7. “I LIKE TO MAKE PICTURES OF CHILDREN”

African American Women Photographers and Wielding the Weapon of ‘Motherhood’

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In 1944, Eslanda Goode Robeson delivered an address for the Pro Merito Club Convention at Tech High School in Springfield, Massachusetts—her son’s high school. Robeson was an activist, author, actress, and anthropologist, whose book *African Journey* (1945) offered a rare African American woman’s perspective on the African continent. She used her platform at this address to criticize the United States government’s focus on “total war,” which had caused people to lose focus on a world in which children “are intellec
tively, comprehensively educated, physically, mentally, and morally” (Castledine 2012: 93). Jacqueline Castledine cites this speech in her text *Cold War Progressives: Women’s Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (2012) as an example of how African American activists used their roles as mothers to further their political agendas. Castledine asserts that Robeson’s experiences delivering public speeches at this time “offered Robeson the opportunity to develop her own concept of activist motherhood” (Castledine 2012: 93). Furthermore, Castledine suggests that this could be seen in the ideology of the Black women—including Robeson—who formed the Progressive Party in 1948, as their “civil rights agenda would intersect with Progressive motherhood, as understandings of maternal peace activism were informed by the concept of ‘mothering the race,’” as the African American women involved in forming the party “integrated issues of race and maternalism, making motherhood both a peace and civil rights issue” (Castledine 2012: 85). As such, Castledine reveals how Robeson effectively weaponized the role of motherhood for her activism. Yet, Castledine overlooks a vital component of Robeson’s activist identity: her passion for photography. Extending the idea of activist motherhood into not just the realm of Robeson’s photographic work, but also into the realm of several other African American women photographers who worked within
the realm of portraiture, reveals how the label of motherhood was effectively weaponized and wielded by African American women photographers in the decades prior to World War Two.

Robeson and other African American women photographers utilized the label of motherhood within their photographic work to their advantage in multiple ways. In some cases, such as for professional portraitists, the advantage was economic and indirectly activistic. Portraitists such as Wilhelmina Pearl Selina Roberts, Elnora Teal, and Florestine Collins would all wield the tool of motherhood in their portrait studios to enable their, at the time, unusual careers, and to provide their communities with aesthetically desirable images of their children in ways which combatted white-held racist stereotypes. For these three women, this was in part due to their situation in the American South, where gendered labor took on more conservative forms which more clearly evoked the theme of motherhood, specifically in the era before World War Two.1 In other cases, such as in Robeson’s anthropological work, the advantage was educational and overtly activist. Robeson used her label as a mother to create familial ties to Africa, championing a deeper diasporic connection between people of African descent. In using motherhood as a tool, these women—some mothers, some not—were able to effectively promote racial pride and protest against white supremacy. African American women across multiple photographic modes used their role—or implied role based on gendered expectations—as mothers with innate sensitivities to children to further their careers and add greater moral weight to their photography. By adhering to the problematic ideals of the ‘politics of respectability’ and speaking to ideals of pictorialism, these photographs advocate for the dignity and humanity of those captured in their lens. In this way, the label of ‘motherhood’ served to disrupt a masculinized field of work. Although the label of ‘motherhood’ could be one with limitations, in occupying this space these women created photographs that not only advocated a familial perspective, but also protested against white-held racist notions of Black inferiority.

Thanks to the research of academics such as Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (1985), Deborah Willis (2000), and Arthé A. Anthony (2012), the works and lives of African American women photographers have become more visible than ever before. A powerful canon of imagery produced by African American women reflecting the realities of life in the 20th century is emerging and revealing a history that combines race, gender, and photographic areas of study. Building on this recovery work, this chapter seeks to expand the groundwork on which it is necessary to consider the role of ‘motherhood’ in African

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American women’s photography before World War Two. For many of these photographers, the role of motherhood was an aesthetic device, a network through which to access new audiences, and a marketing device that simultaneously increased and decreased their reach. As such, this paper will offer a new framework which expands our understanding of “motherhood” as a tool which opened doors for African American women photographers in this era.

