

Introduction

A Riot of Images: Harlem and the Pursuit of Modernity



On March 20, 1935, readers of newspapers across the United States were greeted with news of an unprecedented event: the outbreak the previous evening in black America’s cultural capital of what the elder statesman Adam Clayton Powell wryly called Harlem’s “first great riot.”¹ As Powell recognized, what made the event a “first” (if not “great”) was its inversion of the structure, omnipresent in a burgeoning American modernity at least since Reconstruction, of white-on-black violence.² If the widespread destruction of white-owned Harlem property that ensued was not exactly pay-back for decades of white aggression and mob violence from Brownsville, Atlanta, and Houston to Tulsa and Springfield, Illinois, and many points between, it was a form of notice to white America that the old dispensations had become a thing of the past. Powell’s sense not just of history but of precedent being made—“first” implies iterations to follow—is prevalent in journalistic documentation of the event, particularly in its prominently featured photographs. How is this new fact of American modernity to be imaged and, by implication, managed or imagined?

In considering that question, we might usefully focus on one widely reproduced image of the 1935 outbreak, an image at once representative and suggestive (figure I.1). The photograph features a paddy wagon full of African Americans (all those visible are men; some are obviously injured) who have been taken into police custody. Shot at point-blank range, exploiting in its handling of light and tonality a certain shock effect, the image nonetheless conveys



Figure I.1. Injured Rioters in a Police Patrol Wagon, Harlem, 1935. Corbis.

something of the social complexities attendant on its making. Tightly framing its subjects with the receding horizontal lines of the vehicle's interior and the diagonal patterning on the doors' protective grillwork, the composition emphasizes the orderly containment of black men's bodies in postures of resignation and distress; note the formal regularity established in the play of the men's folded hands and headgear. Absent a directive caption, the shot tenders uncertainty about their status; they are booked as looters but imaged, at least potentially, as victims. Yet in the context of an interwar mass readership (presumptively white), this uncertainty is itself pointed. Whether its subjects are read as criminals or potential objects of sympathy, the image emphasizes the power of modern social agencies—not least the documentary camera—to manage social disorder.

In connection with this image we might usefully consider a second, similar yet strikingly different in effect (figure I.2). It too was shot by an anonymous photojournalist and circulated widely in the mainstream and African American presses; it too can fairly be said to represent the visual record from which it is drawn: eyewitness photographs of the second "great riot" in Harlem on



Figure I.2. Harlem Riot, Arrest of Looters, 1943. Corbis.

August 2, 1943.³ This time (Powell was prescient), the civil unrest was extensive, resulting in multiple fatalities and millions of dollars in damage to white-owned businesses; it brought home the raw fact of persistent social inequality heightened by wartime mobilization.⁴ But the context of escalating retributive or social action seems curiously at odds with the tenor of the photograph. Indeed, absent explicit captioning or textual accompaniment, and in spite of the prominence of nightsticks, a viewer encountering this image might understandably fail to identify its subject as violent social disorder.

In lieu of bloody or bandaged men in postures of submission, an attractive young woman smiles openly at the camera, part of a group of style-conscious women balancing boxes of hosiery and other consumer goods (one shopping bag is emblazoned with the logo “Modesse”) as they are escorted by police. If their destination is presumably once again the paddy wagon, the affective logic has shifted considerably; in a parody of gallantry, one of the officers appears to assist his detainee with her packages as they cross the street. This difference is not, however, entirely an effect of the shot’s focus on women. The photographic record of the 1943 outbreak contains its share of more-predictable riot images (burning cars, injured passersby), but it also includes a host of others



Figure I.3. Boys Wearing Looted Formal Wear, August 2, 1943. Corbis.

in which groups of adolescent boys and young men parade insouciantly in looted blond wigs, or in top hats and tails vastly too large, in the mode of Harlem's signature zoot suit (figure I.3).⁵ Perhaps it would be hasty to call such gestures revolution, and perforce they would not, in 1943, be televised. But they were clearly being made available, even self-consciously staged, for photographic observers.

