Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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Photography affords the body a wealth of possibility. With it memory—fragmented, fluid, malleable, rigid and still—situates the black female body as one photograph in a continually duplicating frame constantly looking back on itself. And within that space is the possibility of freedom.

—Kimberly Juanita Brown, 2015:194

In the opening scene of the award winning documentary Black Mother, Black Daughter (1989), the film’s writer and director Sylvia Hamilton remarks on the goal of the project: “I want you to meet Black women I’ve known, mothers and daughters, who have patiently fostered the survival of our Black culture and community.” The film traces the history of Black settlement in the Maritimes region of Canada, beginning with histories of bondage and ending with women exchanging narratives, testimonies, and life histories about their mothers while weaving maple wood baskets. As Hamilton (1994: 54) explains elsewhere,

some of the earliest sketches and photographs of the Halifax city market show Black women selling baskets overflowing with mayflowers... basket-weaving for them was not an activity used to fill in time; it was work that brought in money vital to the survival of the family.

One of the subjects discussed while the women weave is Rose Fortune, a 19th-century Black woman whose parents were enslaved in Pennsylvania and later fled to Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia as Black Loyalists during the American Revolution. Fortune went on to start her own business in the area as a baggage carrier, and later established a “wake-up” service where she would alert local hotel patrons of departing ships. Among the women weaving is Daurene Lewis, Annapolis Royal’s—and Canada’s—first Black female mayor...
and Fortune’s great granddaughter five times removed. In the film Lewis explains the importance of these historical memories of Fortune, describing the pride she feels in the fact that she is “not the first Black woman to try and do something in my family.” A watercolor of Fortune [Figure 2] clad in an apron and boots is one of the first known representations of a Black woman in Canada and is featured in the film as Lewis speaks. In its documentary nature and use of print culture Black Mother, Black Daughter is one of very few visual mediums that explore the role of motherhood among African Canadian communities—a critical intervention in Canadian historiography. While perhaps not conceived as so-called “enduring objects” for historical study, I argue here that—like the maple wood baskets—vernacular photographs are socially salient objects that contribute to our understanding of public history and collective memory.

Against reigning ideologies that obscure the historical experience of racialized women, the aim of this paper is to highlight the potential of early 20th-century vernacular photography in situating Black motherhood within Canadian history, examining how the family photograph offered individuals a colloquial space in which to perform and subvert racialized, class-based, and gendered notions of national belonging. This paper explores how portraits of Black motherhood highlight the constructed status of signs mapped on the body and challenge the narrow conflation of Black women solely as workers outside of the home produced by the interlocking mechanics of capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism. These photographs highlight how the issue of motherhood and nation were bound up with racial discourses of the time. The materials for this investigation were drawn from the Alvin D. McCurdy fonds at the Archives of Ontario, a collection of nineteenth and early 20th-century
photographs of African Canadian communities in Amherstburg, Ontario—a major terminus of the Underground Railroad. If, as Nikhil Singh (2013: 165) proposes, nations are “social creations engineered and lived primarily through techniques of narration and representation,” this archive offers critical insight into how Black mothers reformulated and reinscribed national identity photographically.

This work relies on vernacular gelatin silver photographs as its primary source. Specifically, it studies deckle-edge amateur family photographs depicting domestic scenes of Black mothers with their children in Amherstburg, Ontario. These objects are read alongside more formal tintype portraits rendering whole family units in order to discern the representational practices unique to maternal photography. The readability of photographs as artifacts and as expressive texts depends upon understanding the socio-historical and cultural context of everyday image-making. As bell hooks (1994: 57) describes:

Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of our class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art making, make photography central.

My goal then is to put these ideas in conversation with Canadian histories of nation-building—examining how ideas about citizenship, race, gender, class, geographical belonging, and cultural memory have been visualized and promoted.

