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Sara Blair. *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. 353 pp.

Clifford Endres

Harlem Crossroads is an important book for anyone interested in the Harlem Renaissance, African-American studies, the history of American photography, or the evolution of literary modernism in America. Using Harlem as a point of departure, Blair focuses on the canonical black writers of the 1930s and 1940s and the power held for them by the photographic image. Why Harlem? Because for photographers, especially after the riots of 1935 (which effectively spelled the end of the Renaissance), Harlem became "a provocative site for documentary meditation on race, usable histories, and the value of culture" (9). These photographers included not only Aaron Siskind and other members of the left-leaning New York Photo League but also Roy DeCavara, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt, William Klein, Don Charles, and Richard Avedon, to mention only the most prominent.

Blair's thesis is that the engagement of modernist photographers with the rich palimpsest of Harlem (James Weldon Johnson once remarked that you could trace New York's history in Harlem's transformation from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro) gave rise both to a new stylistics and to new cultural stances. It was, she asserts, this new conception of the image that attracted the attention of black writers and contributed significantly to their experiments in literary form. Writers to whom she pays special attention include Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Toni Morrison. All were closely involved with photography either as practicing photographers or as collaborators on photojournalistic texts, or both.

The backbone of Blair's book is her readings of specific images, both photographic and literary. She begins by analyzing Aaron Siskind's work in "Harlem Document," a photo-essay produced between 1936 and 1939. Siskind's images push the envelope of 1930s documentary photography as we know it from New Deal image-makers such as Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and other Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers. Indeed, Siskind's resistance

to the "Leica revolution" and the kind of "candid camera" work carried out by Evans (as in, for example, *Many Are Called*) and others is underscored, as Blair notes, by his choice of camera: a bulky 4 x 5 or 5 x 7 view camera whose technical requirements of loading, viewing, and composing made it impossible for the subject not to know that he or she was being photographed. In contrast to the "objective" school of photography, where the camera keeps a studied distance from the subject of its documentation, in Siskind's work the subject becomes an active participant. The result is a foregrounding of social context and its role in image production.

Although "Harlem Document" was never published in full, its images circulated widely, and, according to Blair, helped inaugurate a series of crossroads engagements with post-Renaissance Harlem. Literary figures such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison would admire the representational and expressive possibilities they saw in it and follow them up in their own work. The importance of photography for both writers is underlined by the fact that Ellison carried in his wallet, along with his card—"Ralph Ellison, Photographer"—the scrap of a photo of Wright cradling his twin-lens reflex camera. Blair examines what she calls the "crossings" of literary and photographic interests in their work as well as in that of the man who introduced them to each other, Langston Hughes.

A strong connecting thread among Harlem-associated figures is the photo-text—the combination of word and image in a book. In 1941 Wright produced, with Edwin Rosskam as photographic editor, the photo-text *Black Voices* (full title: *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*). This book drew heavily on the documentary files of the FSA but, because Wright reads the images differently, may be seen as a critical response to James Agee's and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published several months earlier to popular acclaim. Wright would use his own photographs for a 1954 photo essay on blacks in Ghana, *Black Power*. Ellison too was a photographer, supporting himself with his camera work during the mid-1940s to the early 1950s while writing *Invisible Man*. He did not publish the photojournalistic essay on Harlem which he composed in collaboration with Gordon Parks ("Harlem is Nowhere"), but his large archive of images indicates clearly that photography was for him an important means of critical reflection on American culture. As for Hughes, not only did he accompany Henri Cartier-Bresson on photographic forays in Mexico, but, with Roy DeCarava, brought out a best-selling photo-text, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, in 1955.