How might we account for the differences in cultural logic implied by these images? The most powerful social fact registered in the 1935 "great riot," as in its documentation, was the end of the Harlem Renaissance era; in the wake of its cartwheeling, high-flying optimism, and of the economic expansiveness that underwrote it, remained only the sobering realities of what residents north

of 110th Street called the Raw Deal.⁶ And when “thousands of curious white visitors thronged Harlem’s sidewalks” on the evening after the 1935 outbreak, according to a *New York Times* report, their racial tourism was no longer predicated on the kinds of engagement, however problematic, associated with the heyday of the Renaissance. Now, “visitors” were mainly on hand to view the shocking evidence of seething unrest, communist agitation, and racial retribution, in a landscape “alive with resentful Negroes.”⁷ Years before any recognition of the second ghetto as such, Harlem was taking shape, in image and in fact, as a new kind of urban space and icon: inner city, social underground, a complex legacy and a representational challenge.⁸

The most striking photographs of the 1943 event can be said to suggest an awareness of the growing role of the image in this transformation, and of the changing contract between the documenting camera and its subjects, particularly in Harlem.⁹ However determined to strike a blow against white ownership of local trade and the blatant fact of unequal treatment in housing and employment, Harlem citizens who took to the wartime streets were enacting their desire for a share in American modernity for a host of watching eyes. Throughout the frenzied hours of disorder, the heart of Harlem—the broad boulevard of Seventh Avenue—served as the runway for a variety of “surreal” tableaux;¹⁰ in effect it became “a ridiculous fashion show”—“the most colossal Negro picnic ever seen”—whose participants onlookers were invited to record.¹¹ In this encounter, agency photographers, photojournalists, and amateurs alike confronted a new kind of social spectacle and fact; Harlem became the occasion for what we might call a riot of images, conspicuously new in tone and affect. They premised a newly iconic Harlem, at once metonymic of America’s modernity and revelatory of its social failings. And in so doing, they instanced the growing power accorded the camera as a mode of documenting and knowing America—and no less of belonging to it.

The images of Harlem riot, the riot of Harlem images, thus implicate—as they helped propel—a broader cultural shift of central moment to the readings that follow. Between 1935 and 1943, America was giving birth to a full-blown image culture, largely experienced and transacted in the definitive genre of the era: documentary. Although the origins of documentary image making were of much longer reach, the national ascendancy of that genre—which may be defined for my purposes as the attempt, commercial or socially conscious, to record the events, affective life, material culture, or local practices of specific communities—began in earnest in the United States in the mid-1930s, at about the moment of Harlem’s first riot.¹² That moment also marked the advent of a differently explosive phenomenon, the so-called Leica revolu-

tion: the development of high-quality, portable 35 mm handheld cameras, roll film, and lightweight flash equipment that enabled rapid and sequential shooting under uncontrolled or quickly changing conditions (like those prevailing during civil unrest).¹³

These technological breakthroughs not only shifted the ground of the photographic encounter, lifting it out of the studio and onto the street; they also, as I will argue in more detail later, significantly altered the ontology of the photographic image, which was no longer premised on a cult of memorial or the mode of nostalgia. Relocated to the wayward, anonymous thoroughfares of the city, at a moment of sharply heightened interest in the material circumstances of ordinary Americans, the portable camera became the privileged apparatus for documentary—and more broadly social—seeing. By the mid-1930s, photographic images produced on site in urban venues had played a part in the visual archive for almost three-quarters of a century. But the advent of the new portable technology within this specific social context, where it was being shaped to a host of liberal-managerial and commercial uses, significantly altered the terms and potential meaning of the documentary image.¹⁴ Training itself on the epochal realities of everyday life, photography framed them for national consumption and meditation, and thereby powerfully shaped modern American sentiment, class relations, racial regimes, and national ideals.

What one historian calls the “dramaturgical” quality of the 1943 Harlem outbreak is, in other words, powerful testimony to the gathering power of visuality, and in particular of the documentary photographic record, in the interwar period.¹⁵ Indeed, the two “great riots” can be seen to bookend a series of events that chart the spreading reach of the photographic image as an ideological vehicle and as an aesthetic object. In November 1936, the media tycoon Henry R. Luce shrewdly capitalized on the new photographic technologies to found “an entirely new publishing venture”: the “picture magazine,” exemplified by the wildly successful weekly *Life*.¹⁶ Within a year and a half of its launching, the journal had achieved an unprecedented circulation of seventeen million readers, all seduced by its distinctive cocktail of news, gossip, and spectacle—what the critic Bernard DeVoto shrewdly called “equal parts of the decapitated Chinaman, the flogged Negro, the surgically explored peritoneum, and the rapidly slipping chemise.”¹⁷

