

Vision & Justice

A Civic Curriculum

aperture

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Annie Leibovitz,
Michelle Obama,
Washington, D.C.,
2016
© the artist

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Preface

Darren Walker

The “Vision & Justice” issue of *Aperture*, published in May 2016 and guest edited by the incomparable Sarah Lewis, was a triumph. Garnering nationwide attention, “Vision & Justice,” which was dedicated to the role of photography in the African American experience, sold out its run of twenty thousand copies in only seven weeks and won the Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography in the category of Critical Writing and Research.

More important than the critical praise or awards it received was the issue’s wide adoption: the New York University Tisch School of the Arts made it required reading for incoming first-year students, and the Vision & Justice course Lewis teaches at Harvard University became part of the school’s core curriculum. It has also inspired similar classes across the country.

So I couldn’t be more thrilled that the incisive, empathetic, deeply critical, and profoundly hopeful perspective Lewis brought to that publication will now be able to reach and rouse even more people through

this free civic curriculum. Here readers will find fresh ways of seeing the world and bold ideas for transforming it.

The extraordinary artists whose work is featured and explored in these pages show us that art and the fight for social justice are inextricably intertwined. They show us how, across human history, artists have asked provocative questions, galvanized social movements, and empowered those on society’s margins to be seen with dignity, beauty, and grace. They have challenged social preconceptions, told unheard stories, expanded our understandings, and imagined new possibilities.

A well of wisdom and creativity, this curriculum is a testament to art’s unique power to speak to us all and to speak out for justice. It demonstrates that it is the work of art—the *work* of justice—that we all share a responsibility for carrying forward. I hope you will read it deeply, accept its challenge, and share it widely.

Darren Walker is president of the Ford Foundation.

Vision & Justice

Sarah Lewis

In 2013, a young girl went to the White House with her parents and was nervous that she was going to get in trouble for missing a day of kindergarten. She asked President Barack Obama to write her a note to explain her absence from class. He took her request seriously, writing with determined focus. She stood beaming as she watched his hands at work, her own hands clasped expectantly, ready to receive the note. She may have been unaware of the history of that moment, yet White House photographer Pete Souza made sure that it would not escape our view. He cropped into the frame a painting of George Washington that hung in the East Room above the Wounded Warriors gathering, an event that her parents had attended. In the middle ground of the photograph are veterans and family members, as if emblems of the sacrifice of all kinds required to arrive at the present moment.

How have we enlarged our notion of who counts in society from the founding of the country to the current day? In 1790, American national belonging, as codified by the Naturalization Act, was legally defined as being white, being male, and being able to own property. Today's definition of citizenship is wider, but also contested. Is the transit from that moment to the current day simply a legal narrative, or is it also a cultural one? And if it is a cultural narrative, what are the inflection points along that journey?

The distribution of rights is central to justice, and these rights are many, but the most foundational of them all is the right to participate and be recognized

as a member of the body politic. How is the foundational right of representation in a democracy—the right to be recognized justly—tied to the work of images in the public realm? Images have both limited and liberated our definitions of American citizenship and belonging. They have created narratives about who should be centered and valued in civic life.

American citizenship has long been a project of vision and justice.

“Vision & Justice.” As I wrote in 2016 when I was asked to guest edit a special issue devoted to photography of the black experience—the first of its kind for *Aperture* magazine—I could think of no other theme. No matter the topic—beauty, family, politics, power—the quest for a legacy of photographic representation of African Americans has been about these two things. The centuries-long effort to craft an image to pay honor to the full humanity of black life is a corrective task for which photography and cinema have been central, even indispensable.

Understanding the relationship of race and the quest for full citizenship in this country requires an advanced state of visual literacy, particularly during periods of turmoil. Today, we're able to witness injustices firsthand on a massive scale that would have been unimaginable decades ago. We have had to ask ourselves questions that call upon powers of visual analysis to read, for example, the image of Eric Garner's killing, virally disseminated through social media, or to understand the symbolism in Dylann Roof's

self-styled portraiture before his killing of the Emanuel Nine in Charleston. Being an engaged citizen requires grappling with pictures and knowing their historical context, at times, with near art historical precision. Yet it is the artist who knows what images need to be seen to effect change and alter history, to shine a spotlight in ways that will result in sustained attention. The enduring focus that comes from the power of pictures—by artists such as Ava DuVernay, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jamel Shabazz, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Deborah Willis, Bradford Young, and so many more—moves us from merely seeing to holding a penetrating gaze long enough that we consider anew what is before us.

The “Vision & Justice” issue took its conceptual inspiration from the abolitionist and great nineteenth-century thinker Frederick Douglass, who understood this long ago. In his Civil War speech “Pictures and Progress,” Douglass spoke about the transformative power of pictures to effect a new vision for the nation. This issue opens again with that historic framework—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s writing on Douglass's prophetic, probing ideas and theories about the medium of photography at the dawn of the photographic age. Douglass, the most photographed American man in the nineteenth century, argued that combat might end complete sectional disunion, but America's progress would require pictures because of the images they conjure in one's imagination.

Today, as we are awash with images through the scale of technology and live in an increasingly polarized climate in the United States—sociologists tell us that we come into close contact with those who do not share our political and religious views less and less—it is increasingly visual culture that shows us worlds unlike our own. The Vision & Justice Project wrestles with the question of how the foundational right of representation in a democracy, the right to be recognized justly, has historically and is still urgently tied to the work of visual representation in the public realm.

Social media has changed how we ingest images. Protests, social injustice, and collective moments of triumph are all played out in photographs and videos in real time unlike anything we thought possible just a few decades ago. What skills of visual literacy are required to understand the opportunities and challenges that technology presents to civic life?

It is an ancient idea: reason alone is not enough to make us good. Aristotle pondered it. Douglass risked the confusion of his Civil War audience to talk about it. Pictures, he argued—the work of culture—could be more crucial than even combat for American progress. At the end of his speech, he said that it might take over 150 years for a scholar to come along and better articulate what he had in mind. I'd like to think that many of those in these pages are who he hoped would

“American citizenship has long been a project of vision and justice.”

come. By this, I don't only mean the extraordinary image-makers. I also mean the leaders such as James Baldwin, Anna Deavere Smith, Bryan Stevenson, Darren Walker, and more, who have so urgently understood the importance of the cultural narratives that images have created for justice in this country. I also mean the students, the ones at Harvard University, where I am so fortunate to teach alongside an inspiring set of colleagues, and the civic students, the ones who came out Friday nights to the Brooklyn Public Library, for example, and who form a community with all of us doing this work.

Since the release of *Aperture's* “Vision & Justice” issue in May 2016, I've wanted to both protect and break down the walls of the classroom. This publication is an attempt to resolve this tension. I've received requests to put together a civic curriculum, a set of resources for educators and those who want a constant education. This volume contains a few cornerstone texts about the nexus of images, race, and justice. I've organized the articles into five categories—Art, Race, & Activism; Civic Space & Memorials; Race, Technology, & Justice; Race, Childhood, & Visuality; and Vision & Justice Curriculum. While this is not the approach I take in teaching the course, it is a response to the themes that I see debated in public life.

This is a sketch of a civic curriculum, a visual literacy coursepack for the class we're all in at the moment during this democratic age. It deliberately includes essays by current and former students.

For a midterm assignment in the Vision & Justice course, each student is asked to write about an image that they found synoptic of racial inequity or social justice in relation to a Supreme Court case or a landmark court decision that impacted the narrative of race and citizenship in the United States. The assignment also asks them to discuss what the image suggests about what would come after that court case—the unfinished, constant work of justice. The parameters are to do so in approximately five hundred words without sacrificing rigor—a way to prepare them for the new template of communication in the digital, civic arena. The essays are gathered here with the students' permission and enthusiasm.

Teaching about the intersection of vision and justice means expanding any course syllabus on a near daily basis. It is with that spirit that I hope this volume is seen as a starting point for discussion, an open-source invitation for more collective work.

This publication is deliberately free, thanks to the generous support of the Lambent Foundation and the Ford Foundation. There is past precedent for releasing such a publication at no cost to the public. From 1983 to 1986, and again from 1988 to 1991, Professor Bill Jay worked with his students at the Arizona State University School of Art to produce the *History of Photography* monograph series, which included student essays and photographs, and was available to a public readership free of charge. In a 1996 interview with Darwin Marable, Jay lamented “the isolation of the artist from the culture, from society, and ... academia.” He believed that the responsibility for creating and mitigating this alienation lay within academia, as he noted in *LensWork* in 1993. Throughout his long and esteemed career, Jay positioned himself as a bridge builder rather than a gatekeeper, connecting the discrete worlds of art, academia, and public life.

Deborah Willis serves as a model of an extraordinary educator focused on the public work of race and image-making in American society as much as on the work that happens in the classroom. It is, too, her care and commitment that have inspired the open spirit of this volume and, I believe, the entire field.

This publication is dedicated to the students who represent the future that has rushed in and will not wait.

It is dedicated to those who have walked this path and who will lead the way.

The volume is an encomium to the work of the arts—not merely a respite from life, a sort of luxury, but the way that we have created the more just society in which we are honored to live.

Sarah Lewis is assistant professor of the history of art and architecture and of African and African American studies at Harvard University.



President Barack Obama writes a school excuse note for Alanah Poullard, 5, while visiting with Wounded Warriors and their families in the East Room during their tour of the White House, Sept. 19, 2013

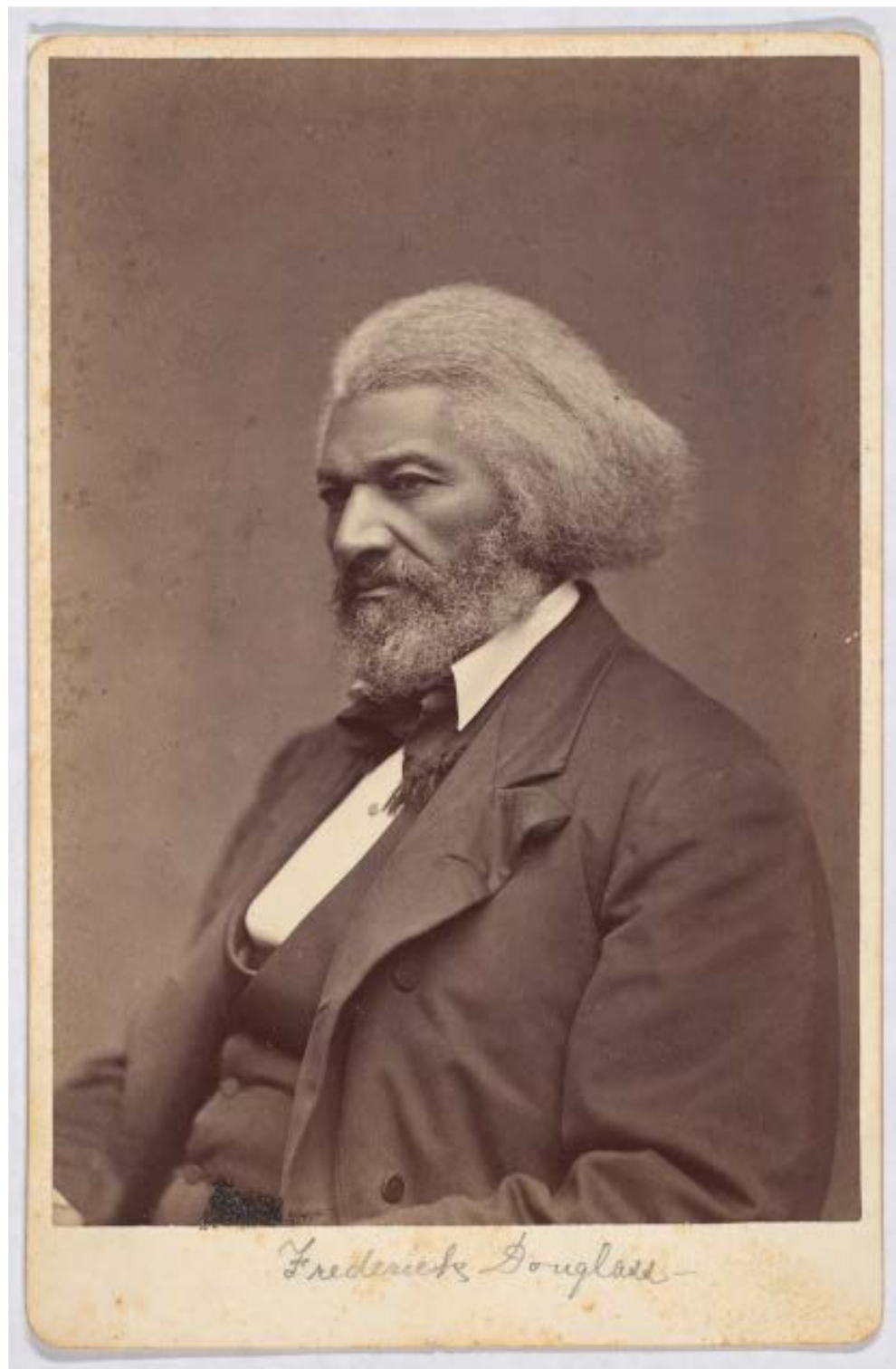
Photograph by Pete Souza/The White House

Jane Evelyn Atwood,
James Baldwin with a
bust of his likeness by
Lawrence Wolhandler
in his hotel room, rue
des Grands Augustins,
Paris, 1975
Courtesy the artist



Art, Race, & Activism

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Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

“Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.” —Frederick Douglass

Since he was photographed more than any other American of his time, it shouldn't surprise us that Frederick Douglass not only used photographic images of himself, like he used his oratory, in the battle to end slavery and to insure for the Negro full citizenship rights, but he also theorized about photography, about its nature and its uses. Douglass was, by all accounts, a master orator on his feet, summoning rhetorical tropes and figures seemingly at will to maximum effect. For someone so urgently concerned with effecting immediate political change, he was extraordinarily

patient in making his case. One of his favorite tropes was chiasmus, repeating two or more words or clauses or grammatical constructions, balanced against each other in reverse order, a rhetorical X, somewhat akin to a linguistic seesaw: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”

And since chiasmus always entails a form of reversal, its potentially political uses are as great as its aesthetic uses, particularly if one is a fugitive slave implicitly making the case for his common humanity with his white reader through the text that reader is holding in her or his hands. Here, rhetoric is called upon to reverse the world's order, the order in which the associations between “slave” and “black” and between “white” and “free” appear to have been willed, fixed, and natural.

“A masterful orator and impassioned activist, the most photographed man in nineteenth-century America was also a theorist on the riveting new medium.”

In his carefully crafted first book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Douglass sets out, through a series of binary oppositions that comprise his extended chiasmus, the salient characteristics of the world the master had made. Masters are your fathers; slaves are your mothers. Masters are white and ride in carriages drawn by horses; slaves are black and arrive on foot in the middle of the night. Slaves tell time by the planting, growing, and harvesting of crops; masters mark time by the calendar. Masters know their exact birth date; slaves cannot. Masters connote and carry civilization, culture; slaves denote and embody savagery, barbarity.

Then, all of a sudden, Douglass reverses these associations, turning them upside down just as surely as if he had grabbed the two branches on each side of the X of the chiasmus with both hands and flipped them, showing that we had gotten these associations wrong all along, that there was nothing natural or fixed about them after all; that they were constructed, arbitrary, and, in fact, evil perversions of the natural order of things in which all men and women are meant to have equal rights.

Once exposed for what it is, the world the master has fabricated can be destroyed, X-ed out. The apparatus of the camera obscura is the optical counterpart of chiasmus, literally the X at the back of the box, the mechanism that reproduces, rotates, and reverses a scene, transforming it into an image flipped 180 degrees. Douglass used photography in the same way, registering, through image of himself after image of himself, that “the Negro,” “the slave,” was as various as any human beings could be, not just in comparison to white people, but even more importantly among and within themselves.

Though it is astonishing that Frederick Douglass was the most photographed man in nineteenth-century America, it does not come as a surprise that he was the most photographed black man in the nineteenth century. Why wouldn't Frederick Douglass have been drawn to this seductive technology to further his antislavery political agenda, to show the variation in forms of black subjectivity, indeed to display individual black specificity, especially his own? Even “the representative colored man in the United States” presented a range of selves over time. There was not “a” Frederick Douglass; there were only Douglasses. And that, for him, was his ultimate claim on being fully and equally and complexly human. Not only did the black object actually, all along, embody subjectivity, but this subjectivity evolved and mutated over time. And that is one of the most important political points about “the nature of the Negro” that Frederick Douglass was able to achieve over a half century, through his manipulation of his own image through the technological wonders of nineteenth-century plate photography.

