heart of the family business and the last time that the Scurlock name was prominently displayed on U Street. The Scurlock Studio relocated to 1803 Connecticut Avenue in August of 1976. A few weeks later Robert Scurlock wrote his new landlord to ask for permission to install a display window and new sign that read “Color Photography by Scurlock – Portraits and Weddings.”<sup>129</sup>

. . .

Perhaps, when Green Line construction finally came to U Street in 1985 Robert Scurlock counted himself fortunate that he had already relocated. Quickly, “residents learned that the only thing worse than lack of construction was construction itself.”<sup>130</sup> Businesses struggled especially during the building phase, which essentially consisted of “a series of muddy trenches disrupting traffic” and making it impossible for shoppers to use the sidewalks.<sup>131</sup> When the first trains ran, U Street institution Ben’s Chili Bowl displayed a sign that “We Survived Metro.”<sup>132</sup> In that year, 1991, Robert Scurlock turned seventy-five years old and the Shaw area had irrevocably changed from when he first entered his father’s studio. Although he still took photographs, and would continue to do so until his death in 1994, he did so in an environment Addison Scurlock likely could not have imagined. After World War II Robert Scurlock saw hopeful opportunity for African Americans, and tried to steer his career in photography so that he, his brother George, and other photographers could take advantage. Scurlock faced continual challenges, including

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<sup>129</sup> Robert Scurlock to Ed Haynes, Business Services, Inc., September 9, 1976, Series 8, Box 76, Scurlock Studio Records.

<sup>130</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 217.

<sup>131</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 209.

<sup>132</sup> Schrag, *The Great Society Subway*, 217.

changes in the industry, racial discrimination, demographic changes in the District, and violently misguided policies of urban renewal. The photographer faced them, generally, with confidence and ability, balancing an insistence of full economic freedom with commitment to the African American customers that supported his family's work in the first place. Under Robert Scurlock's guidance, the "normal routine of business" in the Scurlock Studio proved to be one of continual transition and adaptation.

## **Conclusion**

### **“Soul Brother All the Way”**

As civil unrest engulfed Washington, DC in April 1968, George Scurlock took a picture of a sign hanging in the display window of his family's sixty-four-year-old photography business that read “Soul Brother All The Way.”<sup>1</sup> (Figure 36) As a racially-based plea to spare the building at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, the hand-lettered poster functioned with the bridal portraits already in place as testament to the Scurlock Studio’s participation in the everyday life of black Washington. The same window long served as a point of pride where African Americans came to see their own best images. The Scurlock window-box sold visions of prosperity, even as the views it contained neglected the economic realities of some African Americans and frustrations that would boil over in multiple cities that year. It can also be said that the photograph obscures a more complex entwining of culture and commerce at a site where Scurlock consumers regularly encountered themselves visually.

The reflection in the glass of the window shows the residences and other businesses across U Street, locating the Scurlock Studio in the real space of the city. Two male passers-by are also reflected on the glass. Perhaps one of the brides is a relative, friend, or neighbor? Their presence reminds us that these photographs are records of social networks and are objects that gave structure to people’s everyday lives. While we might imagine the emotions George Scurlock felt as he clicked the shutter – anger over

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<sup>1</sup> See Gardullo, et. al., *Picturing the Promise*, 15.

the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.? fear that nearby fires might spread to his building? – the photograph does not reveal the decisions that he made as he produced the portraits in the display, nor the decades of his labor and that of his father and brother that went in to making sure that the phrase “Photography by Scurlock” meant something special to African Americans in Washington. This dissertation has been an effort to recover the daily work of black photographers that created these layers of meaning.

Historians have routinely praised black photographers’ ability to “reflect” everyday life during segregation but have largely overlooked the specific circumstances of photographic production and the multiple uses, public and private, that African Americans found for photographs during this period. The photographers examined here pursued a wide variety of paying photography work, from formal family portraits to snapshots in nightclubs. In the studio, black photographers learned to satisfy black customers using technology and equipment designed to privilege white faces. Outside of the studio, group portraits of fraternal groups, social clubs, churches, and schools built a sense of community. In the South, photography contracts in segregated schools could become the most reliable stream of income for African American photographers. Likewise, hustling studio photographers ventured into black-controlled leisure spaces to sell photography after regular working hours. During the first half of the twentieth century, African American studio photographers pursued all of these types of work to earn a living *and* to satisfy the demand of African American consumers.

Some African American photographers found that paying photographic work outside the studio disappeared as African Americans achieved (in theory) the goals of racial integration, and many black-controlled institutions subsequently faced elimination.

Whereas Addison Scurlock built his studio during the Golden Age of Black Business, his son Robert Scurlock branched out after World War II in pursuit of integrated markets and government contracts. Like many African American enterprises, however, the Scurlock photography studio faced significant challenges in the departure of the black middle class from the inner cities, the turmoil of the late 1960s, and ultimately the destructive effects of urban renewal. For a period, Robert Scurlock managed to maintain the success of his family's studio, a central institution in the cultural life of black Washington, in a way that eluded other studio photographers.