For the first time in media history, the photograph, or what Luce called “the photographic essay”—the conjoining of “naturalistic,” “unposed,” “honest” images with narrative analysis, oral testimony, and directive captions—had become the essential engine of mass communication.¹⁸ The cover of *Life*'s inaugural issue featured an image by the documentary photographer Margaret

Bourke-White (a monumentalizing shot of an early New Deal success, the Fort Peck dam in Montana) that launched the journal's visual style and catapulted Bourke-White herself to meteoric fortune. A few months later, in collaboration with the writer Erskine Caldwell, Bourke-White published a photo-text documentary volume titled *You Have Seen Their Faces*. It became an instant sensation and the model (and antimodel) for a spate of photo-text books featuring documentary images, including the modernist classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Meanwhile, in 1935, Rexford Tugwell, the director of the quintessential New Deal agency later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA), had formed a special "historical" unit to create a photographic archive of forgotten Americans—and of the federal rehabilitation projects that were, thanks to liberal ideology, bringing "relief" to the displaced, the poverty-stricken, the illiterate, and the unfed. Over the next five years, picture magazines such as *Fortune*, *Life*, *Look*, *Today*, and *Nation's Business* as well as innumerable garden-variety national and regional journals became voracious clients of the FSA and other photo archives. By 1940, the FSA's Historical Section alone was placing some 1,406 images per month in such commercial vehicles.¹⁹

As even this brief sketch suggests, and as photo historical scholarship has emphasized, documentary image making under the sign of modernity not only penetrated to but defined the coalescing realms of mass media, New Deal state building, and postwar consumerism. No wonder that it played such a significant role in shaping the responses of Harlem's inhabitants to their own political disenfranchisement and social marginality. What is surprising—or as yet unacknowledged—is the degree to which real and iconic Harlem shaped the development and uses of documentary, not only as a photographic practice but as a set of representational possibilities, both visual and literary. The evolving interests of documentary practice in all its forms were varied, and its practitioners were fluidly positioned on a cultural field encompassing radical socialism, nation building, Stalinism, and every other socially conscious stripe. But they shared to a remarkable degree an interest in Harlem as a site of encounter, an emblem of the challenge of representing American modernity. In the wake of the 1935 riot, at the moment of photography's ascendancy as a cultural agency and a form of art, Harlem became a photographic proving ground. The self-taught, left-leaning members of the New York Photo League worked there regularly beginning in the mid-1930s; the picture press founded by Luce also predicated its power to slake a definitively modern thirst for sensation on its ability to provide viewers with a gallery of images to which Harlem is literally central: "Farmer faces, mining faces, faces of rugged individualists, Harlem faces, hopeful faces, tired old faces, smart night club faces . . .—the

faces of the U.S.”²⁰ Throughout the 1940s and 1950s and beyond, for socially conscious, photojournalistic, and experimental photographers alike, Harlem remained a special provocation, a site that afforded charged visual opportunities, spectacles, evidence, found objects, and decisive moments.

Harlem after its first great riot—which is to say, Harlem after the Renaissance—thus profoundly shaped representational practices and conventions at midcentury, in photographic texts and beyond, as image makers, writers, and others sought to explore its everyday life in the name of marketable shock, making it new, or making social change. For some of these observers, the appeal was not (or not only) the scandal of conditions on the ground north of 110th Street. To be sure, the hard facts of daily life in Harlem—site of the most densely populated housing tract in Manhattan, the highest rates of infant mortality in the city, and a structural unemployment rate that was, even during the Depression, significantly higher than that of any other population or community—were of precisely the sort to attract liberal-managerial zeal.²¹ But for certain observers, Harlem as a photographic proving ground offered a unique opportunity to meditate on the very conditions of documentary encounter: what powers accrued to the camera and the photographer’s gaze; what kinds of social transactions produce a documentary text, and how they are represented, aestheticized, or repressed within it; how the drive for formal nuance and complexity serves or negates the representation of human and social being.