Douglass was acutely aware that images matter. Perhaps more than any other former slave who wrote about his or her transformation from enslavement to citizenship, Douglass seems to have understood that the war against slavery and the obliteration and reconstitution of one's black subjectivity assumed many shapes and forms more subtle than armed combat and the passage and enforcement of laws—so many of these operating in the realm of the symbolic and the cultural imaginary. And the battlefield on which he could serve as captain, without peer, was that of the representation through photography of a construct that Ralph Waldo Emerson had named “the anti-slave”: “Here is the anti-slave ... now let them emerge, clothed and in their own form.”

What was Frederick Douglass trying to represent and, just as importantly by contrast, what was he trying, through his over 160 photographic portraits, not to represent? Douglass, through these images of himself, is attempting both to display and displace: he is seeking at once to show in two dimensions the contours of the anti-slave, “God's image in ebony,” as the abolitionists like to say, who in essence and in

possibility fundamentally, by definition, shares the blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of every other white human being. Even more directly, however, Douglass was intent on the use of this visual image to erase the astonishingly large storehouse of racist stereotypes that had been accumulated in the American archive of antiblack imagery, the bank of simian and other animal-like caricatures meant to undermine the Negro's claim of a common humanity, and therefore the rights to freedom and citizenship and economic opportunity.

Engaging photographic imagery in this war over the representation of the black subject was a most daunting task. Douglass, in the end, would realize this, as the decade of the 1890s saw the unprecedented proliferation of “Sambo” imagery. Ultimately, though, Douglass saw much more clearly than so many of his colleagues that no single text, no single photograph, no single word nor image, could stanch the Niagara flow of stereotypes that American society would call upon to do the symbolic work of a mode of economic neoslavery and legalized Jim Crow segregation, long after slavery per se had been abolished. But if racist images could not be crushed, they could be countered, and countered with force.

Douglass not only ensured that he was photographed frequently over the course of his professional life, from 1841 to somewhere between twelve and twenty-four hours after he died, but he also theorized about the nature and function of photography in four lectures “on photography and ‘picture-making.’” Douglass tells us in his 1864 speech “Pictures and Progress” that fate had given him both a mission and a text with which to embark upon that mission: “Now the speech I was sent into the world to make was an abolition speech. ... When I come upon the platform the Negro is very apt to come with me. I cannot forget him: and you would not if I did.” “You” would not, he is saying, because “the Negro” is written on his face at a time when the blackness of that face cannot possibly be erased or be rendered transparent or invisible. Hence, he is engaged—one might even say he is trapped—in a discursive arena in which even a lecture about something as seemingly apolitical as photography or art in the end must, by definition, be engaged within and through Douglass's state of being as a black man in a white society in which one's blackness signifies negation.

In “Pictures and Progress,” Douglass further explains that his other motivation for embracing this new technology with such alacrity, on behalf of the Negro, as representative Negro, as the anti-slave, is to counter the racist stereotypes, “the already read text” of the debased, subhuman Negro fabricated and so profusely distributed by the slave power, by supplanting those images with a proliferation

“Why wouldn't Douglass have been drawn to this seductive technology to show the variation in forms of black subjectivity?”

of anticaricatures. No wonder Douglass emerges as the most frequently photographed American in the nineteenth century. He was a reformer on a mission: he seized upon those long-exposure glimpses of black and majestic human forms, miraculously generated by the chiasmic magic of Louis Daguerre's camera obscura, to fabricate—to picture—the very images through which, at long last, the Negro as anti-slave could emerge and then progress, “clothed in his own form.”

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher, Jr. University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University. This essay is adapted from “Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Anti-Slave ‘Clothed and in Their Own Form’” in *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (2015) and was subsequently republished in *Aperture*, issue 223, “Vision & Justice” (Summer 2016).

The Creative Process

James Baldwin

Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone. That all men are, when the chips are down, alone, is a banality—a banality because it is very frequently stated, but very rarely, on the evidence, believed. Most of us are not compelled to linger with the knowledge of our aloneness, for it is a knowledge which can paralyze all action in this world. There are, forever, swamps to be drained, cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed: and none of these things can be done alone. But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The role of the artist, then, precisely, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest; so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

The state of being alone is not meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake. The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearful aloneness which one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help. Or it is like the aloneness of love, the force and mystery which so many have extolled and so many have cursed, but which no one has ever understood or ever really been able to control. I put the matter this way, not out of any

desire to create pity for the artist—God forbid!—but to suggest how nearly, after all, is his state the state of everyone, and in an attempt to make vivid his endeavor. The states of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge.

It is for this reason that all societies have battled with that incorrigible disturber of the peace—the artist. I doubt that future societies will get on with him any better. The entire purpose of society is to create a bulwark against the inner and the outer chaos, literally, in order to make life bearable and to keep the human race alive. And it is absolutely inevitable that when a tradition has been evolved, whatever the tradition is, the people, in general, will suppose it to have existed from before the beginning of time and will be most unwilling and indeed unable to conceive of any changes in it. They do not know how they will live without those traditions which have given them their identity. Their reaction, when it is suggested that they can or that they must, is panic. And we see this panic, I think, everywhere in the world today, from the streets of New Orleans to the grisly battleground of Algeria. And a higher level of consciousness among the people is the only hope we have, now or in the future, of minimizing the human damage.

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, scientists, et cetera—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that the visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

I seem to be making extremely grandiloquent claims for a breed of men and women historically despised while living and acclaimed when safely dead. But, in a way, the belated honor which all societies tender their artists proves the reality of the point I am trying to make. I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own. For the truth, in spite of appearances and all our hopes,

is that everything is always changing and the measure of our maturity as nations and as men is how well prepared we are to meet these changes and, further, to use them for our health.

Now, anyone who has ever been compelled to think about it—anyone, for example, who has ever been in love—knows that the one face which one can never see is one's own face. One's lover—or one's brother, or one's enemy—sees the face you wear, and this face can elicit the most extraordinary reactions. We do the things we do, and feel what we feel, essentially because we must—we are responsible for our actions, but we rarely understand them. It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less. But the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed. There are so many things one would rather not know! We become social creatures because we cannot live any other way. But in order to become social, there are a great many other things which we must not become, and we are frightened, all of us, of those forces within us which perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet, the forces are there, we cannot will them away. All we can do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation. The human beings whom we respect the most, after all—and sometimes fear the most—are those who are most deeply involved in this delicate and strenuous effort: for they have the unshakable authority which comes only from having looked on and endured and survived the worst. That nation is healthiest which has the least necessity to distrust or ostracize or victimize these people—whom, as I say, we honor, once they are gone, because, somewhere in our hearts, we know that we cannot live without them.

The dangers of being an American artist are not greater than those of being an artist anywhere else in the world, but they are very particular. These dangers are produced by our history. They rest on the fact that in order to conquer this continent, the particular aloneness of which I speak—the aloneness in which one discovers that life is tragic, and, therefore, unutterably beautiful—could not be permitted. And that this prohibition is typical of all emergent nations will be proven, I have no doubt, in many ways during the next fifty years. This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. And, in the same way that to become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and, ultimately, without great courage, lies to oneself about all one's interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell

“Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war.”

himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations. We know how a person, in such a paralysis, is unable to assess either his weaknesses or his strengths, and how frequently indeed he mistakes the one for the other. And this, I think, we do. We are the strongest nation in the Western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity which no other nation has of moving beyond the old-world concepts of race and class and caste, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the new world. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. For an artist, the record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced. Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, make freedom real.

James Baldwin was a writer and the author of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), among many other novels and essay collections. This text was originally published in *Creative America* (1962) and was later included in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (1998). It is reprinted here by arrangement with the James Baldwin Estate.



Carrie Mae Weems,
*Grace Notes:
 Reflections for Now*,
 2017. Photograph
 and set design by
 Matt Saunders
 Courtesy Matt Saunders

Carrie Mae Weems Still Believes in Your Humanity

Mattie Kahn

In October 2017, Carrie Mae Weems performed her latest production, *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now* (2017), at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The show commemorates the nine men and women who were killed at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Its title is a nod to the brief, beautiful moments in which President Barack Obama sang “Amazing Grace” to honor a victim of that attack, South Carolina State Senator Clementa Pinckney.

**“When will you stand up?
 And if you’re not standing,
 then you’re part of your
 own problem.”**

Mattie Kahn: The piece was inspired by *Antigone*, and it’s very much in the model of the Greek tragedies. Those dramas have brought people catharsis for centuries. But you’re not looking to give people just an emotional release. It’s more than that. How do you want people to feel when they leave the theater?

Carrie Mae Weems: Responsible. Culpable. Claim that culpability. We’re in this, trying to resolve and understand how we might move forward, and the only way we do that is through seeing ourselves, questioning ourselves. I think that’s what the piece really does. It simply offers a mirror to myself and for the audience. Yes, it’s deep, and it’s complex, but if we turn away from it, then we lose ourselves, and we’ve turned away from the truth.

MK: If you could dream up your ideal audience for this performance, who do you want to see looking out at the work and themselves, as you said?

CMW: It would be wonderful to have an army of conservatives march in and sit there and take it in, but that probably won’t happen. I want anyone who is willing to ask themselves the hard questions: How are you culpable? When you see racism, what is your response? When someone says, “Well, he deserved to die,” how do you respond?

I’m assuming we’ll have a more progressive audience, but our progressive audience is still in command of its own moral authority. And we don’t have any victories to celebrate, either. Any number of progressives are pissed off at Black Lives Matter. “Did they really need to march? Did these young brothers really need to be on their knees in the NFL?” ... When do you stand up? When will you stand up? And if you’re not standing, then you’re part of your own problem. You’re an accomplice in your own disintegration.

So, how do we participate, knowing what we know? I think that’s a question that I’m always asking myself. “I’m f—d up. I’m a racist. I can be sexist. I need to deal with that.” Me! Carrie Mae Weems, who deals with it all the time! I find myself thinking, “Damn, wow, she’s fat.” Or, “Why did they interview her?”

We’re steeped in this culture, which means all of us have to be active resisters to it. That’s what it takes. And if we know that’s what it takes, can we do it? Can we stand up for the truth?

MK: In its own odd way, it’s exciting to feel like you can demand that of yourself and the people around you.

CMW: Yes, I think so. It is exhilarating. It’s exhilarating and uncomfortable, and therefore, it’s necessary.

Mattie Kahn is a journalist and senior editor at *Glamour*. This interview first appeared in the October 25, 2017 issue of *Elle*.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, Shea Cobb with her daughter, Zion, and her mother, Ms. Renée, outside the Social Network banquet hall, 2016, from the series *Flint Is Family*

Courtesy the artist; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome; and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels

Flint Is Family

In a film by LaToya Ruby Frazier, a poet speaks about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan

Shea Cobb

When you think about water, you don't consider government. In fact, you don't consider people at all. Even though we've built plants and machines to alkalize and purify, when you think about it, you only, in your most remote mind, if at all, think about God, something nature intended. When you think about water, you don't consider poison, because poison isn't something you consider for yourself. You don't think about murder, so when you think about water, you never

consider self-destruction. And even though these considerations are not to be had, it is the reason I am becoming the tin man, stiff, hollow, and heartless, because that's the destiny of a dry body, clang and tap dances and emotional breakdowns, because the tears is the closest to lubrication that you'll get.

Without the oil can, we're just sitting, singing "Let My People Go," another freedom song, because the echoes of them old fields been long gone, but we remember them. We think about them backs

that harvested our future irrigation, and we consider only masters' plantations, and how keeping them n—s in one place without fair law and fair play, just makes for good old-fashioned American life. And I'm pointing the finger, because I've read them inconvenience letters, and I read them notices, and before I even ever paid a bill I was still treated like a bottom-feeder, like my taxes don't contribute to their vacations and secret sanctions. I was treated like I ain't American, 'cause when you think about water, you think about Flint, and you line it up the Willie Lynch, and you place that name on Snyder's face, the noose that faced only to watch yourself hang.

What would I do if I could taste God? What would I do if death wasn't served by still rot? What would I do if my baby was going to be safe and sound? What would I do if disease wasn't plaguing my town? What would I do if I could feel water trickle down my spine without drying me out? What would I do if I wasn't self-destructing? What would I do if I could feel?

✱

My name is Shea Cobb. I am a bus driver, a coach, a singer, songwriter, and poet. I'm also a student. I graduated from Southwestern High School. I attended my community college and the University of Michigan-Flint. Born and raised here, since 1984.

Because of my work schedule as a bus driver, I work a split shift, so I'm up at 5, out the door by 5:40. Clock in at 6. I'm a standby driver. That means I get anything that comes down the pipeline. I don't have a set work schedule. The more trips I do, the more money I make, which makes it better for my house, but it takes away from my time with my daughter.

It was rough at first, because the water fountains were still on at school, and then they cut the water fountains off, and then they cut them back on. I asked her one day, I said, "Are your fountains off at your school?" And she said, "No, they're still on." I said, "Do you drink that water?" And she said, "No, I don't, but my friends do." And I was like, "If you see them drinking it and you're thirsty, you go get a bottle of water." Because my daughter will follow people. I can't afford that. So, she's aware. I hate that she's aware.

Since the water situation, I don't cook. I'm discouraged to cook in my house and use my kitchen. We'll go out to eat, and we'll eat on the outskirts of the city.

We don't ingest the water on any level. When we brush our teeth, we brush it with bottled water. We get a bottle of water, and we waterfall it. You brush your teeth, you spit it out, you waterfall your bottle, and you brush some more.

The Flint River is toxic, has been toxic for years. Fecal matter in the Flint River, toxic chemicals and waste dumped in the Flint River. We don't have to drink out the Flint River. We don't swim in it. We don't mess with it. We don't even like the smell of it. When it get hot outside, in downtown Flint, you can smell the Flint River. It stinks. Why would we drink it?

My uncle, who worked for the city over twenty years, told me, "If you ever fall in the Flint River, and that water get in your mouth, you go straight to the hospital."

If I didn't have my daughter, I would stay. I would stay with my mom. Unfortunately, the water crisis is going to pull us apart. We're talking about a situation that will affect the cognitive mind, affect you physically, mentally. I don't want my daughter to grow up like that, and I really would like for my mom to go with me. She said that she would, at first, but like I said, this is a home for her. It's home for me. I hate that I'm going to have to leave her here. But I've got to be the best mom I feel like I can be, for my child, and that's rough.

The women of Flint are strong. We're here, and you don't get to get rid of us at the price of a dollar. We are Flint. We live, we love, we get married. The water crisis does not stop that. It doesn't stop us from living.

Your art, and the ability to hustle and have multiple talents, is what really gets you through. You can't just drive a bus. You gotta do hair, and you can't just do hair. You gotta do poetry, and you can't just spit poetry in Flint, you gotta leave the city and go to other places and get that money too. It's the hustle that gets us through, you know? The ability to be multitalented that helps us survive here and not lose our minds.

Going to the studio is like going to another world. I'm no longer in Flint, there's no more water crisis, it's just me and music.

LaToya Ruby Frazier, an artist and 2015 MacArthur Fellow, photographed Shea Cobb and other women from Flint, Michigan, for a 2016 story in *Elle*. This text is excerpted from Frazier's film *Flint Is Family* (2016).



How Gordon Parks Became Gordon Parks

Deborah Willis in Conversation
with James Estrin

Gordon Parks,
Untitled, 1941
© and courtesy
The Gordon Parks
Foundation

At the beginning of the 1940s, Gordon Parks was a self-taught fashion and portrait photographer documenting daily life in both St. Paul and Chicago. By the end of the decade, he was photographing for *Life* magazine. While his career has been examined closely, both by himself and by others, this formative decade has attracted less attention than his experiences as the first black staff photographer at *Life* and later as a groundbreaking Hollywood filmmaker have.

Deborah Willis, who is a noted photographer and author and the chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, knew Parks well. In 2018, she spoke with James Estrin about Parks and his legacy for the *New York Times*.

