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Photography and the Work of Class and Race

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Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture. By Shawn Michelle Smith. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004. 225 pages. \$74.95 (cloth). \$21.95 (paper).

Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer. By Melanie Anne Herzog, with a foreword by Douglas R. Nickel and an afterword by Catherine Linder Spencer. Seattle: University of Washington Press and the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, 2006. 176 pages. \$30.00 (paper).

In his astute juxtaposition of the photography of Alfred Stieglitz and Lewis Hine, Alan Trachtenberg draws distinctions between Stieglitz's *Camera Work* and Hine's *Social Work*.¹ Rather than cementing a bifurcation, however, Trachtenberg is careful to show the inseparability of photography as art and photography as document. That dialogic relationship informs these two books under review and their treatment of the cultural and political work of photographs, archives, and photographers. Authors Shawn Michelle Smith and Melanie Anne Herzog construct contexts for their studies of the archival work of W. E. B. Du Bois and the photography of Milton Rogovin, respectively, that enlarge our understanding of how photographs can work against the grain of specific historical and cultural assumptions. That is, they underscore how camera work is also political work.

Shawn Michelle Smith's important *Photography on the Color Line* establishes W. E. B. Du Bois as a visual archivist who understood the power of photographic representation to disrupt, perhaps unmoor, the pseudo-scientific racial taxonomies undergirding systemic racial oppression. Du Bois visited the Paris Exhibition of 1900, where his contribution as archivist to the American Negro Exhibit, what he described as "a little display showing the development of Negroes in the United States," won a gold medal. Du Bois re-presented 363 photographs, archived in albums titled *Types of American Negroes, Georgia U.S.A.*

and *Negro Life in Georgia, U.S.A.* These photographs were gleaned from an earlier ethnographic project, Georgia Negro Exhibit, which Du Bois developed in collaboration with students at Atlanta University. As Smith cogently notes, this archive exposed a complicated narrative and counternarrative. The presence of Du Bois's words about the photographs signals the emerging power of his theorizing about race. One display was introduced with what would become his signature: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." However, the absence of captions to accompany the archived photographs obscures any literal rendering of names, places, and their meanings. The photographs, whether in paired frontal and profiled head shots in oval frames or in studio settings, presented an alternative narrative of Negroes living in the deep South. These are images of well-dressed, mostly young, middle-class men and women and beautiful children. The studio portraits are carefully situated within bourgeois settings of laced curtains, opened books, and potted plants. The men's suits are well tailored and the women's and children's garments are beautiful confections of bows, pleats, and lace. As Smith interprets Du Bois's intent, these portraits challenged the racial typology that relegated blacks to an inferior caste and fueled white supremacist violence.

Arguing for the importance of these photographs in advancing Du Bois's "new cultural vision," Smith employs a comparative theoretical framework to locate the images within their own cultural context and to theorize their contemporary meanings. Noting the literal and metaphoric meanings of his visual tropes of "the Veil" and "second-sight" and emphasizing that double consciousness emanates from the burden of being seen through the eyes of others, Smith makes a convincing case for recognizing Du Bois "as an early *visual* theorist of race and racism" (25). She argues that Du Bois adapts William James's *Principles of Psychology* to illuminate how race informs—if not shapes—the process of identity formation. She then moves into a Lacanian reading of Du Bois's double consciousness/double vision and explores a "fundamental fracture" in development, a "psychological splitting of black consciousness under a white gaze" as evidenced later in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (33). This theoretical line could have taken her to James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, but her direction is visual, not literary. She thus links back to imagery in her analysis of the Veil as not only a shroud of invisibility but also a tool for second sight.

How Du Bois answers and reassembles these psychic splits in the context of the scientific propaganda of his day and how his intentions are accented by his own patriarchal and class sensibilities are the focus of the next two



Figure 1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A.* (1900), photograph by Thomas E. Askew. Plate 10, vol. 1, no. 66, from the Daniel Murray Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

scientific authority to systemic oppression disguised as visual racial inferiority. As counterevidence to the nude or semi-nude frontal and profiled daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women taken by Joseph T. Zealy for Louis Agassiz a half-decade earlier, Du Bois proffered countertypes, using, as Smith argues, “scientific methodology to undermine racist scientific claims” (55). What Smith undertheorizes is how Du Bois’s countertypes are not only situated against scientific typology but also are embedded within other photographic practices such as earlier occupational tintypes, Lewis Hine’s Ellis Island photographs, illustrated publications sympathetic to the lives of workers such as the *Independent*, Frances Benjamin Johnston’s 1902 photographs of the Tuskegee Institute, and later August Sander’s typological catalog of hundreds of Germans. Du Bois’s methodology is to have middle-class materiality trump racist stigma. But there are traps.

chapters. Smith cites Du Bois’s proclamation that “All Art is propaganda” (44) to trace how his collection functioned as a counter-archive that challenged pernicious scientific typologies designed to give

Smith notes how Du Bois the scientist countered the presumed “objectivity” of then-current scientific methodology (particularly that of Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics) by presenting his own set of Negro types that refute claims of inferiority based on race. What Du Bois’s multihued archive attests to is the impossibility of race purity, conceptually and literally. However, Smith also recognizes the objectifying tendencies of Du Bois’s counter-objective methodology—or to evoke Audre Lorde, the inherent problems of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.