“She and My Father Started a Mission”: Motherhood and Portraiture in the American South

Maternalism and the notion of motherhood often formed a key part of a white women’s role in the Progressive Era (Ladd-Taylor 1993). For African American women, however, the Progressive Era was a complicated landscape to navigate, as they were confronted with both racism and sexism, and would not officially be able to exercise their right to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Nevertheless, the idea that women possessed a unique set of qualities that made them better suited to some kinds of public work and activism took root. African American women were involved in maternalistic reform cultures, as both reformers and targets of reform, commonly within the Church. Some practices that by modern standards we can recognize as problematic were embraced. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham spoke of a “politics of respectability” that was adopted by the Women’s Convention of the Black Baptist Church during the Progressive era (Higginbotham 1993: 14). This was the idea that by following Victorian ideals of behavior and conduct, “reform of individual behavior [functioned] as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform” (Higginbotham 1993: 187). By policing their conduct in such a way, these women also attempted to protect themselves and their communities from brutality and violence. This not only enforced the idea of progressive values and “dignified” conduct among African Americans themselves, but also challenged the racist stereotypes commonly held by white people. Floris Barnett Cash noted this in her analysis of African American clubwomen from 1896–1936, as they “looked to progress and respectability to bring the masses in step with the values and attitudes of the middle class. [...] The politics of respectability was a means of expressing Black women’s identity, discontent, and agenda for social action.” (Cash 2001: 4) By evoking the idea of ‘motherhood’ in their photography, the women in this essay engaged with this longer tradition of class aspirations as a route to racial pride.
It would be easy to fall into a discussion of the merits of the “politics of respectability” as a strategy for reform, and indeed the approach has been roundly criticized. E. Franklin Frazier vocally criticized ideas of respectability through a class lens. He argued that the Black bourgeois have “accepted unconditionally the values of the white bourgeois world: its morals and its canons of respectability, its standards of beauty and consumption” (Frazier 1965: 26). In so doing, Frazier argues that the politics of respectability hinges on the wholehearted rejection of the African American “folk” culture. This view may certainly be supported by the pictorialist techniques which the women in this chapter adopt, a form generated by white people. Indeed, they do seek to emulate a middle class standard, to the exclusion of a more working class “folk” identity. The same can be said of the women in this chapter themselves—they belonged to the Black upper and middle class, which afforded them a degree of social mobility and enabled them to progress in their unusual careers as photographers. However, although the idea of the “politics of respectability” was problematic for holding its class aspirations to white standards and rejecting the culture of the African American working class, the women in this chapter arguably did not possess the social capital to either problematize this idea or present an alternative aesthetic. To argue the righteousness of such an approach does not erase the fact that these images were produced, and that they were effective tools to challenge white, racist stereotypes in the private and public sphere. The influence of progressive ideals can be seen in the field of pictorialist photography, which early African American women’s photography evoked in significant ways.

Pictorialism was a mode of photography for which women were thought to be especially well suited, based on their inherent feminine qualities. Although there is no precise definition of pictorialism, Davidov writes that “Pictorialist photographers, one might say, wished to preserve in their carefully crafted pictures the very thing Walter Benjamin would declare dead after the invention of photography: the aura, the unique and irreproducible quality that made a pictorial work ‘art’” (Davidov 1998: 52). Within this field, and for the first time in photographic history, women’s femininity was a desirable trait. Rosenblum writes that “women were supposed to have an intrinsic artistry that enabled them to convey each individual’s character and to understand the virtue of indefiniteness, which brought the camera image closer to handmade art” (Rosenblum 1994: 75). Davidov notes that “Käsebier’s special interest in studies of mothers and children had to do with her interest in progressive child-raising methods” (Davidov 1998: 60), as can be seen by her images.
However, these women explored pictorialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the early stages of the Progressive Era, and it would take African American women until at the earliest the 1920s to meaningfully engage with pictorialism due to the lack of accessibility to the camera. The notable work of the Black women portrait photographers discussed in this chapter—Wilhelmina Roberts, Elnora Teal and Florestine Collins—should be considered as part of this canon.

