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The Harlem Book of the Dead: Pan-Africanism, Funerary Portraiture, and the African-American Way of Death

by

Jessica Feldman

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

July 24, 2020
Date

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ABSTRACT

The Harlem Book of the Dead: Pan-Africanism, Funerary
Portraiture, and the African American Way of Death

by

Jessica Feldman

Advisor: Maria Antonella Pelizzari

This thesis examines the text and images contained in James Van Der Zee and Camille Billops's seminal photobook *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978). The title, frontispiece, and introduction, combined with Van Der Zee's funerary portraits, illuminate the connection between African-American rituals of death and Pan-Africanism. While these two concepts appear to be distinct, they are both predicated upon and intrinsically linked to key values in African American culture, including liberation and the meaning of community. Each chapter focuses on a different contextual framework for situating *The Harlem Book of the Dead* within the historical and political moment in which it was created: post-mortem photography, the interconnectedness of Christianity and mourning rituals within the African American community, Pan-Africanism.

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Introduction

James Van Der Zee is known as the pre-eminent portrait photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, and his name likely conjures images of the newly emerging black middle and upper class, posed in their finest clothes in the photographer's studio. However, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978, Figure 1), which is the only photobook he published throughout his career, in collaboration with artist Camille Billops and poet Owen Dodson, reveals a radically different side of Van Der Zee's oeuvre: his funerary portraits and complex narrative montages. These portraits are among the most visually rich and technically skilled images that the photographer created over the course of his long career. After he photographed a funeral, he would develop the photograph of the deceased, and then montage the image alongside found printed fragments, which often included Christian iconography, poetry or scripture, or images of the deceased while they were still living.[1] The title of the book, and the introduction by Billops, reference the death rituals of the ancient Egyptians, a long-standing cultural focal point of the Pan-African movement, a worldwide movement that aims to strengthen ties between diasporic groups of African descent. The title, frontispiece, and introduction, combined with Van Der Zee's twenty-eight funerary portraits, bring together Pan-Africanism and the African-American rituals of death. These two elements may at first glance appear distinct, but in fact they are both predicated upon and intrinsically linked to key values in African American culture, including liberation and the meaning of collective community.

Van Der Zee grew up in Lenox, Massachusetts, among a dozen or so black families living in the area. Lenox is located in the Berkshires, and most of the members of the town's

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[1] Deborah Willis and Roger Birt, *Van Der Zee: Photographer, 1886-1983* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1993), 169.

African American working class, including his parents John and Susan Van Der Zee, were employed by the wealthy residents of summer estates.[2] James and his siblings had a comfortable childhood, and from an early age he demonstrated talent in both art and music. At the age of eight or nine, the young Van Der Zee saw an advertisement in *Youth's Companion* that offered the opportunity of obtaining a camera after selling packets of ladies' sachet powder. He followed through, selling all of them and mailing the money back to the advertiser.[3] The advertiser sent him back a package that contained a camera, some glass plates, and a variety of chemicals; even though Van Der Zee failed to develop a single picture with this first camera due to the technical complexity of the process, his love of photography was sparked. The following spring, he purchased his second camera, and set to work photographing his friends and family, turning his closet into a makeshift darkroom.

In 1906, Van Der Zee moved to New York City to work alongside his father and brother who had also relocated from Massachusetts, and he met his first wife, Kate Brown, at a church fundraising event. They married in March 1907, after Brown became pregnant, and decided to relocate to Phoebus, VA, to be closer to her relatives.[4] Van Der Zee had taught himself almost everything he knew about photography, and in Phoebus he was treated like an expert in the field. The town was not far from the Hampton Institute, one of the earliest historically black colleges in the nation, where students gained experience learning trades and technical skills in fields such as agriculture, carpentry, tailoring, and blacksmithing, among many others. During this period

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[2] Ibid, 26-29.