James Estrin: **What I find extraordinary is Parks's range and all of these different things during the period from the 1940s to the 1950s.**

Deborah Willis: Gordon was comfortable with knowing—and making different images about different communities. He understood what it meant to be an American in different forms and different ways. At the black newspaper that he worked at in St. Paul, he demanded a byline. He understood what it meant to have his name imprinted on the newspaper when he was making photographs of gorgeous ladies, college students, women who wanted to be models. He's actually part of their dream. He's documenting their dreaming of their lives outside of domestic work—opportunities that were broader.

JE: **The photographs he made for Standard Oil are mostly of white people working. But if you look at the family scenes over dinner you see the composure that he must have had to make them as comfortable as they were.**

DW: I believe that he was able to make people feel at ease. You know, he was just a good soul.

JE: **How did you meet him?**

DW: I was studying photography at the Philadelphia College of Art, and there were no black photographers in the history books. I was working on a paper for one of my teachers and asked, "Where are the black photographers?"

I remembered seeing Gordon's work in *Life* magazine when I was a teenager and was curious about why he was not in the history of photography. I wrote a letter, in purely undergraduate language, that said, "I'm writing a paper on black photographers, I'd like to meet you and talk to you about your work." He sent a letter back and said, "Yes, come and meet me." I met him, and he opened his door, and you know, he'd been in my life ever since.

JE: **So how would you describe him?**

DW: Generous. One word, generous. He listened closely. He understood what I needed, and he offered support. He loved his work. He understood that he had a legacy. And the fact that his photographs were organized, the fact that he knew he wanted his collection to be preserved and his story told by himself and by others.

“Parks was always looking at beauty. Not in terms of sentimental beauty, but understanding beauty in life.”

many other people. Is there something that you think is not often considered but is pivotal to understanding him?

DW: I found that he was always looking at beauty. Not in terms of sentimental beauty, but understanding beauty in life, beauty in living. And I think that that’s something that he was in search of in all of his photographs, about life and beauty in that simple sense. And that’s something that people don’t talk about often.

JE: What was the relationship between him and Langston Hughes?

DW: He was in the environment of all the Harlem writers, and he worked closely with Langston when Langston moved to Chicago to present his play *The Sun Do Move*. They met in rehearsal time, and they made photographs while he was in Chicago. They had a strong bond and a real playful relationship. Gordon was also close to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

JE: And I can see his deep involvement, not just as someone who took the pictures, but as someone who is part of that.

DW: And you see that sense of theatricality in his work. The way that Gordon created the narrative for the *Invisible Man* photographs—not only the manhole cover, but the underground scene with the light bulbs. He’s reading deeply into the text. He understood props as well. That’s why he could easily move right into making films.

JE: Is there anything else that you think is key to understanding him, both as a photographer and as a man?

DW: Well, he understood that his images mattered. That’s why he wanted the byline. And I think that he agreed to make a radical difference looking at black lives in Chicago or in St. Paul.

He understood what mattered. And most people don’t. They think in the moment, but he’s thinking beyond that.

James Estrin is the coeditor of the *New York Times*’ “Lens” section. This conversation was first published by the *New York Times* on October 1, 2018.

Alexandra Bell Is Disrupting Racism in Journalism

Doreen St. Félix

The artist and journalist Alexandra Bell has long been a scrutinizing reader of news media. As a young child in Chicago, she relished receiving copies of the historically black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, which she often read from front to back alongside her mother. Its explicit political anima, visible in the contrast between the *Defender*’s tone and mainstream news coverage, made a lasting impression on Bell. She earned a master’s degree in journalism, from Columbia University, in 2013, and has since honed a public-art practice that exposes biases in print journalism. Her *Counternarratives* series interrogates the shaping and spreading of information and the ways in which narratives in reportage advance the agendas of the powerful. She uses redaction, omission, annotation, and text-editing to alter articles, primarily from the *New York Times*. She then prints out enlarged versions of her deconstructions and plasters them onto walls around the city.

The series had its clandestine debut, in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, on New Year’s Eve in 2016. Bell critiqued the *Times*’ coverage of the death of Mike Brown, in 2014, in which the paper ran side-by-side profiles of the victim and his

killer, Darren Wilson, under the joint headline “Two Lives at a Crossroads in Ferguson.” Bell and many other readers felt that the framing of equivalence, and of tragic coincidence, diminished what had happened that August afternoon. Bell erected a diptych of her own, with Wilson’s profile whittled down to read, simply, “Officer Darren Wilson fatally shot an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown.” The second panel bore the new headline “A Teenager with Promise,” I noted last year, when I interviewed Bell.

Since then, Bell has emerged as the people’s public editor. Her *Counternarratives* works now surface not only on the façades of buildings, but on the white walls of galleries and museums. Earlier this year, the International Center of Photography gave Bell an Infinity Award in the applied category. A new interview with Bell [available on newyorker.com] was conducted in her studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn. In it, you can see potential edits of articles from the *Times* tacked onto the wall above her desk, where she uses InDesign to remake the news. “I think everything is about race. Black communities, gay communities, immigrant communities feel a lot of media representation to be inadequate, biased. There’s a lot of reporting around

JE: And why do you think that is?

DW: Absence. The absence of the stories that he probably missed when he looked at the magazines while he worked on the railroad in the 1930s. He understood the silence of African American history in terms of the larger story. And he was determined to make sure that his story was told and the breadth of his story was told from multiple perspectives, from a boy growing up in the Midwest to someone who had a dream about being a photographer. His life was complex. And it was not one-dimensional, as most people think when they see someone who is black and poor in that time period.

This was a time when *The American Negro Exposition* was in Chicago in 1940, and he was traveling back and forth with a young family. Those experiences probably left an impact on him, especially when he started going to the Art Institute of Chicago to look at art and tried to place himself within that framework of art-making and art-creating.

JE: His life has been widely examined—by himself in three memoirs, and in the last few years by



Alexandra Bell,
A Teenager With Promise, 2017,
 from the series
Counternarratives.
 Installation at
 Sincerely, Tommy,
 Brooklyn, New York
 Courtesy the artist

“Bell has emerged as the people’s public editor.”

police violence and black men, and I realized a lot of the arguments we were having were about depictions,” she says. Bell has been grouped into a class of black artists considered to be solely responding to the crisis of police brutality. But she is contesting the bones of journalism. “I am really trying to see if I can disrupt subliminal messaging about who should be valued,” she says.

“There are these subtle ways that racism works in the oldest of institutions,” she continues. One moment in the video shows Bell discussing the Unite the Right rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. “I’m thirty-five. I’ve never seen a torch rally,” she says. She demurs that she suspected that the *Times* would screw up coverage of the event in some way. It ended up being the layout. Bell knows to anticipate soft bigotries even in elements like design. “The problem here *was* the layout,” she says. “It was a side piece. ... The layout doesn’t speak to the severity of these issues.”

Doreen St. Félix is a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. This article first appeared on newyorker.com on May 29, 2018.

Anna Deavere Smith Is All Ears

Nicholas DeRenzo

Anna Deavere Smith may be America’s greatest listener. Though she’s best known for scene-stealing turns on *Nurse Jackie* and *Black-ish*, her true passion lies in creating documentary theater, which has earned her a MacArthur “genius” grant and Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize nominations. Her process involves delving into hot-button issues by interviewing people and re-creating their responses verbatim, conjuring worlds with a switch in posture, a verbal tic, or a colloquialism. This approach has yielded kaleidoscopic one-woman shows on American health care and the LA riots, but her latest project is her most ambitious.

For *Notes From the Field*—which premiered onstage in 2015 and aired on HBO in 2018—Deavere Smith spoke to more than 250 people about the school-to-prison pipeline. Her look at mass incarceration and education reform sees her playing characters such as Kevin Moore, the Baltimore man who filmed Freddie Gray’s arrest, and Bree Newsome, who climbed the South Carolina State House flagpole to remove the Confederate flag.

“Every time I open my heart to someone who is in pain or struggling, I feel like the light’s coming in, and I’m becoming a stronger person.”

Nicholas DeRenzo: **What led you to explore this form of documentary theater?**

Anna Deavare Smith: There are certainly people who have worked in this form; the great Chicago journalist Studs Terkel comes to mind. They helped substantiate an idea that my grandfather gave me as a kid: “If you say a word often enough, it becomes you.” What became critical to me was to be present for an interview and then, to use his phrase, I become them, with an overall idea of trying to absorb America word for word. It was my antidote to having grown up in a segregated environment. I’ve spent my adult life chasing that which is not me as an artist.

ND: You’ve called the show part of a “new civil rights movement.”

ADS: To quote Gloria Steinem, “I’m a hope-aholic.” I’m hopeful that we are becoming more and more aware of inequality—particularly in this political climate. We have what I call a “protective amnesia” in America. We forget things, and then we have to have episodes like the killing of Michael Brown and the rash of videos we saw after that to remind us that we live in a gravely unequal society and that those who are poor, in all colors, are more susceptible to injustice and even brutality. It’s why a movement like Black Lives Matter could start. But the ripple effect is that we start to look at not just the police, but also the fact that our schools, which we have always looked to as the great equalizing force, are in big trouble.

ND: What inspired you to pursue the topic of schools?

ADS: I didn’t know anything about the school-to-prison pipeline. A philanthropist on this beat, Ann Beeson, invited me to her offices and had people from around the country telling me horror stories about five-year-olds being handcuffed for having tantrums. A kid from Baltimore, my hometown, had peed in a watercooler, and they were going to take him to jail. My mother was a teacher—to me, teachers save lives. The last thing anybody would do is send somebody to jail. A couple of days later, I was in hair and makeup at *Nurse Jackie*, next to the actress Eve Best, and I said, “I just can’t get this out of my mind.” And she said, “Whatever happened to mischief?” That’s the moment when I decided to do this project. Rich kids get “mischief”; poor kids get pathologized and sent to jail for being kids. The country is so afraid of poor kids. I think it’s because we’re basically afraid that these “wild” individuals who are caught up in this epidemic could spread it to ourselves and our children and contaminate us all.

ND: Do you feel like you’re giving these people voices?

ADS: What are you talking about?! They’re giving me a voice. Because of Niya Kenny [who filmed her classmate getting pulled out of a chair and arrested in their high school in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2015], I get to end the first act with “Mind your business? Seems like something you need to make your business.” Lights out, applause, applause, applause, hollers, and yells. I’m an actor. I’m just running my mouth.

ND: Watching the show is a very emotional experience. How do you stay optimistic?

ADS: People say, “Don’t you get sad? Don’t you get down?” A rabbi, David Wolpe, once told me, “The only whole heart is a broken one; it’s the kind of cracked that lets light in.” Every time I open my heart to someone who is in pain or struggling, I feel like the light’s coming in and I’m becoming a stronger person. I’m grateful that people feel I’m worthy to carry their stories. Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” [1849] has a great line: “I loved the weight I had to bear.” That’s how I feel about that which could otherwise be considered darkness. As an American, I love the weight I have to bear.

Nicholas DeRenzo is a writer and senior editor at *Hemispheres*. This interview was first published in the February 2018 issue of *Rhapsody*.



A Tribute to Deborah Willis

Sarah Lewis

“Few understand the history of the nexus of power and beauty and how it operates internationally better than Deborah Willis. Few ever will.”

To introduce our honoree for the Vision Award from the Center for Photography at Woodstock tonight is an extraordinary privilege. It is also almost an impossible task. How can I, or how can anyone, honor a scholar, an artist, and an educator who has created the headwaters of the field of the history of African American photography with one set of remarks?

Through her scores of publications, exhibitions, and indefatigable teaching, Professor Deborah Willis has nourished the expansion and flourishing of the entire field. Select an event going on somewhere around the globe that has to do with African American and African diasporic photography, and chances are that she has inspired it, has organized it, or has been invited to participate in it. One of my first questions for her is always, “Where are you in the world today?” Ask a young photographer about who has inspired them? She will be on nearly anyone’s list. She is omnipresent.

This celebration is not only about Deborah Willis’s scholarship, but about her heart, her extraordinary generosity. She has given a platform to countless African American artists with probing photographic exhibitions, for more than twenty years, at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, and now as the university professor and chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the

Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. She has an inspiring passion for this field that many of us in this room have seen countless times.

What is behind her work is an ethos, a perspective on life that is worth adopting as a model: that we are all worthy of beauty, and that beauty is a kind of representational justice. She has a sense that representation worthy of our dignity is a right and is crucial for the very spirit and progress of African American culture.

What unites her distinctive projects is a focus on the force of beauty in the history of modernism. She is interested in how beauty is posed, constructed, imagined, reviewed, critiqued, and contested in art, the media, and everyday culture. In each of her pictures or the works of those that she has installed on exhibition walls, we see a meditation on how we live in the shadows of the many negotiations in the marriage of race, beauty, and power. Few understand the history of the nexus of power and beauty and how it operates internationally better than Deborah Willis. Few ever will.

When I was asked to guest edit the “Vision & Justice” issue of *Aperture*, I first called her for her insights. Then I considered the work of Frederick Douglass. Her work is carrying a torch perhaps first held by him. During the Civil War, Douglass argued that pictures would have more efficacy than combat for racial reconciliation. Douglass in this speech said that it might take over 150 years for us to understand what he meant. I believe that a person like Deborah Willis is who he had in mind, that someone like her is who he hoped would come.

To live out this mission, she came in the form of something of a unicorn, a woman who is at once a prodigious photographer, a world-class educator, and a prolific scholar.

When she came to my class recently at Harvard University, I received notes from the students afterwards. One note thanked me for bringing her to class. “She has a wisdom and knowing that I had not seen before,” the student said. “She is the kind of woman that I aspire to be.”

Her name, we know, is Deborah Willis. We lovingly call her Deb, not just out of endearment. We use her first name because there is only one of her in our field. She is our twenty-first-century photographic icon.

We salute her, we honor her, and we continue the work because of her, inspired by her example. Please join me in granting Deb with this Vision Award from the Center for Photography at Woodstock.

Sarah Lewis’s speech honoring awardee Deborah Willis was originally presented at the Center for Photography at Woodstock Gala in New York on October 12, 2017.



Norman Rockwell’s Vision of the Four Freedoms Left Some People Out

Lily Rothman

It was no surprise that Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* paintings (1943) were a hit. Though the Office of War Information had turned down the set as not suitable for government use, Rockwell was already a nationally famous artist at the time, and the *Saturday Evening Post* knew to plan a major publicity campaign around its 1943 release of the four now-famous images. The timing was right: As World War II raged on, an interpretation of the Four Freedoms, an idea introduced to the nation during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address, felt particularly urgent. The *Saturday Evening Post* received sixty thousand letters about the images, according to Deborah Solomon's Rockwell biography, *American Mirror* (2013), and the exhibition of the originals was a massive hit. Even the government changed its mind, printing millions of poster versions.

Today, seventy-five years later, those four images—*Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear*—remain some of history's most iconic visual representations of the American idea. But they were always more aspiration than reality. As *Time* observed shortly after the posters first made news, Rockwell's work was "a loving image of what a great people likes to imagine itself to be."

One gap between Rockwell's images and reality was obvious to artist Hank Willis Thomas and photographer Emily Shur. Though the four original images contain a relatively large cast of characters—including specific representations of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the *Freedom of Worship* tableau—that group barely brushes against the depth of American diversity at the time, much less today.

"[Rockwell] was one of the people who really shaped the iconography of America and our visual culture," Thomas tells *Time*. "There are a lot of people who are missing in those images."

So Thomas and Shur set out to address that problem, with a new project that attempts to capture the magic of these iconic images while filling in that particular blank. It's an idea that's been brewing for years: In 2016, Thomas and cofounder Eric Gottesman launched a nonpartisan organization they called For Freedoms, with the idea of helping artists get involved in civic issues. Last year, Thomas recruited Shur, a friend, to help him finally bring its eponymous project to life—"to make a portrait of the America that we live in," as Thomas puts it. (Photographer Wyatt Gallery was also asked to help as a producer on the project.)

Over the course of two separate shoots, they invited friends, acquaintances, and near-strangers to pose for photographic re-creations of the original paintings. Though they were worried nobody would show up, they say something "clicked" once people realized the import of the project, and word began to spread. All told, more than one hundred participants came through the studio—including celebrities, such

as the actor and activist Rosario Dawson, and people with personal connections to the freedoms, such as the Japanese American filmmaker Robert A. Nakamura, who spent time as a child in an internment camp. Their varied cast included Native Americans, trans people, immigrants, activists, and many others, as they strove to find representatives of as many meanings of "American" as possible.