These opportunities to test the limits and possibilities of documentary knowing, now a primary agency of modern American social life, arose in the face of Harlem’s distinctive histories as a site of racial and cultural encounter, indelibly inscribed both in everyday practices and in the built landscape. In a landmark text of the Renaissance moment, *Black Manhattan* (1930), James Weldon Johnson had noted that “the history of New York” might be traced as “the name of Harlem has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro.”²² The texture of this transformation—of its survivals and afterlives, its residual and palimpsestic effects—was even more variegated than Johnson suggests. Well beyond the turn of the century and into the Depression, the streets, structures, and facades of Harlem bore marks of its earlier life as an immigrant enclave, most prominently for German and Eastern European Jews but also for Italians, Puerto Ricans, and other diasporites, migrants, and refugees, whose presence and practices produced a distinctive “kaleidoscope” effect.²³ If the earliest histories of displacement (that of the Manhattan indigenes by Dutch settlers, and the latter by English arrivals) remained invisible, definitively modern forms of contact and appropriation shaped the very streetscape; thus the architectural historian Michael Henry Adams has commented that Harlem’s

thoroughfares, preserving the tangible record of its various communities, resemble “the image produced by two facing mirrors: a reflection of a reflection of a reflection.”²⁴

The historical record, not to mention a growing body of recent scholarship, suggests the relative ease with which America’s others assimilated to whiteness by learning to discriminate against or to appropriate the culture of their black neighbors, tenants, and employees. But Harlem subjects nonetheless negotiated the mutual mediations or “reflection[s]” of race, ethnicity, and origin unique to their home place on a daily basis. Lino Rivera, the youth whose supposed beating by police in 1935 was made the emblem of African America’s exclusion from social promise (and the justification for unrest), was the son of Puerto Rican immigrants; when throngs of reporters sought comment from his family, they found themselves outside an apartment on Manhattan Avenue, just south of the infamous flats area around Saint Nicholas Park and markedly west of the “separate” neighborhood of Spanish Harlem.²⁵ Two months later, when Benito Mussolini’s troops began bombing Ethiopia, Lenox and Seventh Avenues were tense with “patriotic skirmishes” between black residents and those of Italian descent; a local school, P.S. 178, became a battleground for the two Harlem populations, on which it evenly drew.²⁶ Among the objects of spectatorial interest during the 1935 riot were “the words the Chinese laundryman painted on his window when the Negroes were breaking windows of all the white business places . . . —‘Me colored too.’”²⁷ Throughout the interwar period, one of the most active branches of the Workman’s Circle or *Arbeter Ring*, a Jewish workers’ union committed to progressive social action, was the Number Two branch in Harlem. Hardly the usurious Jewish landlords of Harlem lore, its members remained committed to cross-racial politics founded on a shared experience of tenement life.²⁸ After the Renaissance, at the inception of the reign of documentary, Harlem constituted a special kind of crossroads. It exemplified both the cultural moment of Americans of African descent and the shifting facts on the ground of the mutual mediation—however cautious, limited, and economically one-sided—of American racial and expressive cultures.

The growing traffic at that crossroads, for black and white and other Americans, for literary and photographic figures, and for competing views of American modernity, is what I seek to explore. I begin with a rising interest among photographers, after the 1935 outbreak, in Harlem as a provocative site for documentary meditation on race, usable histories, and the value of culture. At its best—that is to say, its most self-conscious—that interest recognized and explored its continuities with the Renaissance moment. The most responsive

white—or other-than-black—photographers working in Harlem made central to their evolving aesthetics the troubling legacy of slumming and appropriation that framed their engagements with post-Renaissance culture. In so doing, they created their own vectors of entry into mainstream culture; they also irrevocably altered the terms of the documentary enterprise, and negotiated the competing legacies of formalism and socially conscious art in innovative ways. From across the color line, Harlem by the early 1950s had become an enabling resource for the first generation of African American documentarians, tenaciously seeking to counter the drag of the Renaissance as a model and burden, the uplift-inflected conventions of Harlem portraiture (exemplified by the commissioned studio work of James VanderZee and Morgan and Marvin Smith), and a voluminous archive of exploitative or deadening images of black life.²⁹ In the decades following the 1935 outbreak, through the turbulent reach of the New Deal and wartime state, Popular Front activity, the liberal consensus, cold warriorship, civil rights activism, black nationalism, and more, black and white and other image makers responded variously to local urgencies, competing aesthetics, and one another. Aaron Siskind, the practitioners of the New York Photo League, Roy DeCarava, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt, William Klein, Don Charles, and many others thus came to make images in and about Harlem that tested or resisted foregone conclusions about race, progress, and modernity as they evaded unitary politics and critical accounting.