[3] James Haskins, *James Van DerZee: The Picture-Takin' Man* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991), 42-46.

[4] Willis and Birt, *Van DerZee: Photographer*, cit., 34.

Van Der Zee photographed many of the leading African American scholars teaching at the Hampton Institute, capturing African American life in the surrounding area. Although he was still developing his skills as a photographer, his works from this time demonstrate his keen eye for composition, texture, and light.[5] Van Der Zee and Brown only stayed in Virginia for a year and half, moving back to New York and settling in Harlem in 1908.

Upon his return to New York City, Van Der Zee obtained a job as a darkroom assistant in the portrait studio of a department store in Newark. Shortly after starting there, he stepped in to take the portraits while his boss was away for the holidays, building up a following of customers.[6] From 1912-1915, Van Der Zee laid down his photographic roots in Harlem, where he opened up a portrait studio at the Toussaint Conservatory of Art and Music, which his sister Jennie had established alongside her husband. Brown left him in 1918, and shortly after his soon-to-be second wife Gaynella Greenlee helped Van Der Zee open up the Guarantee Photo Studio on West 135th Street.[7] The studio was located on street level, making it accessible to the community, and it had electric lighting, which meant that photographs could be taken day and night.[8] The business was a success from the start, as social clubs and churches commissioned Van Der Zee to record their activities, and the residents of Harlem wanted their portraits taken.

Van Der Zee developed a distinctive photographic style, which combined contemporary fashions with elements of traditional portraiture by utilizing painted backdrops, props, and careful posing that enabled his subjects to present an idealized version of themselves. He worked strategically, combining a basic set of poses with a limited number of studio backdrops and props in order to create a final image that evoked the respectability and theatricality of Victorian portraiture.[9] As the photographer once said, "I posed everybody according to their type and personality, and therefore almost every picture was different…in the majority of studios, they just seem to pose everybody the same according to custom, according to fashion, and therefore the pictures seem to be mechanical looking to me."[10] Unlike many portrait photographers before him, Van Der Zee worked in a collaborative manner, trying different poses with his sitters in order to create an image that captured the character and beauty of his subjects.

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[5] Haskins, *The Picture Takin' Man,* 61-62.

[6] Ibid, 86-87.

[7] Willis and Birt, *VanDerZee, Photographer,* 40-42.

[8] Dr. Cheryl Finley, "Harlem Guaranteed: Day or Night, Rain or Shine: The Photographic Legacy of James Van Der Zee," in *James Van Der Zee: Harlem Guaranteed*, September 12-November 2, 2002 (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York), 10.

Despite being self-taught, Van Der Zee was highly skilled in the post-production of his photographs. He often retouched the negatives to remove blemishes and improve the appearance of the sitter, hand-coloring photographs with watercolor or oil paint. Ultimately, through his studio portraits and street scenes documenting storefronts, parades, and social events, Van Der Zee created a photographic record of the growing middle class in Harlem that centered African Americans, affording them a sense of dignity and racial pride. Van Der Zee's images allowed subjects to present the best versions of themselves to the world, at a time when the media was rife with stereotypical depictions of African Americans, such as the Mammy and Uncle Tom, which were applied to reinforce racist notions that African Americans were submissive and constantly seeking white approval. Art historian Deborah Willis has noted that, "His use of nineteenth-century formalist compositional elements to photograph twentieth-century subjects was an elegant and intelligent way of devising a revisionist and optimistic overview of the African American experience."[11]

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[9] Colin Westerbeck and Dawoud Bey, *The James Van Der Zee Studio* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago), 8.