Du Bois’s counter-typology offered an alternative narrative to the dominant culture’s association of blackness with criminality and unbridled sexuality. Du Bois’s archive is a laudatory answer to the regulatory function of the cartoons, mug shots, and caricatures of African Americans. His visual language is a discourse of middle-class respectability grounded in patriarchal family structures. One of the strengths of *Photography on the Color Line* is the reproduced images themselves. They suggest the conundrum of advancing, in Smith’s words, “racial equality through class stratification [as] . . . figured through gender hierarchy” (79). Or, as Smith puts it more directly, “Du Bois is loath to picture a less-than perfect African American body, or a strained and struggling African American family” (93–94). In a cluster of photographs that include a street scene, musicians, a grocery store, and Victorian interiors, there is a single image of field work that is painterly and pastoral in its depiction of agricultural labor. The laborers are not individualized but seen from a distance as bucolic cultivators. It is the absence of labor, or more precisely, the absence of images of workers, as individuals and not just as part of a sociological study, that limits Du Bois’s visual counternarrative. I wish Smith had explored these lacunae more fully.

She concludes her book with a chapter on the “Photography of Lynching” or what might be described as the photography of whiteness as racial supremacy. Du Bois—the man of science and objectivity—is unmoored by lynching, particularly by his direct encounter with the brutal burning, lynching, and mutilation of Samuel Wilkes, described by Du Bois as a “poor Negro” in his own neighborhood of central Georgia. Du Bois experienced a crisis of belief in scientific fact in the face of the horrific banality of lynching. Smith astutely crops images of mutilated black bodies dangling from tree branches, these “strange fruit,”² to focus on whites as pleased spectators. She mirrors and exposes whites to whites. Lynchings, after all, were festive occasions—as Smith points out, six thousand white Georgians witnessed the spectacle of lynching Samuel Wilkes. Lynchings were photographed and reproduced on postcards intended to be sent as mementos and souvenirs. Here Smith expertly analyzes the gendered power relations behind whiteness as spectacle (140) and then less convincingly



Figure 2. Storefront Churches, 1958–61. Photograph copyright Milton Rogovin, courtesy Center for Creative Photography, Tucson.

circles back to her psychoanalytical reading of white subjectivity without adequately probing the economic underpinnings of white violence and fear.

Her epilogue on the archivist in the archive, about the period when Du Bois was editor of *Crisis*, cautions the reader to recognize the problems of representation while acknowledging the politicization of archival work. Du Bois faced tensions between broadly realistic representation and his own favored aesthetics of the black elite—the tangled social work and camera work of photography as transformative agent.

In Buffalo, New York, Milton Rogovin faced similar tensions at an early moment in his career as a politically committed social documentary photographer. In 1957 he was invited to accompany his friend William H. Tallmadge, a professor of music at Buffalo State University College, to take photographs while Tallmadge was making sound recordings at Holiness Church in Buffalo's African American community. This began a series of photographs taken in storefront churches—low-cost spaces not intended as churches—serving the black poor and unemployed. Rogovin returned to these churches, developing his skills as a photographer, for about three years, long after Tallmadge completed his recording project.

Rogovin focused on four storefront churches, particularly one led by Mother Tokio, and began to internalize the narrative process involved in documentary work, especially the vibrant atmosphere of those churches. As was his ongoing practice, he gave his subjects prints of themselves from his sequence of images. Mother Tokio critiqued some of these photos, telling Rogovin that he “made the faces too dark.” At the same time, Rogovin developed a friendship and apprenticeship with noted photographer and teacher Minor White, who encouraged him to make his visual narratives more complex by developing smaller series of images within a larger series. Minor subsequently published Rogovin’s *Storefront Church* series in *Aperture* accompanied by laudatory remarks by W. E. B. Du Bois (1961). Rogovin had been inspired by Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), particularly his chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers.”³ He used Du Bois’s written depictions of “the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy” as guides for his own visual representation of the rhythms of black religious expression. This intersection between W. E. B. Du Bois and Milton Rogovin foregrounds critical questions about the representation of class and race that link these two important books. Rogovin brought his socialist political convictions to bear on his practices as a social photographer. He understood the subjective complexities of representation and sought advice. He showed some of his storefront images to acquaintances in the African American community. Rogovin recalls:

Two of these individuals, physicians by profession, were very critical of my work. They said they had “passed beyond these practices,” referring specifically to the trance, and urged me to drop this series and do something else. This criticism troubled me enough that I decided to write to W. E. B. Du Bois to ask if I could show him my photographs and get his opinion about my *Storefront Church* series.

