# *Picturing Us*

## AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

*Edited by*

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*Mildred Paige and Children,* N.D.
PHOTOGRAPHER: UNKNOWN (COURTESY CHRISTIAN WALKER)

## GAZING COLORED: A FAMILY ALBUM

*Christian Walker*

*The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice,*
*but when they get that black they ain't no use*

—CHILDHOOD RHYME

*There seems to be some tension as a result of the lighter complexioned women I dated and the woman I choose to be my chief executive, my preferring individuals of the lighter complexion.*

—CLARENCE THOMAS

LINED UP, AS IF BY RANK, AN ILLUSIONARY VALUE OF WORTH, the darkest to the lightest, the youngest closest to the old. The light-skinned, near-white baby appeared, at least in 1954, to be a promise fulfilled. At least for the old lady in the photograph, my great-grandmother, Mildred Paige. The baby was the prized result of my family's assimilation by the process of miscegenation. Baby Jimmy reappears a year later, in a photograph taken at my first birthday party, looking conspicuous and disconnected, like a newly met neighborhood kid making his first cautious visit to the home of the colored family on the block.

It was he, along with his sister, who became the only relatives of my generation to totally and completely "integrate" themselves outside the boundaries of race, and that fact seemed to keep my family mired in endless battles over "racial heritage." In the late 1960s, these two cousins of mine crossed what Du Bois called "the most important line of the twentieth century"—the color line—to become, in their minds and in the minds and hearts of scornful and envious relatives, white people.

As a child, I cherished looking through the family album. Older relatives would act as guides, identifying the estranged cousin or renegade uncle who had moved to another place to become another person. Uncles and aunts, as if on cue, would comment on nuances of color and the quality of hair texture of Mildred Paige and five of her six children (ignoring Ralph), comparing their features, their racial physicality, to those of the relatives now passing for white. We kept our family

discussions on the merits of race (as opposed to our discussions on the injustices of race) focused on light-colored eyes and thin lips.

Their recollections, coupled with the photographs, appeared as firm evidence to support intricate rumors spanning four generations. There were whisperings about my great-grandmother's two common-law husbands, one black, one white. There were photographs of my Uncle Joe, his white wife, and their son Butch, who had gone to jail for "hanging around too many white people," half sentences about my mother's first marriage to a white jazz musician and hidden debates about the exact paternity of her fair-skinned brother and sister. It was in looking at family photographs that I first developed a "critical eye" for the nuances of race and especially color, for distinguishing certain racial characteristics as "more black" or "more white."

Yet for me, a brown-skinned child, the most resonant photographs were of Ralph. He was the youngest, and the one child of Mildred Paige who had the most visible African ancestry. In most pictures, made at family gatherings, he stands farthest from his mother. It was he who held, in my imagination, the power to explode the real or imagined myths of my family's couplings with the Irish, the Italians, the Cherokees, the Jews, the Cubans. Ralph, in his blackness, was the pivotal element in our collective family consciousness.

Unlike the near-white cousins, who defined our aesthetic sense of the desirable and the ideal for a person of color, Ralph's presence was at the core of our schism over our sense of marginalization and our estrangement from the newly "white" members of the family. Our identity, like theirs, was not informed by ethnicity or affectional ties, but by an elaborate system of representation based on white subjectivity and racial stereotypes. In essence, we were a family that thought the offspring with the bluest, grayest, or greenest eyes were not only the best looking but also the most likely to succeed.

In every African American family album there is an image that points to what James Baldwin has identified as the "Negro's past of rope, fire, humiliation, castration, and death." It is in those aging and fading pictures of relatives, living and dead, that one finds the underlying nature of self-actualization and its antecedent, the internalization of oppression. In my family album the most joyous photographs were of those relatives who seemed to have survived the subjugations of race, color, and class. Yet





for me, the images that held the most dramatic power were those of relatives who had chosen to live and love primarily in a white social context and who were subsequently plagued by breakdowns and dysfunctions.

In my family's ever-changing interpretation of the photographs, these pictures became infused by a value system that could not be contained within the narrative we assigned each individual image. We embellished each compliment on how pretty the light-skinned cousin was with how crazy or promiscuous she was, until our family pictures became identical to those mass-marketed images produced for general entertainment, and which ultimately function as the official history. We saw in the cousins the same qualities contained in the personality of Peola, the light-skinned girl in *Imitation of Life,* who rejects her mother to become white. For us, *Pinky* and *Sapphire* and *Kings Go Forth,* films where the central character struggles with racial identity, functioned as an authoritative chronicle. We valued these works, as one would value, say, a visual archive that is disputed but never challenged in its assumptions and conclusions about racial madness and interracial sexuality. Our gaze was always external. Some of us considered the family flawed, weak. We were unable to conceive why sane and careful individuals would willingly subject themselves to a cultural test that would define their degrees of blackness, and we wondered how an intelligent relative could have a fondness, an attraction, for white people.

bell hooks has called for the "necessity for black people to decolonize our minds." A rudimentary form of this process began for me in early adolescence, when I attempted a critical (as opposed to emotional) response to the family photographs—images of abandonment—that terrorized me. I seemed to lose my understanding of victimization and began to view acts of racial hysteria, both by African Americans and by whites, as logical choices. Murders, lynchings, the violent reactionary tactics of racism, defined my concepts of racial interaction; if you "hung around too many white people," you'd get hurt, jailed, or killed.