So it was that, confronted with a problem that also faced Rockwell, they soon realized that they couldn't contain America's diversity in just four images—not even composites. (Rockwell also used that technique in his work.) As a result, they ended up with eighty-two final images.

Out of those, a select portfolio of *Four Freedoms* sets will form the backbone of a national billboard campaign that is part of For Freedoms' 50 State Initiative, a national "creative collaboration," launched in September [2018], which aims to use public art, exhibitions, and community meetings as platforms for civic life. (The Norman Rockwell Museum is also holding its own commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the images, including a separate set of "reimaginings" of the images by contemporary artists.)

"I hope that people feel that it's an accurate representation of our everyday population now," says Shur. "Even though I'm sure there's someone we missed in there, I really feel 100% truthful when I say that we really have tried to get such a diverse group."

Thomas also acknowledges that it's not possible to include everyone in the American canvas, and that people who see only a few of the billboards may feel left out—but the expanding cast is part of what makes the idea appealing.

"If we want to hold on to this idea of a classic America, we also need to update it as our country changes," Thomas says, "which means that 75 years from now our pictures will likely mean something different."

Previous page:
Hank Willis Thomas and Emily Shur in collaboration with Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery of For Freedoms, *Freedom from Want*, 2018
Courtesy the artists and For Freedoms

Lily Rothman is a journalist and senior editor at *Time*. This article first appeared in *Time* on October 12, 2018.

Pictures and Progress

Amanda Gorman

*I remember I am a house full of glimmering glass,
The chaos left from the battle and a battalion of gazes.
It is a maze of shells, pieces of black
Unexploded and unexplored.*

*I remember my ancestors.
Bare-backed, bent-backed,
Who built houses full of windows,
Had wombs full of glass,
But never had mirrors of their own,
Never had a home to know themselves
In their own image.*

*How must it have been when the Civil War
Tore from Gettysburg into a transfigured roar
In daguerreotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes,
Electrotypes, in cartes de visite, in the photograph,
My oh my, did Douglass keel over and laugh?
What must have it been like to go from
Being an image of property,
To being the image of progress,
To demand to be more than a picture,
But nothing less than a person.*

*They knew this battle well,
Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, and Harriet Jacobs,
W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T., and Sojourner Truth,
They all knew the truth that photos could
Be the wound and the weapon, but also the hope
and the healing.*

*How too they must've played host
To the clatter of glass and light inside themselves,
crying for freedom, loud as cannons at Sumter.*

*Frederick Douglass said: "The servant girl can now see
a likeness of herself,*

*When once "luxury of a likeness was the exclusive
privilege of the rich and great."*

*And the luxury of likeness is still a luxury and a load
we are learning.
But we will not wait for our vision to be written by
the violence of victors.
Our bodies no longer be the glove of every gaze except
our own,
Because today we are the masters of our own
portraiture,
Where pictures mean people, mean progress,
mean process, mean protest, mean the project of
vision-making, the project of democracy-making,
For a people to be rendered visible, indivisible,
vivid and vibrant as all the glass we carry,
We cannot just have a vision of justice.
We must be able to envision ourselves in that vision
for justice to be served,
For the right to representation that we all deserve.*

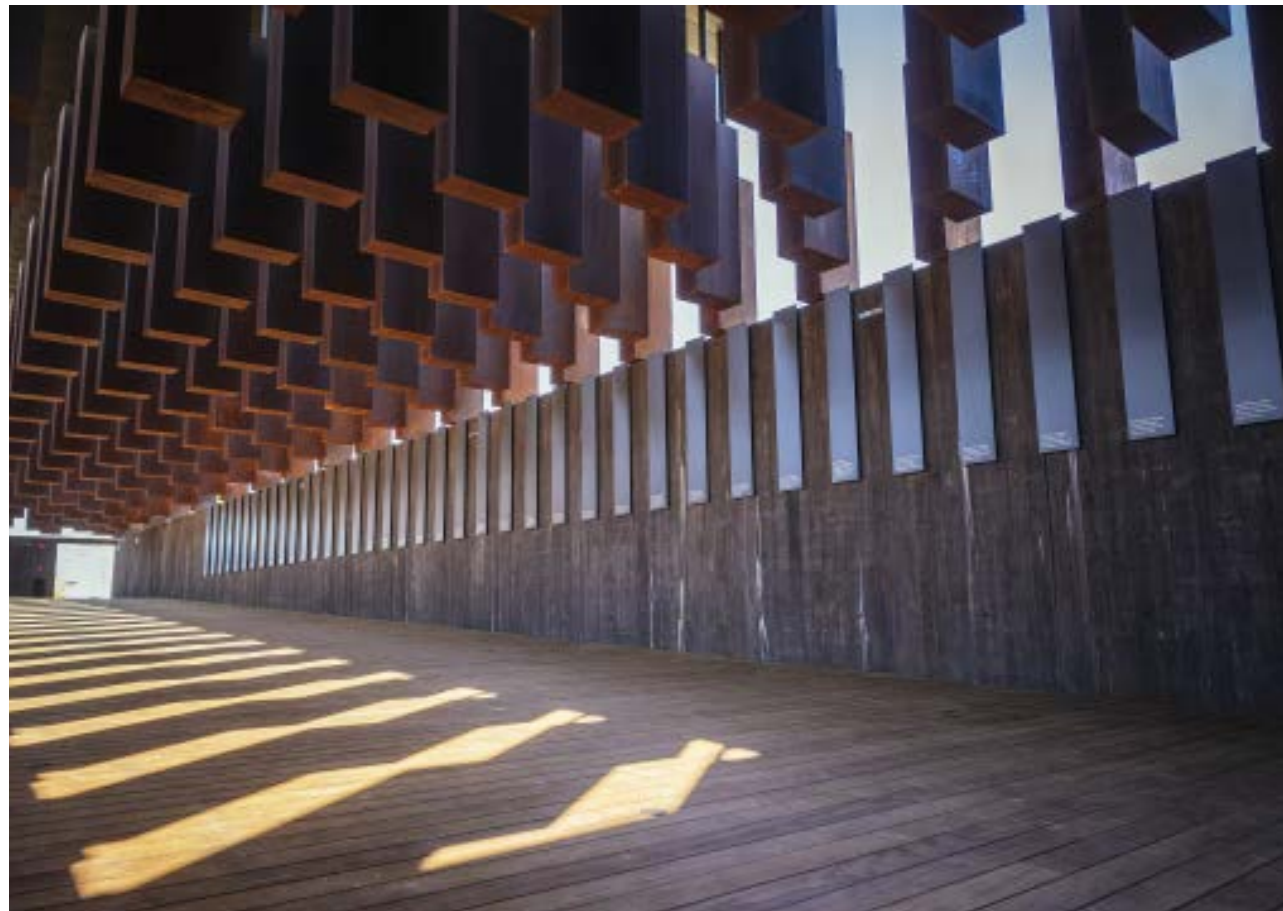
*I remember we all are houses of masses of glass
From battalions past,
Managing to hold ourselves together.
And oh, how glorious are our windows,
How new our mirrors,
Scrubbed and kissed
So we might be able to know ourselves in the reflection
So we might roar back to the vision there.*

Amanda Gorman, '20, is a poet, a student at Harvard University, and the first-ever youth poet laureate of the United States.

Each of the 816 steel slabs at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice—hanging from the ceiling at even intervals—represents a U.S. county where a lynching occurred. The six-acre site, overlooking the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, demands a reckoning with one of the nation's least recognized atrocities, a decades-long campaign of racist terror.

April 20, 2018

Photograph by Audra Melton/The New York Times/Redux



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Truth & Reconciliation

**Bryan Stevenson in Conversation
with Sarah Lewis**

A visionary legal thinker, Bryan Stevenson has protected the rights of the vulnerable through his work as a death-row lawyer. With the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an organization he founded in 1989, Stevenson has made strides in ending mass incarceration and challenging racial and economic injustice. He has argued cases before the Supreme Court, recently winning a watershed ruling that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for children seventeen and under are unconstitutional. Stevenson's 2014 memoir, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, recounts his experiences navigating an unfair criminal justice system.

But his work extends beyond the legal realm—Stevenson is invested in shifting cultural narratives and making history visible. In 2017, Harvard University professor and art historian Sarah Lewis visited Stevenson at his office in Montgomery, Alabama, for an extended conversation. Central to their discussion were Stevenson's projects that opened in 2018: the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which honors the lives of thousands of African Americans lynched in acts of racial terrorism in the United States, and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, which traces a historical line between slavery, lynching, segregation, and mass incarceration. Of his work, Stevenson remarks, "acts of truth telling have a visual component."

“It’s going to take cultural work that disrupts the narrative in a visual way to force a more honest accounting of our past.”

Sarah Lewis: **It’s a rare privilege to be able to talk with someone doing work in the realm of justice who understands the role of culture in shifting our narratives regarding racial inequality. How did you arrive at a place of seeing the importance of culture for getting people to understand this work?**

Bryan Stevenson: When I first started going to death row in the 1980s, I was constantly seeing things that communicated really important truths about the experience of the men and women I was meeting in these desperate places. You would see people interact with each other, constantly sharing gestures of compassion and love and support. You’d witness people acting in ways that were so human. And yet they were being condemned, in large part, because there was a judgment about their absence of humanity.

To counter the unforgiving judgment, I wanted other people to see what I saw. And, if anything, it was through the experience of being in jails and prisons, year after year—seeing this rich humanity and the redemption and transformation of individuals, despite the harshness of the environments—that I became persuaded that if other people could see what I see, they would think differently about the issues presented in my work. So, in the 1990s, when we first started representing our work in a modest way, images became an important part. In our first report we used a picture of the Scottsboro Boys. And we also used a picture of a client with compelling features who had been on death row for twenty years. For me, it has always been clear that there is a way in which photography can illuminate what we believe and what we know and what we understand.

After twenty years of doing that work—and we had a lot of success, but we also saw the limits—I became aware that the rights framework, the insistence on the rule of law, was still going to be constrained by the metanarratives that push judges to stop at a certain point: the environment outside the court. That’s what pushed me to think more critically about narrative, not just within a brief, within a case, within an action, but more broadly. And when it comes to narrative struggle, there is nothing that has been more confounding than racial inequality.

SL: There’s much work happening in the arts around the nexus of art, justice, and culture. But you’re doing the work of having this become more understood in the wider realm. It’s so crucial. Something that I asked myself as I began this work was: What is the connection between culture and justice? This piece about “narrative” is what unlocks that.

BS: Absolutely. I’ve gotten to the point where I believe that the North won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative war. They were able to hold on to the ideology of white supremacy and the narrative of racial difference that sustained slavery and shaped social, economic, and political conditions in America. And because the South won the narrative war, it didn’t take very long for them to reassert the same racial hierarchy that stained the soul of this nation during slavery and replicate the violence and racial oppression that existed before the great insurrection.

It’s the narrative of racial difference that condemns African Americans to one hundred years of segregation, exclusion, and terror, following emancipation. Had we paid more attention to the narrative, we would not have seen the U.S. Supreme Court strike down all of those acts by Congress in the 1870s that were designed to protect emancipated black people and create racial equality. But the Supreme Court embraced the

narrative that basically maintained that black lives are not worth risking further alienation of the South. It wasn’t about law for the court. The law said that we were all equal, but the narrative allowed the court to accommodate inequality and racial terror.

Narrative struggle is where we have to pay attention if we want to avoid replicating these dynamics as we continue to face the same problem of racial divide. ...

SL: You talked about the need to shift our cultural infrastructure in the United States because of the deliberate silence about racial terror, and, of course, this connects to mass incarceration. But can you talk about the shifts that you’re hoping will occur with the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the museum in Montgomery?

BS: We have to make our history of racial inequality visible. We have been so inundated with these narratives of American greatness and how wonderful things have been in this country that it’s going to take cultural work that disrupts the narrative in a visual way to force a more honest accounting of our past. People take great pride in the Confederacy because they actually don’t associate it with the abuse and victimization of millions of enslaved black people. So that has to be disrupted.

What appeals to me about the markers is that they are public; everyone encounters them. We can create a museum. We can create indoor spaces that try to express and deal with these issues. But a lot of the people who need this education are never going to step inside those places. Public markers, however, can’t be ignored, and we have continued that effort with our work on lynching. Our goal is to mark as many of the lynching sites in America as possible. We use the words *racial terrorism* on each one of the markers. We name the victims. We give a narrative that contextualizes the brutality and torture black people endured. I do think that’s important, to challenge the public landscape, which has been complicit in sustaining these narratives of white supremacy and racial inequality. That’s another way in which acts of truth telling have a visual component. If we just go to the public square and people say some words, it doesn’t have the same power as permanent symbols of collective memory.

We are opening the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, which will acknowledge over four thousand victims of lynchings and identify over eight hundred counties in America where racial terrorism took place. Hundreds of six-foot monuments will be on the site, including sculptures created by artists who contextualize lynching within an understanding of slavery, segregation, and contemporary police violence. Deeper exploration of these issues is

then possible in the museum, and all of this, for me, is really exciting. Particularly in these political times where you’ve seen the retreat and obfuscation of historical truth.

SL: It occurs to me, and I wonder if this is correct, that you focused on your own experience of needing narrative to communicate what you were seeing with your clients—how racial terror and lynching have structured the criminal justice system and the landscape of racial inequality.

BS: Yes, absolutely. It’s not a surprise that after emancipation, people went from being called “slaves” to being called “criminals.” Convict leasing and lynching were about criminalizing black people. Rosa Parks makes her stand, and she’s immediately criminalized. Those women who fought for equality on buses here in Montgomery, what they were being threatened with was a formal designation as criminals: Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, all of these women.

The notion that resistance to racial inequality makes you a dangerous criminal has always been there. So, then, it’s not a surprise that after the success of the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, prosecutors begin focusing on “voter fraud” in the black community, followed by this new War on Drugs, which then leads to the United States having the largest incarcerated population in the world. The rate of incarceration is just unprecedented.

I think that the criminalization of black people, and now brown people who are deemed illegal because of their state of national origin, is very much a part of the American story, and it’s been present with us in ways that we just haven’t acknowledged.

This conversation, adapted for length, was originally published in *Aperture*, issue 231, “Prison Nation” (Spring 2018).



Unknown
photographer,
Mary Hinkson
Jackson (left) and
Donald McKayle
(right) on tour with
the Martha Graham
Dance Company in
Spoleto, Italy, 1960
Courtesy the Hinkson
Jackson Family

In Pursuit of the Marvelous

Elsa Hardy

On a frigid winter afternoon, I sat in a reading room at Harvard University’s Widener Library searching for information about Julian Abele, the second African American to earn a degree in architecture, in 1902, and one of the library’s designers. Poring over material on the building’s long and storied history, I finally found him, mentioned alongside an unexpected name: my great-grandfather’s.

Despite Abele’s groundbreaking career, his innumerable architectural contributions, from private mansions to museums to college campuses, are not widely known. Duke University archivist William E. King noted that “scattered sources, infrequent newspaper articles, and reminiscences of family and friends created over decades constitute the primary sources of information about Abele.”¹ Information about his work on the Widener Library project is particularly scant. There are only a few mentions of Abele in the Harvard University Archives. In many of them, his name is misspelled; in others, he is referred to anonymously as a draftsman. Yet, as

Julian Abele rose to prominence in the world of architecture, he changed the landscape of the country that subjugated him.

My revelatory source was described in the library catalog as a book, *Julian Abele and the Architecture and the Architecture of Bon Vivant* by James G. Spady (1982). I had waited patiently for it to arrive from its off-site location. How ironic, I thought to myself, that of all the books in this library, the one on its architect lives somewhere else. *Book* proved to be a generous term: the library attendant handed me a pamphlet consisting of a mere six pages. Among the friends who had supplied Spady with information about Abele was my great-grandfather, Dr. DeHaven “De” Hinkson.

Both the Abeles and the Hinksons belonged to educated, middle-class families in black Philadelphia. But, as it turns out, the Abeles were not only peers; they were also neighbors, and our family trees intersected in more ways than one.