This work, I show, increasingly influenced and involved literary figures who would become canonical—in no small part through the results of their as yet unexplored interests in photography. Although engagements with photography and photo-text were hardly limited to one side of the color line, it is startlingly evident that virtually every African American writer of national significance during the postwar period engaged directly with the archives, practices, and effects of documentary photography. Richard Wright confronted the nearly fatal success of his own breakthrough novel, *Native Son*, by producing a photo-text document in collaboration with the FSA photographer and bureaucrat Edwin Rosskam, and he continued, over the course of his fitful career, to try to harness documentary conventions and image making to the changing shape of the postwar novel as he struggled to move it beyond the limits of protest. Although his planned overtures to and contacts with such storied photographers as Levitt and Lisette Model never materialized in textual collaborations, they attest to the continuing power of postwar images as a model for his work, and help account for his production and the place of images in his final turn to globalist politics and the genre of travelogue.

Likewise, although an early collaboration between James Baldwin and Richard Avedon on a planned Harlem project failed to produce a text, it set the terms by which each figure began to explore competing legacies of formalism and activism, modernist and documentary concerns, within his developing art. Baldwin's engagement with documentary imaging enabled his formulation of an aesthetics of witnessing, and shaped the plangent, often controversial uses he made of a personal and collective past in the autobiographical mode. More specifically, the social histories implicated in the conjunction of a son of Harlem and another of bourgeois Jewish strivers powerfully framed their eventual production of the photo-text volume *Nothing Personal* (1964). And, to take perhaps the hardest case of all, Ralph Ellison: long understood as a profound (if not exemplary) skeptic of images and the power of visibility, Ellison was in fact himself a professional photographer living in Harlem while he wrote *Invisible Man*. Read against the as yet unexplored archival evidence of his interests in documentary and postwar photography, that novel frames itself as a photo-text that suppresses its own visual referents and analogues, so as to harness the affective power and stances of postwar photography to the postwar novel.

Without these writers, the canon of American literature at midcentury is unthinkable. Without their engagements with photography, I argue, their work as we know it would have been impossible.³⁰ Reading them, and other figures, through their photographic engagements—which have remained essentially invisible within literary and cultural history—we arrive at an altered understanding of the literary field at midcentury, and of photography as a practice and cultural resource. Although the writers I address developed quite different responses to the challenge and possibilities of photography, they exemplify a larger movement whose uneven arc I mean to trace: from Harlem, which came to shape representational conventions associated with documentary in all its forms, to the varied, often restive, work of writers seeking to probe the “surreal” landscape of postwar America and the riven legacies—modernist, socially conscious, naturalist, absurdist, protest-ant—of their craft.

As this summary suggests, my account is neither a systematic history of documentary or photographic practices nor an exhaustive study of literary engagements (black, white, or other) with the photographic image. Rather, I focus on specific collaborations—or, to return to a key figure, crossings—that instance the unacknowledged power of photography as a resource for literary figures. In turn, these crossings provide evidence for a variety of claims at work throughout the book: for the uses (rather than merely the power) of visibility in African American culture; for the history of exchanges between

Jews and African Americans (on which more later); for the mutual implication of the novel and the photograph in the tenor of American public life at mid-century and beyond. Taking Harlem as crossroads and lens, exploring the intersection of literary and photographic practices that evolve from the cultures and institutions of documentary, my work takes up precisely where canonical readings—most notably, Alan Trachtenberg’s magisterial *Reading American Photographs* (1989)—leave off: at the very moment when documentary culture and the inauguration of the mass image-world create a new set of conditions for visual production and experience, and a new resource for writers—particularly black writers—attuned to the rhythms of national life.³¹ Reading these writers reading (and in some cases making) American photographs, I offer new accounts of their practices and achievements. And those accounts have implications for our understanding of the uses and significance of photography, in particular, and of visual culture at large.