Foundational scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s (Brand 1991; Braithwaite and Benn-Ireland 1993; Bristow et al. 1994; Harris 1998) firmly situated Black
women in Canada as agential and indispensable historical actors. Building on these studies, subsequent works incorporated gender analyses into the history of Black women’s knowledge and cultural production, and resistance networks. However by nature of the fact that within prevailing hegemonic narratives many Black women have had their identity defined in terms of their labor (through both transatlantic slavery and domestic service programs), and because of unequal relations of archival power, within visual archives in Canada there is an over-representation of Black women as workers outside of their home. While these sources are undoubtedly invaluable to the study of both women’s contribution to the labor market and the material conditions of their experiences, they offer a very limited view of their lives.

Though circulated mostly in the private sphere, the photographs of mothers within the McCurdy fonds have the profound ability to challenge the visual hegemony of white motherhood in Canada. They not only destabilize visual tropes of Black womanhood, but also assert the subjectivity of their sitters. In particular, these photographs showcase both familial life and the unpaid domestic labor of African Canadian women. The economic importance of women’s domestic function to the capitalist economy has been well documented by social reproduction theory and movement-based knowledge generated from the transnational International Wages for Housework struggle. In her research on the history of the housewife, Catherine Hall (1992: 43) argues that, “If, as Marx suggested, wages represent only the reward for necessary labor time—that is, what is necessary for the worker to reproduce the conditions of his own labor-then in modern capitalism the housewife has become one of those hidden conditions, and thus the invisible support for the generation of surplus value.” However, these discussions often centre around the white middle-class “housewife”; the child-rearing and housekeeping performed by racialized women are often further invisibilized. Angela Davis (2011: 132) asserts that Black women have seldom been “just housewives”, they have carried the double burden of wage labor and housework which always demands that working women “possess the persevering powers of Sisyphus.” Since the arrival of Black people in Canada in the 17th-century, Black women have been called upon to do domestic chores, as cleaners, laundresses, and general helpers. Up until World War II approximately 80% of Black women in Canadian cities worked in domestic service (Brand, 1994: 175). The intersecting race, class and gender based oppressions which dictated that the only suitable employment for Black women was as domestic servants in Canada, has meant that vast numbers of Black women have had to do their own housekeeping and other women’s home chores as well.
Moving from the era of slavery and into the era of segregation or from racial dictatorship to so-called racial democracy, we see here the repeated trope of Black woman as an economic object to be exploited. Likely the same image alluded to by Hamilton, an engraving from 1830 within the Nova Scotia Archives depicting “Province House, Hollis Street, Halifax” [Figure 3] features in the left foreground a woman wearing a head wrap seated with her head in her hands with her basket placed at her feet. Positioned within the shadow of the building, across the street from this woman and soaked in the daylight are top-hatted men and a corseted woman carrying a parasol. While the white subjects in their pose and dress coupled with the warmth of the sunlight evoke a leisurely air, the woman seated on the street appears to be taking a short reprieve from her labor in the cool shade, head in hands, and wares by her side. In these examples, gendered notions of Blackness in stereotypical contexts were deployed as a way of depicting Black people in Canada as neither free (due to their continued reliance on forms of servitude as labor) nor citizens, since social and political equity were still very elusive (Crooks, 2019: 66).

This overrepresentation of Black women as unfree or wage workers within the visual archive is in part due to the fact that documents about working-class Black communities are often generated only when their lives intersect in some way with white people. This manifests most clearly in the holdings of Canadian archival institutions, where searches for visual records of Black motherhood during the nineteenth and early 20th-century produce scant historical evidence. As Ashley Farmer (2018) remarks: How should we address the paradox of simultaneously finding copious archival records on some Black women, while also accounting for the deafening archival silence on others?
Attending to epistemological issues that the visual archive presents, scholarly work that aims to recover the historical experience of Black women in Canada must adjust its methodology in order to better account for the power imbalances embedded in archival practice. This study positions vernacular, familial photography as a generative social practice for identifying new sites of historical inquiry. Taking up Gillian Rose’s (2016: 1) argument we need then “to think about family photography not simply as a collection of images, or as a textual archive, or as an ideology... but rather as something that people do: that is, as a social practice.” However much of the critical literature on family photographs marginalizes these objects based on their lack of visual innovation. The most critical response to family photographs comes from within the realm of feminist scholarship (Evans 2007; Chamber, 2001; Spence 1986; Walkerdine 1990; Kuhn 2002), where it is argued that family albums in “their erasure of domestic labor, and the restricted emotional tones they convey, are complicit with women's physical and emotional exploitation” (Rose 8). While these critiques cite the limited terrain of signifying possibility dictated by the tropes of the genre and the seemingly artificial representations of familial life, they overlook the fact that all photographic practices are a mediated form of communication rather than an objective truth. We must then reorient our ideas about family photography towards an understanding that though it is an ambivalent practice, nonetheless it may work as a powerful and complex resource in reconstructing historically marginalized subject positions and social relations.