Spady writes that oral history accounts have assured Abele’s place in the minds of many “OPs,” or

“Olde Philadelphians.” One such OP is my great-aunt Bette, De’s only living child. At ninety-five, Bette could not recall many specific memories of Abele. “I just knew him as a member of a family who were family friends,” she said. “But I knew he was an architectural genius, and I knew he was famous.” She remembers eavesdropping on a conversation about Abele’s marriage to a French woman, Marguerite Bulle. “When I was little I had big ears, so I have some facts. But they might need to be verified,” she giggled.

Though De was younger than Abele and his siblings by at least a decade, they shared similar professional trajectories. “They were making up for an education that had been denied earlier,” Bette explained. Abele’s oldest brother, Robert Abele, was a doctor. In 1907, he cofounded Mercy Hospital, the only Philadelphia hospital that would accept black patients.² Robert financed his younger brother’s training in architecture, and he also forged a path in the field of medicine that De would follow: in 1911, De started medical school, and a few years later he began an internship at the same hospital Robert had cofounded.³

In addition to their professional and familial entanglements, the two black Philadelphian families shared an emphasis on the arts long before the dawn of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s and ’70s. In the words of Spady, they were “pursuers of the marvelous.”⁴

Abele is best known for his prolific output as an architect, but he was also a painter and made furniture, jewelry, and lithographs. His son and nephew were trained as architects, as were two of his grandchildren. Over in the Hinkson house, Marian Anderson was a frequent visitor and gave piano lessons to De’s daughters—my great-aunt Bette and my grandmother Mary, who would grow up to be a dancer.

My late grandmother, Mary Hinkson Jackson, was a product of the subsequent generation. Undoubtedly influenced by the community of artists around whom she had been raised, she understood visibility, movement, and justice to be deeply connected. She was among the first two black dancers to integrate the Martha Graham Dance Company in 1953, and she traveled the world performing and teaching. In one photograph from 1960, my grandmother and Donald McKayle dance on a city street in Spoleto, Italy. With arms outstretched, they take up space in a country not their own amid the medieval architecture that had so inspired Abele decades earlier. Though they were thousands of miles from the neighborhoods and courtrooms in which the civil rights movement was being fought, my grandmother made sure I knew that moving her body was both a privilege and a fight of its own kind.

Saidiya Hartman considers the aesthetic afterlife of slavery. “[T]he past, the present and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather ...

we live the simultaneity of that entanglement. This is almost common sense for black folk.”⁵ As I sat in Abele’s Widener Library unraveling the threads connecting my family to his through time and space, never had I felt this entanglement so acutely. The six pages that felt flimsy when they were first delivered to me suddenly seemed rife with information and possibility. Hartman asks, “what is the character of the aesthetic in the context of terror? Does death find its antidote in beauty?”⁶ Perhaps her words illuminate an otherwise shadowy archival trail left in Abele’s wake. One generation removed from the Civil War and another two from the civil rights movement, Abele quietly worked in spaces he was not always allowed to enter to create beauty that would endure, building by building, sketch by sketch.

- 1 William E. King, “The Discovery of an Architect: Duke University and Julian F. Abele,” *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 7.
- 2 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.
- 3 W. Lorenzo Walker, “DeHaven Hinkson, M.D., 1891,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 66, no. 4 (July 1974): 339.
- 4 James G. Spady, “Julian Abele and the Architecture of Bon Vivant” (Philadelphia: Black History Museum Committee, 1982), 2.
- 5 Saidiya Hartman, quoted in Thora Seimsen, “On Working With Archives: An Interview with Writer Saidiya Hartman,” *The Creative Independent*, April 18, 2018, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives>.
- 6 Ibid.

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Unknown
photographer, Horace
Trumbauer and
Julian Abele perusing
an architecture book,
ca. mid-1930s
The Free Library of
Philadelphia

Excavating Names Lost

Esteban Arellano

public’s awareness. As the crude protest structures arose, other students protested the shacks themselves, claiming a violation to their “rights as students to a beautiful campus.” Susan Cook, a student and Abele’s great-grandniece, responded in a written statement, claiming her great-granduncle “was a victim of apartheid” in this country and would have supported the divestment as well.

Cook’s letter was the first time Abele’s role had been so publicly acknowledged by the school, surprising even Duke’s administration. But Abele’s absence from the consciousness of Duke was much more than just a technicality. At Duke, Abele constructed a world in which he could not belong. While his conception of Duke’s buildings is recorded in the university’s archives, it is unclear whether or not Abele ever set foot on campus.

Almost a century after his career ended, Abele has started to emerge from the shadows of his work. Duke has taken significant steps to rectify his obscurity; in 2016, the school named the campus’s main area (to which Duke Chapel sits adjacent) Abele Quad. At Harvard, the process is just beginning.

A tour of Harvard University feels like a stroll through a phone book. When I first visited it in high school, our guide led us from site to site, reciting an ocean of names from the university’s rich history. Some were familiar—George Washington, John F. Kennedy—and the rest would become commonplace a few years later when I became a student myself. However, it takes even longer to excavate those names that have been omitted. While most students know the mythic history of Widener Library’s namesake, few know about one of the library’s designers, Julian Abele, a prominent African American architect.

In 1902, Abele was the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of Architecture. Four years later, he joined a firm led by Horace Trumbauer, where he rose to the position of chief designer in just three years. But while Abele contributed to over four hundred designs, the attributions still fell to Trumbauer. So, while the family of Harry Elkins Widener selected Trumbauer—a family friend who designed many Widener mansions—to create Harvard’s library, Abele played a significant role in the design.

“The lines are all Mr. Trumbauer’s,” Abele said of his work on the Free Library in Philadelphia, “but the shadows are all mine.”

Indeed, the shadows of Abele continue to linger over the spaces he designed.

During the 1986 protests against Duke University’s investments in apartheid South Africa, students erected shanties in front of Duke Chapel—a building, like Widener Library, with a soaring stature that dominates the campus. And like Widener, the chapel—in addition to Duke’s library, football stadium, gym, medical school, religion school, hospital, and faculty houses—was designed by Abele beyond the

“While most students know the mythic history of Widener Library’s namesake, few know about one of the library’s designers, Julian Abele, a prominent African American architect.”

Esteban Arellano, ’21, studies history and literature at Harvard University. He is from Denver, Colorado. Esteban is a Vision & Justice Project student ambassador.



Harvard University's President Drew Faust (left) and Congressman John Lewis (right) unveil a plaque that recognizes four enslaved people who worked at Wadsworth House at Harvard University. April 6, 2016
 Photograph by Rose Lincoln for Harvard University
 © Harvard University

At Wadsworth House, Truth Reveals a History Obscured

Maya Jenkins

“The plaque is an opportunity for all people to reckon with our collective history.”

It is impossible to remain grounded in an obscured history, impossible to build upon an ignored foundation, impossible to conceive of a just future without an honest and open understanding of the past. In the United States, and at Harvard University, much of the path we walk on holds within it histories steeped in lives stolen and labor forced. To walk on that path is to be responsible for telling the stories of those who built it. In 2016, the then president of Harvard, Drew Faust, recognized that responsibility when she held a remembrance for the “stolen lives in Harvard’s history.”

That remembrance was held on the outskirts of Harvard Yard outside of a yellow house, Wadsworth House. Its full history has long been obscured, its foundation has long been ignored, but its western wall now holds a plaque with the power to present an honest understanding of the past and facilitate the conception of a just future. In the 1700s, it served as a home to the presidents of Harvard. It also housed four enslaved people: Titus, Venus, Juba, and Bilhah. The Wadsworth plaque is a dedication to those four people, to their lives, and acknowledges the great injustice of their enslavement, as well as their erasure in Harvard’s history.

The plaque, a dark gray metal with engraved writing, reads:

*Titus & Venus
 Lived and worked here as enslaved persons in the household of President Benjamin Wadsworth (1725–1737)*

*Juba & Bilhah
 Lived and worked here as enslaved persons in the household of President Edward Holyoke (1737–1769)*

As President Faust said during the remembrance, “We name the names to remember these stolen lives.” Indeed, by saying the names of these enslaved peoples, by carving their existences into the building that once housed and imprisoned them, the Harvard community recognized and honored the human integrity of Titus, Venus, Juba, and Bilhah. Not much is known about these four people—their lives were largely documented by those who owned them. But there can be no question of the significance of the work that they, and other people of color, did at Harvard, even as their personhood was denied. Today, visitors and students alike can speak their names and recognize their contributions.

With its permanence, its physicality, and its placement near one of the busiest entrances to Harvard Yard, the plaque is an opportunity for all people to reckon with our collective history. It is an expression of Harvard’s necessary and continued commitment to acknowledging its enslavement of black people and its greater role in the American system of racial bondage.

Congressman John Lewis, an esteemed civil rights leader, spoke at the 2016 dedication of the plaque. “Sometimes,” he said, “we have to get in the way, get in good trouble, necessary trouble, to bring truth and light.” His words were a call to action, just as the Wadsworth plaque should be. The work of remembrance and recognition is never over. We must name the names and allow their power to help us to work in service of justice.

Maya Jenkins, '21, studies sociology and English at Harvard University. She is from Montclair, New Jersey. Maya is a Vision & Justice Project student ambassador.

The World That Was Not Given to Them

Rachel Burke

At the center of the new Harvard Law School plaza lies a rough stone at odds with the sleek lines of the surrounding contemporary landscape architecture. It sits uneasily between the uniform, manicured foliage and the hard edge of the sidewalk perimeter. Affixed to the uneven surface curving toward the campus crossroads is a simple rectangular plaque that reads:

In honor of the enslaved whose labor
created wealth that made possible
the founding of Harvard Law School
*May we pursue the highest ideals
of law and justice in their memory.*

The stature of this stone is modest compared to its surroundings, the buildings of a legal education financed by Massachusetts colonist Isaac Royall, Jr. Born in Antigua in 1719, Royall presided over a fortune generated from the trade of slaves, rum, and sugar—wealth eventually bequeathed to Harvard College that literally paved the foundation of the Harvard Law School in 1817.

Although it was their labor that made the law school possible, the enslaved men and women were categorically not those for whom Harvard Law School was built. The stone marker unveiled in their memory during the 2017 bicentennial celebration is an intentional reckoning of this history, part of a carefully choreographed institutional introspection. But in the unworked surface of the stone is also a defiance, a reminder of how those in bondage in Antigua and

elsewhere resisted the totalizing infrastructure of slavery. The plaque's centrality to this campus recalls specifically how slaves throughout the Americas persistently tried to frustrate the paradox of a legal system invested in their value as human property, but not in their rights as human beings.

This memorial is a reminder that the American legal system evolved in tandem with the demands of colonists (and later, Americans) to protect the right to lawfully own another person. In the stone we see this foundational complicity of the legal institution; we see the material origins of the buildings where professors like Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story taught constitutional compromises to slavery as moral law. We see, as Sarah Lewis points out in “The Future Real Conditional: Race and Monuments in the United States” (*October*, 2018), citing Tina Campt, a conditional tense—what could this rock have become if something, anything, had altered the history of slavery? But we also see the insistence of those for whom the Constitution was not written, those who never ceased to lay claim to its promises anyway. In the words of law school professor Annette Gordon-Reed, author of the memorial plaque, the potential of unhewn stone invokes their spirits “with the hope that it will spur us to try to bring to the world what was not given to them: the law’s protection and regard, and justice.”

Rachel Burke is a PhD student in the history of art and architecture at Harvard University. She is from Rockville, Maryland. Rachel is a Vision & Justice Project student ambassador.



Tyler Mitchell,
*Untitled (Two Girls
Embrace)*, 2018
© the artist

Race, Technology, & Justice

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in Conversation

When the Robot Doesn't See Dark Skin

Joy Buolamwini

When I was a college student using AI-powered facial detection software for a coding project, the robot I programmed couldn't detect my dark-skinned face. I had to borrow my white roommate's face to finish the assignment. Later, working on another project as a graduate student at the MIT Media Lab, I resorted to wearing a white mask to have my presence recognized.

My experience is a reminder that artificial intelligence, often heralded for its potential to change the world, can actually reinforce bias and exclusion, even when it's used in the most well-intended ways.

AI systems are shaped by the priorities and prejudices—conscious and unconscious—of the people who design them, a phenomenon that I refer to as “the coded gaze.” Research has shown that automated systems that are used to inform decisions about sentencing produce results that are biased against black people and that those used for selecting the targets of online advertising can discriminate based on race and gender.

Specifically, when it comes to algorithmic bias in facial analysis technology—my area of research and one focus of my work with the Algorithmic Justice League—Google's photo application labeling black people in images as “gorillas” and facial analysis software that works well for white men but less so for everyone else are infamous examples. As disturbing as

they are, they do not fully capture the risks of this technology that is increasingly being used in law enforcement, border control, school surveillance, and hiring.

The products of a company called HireVue, which are used by over six hundred companies, including Nike, Unilever, and even Atlanta Public Schools, allow employers to interview job applicants on camera, using AI to rate videos of each candidate according to verbal and nonverbal cues. The company's aim is to reduce bias in hiring.

But there's a catch: The system's ratings, according to a Business Insider reporter who tested the software and discussed the results with HireVue's chief technology officer, reflect the previous preferences of hiring managers. So, if more white males with generally homogeneous mannerisms have been hired in the past, it's possible that algorithms will be trained to favorably rate predominantly fair-skinned, male candidates while penalizing women and people of color who do not exhibit the same verbal and nonverbal cues.

It's repeatedly been proven that apart from technology, people tend to make hiring decisions favoring white and male candidates, all other things being equal. With this in mind, the instinct to hand the rating of potential employees over to technology is understandable. But how do we know a qualified candidate whose verbal and nonverbal cues tied to age, gender, sexual orientation, or race depart from those of the high performers used to train the algorithm will not be scored lower than a similar candidate who more closely resembles the in-group? We won't know if we do not repeatedly test the technology and its application.

The tests that have been done on facial analysis technology raise concerns. In collaboration with the computer vision expert Timnit Gebru, I investigated the accuracy of facial analysis technology from IBM, Microsoft, and Face++. On the simple task of guessing the gender of a face, all companies' technology performed better on male faces than on female faces and especially struggled with the faces of dark-skinned African women. In the worst case, the technology was 34 percent less accurate for those women than it was for white men.

Given how susceptible facial analysis technology seems to re-creating gender and racial bias, companies using HireVue, if they hope to increase fairness, should check their systems to make sure it is not amplifying the biases that informed previous hiring decisions. It's possible companies using HireVue could someday face lawsuits charging that the program had a negative disparate impact on women and minority applicants, a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

The risks of biased facial analysis technology extend beyond hiring. According to the Center on Privacy and Technology at Georgetown Law, the faces of half of all adults in the United States—over



117 million people—are currently in face recognition database networks that can be searched by police departments without warrant. These searches are often reliant on facial recognition technology that hasn't been tested for accuracy on different groups of people. This matters because misidentification can subject innocent people to police scrutiny or erroneous criminal charges.

In the case of South Wales, where Big Brother Watch reports that between May 2017 and March 2018 the faces of over 2,400 misidentified innocent people were stored by the police department without their consent, the department reported a false-positive facial identification rate of 91 percent. But it's important to remember that even if false-positive match rates improve, unfair use of facial recognition technology cannot be fixed with a software patch. Even accurate facial recognition can be used in disturbing ways. The Baltimore Police Department used face recognition technology to identify and arrest people who attended the 2015 protests against police misconduct that followed Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore.

We need to challenge the growing use of this technology, and there has been some progress on this front. The American Civil Liberties Union is calling on Amazon to stop selling facial analysis technology to law enforcement and is contesting the use of in-car facial recognition technology for the Vehicle Face System

being tested at the United States–Mexico border. Though lawmakers in Texas, Illinois, and California have made legislative efforts to regulate facial recognition technology, there are no federal laws. Yet, there is a blueprint. A 2016 report from Georgetown Law School proposed model federal legislation. Policymakers should embrace it.

We can also learn from international models. Unlike the United States, Canada has a federal statute governing the use of biometric data in the private sector. Companies like Facebook and Amazon must obtain informed consent to collect citizens' unique face information. In the European Union, Article 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation requires express affirmative consent for the collection of biometrics from E.U. citizens.

Everyday people should support lawmakers, activists, and public-interest technologists in demanding transparency, equity, and accountability in the use of artificial intelligence that governs our lives. Facial recognition is increasingly penetrating our lives, but there is still time to prevent it from worsening social inequalities. To do that, we must face the coded gaze.

