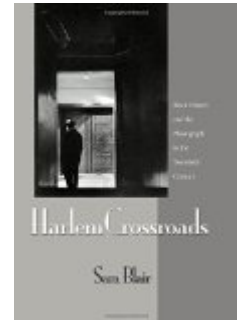


Sara Blair. *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xxi + 353 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-13087-3.



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Sara Blair's groundbreaking interdisciplinary study of Harlem writers and their engagement with photography establishes the importance of both the practice of documentary image-making and of Harlem as a staging ground for producing both dominant and oppositional views of black New Yorkers. Blair takes the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1964 as bookends, focusing on the transitional period between the Harlem Renaissance and the realization of the "second ghetto." [1] Not coincidentally, this period overlaps with the "birth of a full blown image culture" in the United States and the ascendance of the photographic essay as "the essential engine of mass communication," signified by Henry Luce's 1936 founding of *Life*, the widely popular weekly "picture magazine," and by the New Deal government's efforts to create vast archives of documentary images (pp. 5-7). While other art historians have critiqued practices of documentary photography during this period as promoting "state agendas and corporatist values," social control, and the criminalization of socially marginal or deviant figures, Blair is inter-

ested instead in the spaces opened up by documentary image-making in Harlem for "oppositional and affirmative practices" (pp. 15-16).

Due to both "the hard facts of daily life" in the neighborhood north of 110th Street in Manhattan and the creative responses to oppression engendered by them, Blair argues that Harlem presented an exceptional crossroads for photographers and writers interested in testing the "limits and possibilities of documentary knowing" (p. 8). In the unique context of New York City's proximate immigrant communities and of the cultural equation of Harlem with America's race problem, leftist first-generation Jewish American photographers from the Lower East Side partnered with black literary greats to create new ways of imagining black Harlem. The distance between Jewish photographers and their black subjects, which was sometimes maintained and less often transcended in the images they produced, allowed for a "meditation on the very conditions of documentary encounter" and of the power and agency of

photographer and subject (p. 8). The joining of these experimental photographic images of Harlem and its residents (by Aaron Siskind and his colleagues in the New York Photo League, Edwin Rosskam and Richard Avedon) to text (by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and John Oliver Killens) resulted in amazing photo-texts, texts that Blair reads as creating usable histories for opposition to white supremacy, particularly given the normalized racist treatment of Harlem residents as subjects rather than agents of history.

In her carefully crafted text, Blair traces the influence of photography, especially documentary photography, on highly influential African American writers, including Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, and Toni Morrison, in addition to those already mentioned. Blair argues that experimentation with the conventions of documentary photography provided an important resource to all of these writers, who were interested in restoring agency to their black characters, including agency in creating visual representations. Blair convincingly de-centers jazz as the most significant cultural influence on black writers, arguing cogently for the power of reinvention provided by writers' engagement with documentary photography. Wright and Ellison were photographers themselves, while Hughes, Baldwin, Hansberry, and Killens collaborated with photographers to create photo-texts, and Himes and Morrison both incorporated photographs as key signifiers in their novels.

Through her examination of African American writers' uses of documentary photography, Blair arrives at new interpretations of both individual major works and authors' legacies. For example, Blair refutes criticism of Hansberry, based on her plays *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), as committed to an outdated, European-American objectivist and individualist stance. Through an exploration of Hansberry's 1964 photo-text, *The Move-*

ment, which features an "antilinear narrative" and "frictional juxtaposition" of her text with the photographs by Jewish American photographer Danny Lyon, Blair notes how Hansberry's use of text and Lyon's photographs highlights women's collective role in the civil rights movement in contrast to nationalist and masculinist responses (pp. 212-213). "At virtually every turn," Blair writes, "images of women secure yet redirect local claims for the Movement's power and meaning" (pp. 217-218). Blair's novel readings of Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) also highlight the centrality of visual ways of knowing and the complexity of black responses to white gazes, as well as the ways in which gender and sexuality intersected with class and race in forming identity in these texts.