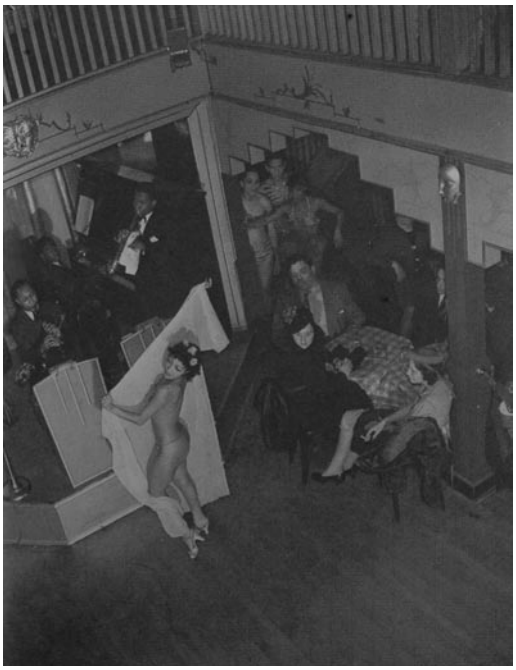
The list goes on. James Baldwin collaborated with his old high-school classmate Richard Avedon on the photo-text *Nothing Personal* (1964), a

controversial volume that directly engages the documentary tradition handed down through Evans, Agee, and Wright. While not directly concerned with Harlem, it is informed, in Blair's words, by Baldwin's status as a "Harlem icon" and Harlem's own "mobility as a signifier for racial experience" (196). The playwright Lorraine Hansberry wrote and organized a photo-text on the civil-rights struggle called *The Movement* (again 1964), based largely on Danny Lyons' documentary work. Chester Himes, though not a photographer, uses the topic of photomontage in his novels, especially *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Even Toni Morrison became involved with a photo-text project while working as an editor at Random House: *The Black Book*, published in 1974. Blair contends that much of Morrison's fiction, *Jazz* in particular, is a concerted effort to wrest photographic history away from the grip of a racial iconography rooted in the legacy of the Harlem documentary.

Except for rare cases of nigh-impenetrable jargon—"at the threshold of the oneiric, where alterity and self-knowledge are entangled and inevitably racialized," to give an example (page 56)—*Harlem Crossroads* is an admirably well-organized, thoughtful, and readable book. It may well, as one of its jacket blurbs claims, go down as "a major work of criticism and cultural history." In any event there is no doubt that it makes a compelling case for the crucial role played by photography and Harlem in the "self-imagination, cultural politics, and literary work" of African-American writers of the twentieth century.

Aaron Siskind, Untitled. [Our Ourn Community], from "The Most Crowded Block in the World", Ca.1940. George Eastman House.

Aaron Siskind, Untitled, from "Harlem Document", Ca.1937-40. Center for Creative Photography.



Aaron Siskind, Untitled, from "Harlem Document", Ca.1937. George Eastman House.

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Walker Evans, *Many Are Called*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 2004. 208pp.

Serhan Oksay

"Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long." This oft-repeated quotation by Walker Evans could hardly be better illustrated than by this new edition of a book that was first published in 1966—twenty-five years after the photographs in it were taken.

Before reading a book, I usually try to explore the writer. Knowing something about an author's life can help throw light on his work. In this case, we have a photographer rather than a writer, or perhaps a writer who expresses himself through photography. In fact, it was because he was frustrated in his attempts to become a professional writer that Walker Evans turned to photography in the first place. He first began to photograph in the late 1920s on a trip to Paris. On his return to New York, he published his first images. Then, during the Great Depression, he began to photograph for the Resettlement Administration, which later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA), documenting workers and vernacular architecture in the southeastern United States. In 1936 he traveled the South with writer James Agee, shooting pictures to illustrate an article on tenant farmers and their families for *Fortune* magazine. This collaboration was the project out of which grew the landmark book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

Those who remember the portraits in that book may nod in agreement with Luc Santé's remarks that "Evans regarded his subjects in much the same way he looked upon signboards and assemblages or folk architecture." Santé goes on to say, in a foreword to this edition of *Many Are Called*, that Evans "liked types, departures from type, sui generis examples, archaisms, sullen ruins; he could savor presumption, classical pathos, self-taught avidity, entropic improvisation, extravagant wrong-headedness, prosaic solemnity. Such qualities can be found in faces and in styles of self-presentation as much as vernacular public displays, although you seldom saw them in the work of the major photographic portraitists

. . . and even less in the output of ordinary studio photographers, who endlessly issued interchangeable portraits of wooden middle-class propriety" (13).

