

Introduction

The Self in Black and White

“The establishment of contact with self is key, the source point from which all messages flow. We speak of our lives as only we can.”¹ To many the significance of this statement—made by Louis Draper in 1972 in reference to his involvement with the African American photography collective known as the Kamoinge Workshop—may appear self-evident. In asserting that “contact with self is key” and “we speak of our lives as only we can,” Draper seems to imply that his individual circumstances speak for the collective experiences of African Americans as a group.

This reading of Draper’s statement relies on the belief that African American photographers are born with an innate talent to represent their race and, by extension their selves, naturally and sympathetically. One of the ways that this essentialized understanding of the representation of race has been constructed and disseminated is by means of a comparison of images of black subjects by African American photographers with those produced by such European American photographers as Bruce Davidson, who spent a considerable period of time photographing this same subject matter. Even though scholars have praised Davidson’s photographs of black subjects, many contend that his position as a European American necessarily “limits” these representations. Photography critic A. D. Coleman clarifies this point in a contemporary review of a series of photographs that Davidson took in East Harlem in the late 1960s:

No matter how insightful a white photographer may be, and despite all precautions he may take, he remains white and therefore alien. Thus, even when there is mutual admiration and respect between photographer and subject, there is automatically a barrier, for they stand on different sides of the socio-cultural fence.

Here Coleman argues that regardless of Davidson’s effort to promote reciprocity between himself and his black subjects through, for instance, his use of a 4 x 5 inch-view

camera and his distribution of prints to his subjects, Davidson's position as a European American necessarily restricts these representations.

When an African American photographer like Dawoud Bey photographs black subjects, this question of racial expertise is rarely posed because he shares their racial background. Yet, if race naturally predisposes Bey to represent black subjects more truthfully and sympathetically than his European American counterparts, why, in the mid-1980s did he, as Davidson had done a decade earlier in his East Harlem photographs, also attempt to establish reciprocity with his subjects by changing from a 35 mm camera to a 4 x 5 inch-tripod-mounted camera as well as by distributing prints to them? Rather than address Bey's collaborative efforts with his subjects in terms of the specificity of this history, scholars have instead turned to the tradition of black image making, and more particularly the binary of positive/negative images, to explain the transformation that occurred in Bey's working process.

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Because access to the means of representation and the freedom to define and distribute one's own image has not always been readily available to African American photographers, scholars argue that these individuals, particularly those working during the 1950s through 1970s, turned to documentary photography, and above all its claims to truth, in an effort to gain increased visibility and to replace the largely negative and damaging images of their race with more positive ones.³ By the mid-1980s, however, a shift supposedly has taken place. At this time, the belief in photography as a tool of documentation and social reform deteriorates as African American photographers recognize the limitations and outright inadequacies of so-called positive images and in turn use their work to question and criticize assumptions inherent in the tradition of documentary photography.⁴ Scholars cite Bey's dissatisfaction with his 35 mm street photography and particularly the distance and lack of reciprocity that this approach supposedly creates between himself and his subjects as an illustration of this shift.⁵

This argument about Bey's practice situates him within several established art historical lineages and narratives. First, as the creation of an African American photographer, Bey's work is presented as the product of a unified and racially cohesive group of individuals. Second, in order to legitimize Bey's work in terms of already established canons, his photographs are aligned with postmodernist and multiculturalist theories of identity, whose very foundation depends upon a rejection or critique of what has come before. Both of these arguments view the relationship between race and the self in Bey's photographs as cohesive in terms of authorship, ideology,

and chronology. They thus fail to address the complex and even contradictory ways in which the meanings of those photographs were negotiated in terms of such historically specific contexts as the documentary-influenced practices of photographers like Bruce Davidson as well as the identity-driven work of postmodernism and multiculturalism. As Bey himself explains: “I’ve often thought of myself as belonging to the in-between generation: the generation after the Documentarians and before the Postmodernists who renounced the documentary impulse completely. I can’t swear allegiances to either, but my vocabulary is drawn from both.”⁶ This statement reveals Bey’s own awareness of the intertextuality of his working practice and, in turn, supports my decision to more carefully address the historically specific theoretical and ideological frameworks that informed it.