It remains important that we consider the work of black studio photographers in context and over time. James Latimer Allen did not take photographs in Harlem in 1925 under the same circumstances as Ernest Withers in Memphis in 1968. Across this period, however, the choices made by professional photographers provide visual insight into the history of African Americans in the twentieth century through the frames of class, gender, and sex by way of bodily representation. As entrepreneurs dealing with the realities of running a business in the context of an on-going freedom struggle, all of the photographers in this study consistently weighed issues of self-interest against those of collective empowerment. Thus, as much as black photography studios were sites for the overlap of commerce and culture, they were also spaces where the tension between economic isolationism and the desire for full citizenship were exposed. Running a photography studio that was, in the words of Robert Scurlock, "strictly business" and paying attention to a community's needs were not mutually exclusive.

## Appendix



Figure 1  
Addison Scurlock, Self-Portrait, c1920s, Courtesy of the Scurlock Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (Hereafter Archives Center, NMAH)

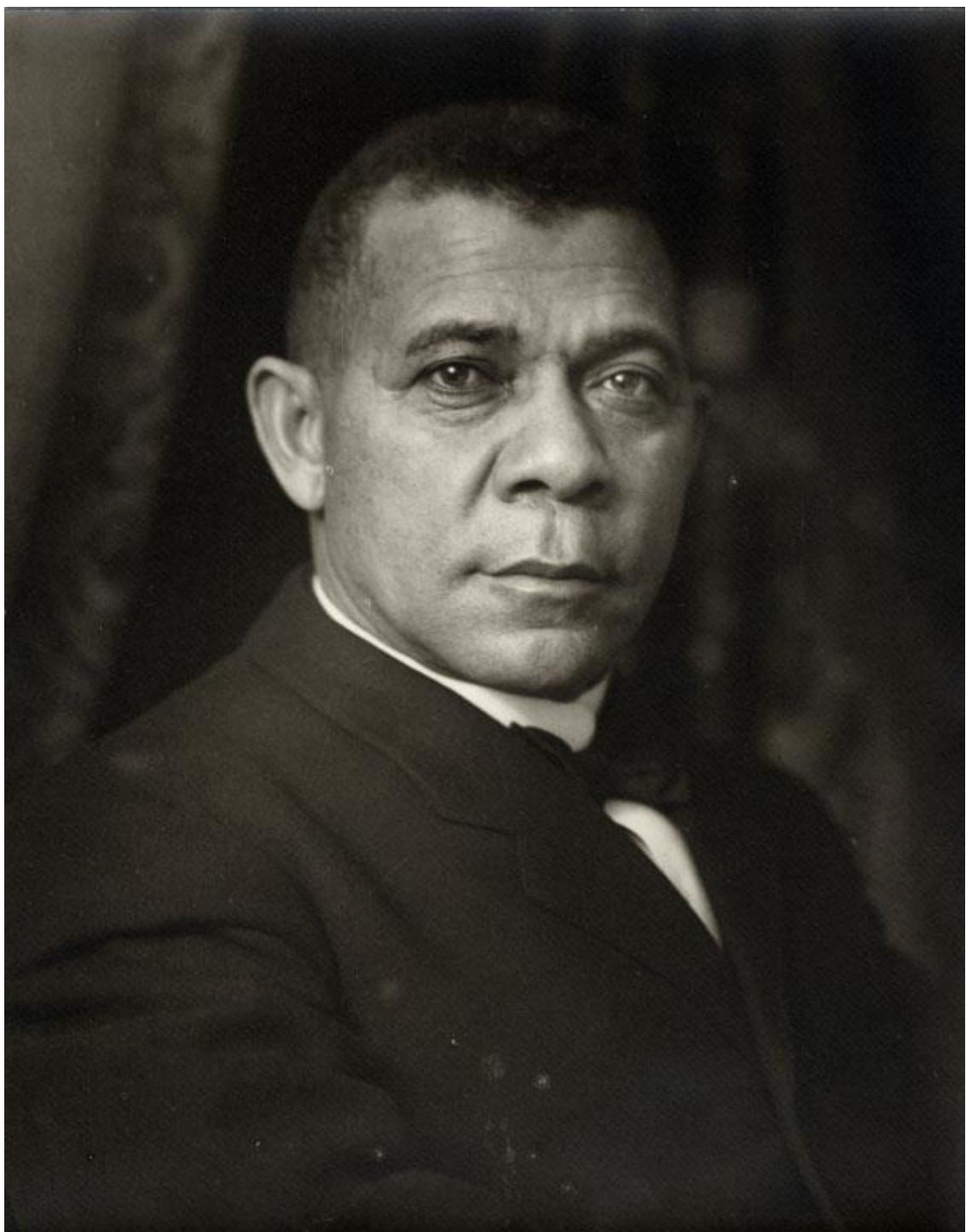


Figure 2  
Addison Scurlock, *Booker T. Washington*, 1910  
Courtesy of the Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 3  
Addison Scurlock, *Underdown Delicatessen*, 1904  
Courtesy of the Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 4  
Addison Scurlock, *Underdown Delicatessen Interior*, 1904  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH

## SUCCESS IN DENTISTRY.

**DR. A. E. GASKINS, OF WASHINGTON, D. C., AND HIS OFFICE.—HIS OWN IDEA.**

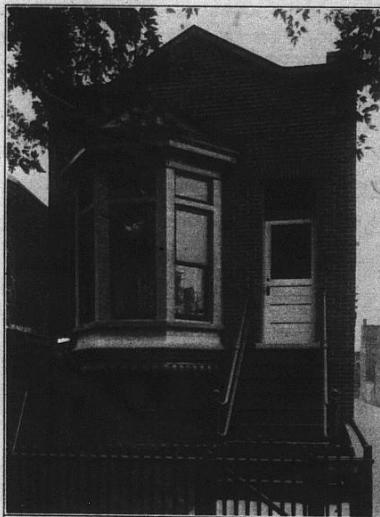
Among the many professions practiced by colored people in the city of Washington is that of dentistry. It is growing to be more and more properly patronized by our people, in pleasant contrast to the times of our forefathers, here and elsewhere, when

sion. In the class of those who have made the most rapid progress in the establishing of a most up-to-date office, with all the latest improved apparatus and conveniences, is Dr. A. E. Gaskins.

Dr. Gaskins was born in the city of Washington, and, like the

kids, is the fact that he has built for himself, independent of all other connections, a beautiful suite of rooms under one separate roof, which he devotes entirely to his profession. On the corner of Fourteenth and T Streets, northwest, is conspicuously seen this ideal office of Dr. Gaskins—typical in every way of the work carried on daily within its walls. The interior is handsomely arranged and neatly furnished, heated with hot water, and lighted by gas.

Aside from the immense private practice of this young, enterprising dentist, he is also employed as a member of the faculty of Howard University, as demonstrator at the Howard Dental School, over which Dr. Summer Wormley is superintendent. Along with this bit of information concerning Dr. Gaskins and his successful career, is shown a view of his own private office building as an object lesson, not only to the other men of his profession, but to other professional men of our race as well, from which inspiration may radiate and bring to the minds of those who are equally successful and ambitious the idea of doing something similar and equally as praiseworthy, in the face of the many critics, within and without the race. Dr. Gaskins deserves universal praise in this advanced move and for the successful work and pleasant manner in which he gains and holds his patients.



Dental Office of Dr. A. E. Gaskins.

the pulling of a tooth only required a "string" and a "cast iron" nerve for the unfortunate victim. Most of the successful men of this profession in the District are the young, enterprising men of our race, and they are carrying it forward along the latest scientific and sanitary principles embodied in this necessary profes-

very few others of this class of unusual workers in their own home town, he has applied himself most diligently in the eyes of both his patrons and his friends. He is a graduate of the Dental College of Howard University, and has been practicing his profession for the last seven years. Unusual in the case of Dr. Gas-

Scurlock, the photograph specialist. Prices reasonable and work guaranteed. Studio, 1202 T Street, northwest.—Adv.

**It will pay you to advertise  
in the  
Negro Business League Herald  
Rates sent upon application  
494 Louisiana Avenue  
Washington, D. C.**



Figure 5  
Excerpt from Negro Business League Herald  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

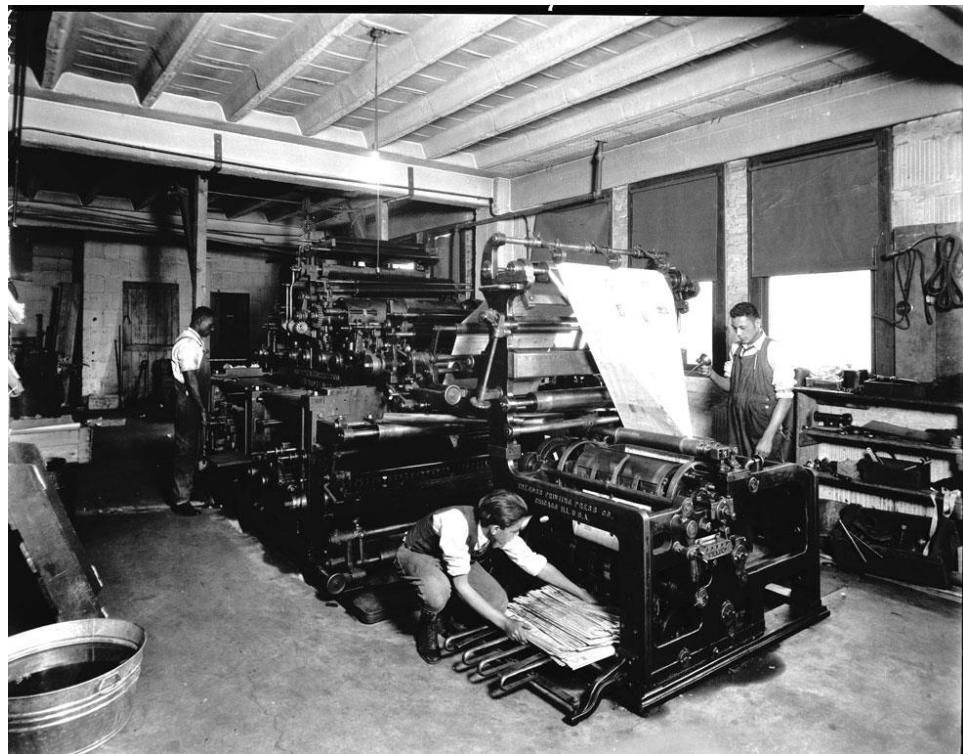


Figure 6  
Addison Scurlock, *Murray Brothers Printing Press*, 1925  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 7  
Addison Scurlock, *Murray Brothers Printing #103*, 1925

Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 8  
Addison Scurlock, *Dinner Meeting in the Scurlock Studio, 1913*  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 9  
900 U Street, c1950

Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH

9<sup>th</sup> Street is to the far left of the frame; Sidewalk display visible under the tree to the right.