Joy Buolamwini, Still from *The Coded Gaze: Unmasking Algorithmic Bias*, 2016 Courtesy the artist

Joy Buolamwini is the founder of the Algorithmic Justice League and a graduate researcher at the MIT Media Lab. This article was originally published in the *New York Times* on June 22, 2018.



Multiracial Shirley Card, 1995
Courtesy Dr. Lorna Roth, Concordia University, Montreal

Racial Bias and the Lens

Sarah Lewis

Can a photographic lens condition racial behavior? I wondered about this as I was preparing to speak about images and justice on a university campus.

“We have a problem. Your jacket is lighter than your face,” the technician said from the back of the one-thousand-person amphitheater-style auditorium. “That’s going to be a problem for lighting.” She was handling the video recording and lighting for the event.

It was an odd comment that reverberated through the auditorium, a statement of the obvious that sounded like an accusation of wrongdoing. Another technician standing next to me stopped adjusting my microphone and jolted in place. The phrase hung in the air, and I laughed to resolve the tension in the room then offered back just the facts:

“Well, everything is lighter than my face. I’m black.”

“Touché,” said the technician organizing the event. She walked toward the lighting booth. My smile dropped upon realizing that perhaps the technician was actually serious. I assessed my clothes—a light beige jacket and black pants worn many times before in similar settings.

As I walked to the greenroom, the executive running the event came over and apologized for what had just occurred, but to me, the exchange was a gift.

My work looks at how the right to be recognized justly in a democracy has been tied to the impact of images and representation in the public realm. It examines how the construction of public pictures limits and enlarges our notion of who counts in American society. It is the subject of my core curriculum class at Harvard University. It also happened to be the subject of my presentation that day.

It is what my grandfather knew when he was expelled from a New York City public high school

“It took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography’s bias.”

had decided that my body was somehow unsuitable for the stage.

Her comment reminded me of the unconscious bias that was built into photography. By categorizing light skin as the norm and other skin tones as needing special corrective care, photography has altered how we interact with each other without us realizing it.

Photography is not just a system of calibrating light, but a technology of subjective decisions. Light skin became the chemical baseline for film technology, fulfilling the needs of its target dominant market. For example, developing color-film technology initially required what was called a Shirley card (see p. 55). When you sent off your film to get developed, lab technicians would use the image of a white woman with brown hair named Shirley as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors. Quality control meant ensuring that Shirley’s face looked good. It has translated into the color-balancing of digital technology. In the mid-1990s, Kodak created a multiracial Shirley Card with three women, one black, one white, and one Asian, and later included a Latina model, in an attempt intended to help camera operators calibrate skin tones (see p. 52). These were not adopted by everyone since they coincided with the rise of digital photography. The result was film emulsion technology that still carried over the social bias of earlier photographic conventions.

Concordia University professor Lorna Roth’s research has shown that it took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography’s bias. Earl Kage, Kodak’s former manager of research and the head of Color Photo Studios, received complaints during this time from chocolate companies saying that they “weren’t getting the right brown tones on the chocolates” in the photographs. Furniture companies also were not getting enough variation between the different color woods in their advertisements. Roth’s research shows that Kage had also received complaints before from parents about the quality of graduation photographs—the color contrast made it nearly impossible to capture a diverse group—but it was the chocolate and furniture companies that forced Kodak’s hand. Kage admitted, “it was never Black flesh that was addressed as a serious problem at the time.”

Fuji became the film of choice for professional photographers shooting subjects with darker tones. The company developed color transparency film that was superior to Kodak for handling brown skin. Yet, for the average consumer, Kodak Gold Max became appealing. This new film was billed as being “able to photograph the details of a dark horse in low light,” a coded message for being able to photograph people of color. When I first learned about this history, from my own father, a photographer, well before I

learned of this history from professional photographers, I finally understood why my father went, almost obsessively, to the camera store down the street from our apartment in Manhattan in the 1980s to buy Kodak Gold Max film to capture the broad range of skin tones in our family.

Digital photography has led to some advancements. There are now dual skin-tone color-balancing capabilities and also an image-stabilization feature—eliminating the natural shaking that occurs when we hold the camera by hand and reducing the need for a flash. Yet, this solution creates other problems. If the light source is artificial, digital technology will still struggle with darker skin. It is a merry-go-round of problems leading to solutions leading to problems.

Researchers such as Joy Buolamwini of the MIT Media Lab have been advocating to correct the algorithmic bias that exists in digital imaging technology. You see it whenever dark skin is invisible to facial recognition software. The same technology that misrecognizes individuals is also used in services for loan decisions and job interview searches. Yet, algorithmic bias is the end stage of a long-standing problem.

Award-winning cinematographer Bradford Young, who has worked with pioneering director Ava DuVernay and others, has created new techniques for lighting subjects during the process of filming. Ava Berkofsky has offered her tricks for lighting the actors on the HBO series *Insecure*—including tricks with moisturizer (reflective is best since dark skin can absorb more light than fair skin). Post-production corrections also offer answers that involve digitizing the film and then color correcting it. All told, rectifying this inherited bias requires a lot of work.

What is preventing us from correcting the inherited bias in camera and film technology? Is there not a fortune to gain by the technology giant who is first to market?

In the meantime, artists themselves are creating the technology for more just representation. We are hearing more about issues with race and technology as we consider the importance of inclusive representation with the success of films from *Black Panther* (2018) to *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Frederick Douglass knew it long ago: being seen accurately by the camera was a key to representational justice. He became the most photographed American man in the nineteenth century as a way to create a corrective image about race and American life.

Yet, for many, the question is still: Why does inclusive representation matter so much? The answers come through viral examples such as the image of a young two-year old Parker Curry gazing up at Michelle Obama’s portrait by Amy Sherald at the National Portrait Gallery, her mouth dropped open, convinced that Mrs. Obama was a queen. Former White House

Shirley Card, 1978
Courtesy Hermann
Zschiegner



photographer Pete Souza has captured an image of a young boy, just five years old, who wanted to know if his hair texture really did match that of the president. You can’t become what you can’t accurately see.

I often wonder what would have come of more time to talk with the technician. Her eyes were glassy as she said goodbye. Mine were, too, grateful for her vulnerability. The exchange was the result of decades of socialization that we often don’t acknowledge has occurred whenever we look through the lens.

Race changed sight in America. This is what my grandfather knew. This is what we experience. There is no need for our photographic technology to foster it.

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Black Lives, Silver Screen

Ava DuVernay and Bradford Young
in Conversation

Bradford Young: I'm so curious to hear from you, Miss Ava DuVernay, a growing artist in the film context. Your life's calling is about the transformative, revolutionary power of cinema. You've taken on a mandate to make film that truly communicates the revolutionary potential of human beings. I'd be curious to hear why you think the image is important in our evolutionary and revolutionary process as black people in the world and within the American context. What makes you feel like image is such a significant element in our development?

Ava DuVernay: We use the term *our mind's eye* for a reason. The images that we consume, and that we take in, can nourish us, and they can malnourish us. They become a part of our DNA in some way. They become a part of our mind, our memory.

BY: Right.

AD: It's in our internal camera. The image. This idea of the image is so much more dense than even using it in a film context. It's an intimacy inside your own memory, inside your own mind.

We see the world and each other in pictures. That's why I think film is so emotional. It's re-creating what's already embedded in our internal process. It's an artificial rendering of what's already going on inside. I think that, for whatever reason, that is why I've always been drawn to it, and as you start to apply theories of progression and liberation and all of those things around very intimate ideas, it becomes even more powerful.

But that's why I'm so excited when I see your images as a cinematographer. Because I know, inherent in that image, there is an idea becoming a part of someone's mental canvas. You drink it in, and that's now part of you. That's why what you do is so important, I think, divorced of story. You're telling your own story within the image that's sometimes not even attached to the narrative that it's inside of. ...

BY: [Film] is not like jazz or hip-hop—art forms that started as expressions of dissonance and resistance. Filmmaking isn't part of our organic narrative as black people in America. We're asking people who were very much interested in making sure film communicated white supremacist values, like the founding fathers of the film experience—D. W. Griffith, Thomas Edison, these people who were very interested in white supremacy—we're asking the sort of grandchildren of those people to allow us into the filmmaking experience with a whole counterpoint to why they started it. You know what I mean? It didn't start off as an art form of resistance. Actually what you said earlier is the real purpose

of why we do this. It's like trying to etch in real time our mind's camera, our mind's image-making capacity. It generates images so that we can deal with life. So the way I navigate it, I think, is that I've just got to stay focused on the possibility that one day it could be completely turned over on its head and transformed.

AD: Those words are moving. As you were talking, a conversation that I had with Ryan Coogler came to mind. We were looking at the statistics that just came out from the Directors Guild of America about super-disturbing numbers that really starkly lay out the omission and the absence and the disappearing of voices other than white men in the guild, or the industry or whatever. It went by year and by studio, by gender and by race. It was like, one woman director at Paramount in 2015, two people of color directors at Warner Bros. in 2013–14, etcetera. We were trippin' out, because he rightly remarked, "That one at that studio in that year is you, and I'm one of the two in this year." So we were talking about those numbers; they might as well have had our names on them. We are the numbers on the chart at this moment. Ain't nobody else around. So how do you reconcile being part of a larger industry, a larger energy that's making a certain thing when you lay the numbers out and we literally are standing alone amongst a lot of opposition, misunderstanding, purposeful omission, all of that? ...

BY: Everything we just talked about is why you and I are together. It is why we're doing what we're doing together. We're aware of what's happening around us.

Ava DuVernay is a filmmaker and the director of *Selma* (2014), *13th* (2016), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), among other features. Bradford Young is a cinematographer and photography director, known for his work on *Selma* (2014), *A Most Violent Year* (2014), and *Arrival* (2016). This excerpt, adapted for length, was originally published in *Aperture*, issue 223, "Vision & Justice" (Summer 2016).



Race, Childhood, & Visuality

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Children play at the Water Lab on Pier 6 in Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, July 9, 2014. Photograph by Linda Rosier/The New York Times/Redux

Let Black Kids Just Be Kids

Robin Bernstein

George Zimmerman admitted at his 2012 bail hearing that he misjudged Trayvon Martin’s age when he killed him. “I thought he was a little bit younger than I am,” he said, meaning just under twenty-eight. But Trayvon was only seventeen.

What may be most tragic about Zimmerman’s miscalculation is that it’s widespread. To many people, black boys seem older than they are: in one study, people overestimated their ages by four and a half years. This contributes to a false perception that black boys are less childlike than white boys.

Black girls are subject to similar beliefs, according to a recent study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality. A group of 325 adults viewed black girls as needing less nurturing, support, and protection than white girls, and as knowing more about sex and other adult topics.

People of all races see black children as less innocent, more adultlike, and more responsible for their actions than their white peers. In turn, normal childhood behavior, like disobedience, tantrums, and back talk, is seen as a criminal threat when black kids do it. Social scientists have found that this misperception causes black children to be “pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected,” according to a report by the legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw.

That’s why we must create a future in which children of color are not disproportionately caught up in the criminal justice system, a world in which a black seventeen-year-old can wear a hoodie without being assumed to be a criminal.

Creating that social change, however, has proved difficult. And that’s partly because the concept of childhood innocence itself has a deep and disturbing racial history.

By understanding this history, we can learn why antiracist strategies have hit some surprising limits and devise tactics to confront or even avoid those roadblocks in the future.

The association between childhood and innocence did not always exist. Before the Enlightenment, children in the West were widely regarded as immodest beings who needed to be taught to restrain themselves. “The devil has been with them already,” the Puritan minister Cotton Mather wrote of babies in 1689. They “go astray as soon as they are born.”

In some religious traditions, children, as much as adults, were understood to bear original sin. Benjamin Wadsworth, a powerful colonial-era minister, described children in 1720 as “sharers in the guilt of Adam” who have a “naturally sinful and guilty state.”

Enlightenment thinkers had different ideas: John Locke suggested that children were blank slates, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau portrayed them as connected to nature. The poet William Wordsworth imagined children as holy innocents who could lead adults to

“People of all races see black children as less innocent, more adultlike, and more responsible for their actions than their white peers.”

God. Rising forms of Christianity de-emphasized the idea of original sin.

While earlier generations had viewed children as miniature adults, nineteenth-century sentimentalists increasingly identified innocence as the single most important quality that distinguished children from their elders. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideas of childhood and innocence had merged. From then on, innocence defined American childhood.

But only white kids were allowed to be innocent. The more that popular writers, playwrights, actors, and visual artists created images of innocent white children, the more they depicted children of color, especially black children, as unconstrained imps. Over time, this resulted in them being defined as nonchildren.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin, one of the most influential books of the nineteenth century, was pivotal to this process. When Harriet Beecher Stowe published her novel in 1852, she created the angelic white Eva, who contrasted with Topsy, the mischievous black girl.

Stowe carefully showed, however, that Topsy was at heart an innocent child who misbehaved because she had been traumatized, “hardened,” by slavery’s violence. Topsy’s bad behavior implicated slavery, not her or black children in general.



Gordon Parks,
Untitled, Harlem,
New York, 1947
 © and courtesy
 The Gordon Parks
 Foundation

“The most important question we can ask about children may not be whether they are inherently innocent. Instead: Are they free from police brutality?”

As long as white children are constructed as innocent, we must continue to demand that children of color are as well. Because the idea of childhood innocence carries so much political force, we can’t allow it to be a whites-only club.

The problem, however, is that every time we insist that the gates of innocence open to children of color, we limit ourselves by language, a “frame,” as the linguist George Lakoff would say, that is embedded in racism. When we argue that black and brown children are as innocent as white children, and we must, we assume that childhood innocence is purely positive. But the idea of childhood innocence itself is not innocent: It’s part of a two-hundred-year-old history of white supremacy.

It’s time to create language that values justice over innocence. The most important question we can ask about children may not be whether they are inherently innocent. Instead: Are they hungry? Do they have adequate health care? Are they free from police brutality? Are they threatened by a poisoned and volatile environment? Are they growing up in a securely democratic nation?

All children deserve equal protection under the law not because they’re innocent, but because they’re people. By understanding children’s rights as human rights, we can begin to undermine the political power of childhood innocence, a cultural formation that has proved, over and over, to be one of white supremacy’s most potent weapons.

The novel’s success prompted theatrical troupes across the country to adapt *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* into what became one of the most popular stage shows of all time. But to attract the biggest audiences, these productions combined Stowe’s story with the era’s other hugely popular entertainment: minstrelsy.

Topsys onstage, often played by white women in blackface, were adultlike, cartoonish characters who laughed as they were beaten, and who invited audiences to laugh, too. In these shows, Topsy’s innocence and vulnerability vanished. The violence that Stowe condemned became a source of delight for white theater audiences.

This minstrel version of Topsy turned into the pickaninny, one of the most damaging racist images ever created. This dehumanized black juvenile character was comically impervious to pain and never needed protection or tenderness.

The racist caricature of the pickaninny often appeared alongside cherubic white children. For example, advertisements run in the early 1900s by the Fairbank Company, which sold cleaning and cooking products, featured the “Gold Dust Twins,” who were seminude, ungendered, ink-black juveniles. The advertising copy read, “Let the Gold Dust Twins do your work.”

Fairbank ran that ad alongside one for Fairy Soap, whose mascot was a serene white child dressed in fancy clothes. Fairy Soap, the advertisement declared, “soothes and softens the tenderest skin.” In these paired advertisements, which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and many other magazines, black nonchildren toil while white darlings receive tender caresses.

These images weaponized childhood innocence, transforming it into a tool of racial domination.

But black activists did not acquiesce to this power play. From the first moments when Topsy devolved into the pickaninny, African Americans worked to counter the libel that their kids were not vulnerable and not really children.

In 1855, Frederick Douglass made exactly this point in “My Bondage and My Freedom” when he asserted, “Slave children *are* children.”

In the next century, key players in the civil rights movement made childhood innocence central to antiracist causes. In 1939, the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark introduced the “doll test,” in which black children, when confronted with their own preference for white dolls, burst into tears.

The Clarks’ findings hit a nerve in part because they used symbols of innocence, dolls and sobbing

children, to display the effects of racism. The Supreme Court leaned on these doll tests in its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, which outlawed segregation in public schools in 1954.

The next year, Mamie Till juxtaposed the bloated, pulverized body of her murdered son, Emmett, with a photograph of him as a smiling schoolboy. The lynchers had defined Emmett as a sexual threat, but his mother made America see him as a kid.