In addition to her interventions into African American cultural and literary studies, Blair suggests that chroniclers of New York City's cultural developments in the twentieth century have slighted documentary photography to the detriment of history. While Blair productively places herself in dialogue with other works, including Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989), William Scott and Peter Rutkoff's *New York Modern: The Arts and the City* (1999), Anne Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1996), Christine Stansell's *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (2000), and James Edward Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s* (2005), her book would have benefited from additional definitions of "modern" and "modernity" and an explanation of how her work challenges and enhances earlier understandings of New York modernism. Nonspecialists might also appreciate learning how the literature that Blair critiques did, in fact, contribute to photography and representation in the twentieth century. Assessments of New Deal photographers, for example, are placed in paragraphs scattered throughout several chap-

ters, rather than grouped together in the introduction.

Blair cites abundant archives and one wishes that she had incorporated additional material from them, including letters and diaries. This would have allowed her subjects to “speak” about their thoughts on photography and their collaborations with others. *Harlem Crossroads* includes seventy beautiful and intriguing photographs. The reader hungers for a few more, especially for a complete layout of at least one of the photo-texts that Blair discusses at length. The reader could then appreciate the juxtaposition of text and image. Ray DeCarava is held up as the African American Siskind, but the reader never gets to see DeCarava’s work. The ambitious scope of Blair’s work undoubtedly required making hard choices on what to illustrate.

Blair’s presumption of familiarity with both photographic and literary works makes this book challenging for most undergraduate history classrooms. Still, she succeeds in encouraging the reader to become acquainted with these important works of photography and literature. Fortunately, several of the works she discusses, including James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Richard Wright’s *Black Power: A Record of Reaction in a Land of Pathos* (1954), and Allon Schoener’s *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* (1969), have been republished in recent years, making them widely available.

Blair concludes her last chapter with a discussion of the 1969 exhibit, *Harlem on My Mind*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which “managed to infuriate virtually every sizable ethnic community in New York City, inflame artists and art critics alike, and catapult black nationalists, the Jewish Defense League, and the John Birch Society all at once onto genteel Fifth Avenue in protest” (p. 245). Curator and Jewish American Schoener’s enormous show presented a history of

documentary images in Harlem spanning from the turn of the century through the 1960s, and was attacked from all sides, as racist (anti-black) and as anti-Semitic. Blair reads the exhibit as “a site of strident confrontation over the uses and meaning of the photographic image” (p. 251).

Blair also points the way, however, for social and political historians of New York City to recognize the importance of cultural production, especially documentary image-making, in chronicling the city’s history. Blair provides a counterpoint to such important recent works as Martha Biondi’s *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (2003), Barbara Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (2003), Craig Wilder’s *A Covenant With Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (2000), and Clarence Taylor’s *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (2001), which document in varying ways the economic and political battles of black New Yorkers to achieve decent housing, jobs, education, and political representation. Blair shows that the struggles of black artists and their allies—often Jewish photographers—to represent Harlem and its residents on their own terms, were no less significant in the fight for equality than the efforts of civil rights leaders A. Philip Randolph, Ella Baker, and Milton A. Galamison.

Further, Blair’s work calls for a reconsideration of the role of documentary photography in twentieth-century American culture. Blair notes that “virtually every African American writer of national significance during the postwar period engaged directly with the archives, practices, and effects of documentary photography” (p. 10). To what extent was this true of American writers in general, and how can we better understand the role of both documentary photography and of literary writing in formulating the consciousness of post-World War II Americans? We can thank Blair for sketching out a broad future research agenda

for historians that will be enhanced by her own lucid analysis of the complicated role played by images in conjunction with literary texts in struggles for black self-representation and Jewish anti-racism in mid-twentieth-century New York.

Note

[1]. For the earlier origins of racially segregated ghettos in America's cities, see Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, new ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-war Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Craig Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

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