Alongside the mode of pictorialism, the emergence of portraiture as a component of African American family life was significant. Portraits of loved ones, friends, and even admired celebrities became commonplace in African American homes in the 20th century. Arthé A. Anthony argues that the photographs Florestine Collins produced were “examples of the visual weapons African Americans used in their fight for self-representation in the 1920s era of the ‘New Negro,’” an analysis which extends to Roberts and Teal’s images as well. The idea of photography as “visual weapons” in combatting white supremacy within the private realm of the home has been well-documented, as photography promoted African American racial pride (Anthony 2002:167–168). In the contemporary moment, Ayana V Jackson’s work can be seen as a powerful example of this approach. Jackson echoes figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and bell hooks when she comments that, “the photos on my grandfather’s wall were propaganda meant to counter all the other negative propaganda I was bombarded with every day” (Estrin 2016). Almost a hundred years ago, W. E. B. Du Bois (1926: 295) famously stated that:

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

That Du Bois took this attitude is notable given the prominent role of photography and portraiture in The Crisis magazine. On multiple occasions, portraits of children would appear on the front cover, which suggests that Du Bois (1912: 261–312) viewed these seemingly domesticated images as tools, or “propaganda,” through which to challenge the racism of the white population. Contemporary academics such as bell hooks have expanded on Du Bois’ understanding of the correlation between activism and portraiture, arguing that the photography which seemingly should exist in a private sphere...
can have a powerful impact on the audience. In Southern African American homes, bell hooks noted the prominence of images on the walls, functioning as “sites of resistance” and “a space where... dehumanization could be countered” (hooks 1995: 59). hooks notes that these images opposed “the degrading images of blackness that emerged from the racist white imagination and that were circulated widely in the dominant culture” (hooks 1995:59). In this way, extending the ideologies of hooks and Du Bois, the images produced by African American women in this chapter served as weapons to protest against the racist stereotypes of the era. The work of Deborah Willis is further testament to this, particularly *Family History Memory: Recording African American Life* (2005). In this text, Willis explores her own photography and the lives and works of many other photographers. She notes the work of three photographers whose “personal art interrogates or overturns social ideas to make powerful statements about race and gender in American culture” (Willis 2005: 188). Therefore, Willis asserts that family photography can function outside of a purely domestic sphere, suggesting that it can serve activist functions that challenge the widely held racist beliefs of the time.

Both the pictorialist aesthetic and the role of portraiture in family life suggest the role of motherhood in the photography of African American women portrait photographers. This relationship is exemplified in their work. An important example includes their images of young children, including those taken by Wilhelmina Pearl Selina Roberts. A college-educated, family-oriented woman, Roberts was one of only 101 African American female photographers by 1920 according to census statistics (Rosenblum 1994: 31). Roberts took photographs within the studio which her husband ran; following their marriage in 1902, they moved to Columbia, South Carolina with their eight children in 1920. Here, Richard opened a photographic studio, named The Roberts’ Art Studio (Wynn unpublished interview). Despite the studio being Richard’s venture, Roberts “learned from her husband the mechanics of the camera,” as she managed the studio and took photographs when he was at work (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 40). Roberts took the initiative to read photographic books, thus gaining her own knowledge on the subject, despite having no formal training or instruction aside from that which her husband taught her (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 40). She followed her passion for motherhood, as her daughter noted that: “my mother was crazy about babies,” and that she would often combine her own childcare with her work as a photographer, stating “she was sort of minding her own baby while she was taking the picture of this other child”
These images of children became Roberts’ area of expertise. Roberts’ images of children demonstrate not just the centrality of motherhood to her work, but her focus on respectability. Indeed, the photograph Roberts took of her own daughter underlines the notions of respectability within pictorialism (Fig. 1). In this image, the young girl wears a white dress framed against a dark background. The notion of pictorialism is apparent with the use of feminine props, such as the chaise longue, which performs the dual function of creating a stylish portrait and suggesting affluence. In this way, the image of a young child performs the respectability and middle class aspirations of the family. This is an aspiration that, according to her daughter, Roberts understood all too well, as the fact that her mother was once enslaved meant that she “was trying very hard to become educated and move away from slavery and I think it was important to her how people looked” (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 15). As Roberts’s daughter maintains, “she felt photography was an important record. She and my father started a mission” (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 15). This idea of photography as a “mission” speaks to the activist connotations raised by Willis, as well as her emphasis on creating an archive of her family images. To record one’s family at their best, and fulfil middle class aspirations, was a desire that the Roberts family’s slave past perhaps entrenched in Roberts’ photographic staging.