In these cases, black activists captured the political power of childhood innocence, which had previously supported white supremacy, and repurposed it for a civil rights agenda.

But there’s a catch. As the poet and feminist theorist Audre Lorde wrote: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” This is exactly the case with antiracist uses of childhood innocence.

The Clarks, Till, and others used childhood innocence to make important political gains, but their use of the “master’s tools” ultimately could not erase the racial connotations of childhood innocence itself. And so, studies continue to show that black children are seen as less innocent and more adultlike than their white peers.

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March for Our Lives

Naomi Wadler

Hi. My name is Naomi, and I'm eleven years old.

Me and my friend Carter led a walkout at our elementary school on March 14. We walked out for eighteen minutes, adding a minute to honor Courtlin Arrington, an African American girl who was the victim of gun violence in her school in Alabama, after the Parkland shooting.

I am here today to represent Courtlin Arrington. I am here today to represent Hadiya Pendleton. I am here today to represent Taiyana Thompson, who at just sixteen was shot dead in her home here in Washington, D.C.

I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national newspaper. Whose stories don't lead on the evening news.

I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence. Who are simply statistics, instead of vibrant, beautiful girls, and full of potential.

It is my privilege to be here today. I am indeed full of privilege. My voice has been heard. I am here to acknowledge their stories, to say they matter, to say their names. Because I can, and I was asked to be.

For far too long, these names, these black girls and women, have been just numbers. I am here to say never again for those girls too. I am here to say that everyone should value those girls too.

People have said that I am too young to have these thoughts on my own. People have said that I am a tool of some nameless adult. It's not true.

My friends and I might still be eleven, and we might still be in elementary school, but we know. We know life isn't equal for everyone, and we know what is right and wrong. We also know that we stand in the shadow of the Capitol, and we know that we have seven short years until we, too, have the right to vote.

So I am here today to honor the words of Toni Morrison: "If there is a book that you want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

I urge everyone here and everyone who hears my voice to join me in telling the stories that aren't told. To honor the girls, the women of color, who are murdered at disproportionate rates in this nation. I urge each of you to help me write the narrative for this world and to understand, so that these girls and women are never forgotten.

Heather Hazzan,
Naomi Wadler, 2018
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Naomi Wadler is an activist and a student at George Mason Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia. This speech was originally presented at the March for Our Lives Rally in Washington, D.C., on March 24, 2018. It is reprinted here courtesy the author.

Multicolored Classroom Visions

Bradlee Few

While the American Constitution does not identify public education as a "fundamental right," all United States citizens are guaranteed equal rights under the law. However, for 167 years, black children learned to read in schools that were vastly under-resourced, compared to the schools where white children learned to recite their ABCs, after the Constitution's signing. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled on the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, wherein Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."¹ The decision to racially integrate public schools was progressive, yet it was often met with violent disagreement, as famously experienced by Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine—the first black students to attend their schools in New Orleans and Little Rock, respectively, who walked to class through mobs hissing racial slurs and slinging tomatoes at them. Still, in some instances, integration created an atmosphere of passive uncertainty and curiosity, rather than vitriol.

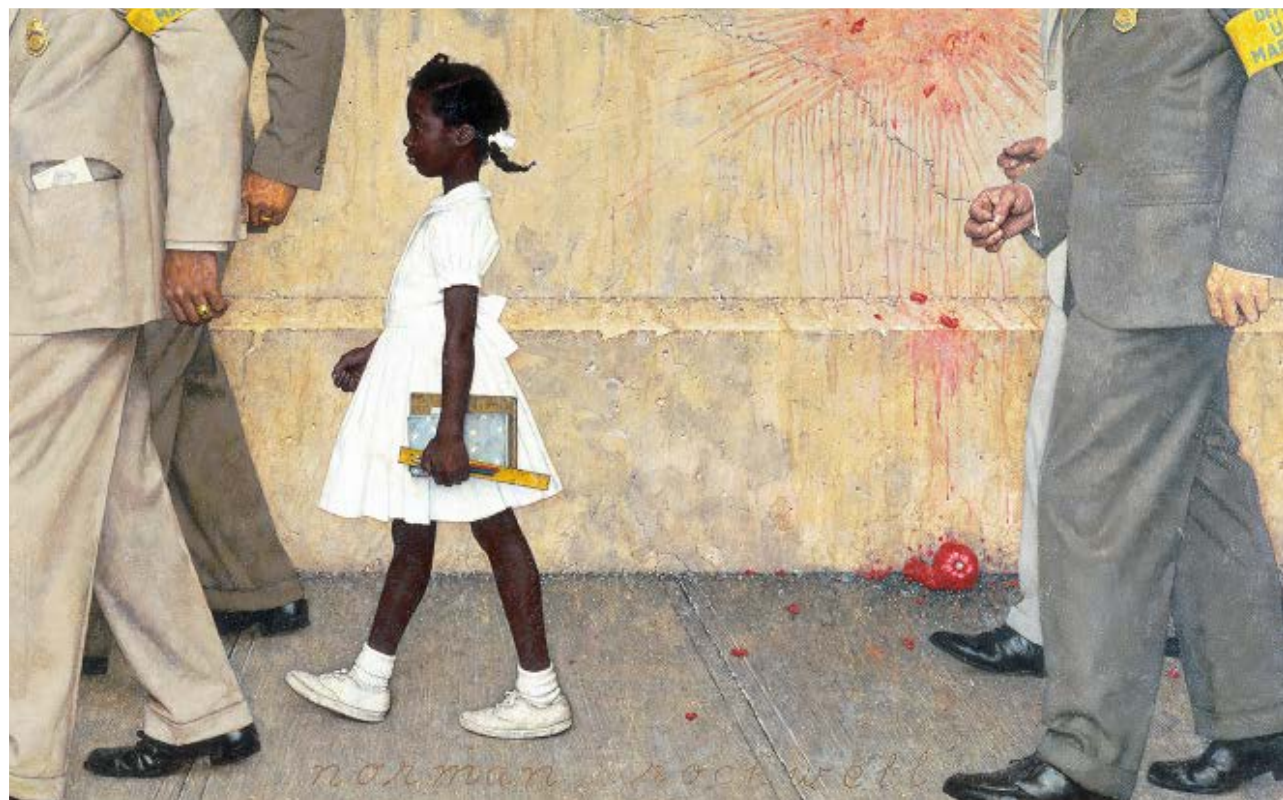
In a photograph titled *Children—The First Day of Desegregation*, taken on September 8, 1954, this alluring sense of unfamiliarity is palpable.² Two girls sit in the foreground of the black-and-white image taken at Fort Myer Elementary School for children of military servicepeople—the first school to desegregate in Virginia. Originally a stock photograph for the Bettmann Archive, this picture represents a vision of integration in American schools that is neither positive nor negative, but hesitant. Locked in each other's eyes, their knees and toes pointed across the linoleum aisle separating rows of desks, the girls are frozen, unsure of their next move. The direction of the white girl's gaze, toward the single black child in the image, is shared by many other captivated white students around the room. Resting their faces on their hands and leaning in to achieve a better view, the white students watch the interaction between the two girls from shadowy—almost ominous—corners of the photograph. Noticeably in contrast to the white student across from her, the black student sits less confidently: her back slouched, her hands beneath the desk out of view, her fingers wrapped around

notebooks doubling as shields, and her face slightly nervous. For the first time in her life, and in Virginia's, she is the only black person in the classroom.

The Supreme Court justices who ruled to integrate public schools in the United States intended their decision to be permanent, to combat structural inequalities facing black children in America. They could not have predicted that a headline in the 2010s would read, "Schools Are More Segregated Today Than During the Late 1960s."³ School desegregation in the 1950s and '60s imagined not only black and white students learning side-by-side, but equal access to resources and success too; yet this dream remains unrealized. The open, empty cupboards in the back of the classroom, coupled with the drafty, plain, colorless setting, may have foreshadowed integration's grim future. Twenty-first-century school segregation is not solely demarcated along black and white racial lines. It affects all underrepresented minority groups systematically quarantined in economically disadvantaged school districts. Remnants of cases on institutional racism, which decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education* were aimed to heal, continue to mark America's deeply flawed contemporary education policy, voting laws, and justice system. It's possible the girls in the photograph embraced moments after the shutter clicked, but they may have also simply returned silently to their work. Regardless, as illustrated in this image frozen in curiosity, the work toward equality is unfinished.

- ¹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- ² "Civil Rights Movement in Pictures," Anti-Defamation League, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/education-outreach/civil-rights-movement-in-pictures.pdf>.
- ³ Emily Richmond, "Schools Are More Segregated Today Than During the Late 1960s," *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/06/schools-are-more-segregated-today-than-during-the-late-1960s/258348/>.

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The Problem We All Live With

Hakeem Angulu

Ruby Bridges, the girl depicted in Norman Rockwell's 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With*, was born in Tylertown, Mississippi. In 1960, at the age of six, she was one of the first six black children in New Orleans to pass the test that allowed them to go to William Frantz Elementary, the local all-white school. On November 14 of that year, Bridges was escorted by four federal marshals to her new school. The presence of the marshals, the anger of the parents, and the serenity of this girl are all captured in Rockwell's painting, created four years after the "event" and ten years after the landmark case that made it possible: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

Brown v. Board of Education unanimously held that racial segregation in the public school system violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, saying that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged school segregation in court cases from the 1930s to the 1950s—all of which were unsuccessful on the basis of "tangible" parts of the schools (e.g., the number of students in classes and the sizes of fields) being equal. However, Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* was founded on the fact that the intangible inequalities of segregation (e.g., the quality of teaching) were what denied black students equal protection under the law.

The issue of "tangibility" is made ironic by Bridges's experience, and by Rockwell's painting. The Supreme Court's decision aimed to remove racial disparities in education, but Bridges's situation is uniquely both tangible and intangible. Bridges is in all white, from the bow in her hair to her shoes, as an acknowledgment of her new position—being surrounded by white students in an all-white space—and a reflection of her innocence. Even the blank white sheet of paper in her hand reflects this motif: she is writing on a previously white canvas.

The placement of the other bodies in the painting is also significant: Bridges is literally "bridging" the gap between her and white America, represented by the marshals. Hers is also the only face in the picture, an inversion by Rockwell to highlight her individuality in contrast to the typified white men that surround her. However, power still rests in the hands of the marshals; one of them holds the letter that presumably grants her access to the school. Finally, the background is marred with uniquely tangible racist symbols, from the letters *KKK* in the top left, to the word *n—r* immediately above Bridges, and then to the tomato to her right. The intangibility of the event is also powerful: the moment is in Bridges's memory forever.

The final significant aspect of this image is where it was initially published: *Look* magazine, a general-interest biweekly in Iowa that usually featured much

“Ruby Bridges continues to advocate for a fairer and more equal public education system.”

more conservative, and white, aspects of America. The publication of Rockwell's controversial image fundamentally changed the magazine. The stated "problem" that we all live with is racism, and that problem persisted no matter how many advertisers or readers were averse to its illustration. In fact, the problem persists today. At sixty-four, Ruby Bridges continues to advocate for a fairer and more equal public education system.

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The Children of the Korematsu Case

Emily Choi

Clem Albers, San Pedro, California, 1942. Trucks were jammed high with suitcases, blankets, household equipment, garden tools, as well as children, all bearing registration tags, as the last Redondo Beach residents of Japanese ancestry were moved to an assembly center in Arcadia, California
 Courtesy U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

A large truck creeps along a packed city street. This is no ordinary truck. Rather than cargo, it contains humans—specifically Japanese American humans—in its shadowy innards. Three children peer out fearfully from within, clutching at the wooden slats of the back of the truck, as if there is not enough air to go around for everyone, as if they are trapped inside a makeshift prison.

The date is April 5, 1942. A forty-year-old photographer named Clem Albers is hired by the War Relocation Authority (the government agency created specifically to handle Japanese internment) to visually document the process of Japanese internment.¹ Earlier that year, following the bombing of the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, responding to an enormous amount of public pressure, signs Executive Order 9066 into law. This paves the way for the internment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese American citizens.²

The effect of President Roosevelt’s executive order was enormous. Japanese American adults and children were forcibly uprooted from their homes and the lives they knew.³ This image, however, focuses particularly on the impact of internment on children. The eye of the viewer is immediately drawn to the figure of the young girl on the left. The mixture of fear and anguish that contorts her tiny face tells a story in itself—these children were stripped of their innocence by the process of internment.

Although we can only make out half of the girl’s face (the other half is obscured by a wooden slat), the half that we can see speaks volumes about her fear and confusion. She looks out from between her little hands, both of which clutch at the wooden slat for support. Her eyebrows are knitted together and the eyes beneath them are scrunched up in distress. The thick wooden planks that entrap the children dominate the image. They create a definitive and tangible space between the viewer and the photograph’s subjects, barring us from complete visual access to the children. Further, the assumed position of the spectator is that of one looking not from within the truck, but from without. The position of the camera, therefore, serves to outline our helplessness as viewers—we can do nothing to save these children. In the bottom right-hand corner of the frame, you can just make out the front of some sort of military vehicle. This subtle framing reminds us that this is a time of war, perhaps at least partially justifying the forcible relocation of such young children.

Korematsu v. United States, decided in 1944, officially served to test the legality of Japanese internment. Fred Korematsu, an anti-internment activist, remained in his home in San Leandro, California, in direct defiance of the president’s executive order. The Supreme Court sided with the United States government.⁴ The immediate effect of the decision

was that the practice of Japanese internment was upheld. The Supreme Court, however, did not take the long-term psychological consequences of their decision—on children in particular—into account.

In other words, internment directly impacted not just one, but two generations of Japanese Americans. Japanese American children spent some of their most formative years in seclusion from the rest of society, where they were made to believe that they were somehow different from their fellow American citizens. Today, this poignant image remains, as if to remind those children—now adults—of the sting of their country’s betrayal.

- 1 Josh Jones, “Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Clem Albers & Francis Stewart’s Censored Photographs of a WWII Japanese Internment Camp,” Open Culture, August 11, 2017, <http://www.openculture.com/2017/08/censored-photographs-of-a-wwii-japanese-internment-camp-by-ansel-adams-dorothea-lange-clem-albers-francis-stewart.html>.
- 2 Julie Des Jardins, “From Citizen to Enemy: The Tragedy of Japanese Internment,” *History Now: The Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute*, April 26, 2012, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/essays/from-citizen-enemy-tragedy-japanese-internment.
- 3 Greg Robinson, “A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010).
- 4 *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).

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Awol Erizku,
*Girl with a Bamboo
Earring*, 2009
Courtesy the artist

Vision & Justice Curriculum

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The Fragility of Citizenship

Jessica Min

Dorothea Lange,
Oakland, California,
March 1942
Courtesy the Library
of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division

“Lange’s photograph reminds us to recognize our shared humanity.”

On December 8, 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a grocery store began displaying a sign that read, “I AM AN AMERICAN.” Two months later, the owner, Tatsuro Matsuda, was accused of being disloyal to his country and was forcibly relocated to an internment camp. The sign bore witness to its owner’s removal and hung outside the store for a month thereafter.

Matsuda was one of 110,000 Japanese Americans whose lives were uprooted by Executive Order 9066, issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1942. The racially motivated order approved the removal of people of Japanese descent, two thirds of whom were American citizens. Paranoia and fear of spying from within the country ran rampant during World War II. When fingers were being pointed at even patriotic citizens like Matsuda, were any immigrants safe from scrutiny?

Taken by Dorothea Lange, the black-and-white photograph of Matsuda’s then recently sold grocery store shows an American Dream lost. Against the shadows of the storefront, the luminous white sign reading “I AM AN AMERICAN” was an assertion of patriotic love. Like a front-page headline, the bold black text cut across the vertical lines of the window frames and pillars. Although the sign was hung as a public plea to his neighbors, the empty street suggests that no one was listening. Or perhaps public debate

had ceased to function altogether. Captured from across the street, the photograph’s impartiality mimics the distance created between former neighbors and fellow citizens.

The sign operates as a memorial, too. What was once a proud statement of presence—of “I am”—now becomes a somber lesson in the futility of a Japanese American’s fight for citizenship. The time and money required to commission the sign reveals how high the stakes were; yet, Matsuda’s show of patriotism could not supersede the visual evidence of his ethnicity. He would never fit effortlessly into the streetscape or revel in the glory of the American Dream, symbolized by the iconic automobile parked outside his store.