In an effort to situate Bey’s practice as well as the representation of race in postwar American photography more generally within a fresh and much-needed historical and conceptual frame, this book takes as its focus a specific group of African American and European American photographers—Bruce Davidson, Roy DeCarava, Louis Draper, Robert Frank, Herbert Randall, Aaron Siskind and Beuford Smith, among others—who worked in or around a particular geographic location, New York City. I have chosen to center my investigation on this group of postwar American photographers for several methodological reasons. When scholars address the representation of race during this period, it is most frequently within the context of African American photography or the more general category of black photography. The absence of African American photographers from the history of photography largely accounts for this tendency. With not a single black photographer included in either Beaumont Newhall’s 1982 edition of *The History of Photography* or Jonathan Green’s 1984 *American Photography*, a number of scholars—most notably Deborah Willis—have focused their attention on the recovery, identification, and preservation of the works of African American photographers and the function of these images within African American culture.⁷ While this significant and groundbreaking work has been necessary in order to subvert much of the exclusionism and racism that has permeated art history, scholars have more recently begun to develop a more critical study of race and its representation, one that art historian Jacqueline Francis has referred to as a “critical race art history.”⁸

My decision to focus on a group of black and white photographers responds in part to this call. In order to move beyond evaluating representations of race, both

in isolation from their broader historical and cultural significance within the United States and as the product of a unified and cohesive group of individuals, I have selected a group of African American *and* European American photographers who share an interest in depicting black subjects. At the same time, in selecting this group, I do not, unlike Coleman in his evaluation of Davidson's East Harlem photographs, consider the relationship between race and self in these images as either essential or unmediated. Instead, I approach race and self as a socially and historically specific set of relations that can change according to the complex and at times contradictory terms of their production and reception. Such a comparative methodology—which is in dialogue with the important cultural studies work of scholars such as Sara Blair, Shawn Michelle Smith, Sasha Torres, and Laura Wexler, among others—is necessary because it offers a model for considering African American and European American photographers both within and beyond this book without reducing either group into overly broad categories of identity or discussing them and their representations through such binary oppositions as black/white, insider/outsider, and positive/negative images.⁹

The so-called documentary nature of these photographers' practices also played a role in my selection process. As I have already mentioned in relation to Bey's work, by the mid-1980s, the practice of documentary photography had become ideologically fraught, particularly for advocates of postmodernism. Critics such as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, and Abigail Solomon Godeau, for instance, offered trenchant critiques of documentary photography, claiming that it privileged the creative genius of the photographer at the expense of, among other things, the subjects that they depicted. Likewise, David Bailey and Stuart Hall also denounced this practice, arguing that the belief in the assumed objectivity of documentary photography and its ability to produce social change set up an implicit hierarchy between photographers and their subjects.¹⁰ In both cases, the arguments of these critics, much like the reading of Louis Draper's statement with which I began, assume that the authors of documentary photography function as autonomous centers of meaning who both determine and guarantee the aesthetic and political value of their images.

To overcome this problem of the all-knowing author, several of these critics sought to call attention to the relative indeterminacy of photographic meaning as well as its dependence upon the contingencies of its uses. As Allan Sekula explains in his influential article "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," first published in

1975, “The photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic outcome.”¹¹ Here Sekula, largely building on Michel Foucault’s notion of the discourse object, insists on photography’s social determination and ubiquity, essentially arguing that a photograph’s meaning is determined by the sociohistorical context in which it is used and circulated. Since I too wanted to distance the photographers in my study from notions of an all-knowing author—albeit an essentialized racial one—the idea that photographic meaning is mutable and contingent instead of determined by the race of its maker became appealing, particularly in the early stages of this project. At the same time, in adopting this approach, I came to perceive its limitations. For instance, if a photograph’s meaning is entirely dependent upon the contingencies of its uses, is the photographer’s subjectivity, by which I mean his or her sense of self—including the experience of racial difference—then entirely irrelevant to that photograph’s meaning? For Sekula and many of his contemporaries, the complexity that subjectivity may bring to photographic meaning was not at all troublesome. In fact, they intended their emphasis on the function and social uses of photography to both challenge and negate the role of subjectivity in a photograph’s meaning. Given my interest in how the photographers in my study used their representations of black subjects to explore the complex and at times even contradictory relationship between race and self, I realized that I could not so easily dismiss the complexity that their subjectivities brought to the racial meanings of their photographs. But the question remained as to how I might ground these subjectivities within the processes of social relations instead of within essentialized notions of race.