In my imagings of black/white sexuality, my family pictures seemed almost interchangeable with the erotic images of black men with white women and black women with white men that adorned the covers of the popular racial fiction of the day. The texts and images of white writers and illustrators provided the subtext for my family's fragmented sexual history. I suspected that the central reason for the rejection by my light-

skinned relatives of the constructs of racial identity could be found in the pages of novels like *Mandingo* and *Drum*. On the covers, and in their pages, white people appeared vicious but passionate, and black people were their rational, half-willing victims. I felt little rage or anger for the circumstances of their powerlessness. Instead, I developed a profound fascination and a dangerous fear of white people—all in keeping with family tradition.

Much has been written on the nature of photographs, their ability to function as both "mirrors" and "windows" in which the viewer projects his or her own sense of reality or truth. In the early 1960s, at the dawn of the principal battles for desegregation, documentary photographs (rather than family pictures, Hollywood movies, or paperback novels) became central to my formation of identity and suggested, for me, the boundaries that denied African Americans full participation in this democratic culture. It was not to images of racial solidarity that I was drawn—the march on Washington, the linked black and white arms. It was the photographs depicting confusion, chaos, and, ultimately, death that fascinated me. The first images from outside the family album that I thought to be accurate representations of myself were in the newspaper and magazine photographs of four black girls in their lacy Sunday dresses, killed in the bombing of an Alabama church; images of growling dogs and lethal jets of water directed at the bodies of children my age and younger codified my relationship to the dominant culture. I understood perfectly when a friend told me that after seeing the photographs of Emmett Till's battered and bloated body, he refused to visit his cousins living in the South.

It has been suggested that the horrific photographs of the direct-action era of the civil rights struggles in the United States "altered the consciousness of the nation" and helped direct the metamorphosis from a civil rights agenda to a human rights agenda that could, conceivably, embrace diversity. Yet these photographs also signified something quite different: that the outdated category of "Negro" was, as Michael Rustin said of race, "both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization." A racial identity forged against the dangers of the "color line" seems a fragile and tenuous foundation for self-reliance and self-respect, the two most prominent defining principles of African American subjectivity.





It was in viewing the photographs of the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s—the stirring of contemporary Afrocentrism—that I first grappled with the notion that the essential nature of African American resistance is to reclaim a collective historical identity: the first line of defense against a legacy of cultural annihilation. In seeing the photographs of the raised arm and clenched fist of black Olympic gold medal winners in Mexico City in 1968, I first glimpsed the expansiveness of ethnicity. My racial identity became politicized. I saw myself as Huey Newton in his black leather jacket holding a rifle. I began to view race in a manner that Manning Marable has suggested "is essentially passive, a reality of being within a social formation stratified by the oppressive concept of race." I began to understand that beneath the portraits of the relatives who had abandoned the family was a strategy. Instead of dealing with their rupture between being "colored" or "white" or "negro" or "ethnic," they had chosen to flee. In their simple, elegant, and erroneous flight, they had elected, because of light skin, to disregard the joys and ravages of "decolonizing the mind."

Before the onslaught of images of the atrocities against blacks during the civil rights struggle, African Americans most often functioned as an invisible, carefully hidden obsession in the twentieth-century cultural consciousness, the separate-but-not-quite-equal other. The occasional public photograph of the "coloreds" (a term we used in my family to distinguish the lighter-skinned relatives) was deemed appropriate enough to contain all the distinctions of color, class, and gender that formed the foundations for the community's diverse nature.

Ironically it is the dichotomy between African American family photographs and the media's image of 1960s activist struggle that has provided the basis for the contemporary discourse on racial identity, the politics of visual representation, and the dismantling of the myth of a monolithic African American community in which all members share the same aspirations, the same political agenda, and the same sexuality.

Yet lately, anyone concerned with racial or sexual representation is tempted to flee the dominant culture's current fascination with the African American body. As Toni Morrison has pointed out, "a reference to a black person's body is de rigueur in white discourse." Two broad categories of visual representation of black identity seem to dominate in the contemporary news and entertainment media, the art galleries and

the museums: images of the elite group of African American achievers who have seemingly escaped marginalization, and, more importantly, images of racial isolation, disintegration, and genocide—the daily feast of photographs of crack dealers, crack mothers, and crack babies.

At a time when the African American visual image has never been more prominent, more commodified, it is crucial to question the ways that racial identity is informed through both public and private photographs: the transformation of a pop star from black child into a kind of Creole Frankenstein; the charting of the weight loss and gains of a talk-show host; the nationally televised "trial" of a conservative African American man's alleged sexual abuse of an equally conservative African American woman; the sexually radical photographs of a Miss America; a coffee-table book of images of naked, sexualized African American men; the image of a sports hero infected with HIV; the videotaped beating of an African American man by the white police; photographs of entire neighborhoods held hostage by drug-dealing teenagers; the internationally televised burning of a city by its minority citizens.

When African Americans glimpse into the "mirror" or "window" of photography, into public or private images, it is vital to acknowledge that what we are may not be the same as what we see. The reconciliation of the dual nature of contemporary racial identity, the acceptance of a racial consciousness that may view the exterior world from a position of both victimization and power, becoming what Deborah Willis calls "contemporary race men and women," might begin when one rejects a visual representation of self that has been germinated in the gaze of the other.