Nor was Roberts alone as an African American woman evoking pictorialist styles in the early 20th-century portrait photography; figures such as Elnora Teal were active as well. Teal and her husband Arthur C. Teal both became established photographers in their own right, but at the time of their marriage, Arthur was an itinerant photographer who travelled and took images. Upon their marriage in 1919, Arthur taught Teal the basics of photography and opened a studio in Houston, Texas at 111 Andrews Street (Moutoussamy-Ashe
Initially they worked together as photographer and photographic assistant, but as the business expanded, so too did Teal’s role, as “she grew to love developing photos in the studio.” (44) Within a few years, the Teals had opened two studios: one at 411 ½ Milan in downtown Houston, and another on Dowling Street in the heart of the Black residential community. When Arthur purchased the second studio, Teal became the sole runner of the Milan studio, entirely independent of her husband. Although they shared the same name—The Teal Portrait Studio—and they considered their businesses one, Teal had complete creative control over her studio.

Teal’s studio proved particularly popular with women and children. Her images display many of the conventions of portraiture that African American women adhered to during the early 20th century. Her female clients saw Teal’s gender as an advantage, as she “paid such close attention to detail” and “bought photography supplies the way some women bought materials for their fine dresses” (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 45). The gendered language of this assertion reveals the key role that Teal’s own gender played in her clients’ assessments of her. Teal’s photography, including one portrait of an unidentified young child, adhered closely to the principles of pictorialism. Like the Roberts image, Teal contrasted white cloth on dark backgrounds, with a soft focus, and a use of theatricalized staging (as evidenced by the chair that the child is leaning on and the bonnet they are wearing). Furthermore, the fall of the fabric and the age of the child, coupled with the child’s upright pose, suggest that there may be someone or something behind the infant holding them up. Whilst it is difficult to say for certain, the conventions of child portraiture during the early 20th century suggest that this is likely, and illustrates Teal’s professional handling of her youngest clients. In this way, Teal

Figure 2. Florestine Collins, Joseph Sordelet, Jr., 1923. Used with the permission of Arthé A. Anthony.
captured an image of a child most likely in their Sunday best, reflecting the ideals of the period that the family wished to project. Features of this image can also be seen in the work of Florestine Collins.

Florestine Collins was born in New Orleans in 1895 and was of Creole descent. Collins had to leave school in 1909 at age fourteen to support her family, and took the dangerous decision to pass for white in order to work in photographic studios. In the Jim Crow era, this practice was one of the ways to avoid racialized domestic work that often left women vulnerable to exploitation or sexual assault from their white employers (Anthony 2012: 26). In the 1910s she worked as a clerk for finisher Jerome Hannafin, as a finisher for Herbert J. Harvery, and as a developer for the Eastman Kodak Company (Anthony 2002: 170). She would open her first studio in 1920 in the domestic space of her own living room, before expanding into her own studio space. Yet despite her different circumstances to those of Roberts and Teal, who started careers with their husbands, Collins’ images of children would mirror them in many ways. Her photographs of young babies evoke many of the same pictorialist techniques as her contemporaries (Fig. 2). For example, the baby in this image is positioned on a piece of furniture, in pale clothing, against a dark background. The combination of white, respectable clothing and props conveys the pictorialist tradition in this image, enacting the class aspirations of the baby’s parents as a route to racial dignity and pride in line with the “politics of respectability.” The image could go on to function as a “site of resistance” within the family home, as advocated by bell hooks, and also as “propaganda” to challenge white-held notions of Black inferiority, as advocated by Du Bois. Hence, producing images of this nature effectively challenged racist stereotypes, as African Americans were able to present themselves as they wished to be seen, and display them as they saw fit.