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The theoretical ideas of structural linguist Émile Benveniste provided me with one way to respond to this problem. According to Benveniste,

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue which is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in turn designates himself as *I*.¹²

In this passage, Benveniste proposes that subjectivity is not something that is stable or fixed—as assumed in my initial reading of Draper’s statement as well as by critics regarding the authors of documentary photography—but rather something that is constituted by an intersubjective exchange. Film scholar Kaja Silverman clarifies this

claim as, “the impossibility of isolating language from discourse, or discourse from subjectivity.”¹³

Benveniste’s proposition has been particularly important to my study, since it has allowed me to consider the photographers discussed in my book, not as privileged and authentic sources of meaning, but in terms of how the racial meanings of their representations “are given concrete expression,” as Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue in their important book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, “by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded.”¹⁴ In short, Benveniste’s theoretical ideas, along with those of Omi and Winant, have enabled me to speak about these photographers without resorting either to essentialist binaries or to notions of the all-knowing author assumed intrinsic to the tradition of documentary photography. In their place, I have been able to focus on the specific ways in which the racial meanings of their representations shifted according to the social and historical terms of their production and reception.

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To begin to reconstruct what it was possible to discuss about photographic representations of race in postwar America, and how these images shape and were shaped by broader social structures, I engage, in each of the four chapters in this book, in a kind of dual mapping, combining a consideration of art historical formation, including close formal readings of relevant visual and textual materials, with careful attention to the complexities of the historical moments and social relationships in which these images were produced and received. These include not only pertinent artistic and sociohistorical contexts—photography exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the representation of black masculinity in the print media, the discourse on the culture of poverty, and the function of violence within the civil rights movement, to name just a few—but also those more private and elusive attitudes, desires, and interpersonal relationships that influenced the manner in which these representations came to acquire meaning about race and self during this period. In mapping these photographers’ representations in relation to the terms of these artistic, sociohistorical, as well as private contexts, I attempt to raise important questions about the varied ways in which these photographers navigated their way across this complicated terrain in their attempt to understand their own subjectivities and racial identities. I also question the central role that race as a sociohistorical concept and photography as a medium of intersubjective exchange played in these investigations. In so doing, I hope to establish the complex, shifting, and even fraught ways in which race, subjectivity,

and documentary photography—especially as an index of the “real”—not only produced one another but were inescapably intertwined in postwar America.

The historical and conceptual parameters for this analysis developed largely as a result of the extensive archival research that I conducted, at among other institutions, MoMA, the LBJ Library, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the International Center for Photography. Besides this research, I met and interviewed numerous members of the little-known African American photography collective known as the Kamoinge Workshop. I have used these materials alongside other contemporary visual and textual documents to develop and expand the historically specific set of conditions and debates addressed in this book. In so doing, I hope to sweep away many of the established art historical lineages and narratives concerning the representation of race during this period. In their place, I offer a model for assessing these images that emerges from more careful and critical considerations of the historical dimensions of the specific visual conditions and social relations that informed these photographers’ explorations into race and self.