A good place to find and photograph subjects with such qualities might be a place where they were enclosed in a normal context, yet free of self-consciousness, perhaps even seated (for the photographer's convenience) against a dark background under impersonal lighting—in short, a subway car, where, by convention, one does not stare at one's fellow passengers.

Between 1938 and 1941 Evans descended into New York City's subway system three times in pursuit of images—of faces unmasked, of images that would reveal beneath their surfaces the gritty reality of the modern moment. Deep underground, Evans shot hundreds of pictures of people who had no idea they were the objects of a photographic stare. He managed this by hiding his camera (a 35mm Contax) beneath his winter coat, its lens peeking out between the buttons, and a shutter-release cable running down his sleeve to a bulb in his hand. The results were, in his mind, what a portrait ought to be: "anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind" (198). From more than six hundred exposures he chose eighty-nine for publication—hence the title, from Matthew 22: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

It was 1966, however, before the book was published, even though Evans's friend Agee had already drafted an introductory essay in 1940. It is the 1966 edition (dedicated to Agee) that is reprinted here. It includes Agee's introduction, the foreword by Santé, and an afterword by Jeff Rosenheim. Interestingly, all the photographs but two have been reproduced by digital scanning of the original negatives; those two, like the reproductions in the first edition, were made from Evans's gelatin silver prints. No difference in quality is discernible.

On first seeing the photographs, we realize that most of them are slightly out of focus and the composition is far from ideal. This is owing to the above-mentioned hidden-camera trick, which enabled Evans to reach his goal: his subjects are completely unaware of the photography session. Yet there seems to be a few exceptions. One could swear that the man in Plate 66 is posing for the camera, or that the workingman in Plate 4 is more than suspicious. There are other examples in which subjects appear to be staring at us with, if not suspicion, at least curiosity.

This book is like a novel without words. We could even free-associate from "novel" to "novelty." In fact you could make a board game out of the book, named possibly "Guess the Mood." Throw the dice and move your token; land on, say, Plate 54 and guess at the man's mood. Is he engrossed in the subway

advertisements or is he working out a mathematics calculation? How about the couple in Plate 68? Are they on the verge of a kiss or an argument? There's another couple in Plate 81: the man appears to be reading a magazine; but is he really, or is he just trying to avoid contact with his unhappy wife?

From a photographer's point of view, my favorite prints are Plates 49, 83, and 89. Plate 49 shows a well-dressed, even dapper, black man staring off into space; it makes me think of Charlie Chaplin in disguise. Plate 83 is remarkable for the interplay between the sailor's profile and the pin-up girl in a Chesterfield ad behind him. Plate 89 is a work of perspective. In it an accordion player stands between rows of passengers, singing his song in transit although nobody else seems to listen or to care. It represents Evans at his story-telling best.

In eighty-nine plates Evans created a new chapter in documentary photography by taking the ordinary and common and raising it to the remarkable and interesting. Agee compares Evans's accomplishment here to that of Charlie Chaplin's in *City Lights*: perceiving and revealing the naked, unguarded human soul through the signature of its precise and unique time and place in the world.

In 1965 Evans left *Fortune*, where he had been a staff photographer for 20 years, to become a professor of photography at Yale University. He taught there until 1974, a year before his death. Evans never became a popular photographer. Popular photographs are for decorating big houses; by comparison, Evans's work lives in the homes of ordinary people.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1941. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1941. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Walker Evans, Untitled, 1941. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1941. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1941. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1938. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Walker Evans, Untitled, 1989. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.