Dr. Du Bois answered promptly and invited me to visit him at his home in Brooklyn. There I showed him my photographs, and he expressed great interest in them and offered to write an introduction for this series.⁴

Du Bois’s “introduction” to Rogovin’s storefront church series is a quoted excerpt from his chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers” from *The Souls of Black Folk*. It combines social science with spiritual lyricism:

The music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.⁵

Rogovin’s powerful photographs and Du Bois’s poetic language evoke for the viewer/reader what Alan Trachtenberg calls (writing about Lewis Hine) an

“imaginative empathy,” an intersubjective response to the “inner humanity of the subjects as a basis for acknowledging our own” (203–5). This is a far cry from typology, the exotic of the other, and the photographic usurpation of lives seen from a distance. Herzog convincingly situates Rogovin within this lineage of socially conscious interpretative photography that re-presents the dignity of an individual within a collective sensibility.

Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer is a collective project and a beautiful book. Besides the early images of Buffalo’s storefront churches (1958–61), we see portraits of Mexican peasants (1950s); Appalachian unemployed miners, their families, and their homes (1962–71); Native Americans from reservations near Buffalo, New York (1963–85); African Americans from Buffalo’s East Side (1961–63); Chilean workers and their families (1967); an extraordinary triptych series of residents from Buffalo’s Lower West Side (later becoming a Quartet Series, 1971, 1984, 1992, 2002); members of Lackawanna, New York’s Yemeni community who emigrated to work in the now defunct steel mills outside of Buffalo (1977–79); a documentary series on steel workers at home and on the job (1977–79), and then returning to the same subjects at home after their jobs as steel workers had ended (1985–87); miners from Zimbabwe, Scotland, France, Spain, Germany, Cuba, China, Mexico, Czechoslovakia (1981–89); family photographs; and much more. The cumulative effect is the merging of visual document and aesthetic image accompanied by informed, synthetic biographical commentary by Melanie Anne Herzog. The book is a collective effort not only because it was jointly published by the University of Washington Press and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, but also because Herzog weaves interviews, letters, Rogovin’s poetry, literary allusions, historical commentary, family conversation (especially with his life and professional partner, Anne Rogovin), and Rogovin’s written autobiographical reminiscences into a coherent narrative. Herzog skillfully allows Rogovin to speak, in a manner comparable to Rogovin’s photographic commitment to having his subjects present themselves to his camera—images given rather than captured.

Milton Rogovin was born in Manhattan in 1909, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants. An intellectually inclined, nearsighted boy, he graduated from Stuyvesant High School and, following the direction of an older brother, trained to be an optometrist at Columbia University. He was radicalized by the brute reality of the 1933 economic depression and began to study socialism as an alternative political economy. He became aware of the photography of Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and later the work of Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, and others. He moved from Manhattan to Buffalo in 1938, became a

member of the United Optical Workers Local Industrial Union of CIO, and in 1942 met and married Anne Snetsky (Setters) who would become a catalyst in his progression as a photographer. He opened an independent optometry office and became the unofficial labor union optometrist. He was inducted into the armed forces in 1942 and served primarily as an army optometrist in England until the end of the war. By 1947 the Rogovins had three children, had become political activists in Buffalo, and were soon tainted by the anti-communism of the 1950s. In 1957 Rogovin was called to testify before the House Subcommittee on Un-American Activities and was labeled “Top Red” in Buffalo’s local newspapers. Soon after, his optometry practice diminished, as patients were afraid that any association with Rogovin would lead them to be labeled as reds as well. Neighborhood parents did not want their children to play with the Rogovin kids, and the family was sustained mainly by Anne’s salary as a teacher. This was a turning point at which Rogovin—with the support of his family—began in earnest his commitment to social documentary photography. The Rogovins traveled to Mexico, where they became aware of the politically conscious graphic arts tradition of the Taller de Grafica Popular (People’s Graphic Art Workshop) and where Rogovin produced a series of portraits that presented the dignity and strength of ordinary people. These were the beginnings of his signature style of direct (unposed) portraits that suggest a relationship of mutuality between the subject and the photographer, a level of trust that was made possible by Anne Rogovin’s rapport with the people he photographed. These are not a series of worker “types,” but rather aesthetically informed visual documents that present workers as more than the value of their labor or the material goods they produce.

Like Du Bois, Rogovin’s Marxist perspective gave him a wider lens, seeing the conditions of poverty as part of historically shaped economic and racial oppressions. Unlike Du Bois, who focused on the black middle class, Rogovin chose to focus on what he repeatedly calls “the forgotten ones”—primarily workers and their families—from a variety of races, ethnicities, and nations. Rogovin’s photos do not insist that visions of class should trump those of race, but rather that the inherent dignity of human beings defies categorization. This humanistic generalization should not mask, however, the immediate and historic oppressions that Du Bois faced and Rogovin understood. Rogovin’s portraits and Du Bois’s archive attest to the power of photographs—even in our image-saturated world—to offer fresh insights into our collective humanity. The burden is on *us* to see not as consumers (academic or material ones) or voyeurs, but as participants.

Notes

1. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).
2. See Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944); and Billie Holiday's signature song, "Strange Fruit," written by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol) in 1938.
3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, edited with an introduction by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).
4. Herzog, *Milton Rogovin*, 52.
5. *Ibid.*, 54.