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What follows, essentially, are four case studies for considering the varied ways in which postwar photographic representations of race collided and colluded with the broader social systems in which they were produced and received. In each of these studies, I use historically specific sets of conditions and debates that shaped, and in turn were shaped by, these representations to map the complex and even contradictory ways in which ideas about race and self and their representation in photography were articulated and negotiated, as well as contested, during this period. At the same time, while each of my studies focuses on a specific set of social and historical relationships as well as a particular group of photographers, images, and texts, I do not attempt to organize this material into discrete, self-contained chapters nor do I always introduce these chapters in the most straightforward manner. Instead, I begin each one with an extended discussion of a specific photographer, group of photographers, or photographic project, and then frequently shift this discussion to a different set of photographers or photographic projects by the end. I organize the material in this way not only to call attention to the varied, even disjointed, nature of the social and historical terrain against which I construct the arguments in my book but also to suggest how dense and circuitous the racial meanings are that I attempt to address in each of my chapters. These organizational strategies may at times try the reader’s patience, but that structure is deliberate, since I want readers to become physically as well as

conceptually aware of the ways in which the racial meanings embedded in this material are not only willfully entangled but also continually rearticulated according to the socially and historically specific terms of their production and reception.

What does connect these four studies, however, is the concept of “intersubjective exchange” that I borrow from Benveniste. As I explain earlier, I am interested in this theoretical idea because of the way that it allows me to ground the subjectivities of my selected photographers within the processes of social relations rather than in essentialized notions of race. But while the notion of “intersubjective exchange” provides an overarching conceptual framework for my book, I also use this concept to discuss actual social relations, including the intersubjective relationships between the photographers, subjects, and viewers of images discussed in my book. My interest in the terms of these relations as well as in photography’s potential to engage in them is two-fold.

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I turn to this relationship in my book first as a way to complicate the subject/object hierarchy considered implicit in documentary photography as well as to suggest the manner in which ideas about selfhood were explored relationally during this period relative to the social world. At the same time, given my interest in how ideas about self were shaped and reshaped through photographic representations of race, it is often more accurate to consider the intersubjective relations of the documentary photographers that I address in this book, especially in Chapters 1 and 4, in terms of interaction as opposed to exchange. This is because, on the whole, many of the photographers that I consider did not intend their images to function as a form of collaboration as implied by the term “exchange”; several of them were specifically interested in using their photographs to explore the nature of their subjects’ reactions to having their pictures taken. This is not to say that these photographers never took images of consenting subjects or that they were attempting to “speak” on behalf their subjects. But for the most part, they were more interested in using the relationship between themselves and their subjects as a means to negotiate the relational space between their private and social selves than in ensuring that their subjects were involved in the actual picture-making process. Some may criticize these efforts as upholding the privileged subjectivity of photographers at the expense of the subjects depicted. I would argue, however, that such challenges to the function of photographers as coherent and original sources of authorial power, while important, have nevertheless caused to remain largely unexplored the complex and often contradictory relationship that sub-

jectivity—as a socially and historically constructed not essentialized term—brings to the representation of race in postwar American photography.¹⁵

I also use the concept of intersubjectivity, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, to explore the complex network of social relations, and more specifically “structures of feeling,” that exist between viewers and the subjects depicted in the photographs in my book. In these analyses, I turn to this concept as a way to call attention to the intricate and even conflicting ways in which the racial meanings of these photographs were formed, shifted, and even reconstituted according to the social and historical terms of their production and, more important, their reception. In both cases, the concept of intersubjectivity provides a way for me not only to address photography’s dialogical potential but also to speak about the relationships between the authors, subjects, and viewers of these photographs in terms of the actual racial dynamics of social life as opposed to those more essentialized notions of identity implied by such binaries as positive/negative images, black/white, and outside/insider.¹⁶ This does not mean that intersubjectivity is the only conceptual framework through which to analyze these images or even the most historically correct one. Instead, I have used this theoretical concept to suggest the historically specific ways in which these photographic representations of race have been understood, lived, and negotiated in relation to the multifaceted identities of their photographers, subjects, and viewers and the complexities of their social as well as private interactions in the world. It is my hope that in reading these images in this manner, this book will not only challenge commonly held assumptions about how the self has been experienced, conceptualized, and reflected in relation to photographic representations of race but, more important, will also begin to illuminate what is at stake when these efforts are overlooked or ignored.