That Collins directly linked her own gender, and therefore her capacity for inherent motherly skills, to her work can be seen by examining her advertisements. A New Orleans Herald advertisement from 1925 stated:

WHY NOT A PICTURE OF THE CHILD
With the First Book Bag, on the Way to School for the First Time
Preserve That Wonderful Event
BERTRAND’S STUDIO
I Like to Make Pictures of Children

(Anthony 2012: 41)
Arthé A. Anthony maintains that this advertisement “appeals to mothers with its implications that as a woman photographer, she had special skills for understanding the importance of critical moments in a child’s development” (41). Although Collins never had any children herself, she used her gender and the assumptions that people made at the time to directly compound her status as a businesswoman. In this way, Collins signified her gender through her advertising to imply that she had innate motherly instincts which would produce a better photograph of children than her male competitors. In other words, Collins utilized the label of motherhood for a competitive advantage.

Collins takes this even further in her 1926 advert in *The Crescent City Pictorial*, as she makes an image of herself central to the advertisement (Fig. 3). We can see that Collins (then named Bertrand) makes herself the focal point of the advertisement. Within the context of the wider page, the self-portrait of Collins sits centrally, her direct gaze emphasized by the fact that it is the only portrait on the page. Hence, it immediately catches the reader’s eye. Collins’ gesture and body language suggest confidence, as she sits with one hand on her hip. Once the portrait has caught the reader’s attention, however, it is the second image on the right that asserts her identity as a businesswoman. A small boy sits in the center of the frame, as the high ceilings dwarf him, and a downward angle is created by the perspective of the room. Collins, standing to the viewer’s left, contrasts this image in her pale dress, and frames the boy both literally within the scene and spatially within the photograph. Here, we see Collins at work, not looking at the camera. In the potentially intimidating space of the studio, Collins bridges the gap between the viewer and the boy she photographs. In so doing, she

Figure 3. OCW Taylor, *The Crescent City Pictorial*, 1926. Source: Digital Library Website, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA

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casts herself as a protective, motherly force in these images. Unlike many white female photographers, who by the 1920s were able to take their cameras into outside spaces, Collins creates a physically safe, interior domestic space in both her advertising and her images. When reaching out to her community, Collins orientates herself around her gender, using it to generate business for herself and establish her unique identity compared to her male counterparts. Thus, signifying the language and imagery of ‘motherhood’ was crucial to this success.

Due to the collaborative nature of their studios, there are no similar advertisements that pinpoint a similar attitude in the marketing of Roberts or Teal. Yet this evocation of family dynamics can be seen in the content of their photographs, and specifically within their images of familial groups. Roberts’s image *Grandmother with three children* exhibits this, as it draws on notions of pictorialism (Fig. 4). The contrast between the white dresses and the dark background, use of props in the form of balloons, and soft focus creates a feminine quality to this image. In addition, what little can be seen of the painted backdrop suggests flowers, curtains, and a painted bay window, which is again consistent with the romantic qualities of pictorialism within a domestic setting. Whilst in portraiture it was common for subjects to hold objects of symbolic significance—for instance, a man seeking to appear intelligent might hold a book—here the grandmother at the center of the image is holding the hands of her granddaughters in her lap. We can also see that she rests one of her hands on the shoulder of her granddaughter. In this way, Roberts creates an image that cultivates a sense of a close, interlinked family. Teal created images of a similar ilk, including one of Mrs. Irene Frazier which appeared in Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe’s *Viewfinders* (1985). This image, likewise, typifies many of the conventions of pictorialism and children’s

Figure 4. Wilhelmina Roberts, *Grandmother with three children*, date unknown. Courtesy of the South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC
portraiture. The framing of the photo places the entwined hands of baby and mother in the center of the photograph, and by emphasizing the literal interconnectedness of their hands, Teal emphasizes the closeness of their relationship. In this way, the aesthetics of these images reflect notions of motherhood and intergenerational connectedness.