Figure 10  
Scurlock Studio Reception Area, c1911  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 11  
Scurlock Studio Main Room, c1911  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 12  
Scurlock Studio Postcard, c1907 - Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 13  
Addison Scurlock, Unidentified Family, nd  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 14  
Addison Scurlock, *Dr. Carter G. Woodson*, 1915  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 15

Addison Scurlock, *Mary Church Terrell as a Young Woman*, c1920-1930  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 16

Morgan Smith, Glen Mili, E. Simms Campbell in the M. Smith Studio, 1946  
“Looking at pictures for Life magazine story” (Verso)

Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Schomburg Center for Research in  
Blaack Culture, New York Public Library



Figure 17  
M. Smith Studio Interior, nd  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL

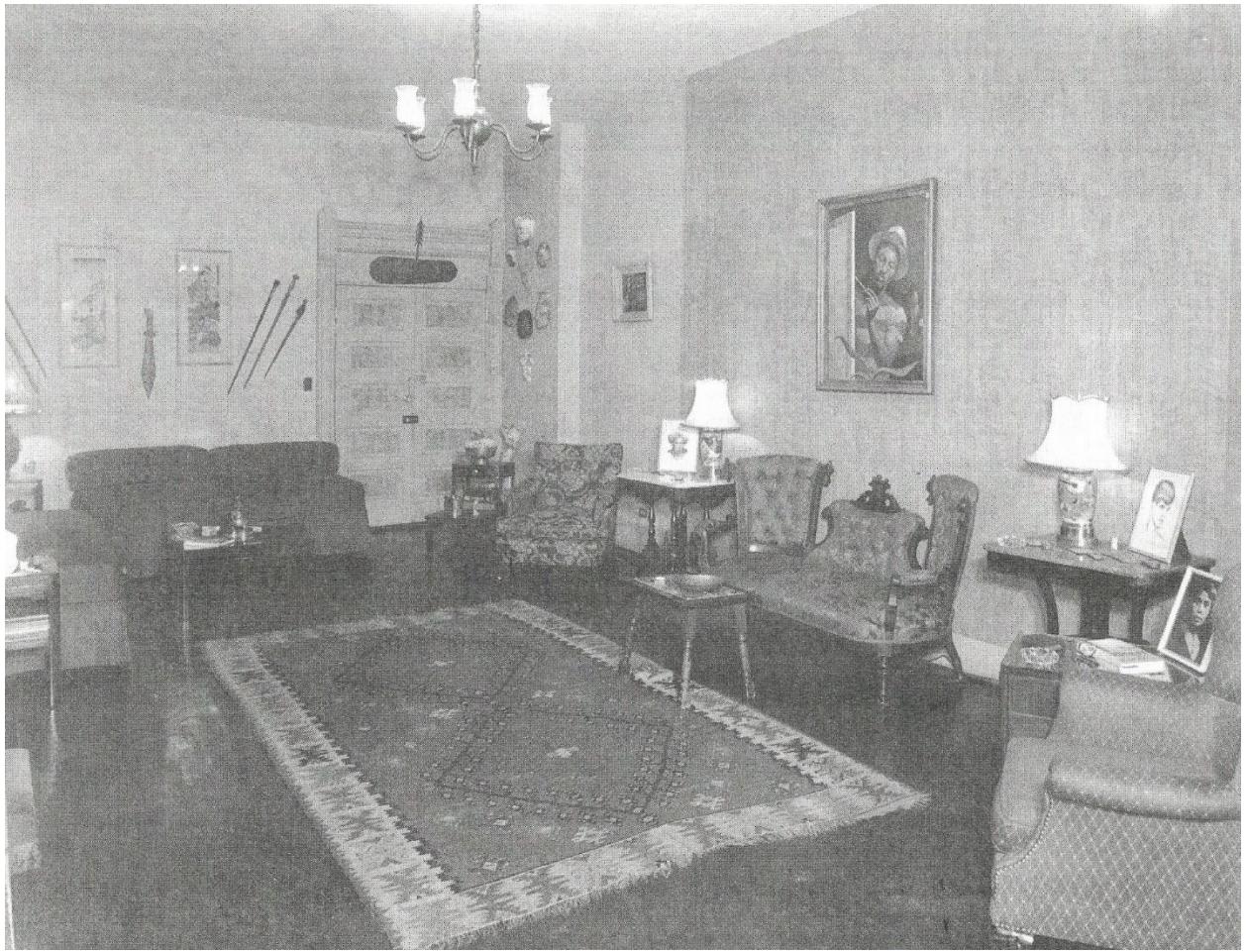


Figure 18  
M. Smith Studio Interior, nd  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL

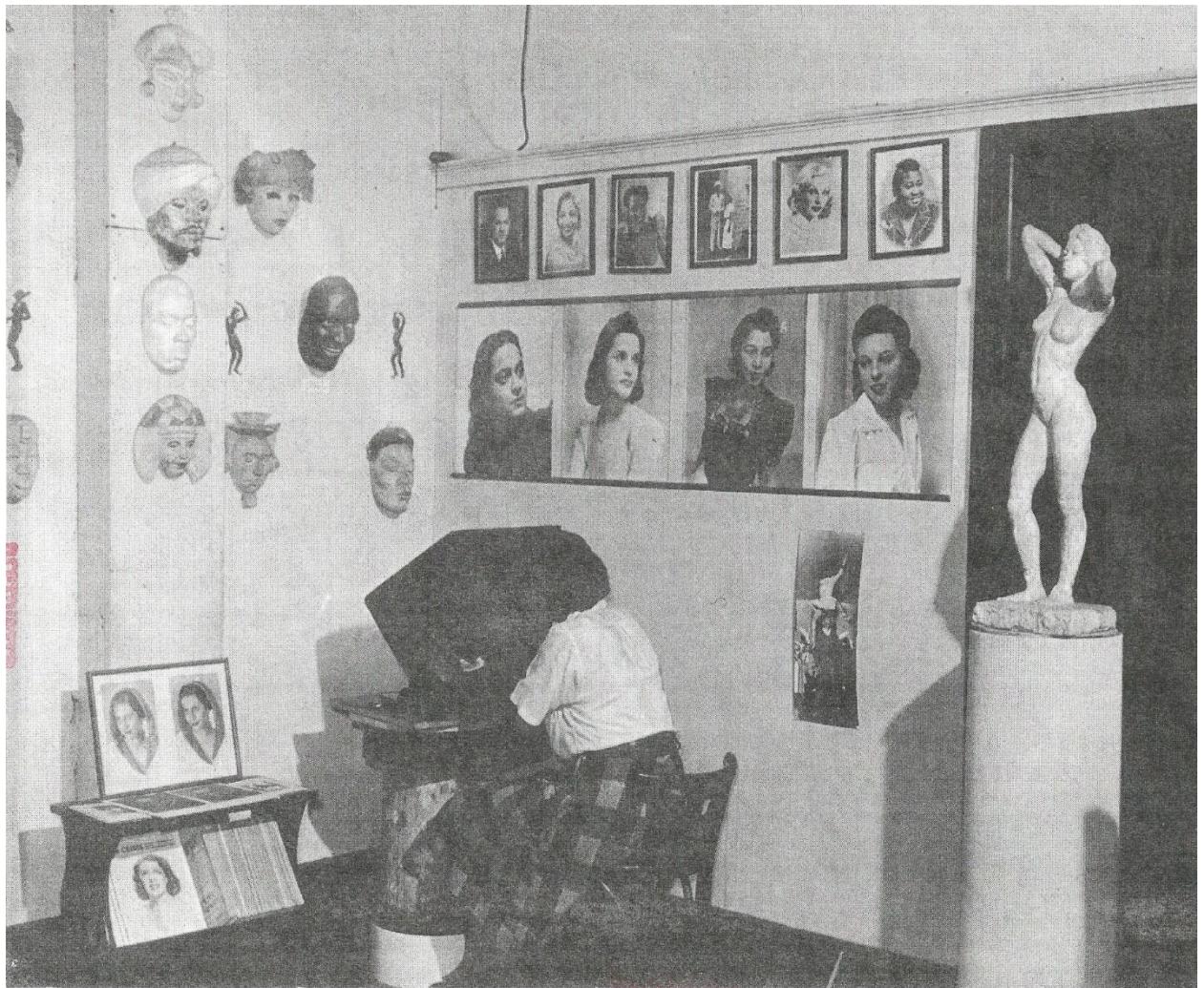


Figure 19  
M. Smith Studio Interior and Assistant Doing Retouching Work, nd  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL



Figure 20  
M. Smith, *Burnu Acquanetta visiting the M. Smith Studio*, c1940s  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL



Figure 21  
M. Smith, *Paul Meeres and Partner*, M. Smith Studio Backdrop (written on verso)  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL

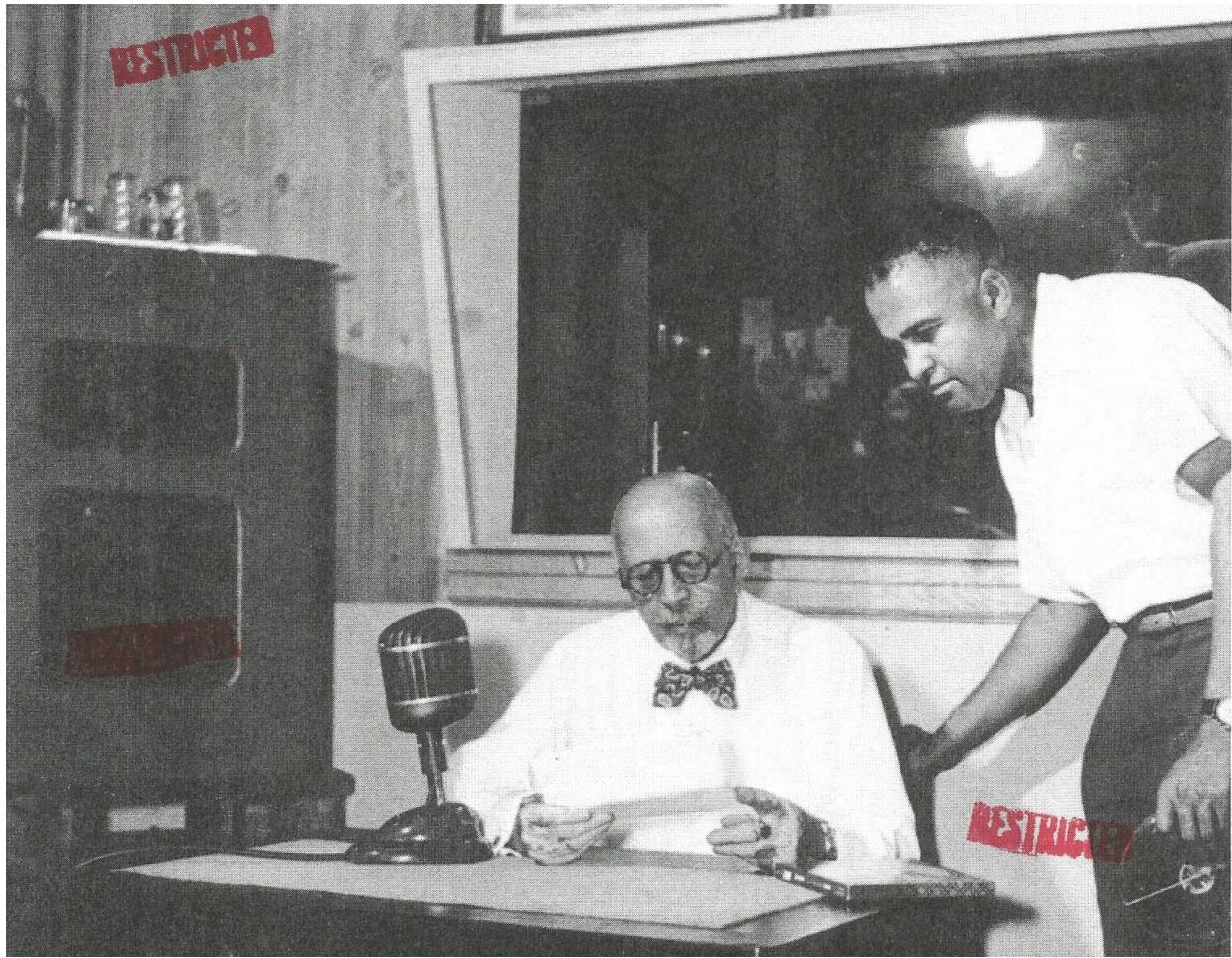


Figure 22  
M. Smith, W.E.B Du Bois with Carlton Moss in the M. Smith Studio recording area  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL

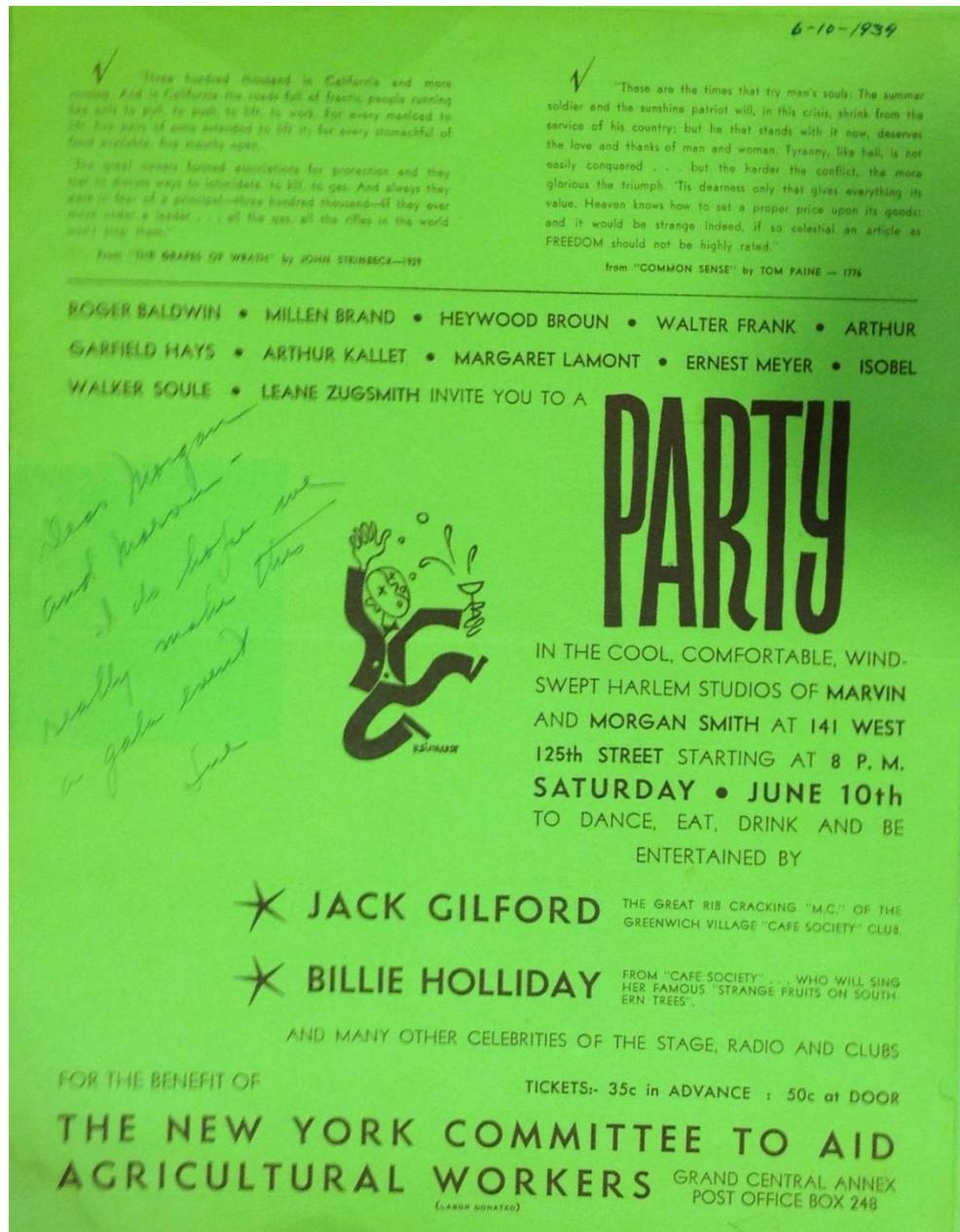


Figure 23  
Party Flyer, M. Smith Papers  
Courtesy of the Manuscripts and Archives Division, Schomburg Center, NYPL



Figure 24  
Morgan and Marvin Smith Lighting a Model at their Studio, nd  
Courtesy of Schomburg Center, NYPL



Figures 25 and 26  
Addison Scurlock in the studio and darkroom  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 27  
Addison Scurlock, *Mamie Fearing Scurlock*, c1910  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 28  
Ernest Withers, following Medgar Evers Funeral, 1963  
Courtesy Panopticon Gallery



Figure 29

Ernest Withers, *I Am a Man*, Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, March 28, 1968  
Courtesy Panopticon Gallery



Figure 30  
Ernest Withers, *Flamingo Room*, mid-1950s  
Courtesy Panopticon Gallery



Figure 31  
Ernest Withers, *Club Paradise*, c1950  
Courtesy Panopticon Gallery



Figure 32

Pamphlet Printed by Custom Craft, Inc. for Daughter of the American Revolution,  
Washington, DC, 1958  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 33  
Robert Scurlock, *Self Portrait*, c1958  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH

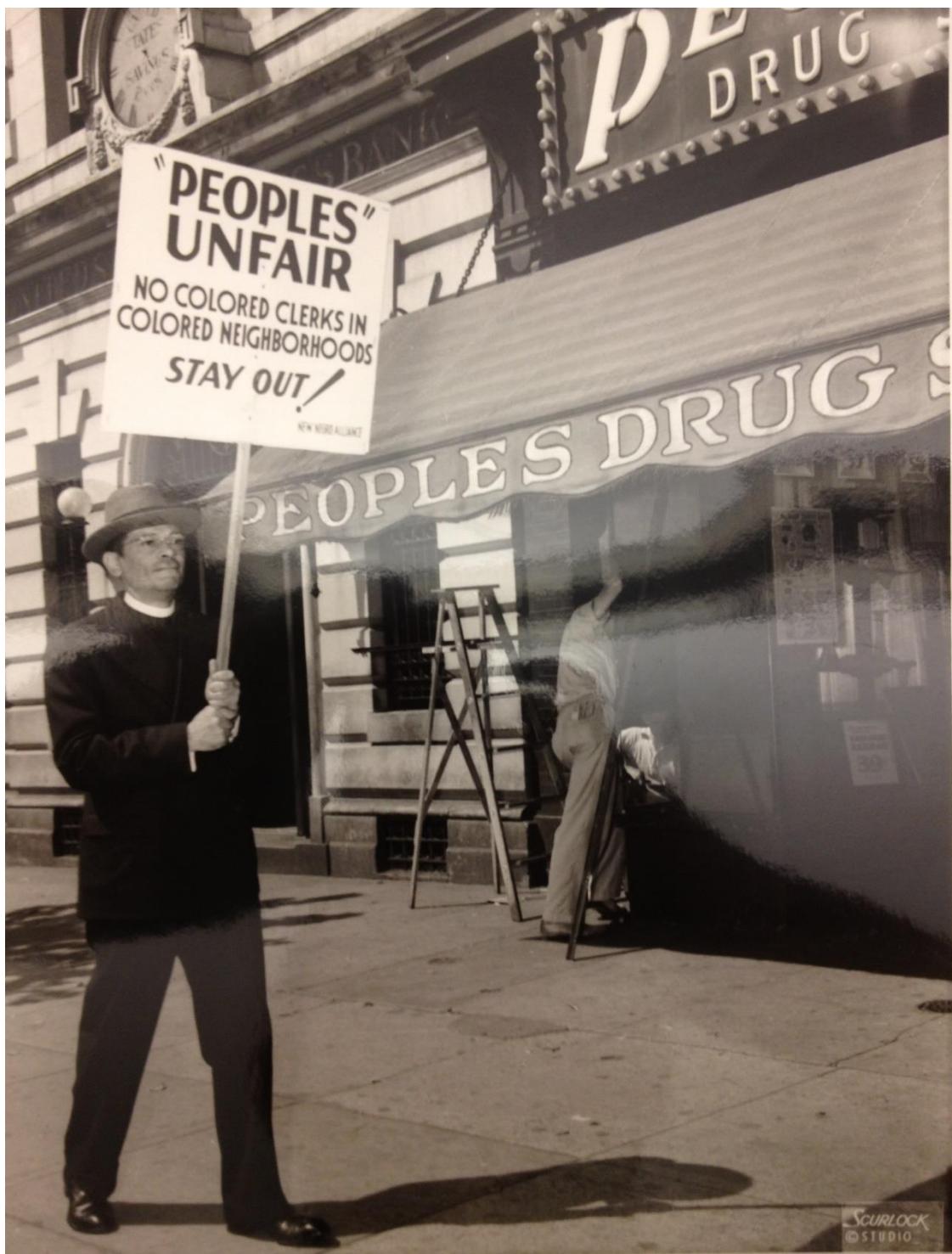


Figure 34  
Scurlock Studio, *New Negro Alliance*, c1933  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 34  
Robert Scurlock, Promotional Photograph for the Capitol School of Photography  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH



Figure 35

Capitol School of Photography Brochure, Rear Cover  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH

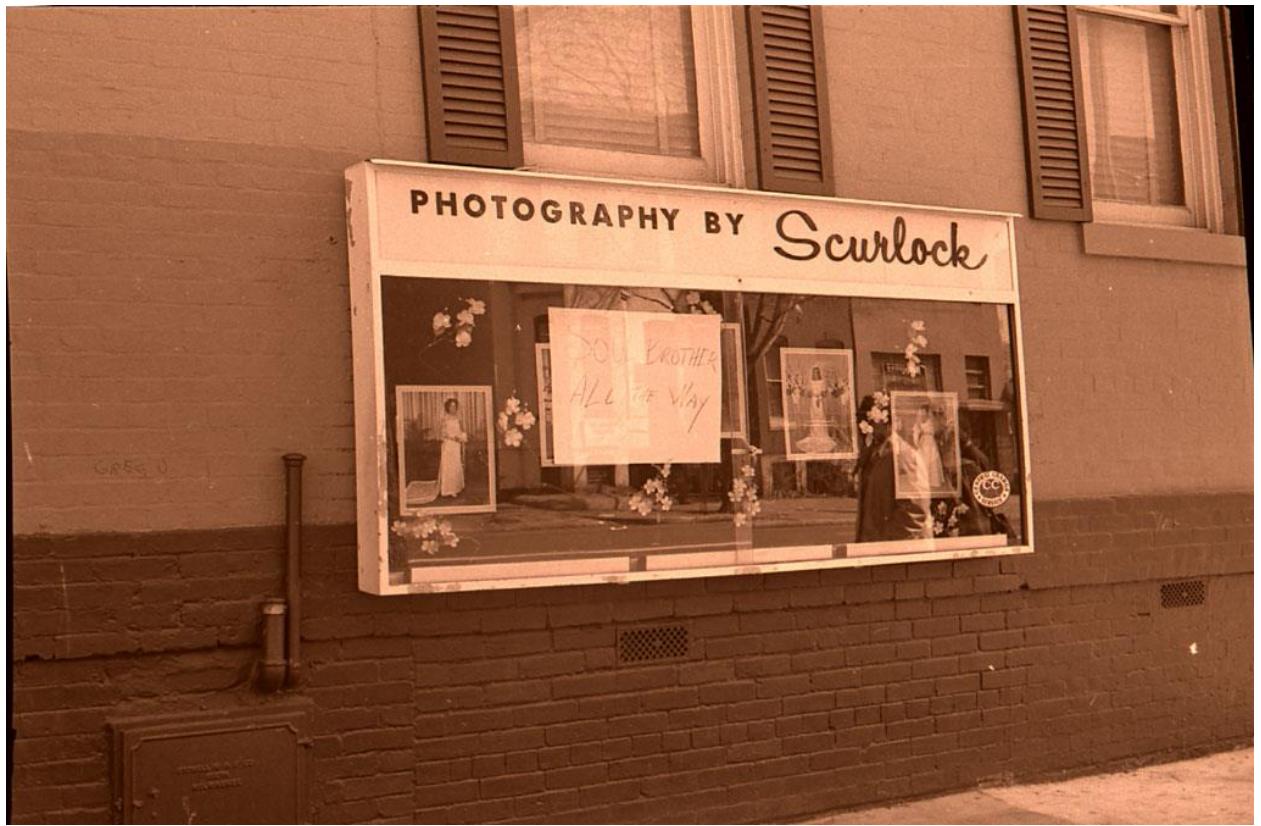


Figure 36

George Scurlock, *Civil Disturbances '68*  
Courtesy Archives Center, NMAH

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Library of Congress  
Booker T. Washington Papers

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