For many, family photographs and their talismanic properties are critical to achieving the state of being at home (Gregson 2011: 24). In documenting family history, representing private sentiment and displaying pride in one’s lineage, these objects are then important tools for placemaking and the production of domestic space. In her discussion of how the camera and photographs affect Black lives, bell hooks (1994: 59) situates the home as a powerful site for an oppositional Black aesthetic:

The walls and walls of images in southern Black homes were sites of resistance. They constituted private, Black-owned and -operated, gallery space where images could be displayed, shown to friends and strangers. These walls were a space where, in the midst of segregation, the hardship of apartheid, dehumanization could be countered.

In the shadow of histories of terror, enclosure, and surveillance and the representational practices that they engendered, the family photograph
and its placement within the private sphere becomes a practice of counter-archiving. Speaking to the comforting presence of a hand-painted photo of her great-grandmother Katie Jackson, contemporary photographer Ayana Jackson describes a similar experience upon entering her grandparents’ living room in East Orange, New Jersey. For Jackson the photographs of relatives and their placement within the home had a clear message: “You have a history, you have a legacy and there’s something to look up to and live up to as a part of this family” (Estrin 2016). Here the wall of the home becomes a palimpsest documenting intergenerational triumphs and struggles, offering its viewer a space to encounter the ways in which family members gave materiality to their achievements, and aspirations.

Tina Campt’s (2012: 5) work on the African diaspora in Europe suggests that photography can also function as a site of diasporic, racial and gendered subject-formation, challenging negative stereotypes and assumptions and creating a counterimage of who these subjects are, as well as who they might be, or become. They therefore have the ability to visualize creative forms of family produced over and against the disparate geographies and temporalities that constitute diasporic migration, settlement, and dwelling (Ibid.). Linking national identity to objects, Campt (2012: 163) argues that within these portraits props created a tangible link to the photographic subject. For instance, the purse formed part of a Sunday best outfit, which, when photographed and sent “back home”, placed relatives and friends in a visual context of people “keeping faith” oceans away (Ibid.). Or, in the case of the McCurdy fonds where the circulation of photographic portraits across the Detroit River borderlands is evidenced by photographic studios or postage stamps naming sites from both sides of the Detroit River, “rivers away”. In this context, the feminized work of taking, curating and distributing photographs played an essential role in maintaining familial bonds and documenting family histories. The objects within the fonds then speak to the transnational character of life in the borderlands, where photographs map and sustain networks of kinship. Here style became more than just a superficial means of cultural engagement but also a visual affirmation of their cultural and social relevance in their new home (164).

Within Canada the dual processes of settler colonialism—which annexed territory, forced Indigenous peoples onto reserves, instituted patriarchal governance, and destroyed cultural practices—and European immigration, helped to secure the dominion of white settlers over stolen land and resources (Maynard 2017: 32). As Robyn Maynard (Ibid.) argues, “both white supremacy
and the outer appearance of racial tolerance were integral to the nation-building process and the creation of Canadian national identity.” Racial formation shifts from its dependency on placing bodies within a hierarchy defined by scientific racism to situating bodies in conflict with racialized notions of cultural and national character. Sunera Thobani (2007: 158) explains: racial hierarchies become organized through the discourse of cultural and national difference, not of biological inferiority. Specifically “The inscription of specific ‘national’ characteristics into these subjects as elements of their innate humanity elevates such traits from the realm of ‘natural’ human existence and writes them into the body politic, thereby catapulting them into the sociocultural realm of the national symbolic.” (Tobani 2007: 8). Cultural and national belonging are then racialized, and if we believe photographs to be social objects that produce social positions and social relations then they provide a fruitful site for examining how women negotiate subjectivity.