Neither my method nor my local arguments will be uncontroversial, so it would be well for me to outline the various lines of approach in the disciplines I engage, and at whose intersection, not unlike that of a Venn diagram of overlapping fields, I situate my work. Among the most influential scholars of a previous generation of photo historians, the reigning wisdom on documentary photography (particularly that of the New Deal era) has been correctively critical—attuned, that is, to the ways in which documentary practices enabled the promotion of state agendas and corporatist values, the control of ever greater sectors of the citizenry, and the criminalization of socially marginal or deviant figures (most conspicuously African Americans).³² In the field of American studies, this corrective view has had special purchase; indeed, any exceptionalism with respect to U.S. contexts has served only to redouble skepticism about the photograph as an imposed mode of seeing, a means of “testing, confirming, and constructing a total view of reality.”³³ This may in part be because critical emphasis has fallen on photography as a nineteenth-century cultural formation, rooted in the historical logic of its inceptions and earlier uses. In some of the most provocative and influential recent readings in the field, photography has been powerfully sutured to pre-twentieth-century nation-building projects. The rapidly growing image repertoire, it has been persuasively argued, was instrumental in reshaping national identity after the Civil War as normatively masculine and white; photographic portraiture, in all its guises and practices, is shrewdly seen to have assisted at the birth of the modern middle-class subject by shaping a new cultural good—interior selfhood—on which exclusionary citizenship was increasingly founded.³⁴ Likewise, the practice of photography by elite nineteenth-century women, as both a profession and a visual regime,

is richly shown to have enabled the formation of a domestic front that drew its social power from the logic of imperialism.³⁵ Ironically, the very historical acuity of these readings—their insistence on the deep embeddedness of photographic meaning and practice in specific social contexts—has underwritten a free-floating skepticism about visuality at large. In the wake of this body of work, photography itself threatens to become newly evidentiary: not of historical or social processes, but of its own complicities and dangers. The result is that photography in its broadest cultural resonances and aesthetic effects is writ as “not democracy”—rather its betrayer and scourge.³⁶

In the field of African American studies, scholars of black cultural production have redoubled such vigilance about the implication of photography in failed or false democracy. With ample justification, they have fastened on deep, enduring histories of surveillance, appropriation, and a disciplinary gaze that “congeals” black bodies as it “arrest[s] representation at the threshold of human being.”³⁷ For many critical readers of African American culture who do address photography, its most salient effect in black life has been its production of lynching images, an archive whose existence owes its life to the participation—or at weak best, the studied neutrality—of the camera in the face of brutal murder.³⁸ More broadly, the centrality of music and oral expression in black culture has produced a persistent emphasis on what we might call the sonic at the expense of the visual. For key readers in the field throughout its developing life, from Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and Kimberly Benston through Paul Gilroy and beyond, all black arts aspire to the condition of music: African American, and indeed American, modernity is embodied by the figure of “the blues musician at the crossing”; the possibility of black diasporic modernity is fundamentally “heard to be a matter of music.”³⁹ (Not for nothing has the visual culture scholar Michele Wallace dissented by proclaiming: “I am at war with music.”)⁴⁰ In the ongoing study of African American culture, photography has been—with certain sharp objections—framed as a blunt instrument or coercive tool, a merely instrumental source of evidence or an irrelevance to meaningful critical practice.⁴¹

These variously disciplinary readings are powerful, necessary, and foundational to any alternative claims, including my own. Beyond their frames of reference, however, are the undeniable facts that photography has had a life and afterlives beyond the specific social and institutional contexts in which it first took shape and that it has historically galvanized a wide range of oppositional and affirmative practices in the very communities it functioned to segregate, disenfranchise, or render invisible. The writers I address engage variously with photographic precedent, becoming both avid consumers of images (in

mass circulation, on exhibition, and in archives) and producers of new ones—even, perhaps, of new kinds of images, or at least of images aware of the expressive and cultural designs of changing photographic agencies. Their responses should, I argue, figure prominently in the exploration of what a recent anthology calls “photography’s other histories.”⁴² Committed to that exploration, my work aims to contribute to a rising interest across disciplines in the modalities of the visual as grounds for consequential engagement with social history and experience.⁴³ More distinctively, I aim to educe the powerful crossing between—the mutual mediation of—twentieth-century literary and photographic practices, in the generation of new stylistics and cultural stances alike.

In the exploration of that crossing, I attend closely to another of consequence to histories of image making. Photography, as I show in more detail later, has a life belonging explicitly to the twentieth century in the United States, when the small-camera revolution, following on the felt effects of industrial growth, great and lesser migrations, and diaspora, radically altered the possibilities for documentary image making—and not only in technical or formalist ways.⁴⁴ Canonical photo history emphasizes the forms of middle-class slumming and ethnographic curiosity enabled by portable cameras from the advent of street photography in the later nineteenth century (particularly by the first Kodak models of the 1880s); it thus obscures a signal shift in the practice and uses of site-specific imaging from the mid-1930s on.⁴⁵ This shift implicates not only the social relations in which photography takes part, but changing conceptions of the very being or ground of the photographic image, and the possibility of dissenting and affirmative responses founded in them.