[10] Lara Antal, *James Van Der Zee: Photographer* (New York: Cavendish Square Publishing, 2017), 67.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Van Der Zee's career was booming. He had photographed some of the biggest celebrities in Harlem, including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Countee Cullen, Florence Mills, and Satchel Paige, among many others.[12] In addition to his portrait work, he started to take on photojournalistic commissions, such as church conventions, school convocations, and he spent a summer as the official photographer of the United Negro Improvement Association, led by political activist Marcus Garvey. However, his most important clients continued to be middle-class Harlem residents. His studio managed to survive the Great Depression with only a slight decline in business, but by the end of World War II, it experienced a steep drop-off in profits. This decrease was due to a number of different factors: the black middle class had started to leave the area for the suburbs, cameras had become much more accessible, and Van Der Zee's signature style was becoming outdated in the era when documentary photography became pervasive.[13] To make up for the loss of income, he started a mail order photographic restoration business, making copies and enhancing damaged prints that clients would send in, among other services. Unfortunately, by the 1960s, he found himself struggling to pay the mortgage on his home and even stopped taking photographs altogether.

In 1967, Van Der Zee's luck began to change when Reginald McGhee walked into the artist's studio. Curator Allon Schoener at the Metropolitan Museum of Art had conceived of the exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, to be a multimedia presentation on the black experience in New York City. Schoener hired McGhee, a professional photojournalist whose work had appeared nationally in newspapers and periodicals, as director of photographic research.[14] McGhee was looking for photographs of Harlem in the interwar period and discovered Van Der Zee's studio in 1968. Van Der Zee ended up being the single largest contributor to the show, which incorporated many of his portraits of clubs and social organizations, photographs of Garvey and the UNIA, scenes of life in Harlem, and portraits of Harlem residents.[15] *Harlem on My Mind* would prove to be transformative for Van Der Zee's reputation, and at eighty-two, he finally began to receive widespread acclaim.

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[11] Ibid, 91.

[12] Haskins, *Picture-Takin' Man*, 141.

[13] Willis and Birt, *VanDerZee, Photographer*, 51.

After this recognition, Van Der Zee returned to portrait photography, and his career continued through the end of his life, until his death at the age of ninety-six. In the spring of 1976, he began collaborating with artist Camille Billops on *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.[16] The book opens with a foreword by Toni Morrison in which she comments on the power of Van Der Zee's images while praising the collaborative nature of the photographer, Billops and Dodson; followed by an introduction written by Billops in which she connects the death rituals depicted in Van Der Zee's photographs to those of ancient Egypt. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* strikes a delicate balance between life and death, interspersing the twenty-eight funerary portraits into an autobiographical account of Van Der Zee's life, as told through an interview with Billops, and poems by Owen Dodson, which are written from the perspective of the deceased in the photographs, reflecting on life, death, and what comes after. The interview is divided into eight thematic sections, with headings that give the reader insight into what topics the following interview section will cover, which ranged from *Mothers & Prophecies* to *Soldiers,* with each section touching upon major events that will happen within one's life, while eventually circling back to death as the subject Each interview portion is followed by poems by Dodson and funerary portraits. There are two exceptions to this scheme: the section titled *James Van Der Zee: The Young Man,* which segues directly into the section titled *Children & the Mystery of Birth,* and *Mourners & the Posing of the Dead,* which transitions directly into *Man is the Head of Everything Big on Earth*; these interview sections do not have any photographs in between them. .

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[14] Allon Schoener, "A Retrospective Walk Through 'The Harlem On My Mind' Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969," http://harlemonmymind.org/retrospective.html.

[15] Haskins, *Picture Takin' Man*, 229.

[16] Antal, *James Van Der Zee*, 80.

Throughout *The Harlem Book of the* Dead, Billops' interview with Van Der Zee weaves together the images, indicating that the text was a deciding factor for the selection of photographs. The layout of text and image is inconsistent throughout, with some funerary portraits across from the beginning or end of an interview section (Figure 2), some portraits across from other portraits (Figure 3), some portraits across from a corresponding poem (Figure 4), and still other portraits occupying the same page as the corresponding poem with the text beneath (Figure 5). Billops and Van Der Zee conclude the book with a description of plates, providing contextual information on eighteen of the funerary portraits, with some descriptions prompted by questions from Billops, and others provided directly from Van Der Zee's stream of consciousness. When examined as an object, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* is a photobook that is as visually complex as the funerary portraits that it presents, challenging the reader to consider the ways in which the spirits of the dead will remain with the living, inextricably linking life and death.