Because “all nationalisms are gendered”, the function of gender power is crucial in understanding the formation of the nation-state (McClintock 2015: 352). Specifically, McClintock (355) identifies five ways in which women have been implicated in nationalism: as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations); as active transmitters and producers of the national culture; as symbolic signifiers of national difference; and, as active participants in national struggles. Nationalism is thus constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse and thus cannot be understood without a theory of gender power. The centrality of race to the Canadian nation building project is clearly articulated in dominant ideologies of Motherhood of the era (Arat-Koç 1989; Anderson 2009). The concept of Motherhood gained increased importance in Canada at the turn of the century. Faced with a declining British-Canadian birth rate, an influx of immigration, and the loss of the nation’s white men during the Great War, the Canadian state turned to women of British background to act as the saviors of the race through their position as mothers (Green 2017). However, while emphasizing domesticity and motherhood as ideal roles for white women, dominant ideologies and institutions within Canada located racialized women as workers first and foremost even when this worker status was achieved at the expense of separation from family and children.

While studies of how Black women laborers navigated marginalized forms of work are crucial to our understanding of Canadian history, in some ways the visual discourse of Black womanhood in Canada has fostered a way of seeing.
This power dynamic that the archive reproduces contributes to an imbalance in what can be understood via visual sources about the historical experiences of these women. Derived from Audre Lorde’s poem “Afterimages” about the murder of Emmett Till and its famous photographic representation, Kimberly Juanita Brown (2015: 1) conceptualizes the term “photographic afterimage” as the force of the photographic in engendering a discourse in the service of violated Black bodies—both past and present. Specifically, she employs the “afterimage” as a tool for navigating the trace of slavery’s memory in Black women’s literary and visual representations. In her own words:

If we think of the afterimage as a violation of the gaze, the ‘force that remains within,’ the repetition of this force creates a visual circle that can seem unyielding. The afterimage as temporal motif, then, is the organizing mechanism suturing black women to the cultural narratives that have been used to placate black Atlantic subjectivities in flux. (Brown 2015:11)

She positions repetition as an ocular residue, a visual duplication as well as an alteration—perpetuating the visuality of hegemony (Brown 2015:13). For Brown, the visual solidifies representation and directs the trajectory of discourse. Here the body is infused with layers of meaning, with representations of these “marked bodies” having a profound ability to linger throughout the diaspora. Exploring the relationship between violence, sexuality and maternity within the institution of slavery, Brown (2015: 72) argues that “the racial and gendered construction of the mythology of Black women’s maternal capacities is a vestige of the past revisited on the present and repeated, surviving efforts to dismantle it.” This manifested most innocuously in the figure of the mammy—a symbolic image of service and surrogate mothering. In all of these constructions or tropes, the body represents a conflation of temporality and space, or an “archive of time” that simultaneously prefigures future slaughter and conquest, and survives it (177). Here Brown takes up Paul Gilroy’s (2007) argument that the ineffable terrors of slavery were kept alive in ritualized social forms—that its residual traces still contribute to historical memories at the core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation.

However the vernacular photographs of Black motherhood within the McCurdy fonds challenge what Brown (2015: 7) describes as the “enactments of hypervisibility [that] black women cannot escape.” These photographs, then, assert Black subjectivities that may potentially rupture the “controlling
images” of Blackness within Canadian visual culture. While careful not to name self-portraiture photography as a solution to the problem of racial legibility and slavery’s afterlives, Brown (2015: 181) does concede that the medium and the pattern of “forced recognition” that it fosters allows for a greater measure of visual mobility. Here, the task of convincing a collective constituency of the subject’s right to render the vicissitudes of her history a thing that is seen and therefore known falls to the image-maker herself, and the body she carries with her through the world (Brown 2015: 181).