Yet it was not just aesthetically that the theme of motherhood factored into the careers of African American women portrait photographers. The network of motherhood played a role as well. Wilhelmina Roberts did not enter the world of photography until she married her photographer husband in 1902 at the age of nineteen and did not become an active photographer until her husband opened his own studio in South Carolina in 1920. Richard worked a day job as a custodian, leaving his wife to run the studio in his absence. Outside of the studio, Richard did not permit his wife and daughters to work because, according to Wilhelmina and Richard’s daughter, “he knew that segregation would be too much. He didn’t want us to experience that” (Wynn unpublished interview). However, within the context of his studio, Wilhelmina Roberts was able to experience working life and develop her own artistic voice. What began as Roberts selling homemade cookies in the waiting area of the studio, in a classically gendered form of labor, soon evolved into a more photographic role. When asked what her mother’s most important contribution to the studio was, Roberts’s daughter stated:

I think it was in meeting the people who came there, and they had confidence in her, and I think they were then able to be more relaxed when Dad took the pictures. Also, she was the one who designed a little dressing room and kept it supplied with things that people would use to comb and brush their hair when they came in. (Wynn unpublished interview)

Roberts also helped pose the subjects whilst her husband took their pictures and adjusted their clothing and appearance accordingly. Roberts’ role in the studio can be read as a traditionally maternal one—setting subjects at ease, undertaking gendered labor.

Even where the photographer herself did not fit the archetype of motherhood, there remained gendered restrictions on the kind of work she could undertake. Florestine Collins would remain a photographer in a studio setting throughout her career. At times she was frustrated by her lack of mobility and found her efforts to photograph outside of a domesticated studio space

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rebuffed. For instance, when Collins was not selected to photograph a group picture of the local bridge club Entre Nous, Collins’ friend Marguerite Perez “vividly recalled how angry she was that she was not chosen as the group’s photographer” (Anthony 2012: 67). Collins actively sought to educate and train her family and friends in the art and business of photography as well. Her sister Thelma Lombard was a saleswoman, her other sister Mildred Gardina and family friend Walterine Celestine co-managed the establishment, and her brother Arthur became a photographer in his own right. Indeed, Anthony mistakenly assumed that Collins had learned photography from her brother, but Collins “corrected the mistaken assumption in no uncertain terms, making it clear that she, the oldest, had introduced her younger siblings to photography” (Anthony 2012: 6). Ironically, her brother would be able to journey outside of the studio and town to take photographs further afield, something that Collins was rarely able to do. Collins’ networks were inherently familial and domestic in nature and reflected both the opportunities and limitations of that approach.

Likewise, despite Elnora Teal’s artistic prowess and the independent nature of her business, it is significant that Teal was very rarely able to photograph outside of a studio setting. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe notes that “Elnora Teal never photographed outside of her downtown studio, but because of its location, she was always busy” (Moutoussamy-Ashe 1985: 44). Whilst Arthur travelled around the state and established his own photography school, Teal remained restricted to a studio setting for most of her career. Nevertheless, following Arthur’s death, Elnora was able to maintain both studios and their photography school for over a decade. Motherhood, therefore, became a tool to emphasize Roberts’, Teal’s and Collins’ roles as businesswomen in their local communities. Whilst more masculinized forms of labor would have been frowned upon, particularly in the early part of the 20th century, these three women utilized the aesthetics, networks, and marketability of motherhood in order to work an unusual career in a way that would have been deemed societally respectable.