Despite this being the only artist's book by one of the most prolific American photographers of the twentieth century, there is a surprising lack of in-depth scholarship on the subject. Recent writings on *The Harlem Book of the Dead* include a *Time* magazine article by Mia Tramz titled, "Death in Harlem: James VanDerZee's Funerary Portraits." Tramz concludes that, "[t]he book is an ode not only to lives past, but to a time past – and to a slice of history that might otherwise be lost. It is a meditation on death and loss, but also on beauty."[17] A more scholarly analysis can be found in Margaret Olin's *Touching Photographs,* investigating the role of photography in communities.[18] Olin argues that the way people feel and touch photographs may be more central to their meaning than how photographs look, and that the instinct of touching photographs is individual, interpersonal, and community-wide.[19] Her chapter on Van Der Zee focuses on *The Harlem Book of the Dead,* examining the relationship between text and image by homing in on Dodson's poetry. The author studies how the poems reinterpret the photographs, and notes that they often contrast with the textual fragments added by Van Der Zee in his montages. Van Der Zee's textual inserts give voice to the mourners, rather than the deceased, and seem intended to comfort them in their time of loss. Dodson's poems draw upon the narrative quality of the photographs created by these inserts, but are instead written from the perspective of the deceased, leaving readers to grapple with their own notions of what happens after death.

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[17] Mia Tramz, "Death in Harlem: James VanDerZee's Funerary Portraits," *Time*, February 24, 2014, https://time.com/3807384/death-in-harlem-james-vanderzees-funerary-portraits/.

[18] Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 119.

[19] Ibid, 18.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, there were two exhibitions with accompanying catalogues which broadly examined Van Der Zee's career. The most recent of these is *The James Van Der Zee Studio*, held at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2004. In the exhibition catalogue, curator Colin Westerbeck analyzes Van Der Zee's studio practice, including his use of painted backdrops, props, and careful posing, and the earlier photographic traditions from which they hail.[20] Photographer Dawoud Bey's essay examines the different social, formal, and conceptual functions of these photographs for the African American communities, concluding that they served as a form of self-affirmation.[21]

The most notable exhibition of Van Der Zee's work was the earlier retrospective held at the National Gallery of Art in 1994. The accompanying catalog became a foundational text on the photographer, with an introduction by Deborah Willis who remarks on the importance of the work for many African American contemporary photographers such as Bey, Roland Freeman, and Coreen Simpson, among others.[22] Additionally, the catalog features the most comprehensive biography on the photographer, written by historian Roger Birt.

The Harlem Book of the Dead remains understudied in these two major catalogs. The following discussion foregrounds the ways in which the book reveals that African American funerary practices, and beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife, fulfill a central tenet of the Pan-African movement, that members of the African diaspora share an inter-generational cultural history. Prior writings have not provided a thorough examination of these topics, how they interact with one another, and the role that *The Harlem Book of the Dead* occupies within the broader genre of post-mortem photography. Each chapter focuses on contextualizing this book within the broader history of each of these movements, in order to fully understand the historical contexts the artists worked within, and the ways in which they departed from previously established traditions. By examining the funerary portraits in conversation with the text, this thesis illuminates the meanings behind the striking and visually complex images, and the ways in which Van Der Zee used photomontage to visually signify the deceased being ushered into the afterlife by combining images of the earthly and the heavenly. While examining the book as an object, it becomes clear the ways in which Van Der Zee's funerary portraits work within a previously established photographic tradition, and yet the text pushes readers to study how Van Der Zee's use of photomontage reflects African American attitudes towards death and mourning.