Rather than the positivist renderings of the maternal that Brown describes throughout her text in which the sitter is framed as an object to be empirically “known”, within the McCurdy fonds vernacular representations of motherhood assert the sitter’s agency in directing the gaze, disclosing what she pleases. So while the previous examples illustrate how the Canadian visual
archive conflates the Black body with servitude—bound to reproductive and productive processes—here, “mystery is freedom” (Ibid). Self-representation is then a site of struggle: the feminized work that stages the colloquial space and elicits the performance of poses required to produce the photographs under investigation here becomes crucial oppositional labor in countering the hierarchies of patriarchy, nation and state. These photographic practices offer us a richer picture of Black life in Amherstburg, Ontario.

Several of the photographs within the McCurdy fonds recuperate these invisibilized histories, documenting the family life of African Canadian women during the turn of the century. While tintype and cabinet card photographs were customarily the medium for documenting entire family units, the deckle-edge amateur photograph appears to be the common medium for picturing a mother and her children. One example from the McCurdy fonds features a mother seated on a floral sofa complete with a lace cover holding her child on her lap [Figure 4]. The skirt of her dress takes up more than half of the frame, the young infant nestled among the folds of her voluminous dress. Though not as neatly staged as a studio portrait, this photograph is clearly orchestrated to demonstrate the sitter’s self-containment. This is most legible in the obvious coordination between her dress and that of her child’s, as well as her freshly applied lipstick and her ring finger prominently displayed just below the centre of the image’s frame. What this photograph represents then is mastery of the domestic space—an obedient child, and immaculately turned out mother, within the clean and well-appointed home—at once demonstrating and masking the immense labor and energy put into this performance. While we will never know who is taking the image, this trend speaks to the idea that vernacular photography was viewed as a more appropriate site for

*“Tintype of unknown family, Amherstburg, Ontario”, ca. 18--. Alvin D. McCurdy fonds, Archives of Ontario*
representing maternal relationships. Father figures are very rarely pictured in these amateur photographs, rather they make their appearance in the more formal family photographs taken outside of the domestic space [Figure 5]. This may be because of the low cost of the gelatin silver print compared to a formal portrait taken in a studio where certain modes of dress were enforced. The maternal photograph then existed most frequently in an informal or candid state—speaking perhaps to both the intimacy of the relationship and how it was regarded as somewhat secondary to the larger family dynamics.

These representational strategies speak to Frantz Fanon’s observation that “there are close connections between the structure of the family and the structure of the nation” (McClintock 2015: 360). Fanon destabilizes the idea that this projection is normal or natural, and reads familial normality as a product of social power—of social violence. In particular, as McClintock (360) explains,

Fanon is remarkable for recognizing, in this early text, how military violence and the authority of a centralized state borrow on and enlarge the domestication of gender power within the family: Militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father.

It can be said then that picturing the family patriarch required a more formal and therefore costly medium, more suitable to representing a cohesive structure as well as a rigid hierarchical structure. It follows then that the surplus excess of the handheld camera, with its affordability and reproducibility made it more suitable for the task of maternal photographs taken within the domestic space.

By nature of this fact, within the McCurdy fonds the house front becomes a popular setting for staging maternal photographs. This thematic was commented on by Hirsch (1981: 48): “Entire houses, house fronts, and stoops in varying scales and proportion, show us the family’s territory, symbolic of its place in the world.” Throughout the McCurdy fonds there are numerous photographs that feature women, with and without their children, standing proudly in front of their homes [Figure 6]. The home front functions within these amateur photographs as a declaration of property, a suggestion of spatial mastery. Similar to the photographs taken inside of the home, these house front stagings are organized like a more formal portrait taken within a studio. In one example a woman and her daughter stand outside their home on a sun drenched porch [Figure 7]. Both mother and child are fashionably dressed and
well accessorized, and while the shadow of the photographer can be seen in the foreground, the lighting of the shot permits a clear rendering of both subjects. Similarly organized is a photograph of a young child dressed in a petticoat and bonnet with immaculate white shoes and matching lace socks, standing in front of the steps of a home [Figure 8]. Again the subject is facing the bright sunlight, casting a shadow into the frame that can clearly be identified as a woman based on the silhouette of her hat and coat. Likely the child’s mother, the woman has carefully crafted this representation. The compositional structure of these photographs is such that both the subjects and the background take up significant space within the frame, suggesting that inclusion of the housefront was an intentional act. Just as backdrops used in commercial portrait studios contribute to the meanings produced in photographic space, within vernacular photograph the background plays an equally important role in elevating and animating its subjects. Here domestic space functions via its
associative qualities able to engage different modes of seeing and inscribe social identities codified by socio-political aspects of the domestic.