Far from the socially privileged, middle- or leisure-class subjects of canonical study, the vast majority of U.S. practitioners in the wake of the Leica revolution and the Harlem riot were amateurs, autodidacts, immigrants, refugees, or inhabitants of tenements, uptown or down. More to the point, they were also overwhelmingly Jews: not quite white, or only provisionally white in the racial economy of interwar America. The startling preponderance of immigrant and first-generation Jews on the field of documentary from its inception as a distinctly modern agency—a preponderance so marked, one photo historian has noted, as to make that field “difficult to imagine without them”—has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention.⁴⁶ Their presence was a necessary if not sufficient condition to the evolution of documentary as a labile genre committed, in its most generative strain, to the marginal and forgotten as subject matter and to the purview of the outsider or the alienated as a point of stylistic departure.⁴⁷

In response to their growing body of Harlem-inflected work, black writers and intellectuals were drawn into collaboration with Jewish (aka “downtown” or socially conscious) photographers on documentary projects, resistance to its effects, and redefinition of its terms and uses. They were, of course, responding to the oppressive reach and power of the photographic archive and its representations of black Americans. But they also responded to the varied possibilities embodied by the photograph as an agency, record, and cultural form. In so doing, they embraced what the cultural anthropologist Christopher Pinney calls “photographic affirmation and revelation,” in a moment when photography became a “locally appropriated medium” in a widely consequential way.⁴⁸ My book does not essay a full-fledged study of Jewish and African American relations on the field of culture, in the manner of recent work by Eric Sundquist, Jeffrey Melnick, and others. But it does explore those relations in an array of photographic contexts, offering an alternative to the identitarian readings of Jewish imaging that currently hold sway, and arguing for the shaping force of this social history on the ongoing life of the photograph, of documentary, and of the literary field.⁴⁹

In fact, I argue, the matrix of immigrant experience, tenement culture, and documentary stylistics is crucial to the emergence of a new conception of the image, a new reading of its ontology that compels the engagement of black writers, underlies the expressive experiments they conduct, and bespeaks the value of those experiments for readings of photography and visual culture. As photographs of the “great riots” in Harlem suggest, the very lability and promiscuity of the modern camera endowed its images with multiple, simultaneous lives: as a form of evidence, a mode of sensation, a call to arms, a considered aesthetic artifact. These alternative logics are worth noting in some detail. Temporally speaking, the riot images—which we can understand as representative of the full range of documentary and photojournalistic production of the epoch—proclaim both “this was real” (i.e., they are evidentiary) and “you are there” (they trade in sensation). But they are hardly predicated on the kinds of truth claims—absolute fidelity to truth of character, uncanny veracity—long associated, both in their historical moment and among critical readers afterward, with earlier nineteenth-century photographic technologies.⁵⁰ Nor do they offer themselves up with the elegiac effect so influentially described by Roland Barthes: that “superimposition” of reality onto what has passed, such that the photograph above all proclaims the status of all its subjects as the “That-has-been,” exposing to us only what is “already dead.”⁵¹ No longer produced or circulated in contexts predicated on these daguerrean,

characterological, or elegiac effects, images of the riot era self-consciously partake in a new regime, what *Life's* first picture editor aptly called “the quick nervousness of pictures.”⁵²

This logic of “nervousness” multiplied not only the state-building, disciplinary, or coercive effects of photography. It transformed the image itself as an object in flux, promiscuously available for commerce, protest, and art. Even as a veritable flood of photojournalistic or otherwise documentary images conditioned viewers to consume the world (usually with unearned sentiment or indifference), the entry of cultural outsiders onto the photographic field shaped other uses of sympathy, distance, and alienation. Perhaps the most purposive account of this felt transformation is given by Lisette Model. Forced, as the daughter of a prominent Viennese Jew, to flee twice from the advances of Hitler’s Reich—first from Austria, and then Paris, for New York—she took up photography, like so many interwar figures, in response to the exigencies of fascism and imposed exile. I will have occasion to discuss in more detail her profoundly influential photographic practice and its links with the work of writers such as Wright and Ellison. Here I want to focus briefly on her offices as a teacher of documentary photography in postwar New York, to suggest how close attention to the twentieth-century contexts of photographic production might alter our sense of possible traffic in the image and of its social implications.