The role of motherhood in portrait photography, therefore, reveals the complex aesthetic and social lines which African American women photographers had to navigate. Their studios were expected to be domesticated, homely spaces that reflected their femininity. Likewise, their imagery was desirable for the inherent delicacy and mothering instincts which they were anticipated to bring to the frame. Both behind the camera and within the images themselves, the idea of motherhood remained a powerful theme in the lives and works of these women. Yet through these photographs, these women were able to create powerful and beautiful images which celebrated
the lives of those within the frame. In so doing they not only advocated for the dignity and humanity of African American communities, but created studios that functioned as a fantasy space for families to present themselves as they wished to be seen—and that space was inherently gendered and domesticated according to the ideals of conventional motherhood.

“For the brothers and sisters, who will know whom I mean:”
Photography, Family, and Anthropology in African Journey (1945)

Even outside of a studio space, African American women photographers engaged with the concept of motherhood. Robeson’s dedication to her 1945 anthropological text *African Journey* is an immediate call for a diasporic familial connection, as she writes “for the brothers and sisters, who will know whom I mean” (Robeson 1945). In so doing, from the very start of this text Robeson cultivates a sense of family in her work. This builds on the idea of “activist motherhood,” and what Nicholas Grant called “the idea of the Pan-African family” (Grant 2017: 162). Grant furthers the perspective of Castledine as he argues that Robeson frequently used the metaphor of family when speaking about Pan-African solidarities, as “Robeson strategically transferred the politics of the home to the global political arena, a rhetorical move that collapsed the divides between the domestic and the public, the local and the global” (162). Yet this was not just a rhetorical move—it was a photographic one as well.

Although Robeson was an impressive activist and writer, who championed the rights of African Americans for decades, her work as an anthropologist is often underdeveloped in discussions of her life and work. Born in 1895, and travelling extensively around the world, Robeson spent decades campaigning for racial equality and decolonization in Africa. Anthropological thought was a key aspect of Robeson’s photographic approach, as she studied anthropology at the London School of Economics. Here, Robeson developed her own thesis: anthropology as “dynamic interpretation,” and the study of “man and his relation to his fellow man, and to his changing environments. Thus, it includes the study of primitive man under primitive conditions, of modern man under modern conditions, of human relations, race relations, of education, of social institutions” (Raiford 2017: 139). Combining her passion for decolonization with her own assertive voice, *African Journey* was a powerful infusion of anthropological work, travel writing, and protest literature.
African Journey was the product of Eslanda Robeson’s first anthropological trip to South Africa in 1936. The difficulty of travelling to Africa at this time cannot be understated, as “there were unique emotional, psychological, and even logistical challenges. European colonialism still dominated the continent” (Ransby 2017: 100). Many Americans at this time had their cultural understanding of Africa from fictionalized and problematic sources, such as “Tarzan comic books and stories about cannibalism” (Ransby 2017: 100). Although Black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey advocated for pride and a return to Africa in the 1920s, many African Americans remained unaware of the reality of life on the continent. Within African Journey, Robeson takes photographs that challenge stereotypical and racist views by presenting her subjects with dignity. Although Eslanda was unable to obtain a visa, she decided to travel to South Africa with her son Pauli regardless. She used her friends in Africa as a network in order to get off the boat at Cape Town and receive her visa, as influential members of the community met her. The role of her husband is also crucial; at various points in African Journey Eslanda speculates that Paul Robeson has assisted behind the scenes, noting that “I sense Paul’s hand somewhere” (93). Although Robeson was an influential figure in her own right, the additional clout provided by being the wife of famous actor and activist Paul Robeson helped her to attain an increased, though still limited, freedom of movement that may have otherwise been denied her. Robeson wielded the privilege afforded to her by being upper middle class, being both a respected activist in her own right and the wife of a well-known celebrity, and being the mother of Paul Robeson’s child in order to produce her ground-breaking work. From this trip in 1936, Robeson would produce the text African Journey a decade later in 1945.