Matsuda was not alone in his struggle. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) took two cases to the Supreme Court, *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943) and *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), that challenged the relocation orders and the discrimination against Japanese Americans. Both cases were lost in court, the government arguing that relocation was necessary to protect the country’s security interests. Justice Hugo Black presented the court’s decision, stating, “We are not unmindful of the hardships imposed upon a large group of American citizens. ... Citizenship has its responsibilities as well as its privileges, and in time of war the burden is always heavier.” The landmark cases set a dangerous precedent under which immigrants, even today, cannot fully lay claim to their citizenship, rendering them second-class citizens not accorded the same dignity as their neighbors.

The photograph of Matsuda’s storefront and other pictures by Dorothea Lange depicting Japanese internment were impounded during the war. Later transferred to the National Archives, the images were considered too critical by the federal government to show to the public. In light of President Donald Trump’s proposal of a Muslim registry, with which the same story of unbridled fear is at risk of repeating itself, Lange’s photograph shows the fragility of immigrant citizenship and reminds us to recognize our shared humanity.

Jessica Min, '18, studied economics at Harvard University. She is from Melbourne, Australia.

“Move On!” The Native v. Naturalized American

Louis Aghanwa

The 1884 Supreme Court case of *Elk v. Wilkins* declared that Native Americans who had any form of allegiance to their tribe did not have the right to vote, even if they paid taxes to the United States government. A Winnebago Native American named John Elk, who was born on an Indian reservation, moved to a non-reservation territory in Omaha, Nebraska, and renounced his tribal allegiance. Elk claimed United States citizenship under the Fourteenth Amendment clause that says, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”¹ Elk was prevented from voting in U.S. elections, however, and filed a lawsuit to dispute this rule. To his surprise, when the case concluded on November 3, 1884, the Supreme Court decided that he could not claim voting rights under the Citizenship Clause because persons who are not “subject to the jurisdiction of the United States at the time of birth cannot become so afterwards, except by being naturalized” under the procedures determined by the United States government.²

Thomas Nast’s 1871 cartoon “Move On!” depicts a Native American man in traditional tribal wear being prevented from voting at the polls by a white man in a coat and a hat carrying a baton. The juxtaposition of the armed white man and the unarmed Native American man highlights that whites were willing to use force in order to stop Native Americans from voting, even if the latter group was physically non-threatening to these oppressors. The white man with the baton is also in line with the American flag hanging from the “Polls” booth at the top center of the image. This separation between the perceived “civilized” left side and the “tribal” right side of the image emphasizes the contradiction between the physical building structure, which represents the right to vote for every

American, and the discriminatory voting suppression that is taking place.

The fact that other nonwhite naturalized citizens were allowed to vote heightened the frustration of the Native American man. Underneath the “Polls” sign, you can see what appears to be a black man, as suggested by his darker complexion and larger lips. Seeing the black man voting in the booth emphasized that Native Americans were essentially the last to gain voting rights by birthright even though they were the first persons on American soil. All of these men, with the exception of the Native American, are allowed to place their votes into the round jar. Shaped like a globe, the jar represents a world in which only these naturalized citizens can participate, where the Native American is excluded as an alien in his own environment.

Behind the Native American man, there are two white American men in hats watching the tribal lands in the distance. This calls into question the right of Native Americans to govern their people. Native Americans were not allowed to self-govern or make decisions regarding how naturalized citizens could act on their lands. The position of the two white men makes the Native Americans appear as though they are being hunted from the distance like prey. In essence, Native Americans’ right to citizenship was hunted down and killed in court. Citizenship was never truly determined by an objective birthright to the soil, as argued by John Elk; it was all by subjective “jurisdiction.”

1 “14th Amendment,” Legal Information Institute (LII), November 12, 2009, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/amendmentxiv>.

2 *Elk v. Wilkins*, 112 U.S. 94 (1884).

Louis Aghanwa, '18, studied history and science at Harvard University. He is from Queens, New York.

Queer the Black, Black the White

Cahleb E. Derry

Kehinde Wiley’s mimesis of European art and consequential intervention in the realms of black and queer art instantiate the question of “For whom?”—For whom was the space intended, and how do we complicate and marry the gap between who should have access and who is actually permitted? For many queer folk, the “For whom?” in black spaces is not always clear, and for many black folk, the “For whom?” in American spaces—namely the canon—is not clear either. For those with both identity markers, the question of “For whom?” often prompts an immediate response along the lines of ...

“Not I.”

In the 2015 landmark civil rights case *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruled that the fundamental right to marry would be guaranteed to same-sex couples across the United States.

Freedom. Ostensibly.

No matter how much of a watershed moment it was, *Obergefell v. Hodges*—described as a “victory”¹ and a “new era for gay rights”² by *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*, respectively—did not rectify homophobia in our country. The black queer experience specifically remains convoluted and littered with othering on behalf of both the predominantly white queer community and the overwhelmingly homophobic black community. *Obergefell v. Hodges* did not prevent Omar Mateen from murdering forty-nine mostly Afro Latinx people inside Pulse Nightclub in Orlando in 2016 nor does it prevent present-day Grindr profiles from specifying “Whites only—no blacks, no rice, and no spice.” Perhaps the snake that Kehinde Wiley’s subject in his painting *Femme piquée par un serpent* (2008) has been afflicted by acts as an ocular display of how this othering feels—maybe the subject’s seemingly inattentive, horizontal positioning is demonstrative of “one whose mortality and carnality have been underscored by its lack of uprightness.”³

Perhaps this piece is also demonstrative of reclamation. The work primarily answers the question of “For whom is justice being served?” by utilizing

mimesis to be unapologetically black and queer in the worlds Wiley operates in—which are often, whether black or white, canonically fixated and homophobic. His use of brown oils on a colossal, billboard-size canvas that would “dwarf the viewers who would approach [it]”⁴ illuminates the skin on the subject’s face, placing his rich brown tone against the blindingly white backdrop of the original French sculpture he mimics. Wiley’s de-gendering of the subject vis-à-vis his sustainment of the descriptor *femme* in its title, in conjunction with the figure’s carnal positioning, challenges the obsolete and white normative origins of the original piece. His mouth sits open, communicating a relaxed and undominated state, as well as agency, through his homoerotic and playful position. While staring back at the viewer with a lustrous glance, he reveals his undergarments, often coded among gay men as a sexual invitation and a common fashion trend among black men in cities. In simultaneity with his backwards hat and visible briefs, he is showered in sunflowers, which deconstruct notions of what the typical urban black man is supposed to look like—Wiley is contending that queerness and blackness are not mutually exclusive. The subject in his painting has agency over his body and its message. He tells us that the answer to the question of “For whom?”—even when the spaces queer black folk attempt to enter often tell us otherwise—should ...

Always

Be

“Me.”

- 1 Garrett Epps, “The U.S. Supreme Court Fulfills Its Promises on Same-Sex Marriage,” *The Atlantic*, June 26, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/same-sex-marriage-supreme-court-obergefell/396995/>.
- 2 Richard Socarides, “A New Era for Gay Rights?” *The New Yorker*, June 17, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-new-era-for-gay-rights>.
- 3 David J. Getsy, “Laying It Down: Heroic Reclining Men and Other Tactical Inversions,” *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* (New York: Prestel, 2015), 84.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 89.

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The Cotton Bowl and the Super Bowl

Eli Wilson Pelton

How can one be free but not a citizen? This is the paradox that the Supreme Court codified with the 1857 ruling of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which declared that “a negro, whose ancestors were imported into this country, and sold as slaves” was “[not] a member of the political community formed and brought into existence by the Constitution” and therefore was ineligible for citizenship, whether free or enslaved. This is the paradox that continues to manifest itself within our contemporary American landscape. The *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case reiterated citizenship as a contested site predicated on the body, one not found in the body’s relation to its surroundings, but in the very body itself. The ruling made explicit, via legal history, that which was implicit in everyday life: to be a black American was and always will be a shifting gradient of citizenship negotiated through the body.

Hank Willis Thomas’s photograph *The Cotton Bowl*, part of his 2011 series *Strange Fruit*, makes this legal history legible through the great American congregation that is football. His digital C-print closes the historical and imaginative gap between two fields familiar to black Americans: the cotton field and the football field. Two black male bodies, their faces obscured by a straw hat and a football helmet, respectively, gaze at each other as they hold similar poses: the slave crouching to pick cotton and the football player crouching as he waits for the ball. The anonymous bodies are mirror images of each other, strung like paper dolls against a jet-black background and suspended in an environment of atemporality, spectacle, and artifice. The photograph traces the lineage of black bodies as commodified tools of profit and maps the

genealogy of black ownership: yesterday it was massa, today the NFL. The figures’ anonymity reinforces their status as objects reduced to bodies and reinscribes history on contemporary football parlance (players are bought, branded, and traded, scorecards and stats are kept, chain gangs are made).

In interviews, Thomas makes clear that the field in *The Cotton Bowl* is intended to represent twentieth-century sharecropping instead of slavery and is a greater rumination on “exploitation” and “spectacle.” His insistence on distinguishing between sharecropping and slavery points to his belief in the continual seepage of the historical past: black exploitation did not end with slavery, but continued with sharecropping, lynching, and redlining, and continues with the NFL, the NBA, and police brutality. Thomas wants the viewer to imagine these legacies not as closed historical episodes, but instead as experiences on a continuum, shifting with time and always under constant, bodily negotiation. This is the paradoxical legacy of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*: freedom and citizenship continue to form a contested binary within the black body, regardless of the type of field.

Eli Wilson Pelton, '17, studied history and literature at Harvard University. He is from Salem, Oregon.

Envisioning the Right to Vote

Jonathan Karp

Somewhere between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, in the first days of spring 1965, Bruce Davidson took a photograph of a young black marcher. The young man’s name is not recorded, but he appears in several of Davidson’s photographs of the march from Selma to the state’s capital. It’s no mystery why. The young man’s painted face illustrates the fight for voting rights in literal, stark relief: “VOTE.” The word is his skin, his blackness. Whiteness, in the photograph and in the United States, is required for both the word’s legibility and the citizenship it represents.

In other photographs, the young man moves. He marches, eyes fixed forward beyond the frame, his mouth open in mid-chant. The sound and action of these photographs make the “VOTE” photograph seem still in equal measure. Here, the young man looks directly at the photographer’s lens. Although Davidson was working in the context of documentary photography, the angle of his subject’s torso and his direct gaze place the image in the tradition of portraiture. It’s the combination of this formal stillness, the provocative face paint, and the context of the civil rights movement that, paradoxically, suggests a relationship between the photograph and a Supreme Court case that would be decided forty-three years after it was taken. In fact, Davidson’s photograph finds its echo in the modern debate on photo ID laws.

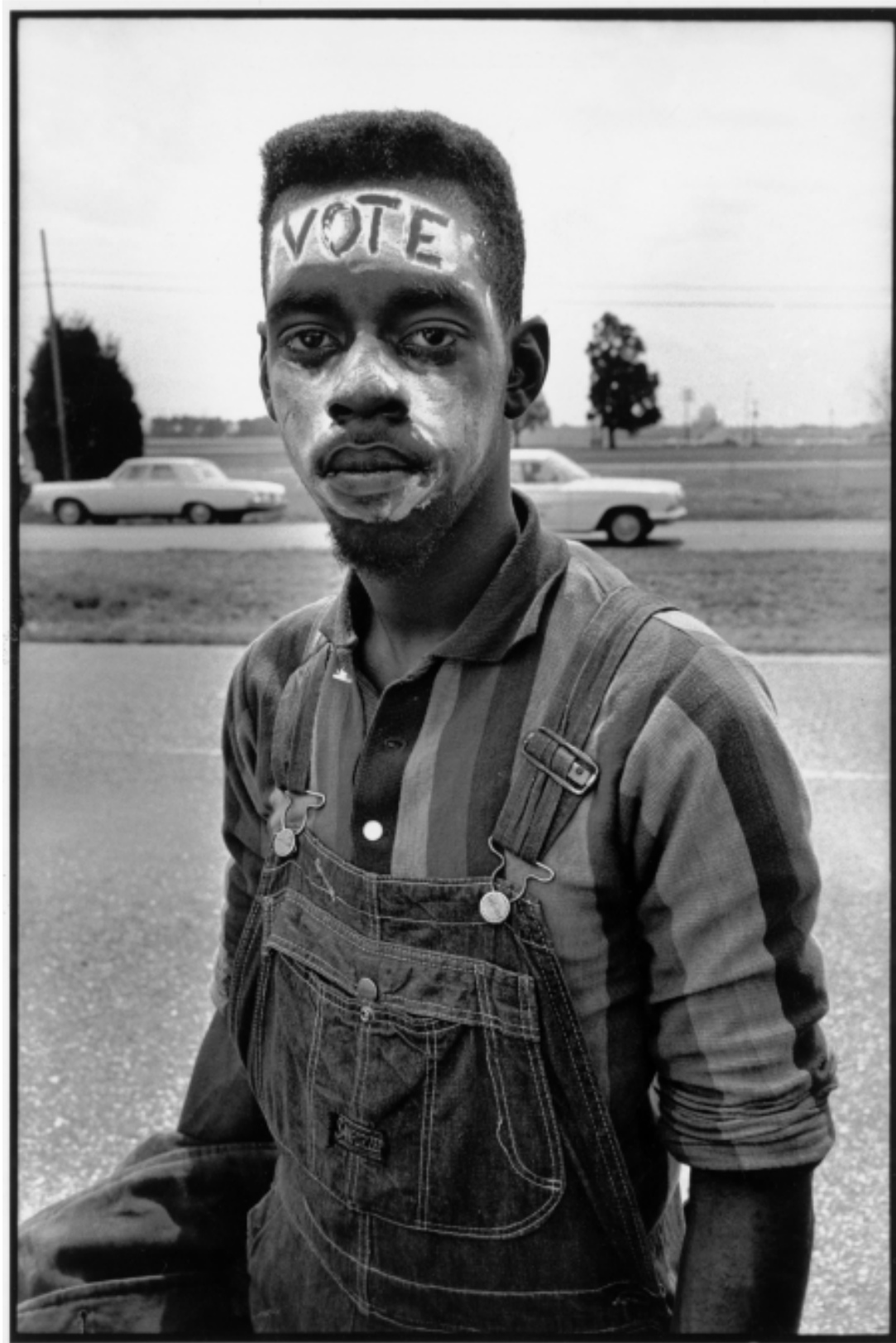
Crawford v. Marion County Election Board, decided in 2008, holds that an Indiana law requiring voters to show photo identification does not violate the Constitution. Though voter ID laws have existed in the United States since 1950, Indiana was among the first states to require photo IDs specifically. These laws serve

to discourage or outright prevent those without photo IDs—a disproportionate number of whom are African American—from voting. What does it mean for the state to require a portrait in exchange for exercising one’s rights as a citizen? In this context, Davidson’s photograph reveals how photo IDs are merely the latest visual site where ideas of race, citizenship, and justice collide.

ID photographs are a form of portraiture but also the portrait’s fraternal twin, the “type,” which establishes norms and compares subjects against those norms. Through a scientific gaze as dispassionate as any at the DMV, nineteenth-century types codified racial difference and justified racism. Photo IDs, as a contemporary type, are similarly relied upon for their accuracy, their ability to classify, and their existence as proof of citizenship.

In the spring of 1965, a young man marched to claim his rights. A half-century later, his image might now exist in a state archive, allowing him, in some states, to vote. A century earlier, his image might have entered an archive that labeled him as subhuman. These multiple visions mark the end of slavery, the maintenance of state power, and the uninterrupted life of photography as an apparatus with which black Americans must negotiate their humanity and their citizenship.

Jonathan Karp is a PhD candidate in American Studies at Harvard University. He is from Lexington, Kentucky.



Bruce Davidson, A young African American man with the word "VOTE" on his forehead during the Selma March in Alabama, U.S., 1965
© the artist/Magnum Photos

Vision & Justice
A Civic Curriculum

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Frederick Douglass, 1847-52
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—Sarah Lewis

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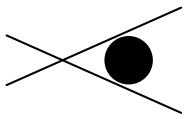
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Vision & Justice
Project

“Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.”

—Frederick Douglass



aperture