For photo historians (among others), the single most misleading feature of photographic practice—and of documentary in particular—is what Allan Sekula calls “the folklore of photographic truth”: the implied claim that the image is a neutral, objective copy or artifact of an object or event in itself, irrefutably real.⁵³ Yet that presumption was systematically challenged by photographers of the postwar era, working to redefine the uses of documentary imaging. In unpublished teaching notebooks associated with her legendary courses at the New School (attended by, among others, Diane Arbus), Model defines the development of documentary with reference not to the picture “Industry”—Luce and his minions—but what she calls “the mind guided camera.” The purpose of the latter is definitively not “to reproduce or imitate nature” (i.e., to embrace fidelity or photographic mimesis) but “always to express the actual state of human understanding of the world and life.”⁵⁴ Central to this notably subjectivist view of photographic work is the key argument—revisited throughout Model’s lecture notes—that the photograph should be understood neither as a replica nor as an indexical trace of the objects it pictures. Rather, “in spite of the fact that [the] image represents streets, houses, people,” it is “merely an *analogy* of the physical world around us.”⁵⁵

Here, Model's conception—in effect a manifesto—veers sharply from the emphasis on the indexicality of the image that undergirded state-sponsored documentary. Instead, her language echoes the thinking of Charles Saunders Peirce, who understood the photograph as simultaneously indexical and iconic: an object both symptomatic of the world beyond it and linked to that world through a resemblance not innate, but forged in perception and experience.⁵⁶ As a leading experimental practitioner and a figure who embodies the condition of displacement, Model firmly insists on the latter relation. Functioning as an “analogy”—that is, a likeness in incidentals of visual semblance between modes of experience otherwise categorically unlike—the photograph presents us with familiar aspects of our social world only to demand that we confront what is unknown, mysterious, or otherwise obscured by our conventions for inhabiting it (“We are surrounded by thousands of images. Most of them [are] invisible because we are blinded by routine”).⁵⁷ For Model, the photograph in the era of the mind-guided image, braced against nostalgia and the allure of unmediated reality alike, is both a “projection” of the material world and a way of exploring its underlying social relations. “An immaterial [version] of what surrounds us,” the image as such “makes it possible” for the viewer “to be receptive” to social and existential verities “project[ed]” within it.⁵⁸ Thus limned, Model's account of the ontology and effects of the photograph literally underlines its difference from received notions in the New Deal documentary context. Against the skepticism generated by commercial and state-sponsored photojournalism's claims to objectivity and social mastery, she poses consequential possibilities for forms of curiosity, uncertainty, and serendipity. In her vision, the photograph is reframed as an occasion for probing “the effects of the actual state of human understanding,” and a tool for making usable histories and self-consciousness (“Photojournalism Search; to know oneself”).⁵⁹

This brief for photography is powerfully inflected by social dislocation. To the extent that it accounts for postwar photographic practice, it begins to suggest why so many black writers of the 1930s and beyond would find in the camera and its objects a model, a resource, and an analogue. At their most self-conscious, their engagements with the camera anticipate the recent counterargument of the photographer Jeff Wall, who has declared (contra Sekula) that there are not one but “two myths of photography. One is that it tells the truth. The other is that it lies.”⁶⁰ African American writers at midcentury engage both views, refusing to resolve them. Responding to the forms and limits of socially conscious and New Deal art, the afterlives of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, and the matrix of postwar social movements, writers at

the crossroads of these epochal projects are simultaneously drawn by postwar photography's postures of outsidership and self-scrutiny, and by the deep history of uses and misuses of the image. Mining photography's range of effects—analogy, sympathy, shock, intimacy, distance, the conferral of dignity, alienation—they seek to harness its varied agencies to the fraught but heady contexts of midcentury culture. When they remake the form of the novel to explore the existential effects of poverty, invisibility, or rapid social change; work to bend the shape of received narrative forms to the energies of shifting social experience; struggle with the black writer's burden of authenticity: in these and other aims, writers in the ambit of photography test the powers of their art in a landscape increasingly shaped by visual texts and visuality. They also test those powers in the ambit of Harlem, originating source and productive resource for a riot of representational stances, icons, and styles. Between the Renaissance and Black Arts, modernism and the second ghetto, grew and flourished the Harlem to which I now turn, crossroads for writers, the photograph, and an American modernity aborning.