Though mothering practices and relations varied enormously within specific historical moments, the reliance on these mythical ideals of the mother rests on the importation of European ideologies. In particular, the home becomes a metaphor for the nation-state, stratified and contingent on shared beliefs of common goals. As Hirsch remarks (1981: 21): “The image of the family as a spiritual assembly overlaps with the image of the state. While the latter describes the family’s relationship to the physical world, the former describes its shared eternal values”. As illustrated by photographs and oral histories within the fonds, long-standing Black communities in Canada
built their own schools, homes and churches, and raised their own barns all while experiencing violent backlash from neighboring white communities. Indicative of this sentiment, in the October 27, 1849 issue of the Amherstburg Courier a local white resident declared that “there is but one feeling, and that is of disgust and hatred, that they (the Negroes) should be allowed to settle in any township where there is white settlement” (Landon 1925: 6). In this way, these photographs have a resistive quality—demonstrating situated knowledges of communities, and their contributions to both real and imagined human geographies (McKittrick and Woods 2007: 4). At the time these photographs were taken formal and informal segregation policies were enacted across all facets of Canadian society, “one of Canada’s foremost strategies for maintaining white dominance” (Maynard 2017: 32–33). Segregated residentially, and subject to practices of containment, Black presence itself was heavily surveilled and resisted (37). The 1920s through the end of the Second World War—the decades in which these photographs were taken—saw an expanded focus on restricting Black presence in public space through “sundown laws”, curfews, and bylaws (Ibid.). When read alongside the local histories of Amherstburg, a place where Black settlers struggled with and resisted against racism on a daily basis, the inclusion of outer and inner spaces of family experience within these photographs suggest a mode of claiming presence. While formal mapping practices may, as Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007) maintain, overlook, erase or segregate Black geographies, here we see a reorienting of social-spatial dynamics in favor of commemorating distinctive local identities. In this way the photographs articulate the locally derived material experiences of both Black women, and the larger Black community of Amherstburg, Ontario—geographic subjects under erasure within Canada’s nation building project.

The photographs analyzed here are a feminized form of cultural production that validate the historical experiences of Black women in Canada. Moreover, they are objects that give materiality to their own specific desires and pleasures, and are a fruitful site for examining entrenched ideologies of womanhood. Though the production of such portraits required careful adherence to tropes of gendered familial structures and middle-class national subjects, these amateur photographs are also capable of reorienting the gaze and actively producing new subjectivities. They radically transgress the conceptions of Black womanhood that have been normalized through the proliferation of negative stereotypes and assumptions via print culture. These hegemonic constructions of Black racial identity, which have their basis in histories of enslavement, shape
the contours of popular memory and influence how images of Black womanhood are perceived and interpreted. Despite their ephemerality, anonymity and partiality, the photographs under examination here give critical insight into how Black women used this technology to create representations that corresponded to the realities, hopes, and aspirations within their own lives.

Notes

1 Alvin D. McCurdy was born in 1916 in Amherstburg, Essex County, Ontario—a major terminus of the Underground Railroad. Like many Black communities formed at the borderlands of Southwestern Ontario, McCurdy’s family history is linked to the processes of migration that defined the African Diaspora in the nineteenth century. Interested in his family’s genealogy and the broader history of Black settlement in southwestern, Ontario, Alvin McCurdy collected material throughout his life in order to preserve his community’s heritage (Crooks 2019, 77). He believed this archival labour necessary, as these histories were largely ignored by traditional cultural institutions and were in danger of erasure. Through donations and voracious collecting, his personal collection blossomed into one of the richest sources of African-Canadian archival material in Ontario, containing roughly 3,000 photographic objects, as well as textual files, oral history interviews, and literary works, with materials that pre-date the founding of the province in 1791, and extend through the mid-twentieth century. McCurdy worked professionally as a carpenter and was a long-time member of the Carpenters and Joiners Union, as well as a Freemason and active member of local anti-discrimination groups.

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