Robeson’s photographs form a key facet of this text, as Maureen Mahon argues that she utilized photography in order to reflect her “diasporic politics of identification” (Mahon 2006). With over sixty images included in the text, with topics ranging from people to objects, Mahon (2006) writes of the images:

Here, she followed the anthropological process of providing information to make “the exotic” seem familiar, selecting photographs that attacked dominant representations of “primitive Africa.” Many of the photo captions identify people by name or occupation, individualizing them and creating a feel of informal snapshots from a vacation rather than of scientific data.
Robeson blended informal snapshots with anthropology to preserve the everyday dignity of her subjects whilst still providing factual evidence. The very notion of a feel of “informal snapshots” to the anthropological data Robeson cultivated conveys an immediate sense of familial connection—as though one is looking at the travel photographs of a family on holiday. Indeed, key to this “familiarization” of “the exotic” was the role of motherhood and creating diasporic family ties.

In *African Journey*, there is an image of four figures standing side by side: Eslanda Robeson, her son Pauli, the Mulamuzi (the chief justice of Buganda) and an unknown second boy. The positioning of the figures—with the two boys separating the two adults—serves as a bridge between the African and African American identities of the adults. The four individuals stand close together, as a single unit. Robeson’s arm disappears behind her son Pauli, suggesting that her arm is around him, and suggesting her role as a mother within this image. By portraying the African American identity in herself and her son alongside the African identity of the Mulamuzi, Robeson advocates what Maureen Mahon has dubbed a “diasporic politics of identification,” clarifying that, “this viewpoint recognizes, creates, and extends cultural and political connections among people of African descent” (Mahon 2006.) Robeson’s book dedication further cultivates these diasporic links. Leigh Raiford writes of this image that “if anthropology photography finds pleasure in difference, family snapshots locate joy in sameness...” and that the inclusion of Pauli is “clearly hailing Africans as family” (Raiford 2017: 146). In this way, Robeson evokes the idea of motherhood by including her son in this image and having body language which suggests embrace. This serves as a tool to suggest a familial, diasporic connection.

In sum, in *African Journey*, Robeson looked to counter inaccurate stereotyping of the African continent and educate American and European readers. One of the key ways Robeson did this was by using photography to invoke diasporic familial ties which suggested commonality between Africans and African Americans. The role of motherhood was prominent in this, as she positioned herself in her image to cultivate the impression of a familial relationship in her photography. Through this method, Robeson advocated for a better understanding of and closer relationships with the people in her images and presented a version of Africa which combated stereotypical images that painted an inaccurate and racist picture. The photography forms a critical part of Robeson’s “activist motherhood,” which in turn becomes a vital tool to advocate for diasporic, familial ties.

“I LIKE TO MAKE PICTURES OF CHILDREN”
Over the course of this chapter, I have demonstrated how the idea of motherhood was presented, utilized, and coded into African American women’s photography during the early 20th century. For portraiture, evoking the ideals of motherhood both in the content and context of producing photographs helped to support women who sought out their unusual careers. By presenting themselves through the language of motherhood, these women presented their work as something different to their male competitors and emphasized the (perceived) innate feminine qualities present in their photography. Even within the more scientific field of anthropology, utilizing the language and subtext of motherhood enabled early African American women photographers such as Eslanda Goode Robeson to bolster their anthropological claims. What unites these fields of study is the presentation of their African American subjects with dignity and respectability. Although a field limited to middle class women, who were able to portray middle class ideals of motherhood, these images nevertheless became powerful tools to combat racist stereotypes. Privately, these portraits would hang in African American homes as symbols of respectability and self-worth. Publicly, these anthropological images would act as a call to action and unity, advocating for the increased connection of a diasporic family.

Notes
1 In New York, Winifred Hall Allen was able to take dynamic shots of African American businesses and streets alongside her portraiture during the Harlem Renaissance. Allen did not overtly evoke the theme of motherhood in most of her images. The more conservative values of the South during this era meant that for women to work in the public sphere, they had to clearly link their work to domestic, private life.
2 The most well-known photographer from this period is James VanDerZee from Harlem, New York (Willis-Braithwaite, 1993).
4 At this time, it was not uncommon for clamps to be used to hold up children for portraits.
5 For further discussion of African American women as businesswomen in the early 20th century, see: Tiffany M. Gill, Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
Works Cited


“I LIKE TO MAKE PICTURES OF CHILDREN”

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