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[20] Colin Westerbeck, "The James Van Der Zee Studio," in *The James Van Der Zee Studio* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago), 15.

[21] Dawoud Bey, "Authoring the Black Image: The Photographs of James VanDerZee," in *The James Van Der Zee Studio* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago), 27-34.

[22] Willis and Birt, *VanDerZee, Photographer*, 25.

Chapter One situates *The Harlem Book of the Dead* within the rich tradition of American post-mortem photography in order to reveal the ways in which Van Der Zee utilized previously existing styles, while creating images that remain singular within the genre. *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, along with *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973) by Michael Lesy (Figure 6), are the most widely known photobooks of post-mortem images. Although Van Der Zee was a self-taught artist, he explicitly states in his 1976 interview with Billops for *The Harlem Book of the Dead* that he was knowledgeable about the tradition.[23] In his funerary portraits, Van Der Zee uses the dominant tropes and poses that recur throughout the genre, including the last sleep, casket photographs, and posing with mourners. However, Van Der Zee placed inserts that included poetry, Christian iconography, and photos of the deceased into his images in order to mitigate the gruesomeness of the subject matter. Following the history and evolution of post-mortem photography is an in-depth analysis of the text and images and their relationship to one another in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, which is notably absent from writings on Van Der Zee and from literature on post-mortem photography.

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[23] James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Dobbs Ferry: Morgan & Morgan, 1978), 3.

Despite the prevalence of post-mortem photography, scholarship has largely overlooked the practice. Dr. Stanley Burns is known as one of the foremost experts in the field; in 1975 he established the Burns Archive, which is the world's largest private collection of early medical and post-mortem photography, containing over one million historic photographs.[24] The archive played an important role in creating a visual record of the history of post-mortem portraiture, and in 1990, Burns published *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, containing over eighty images from the collection and a chronology of attitudes towards death and mourning in America. Perhaps the single-most important text for the study of mortuary photography is *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, written by visual anthropologist Jay Ruby. He compiled a complete history of the practice, tracing its roots from memorial painting to the peak of its public popularity in the late nineteenth century, through the gradual decline of the practice in the mid-twentieth century, as Americans became increasingly uncomfortable with death. Ruby also classified the recurring tropes within postmortem photography: the last sleep (where the deceased appear to be at rest); casket photography; and mourners posing alongside the dead. While Van Der Zee used these traditional poses within his funerary portraits, his use of photomontage is singular within the genre, encompassing not only death as the subject of the images, but capturing the concept of the afterlife as well.

Since their forced arrival in the United States in 1619, African Americans have had a distinctive relationship to death, seeing it not only as something to be mourned, but also something to be celebrated as the ultimate source of freedom. Chapter Two sheds light on Van Der Zee's distinctive style within his funerary portraits by exploring mourning rituals and Christianity within the African American community, and the ways in which they are intertwined. During slavery, African Americans considered death to be a homegoing, in which their souls would return to Africa, and both West African traditions and Christianity influenced many of the mourning rituals they developed. These commonalities can be traced throughout the African diaspora to demonstrate one of the central beliefs of Pan-Africanism, which is the inherent sense of community and culture shared by Black people throughout the world. Through his engagement with Christian imagery, and his inclusion of images of the deceased while they were still living, Van Der Zee visualized African American beliefs about death and mourning rituals, showing that their souls could ascend to something greater.

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[24] Stanley Burns, "Providing Photographic Evidence," http://www.burnsarchive.com/.

A few scholars have written about Van Der Zee's engagement with Christianity, situating his work within the broader history of African American mourning rituals. Published in 2017, *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, edited by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill, contains a chapter by Carla Williams on Van Der Zee's representations of religion. Williams argues that his images of African Americans at worship are the visible manifestation of faith, while reflecting the economic and social mobility that came along with religious affiliation in Harlem.[25] Karla F.C. Holloway included a brief discussion of Van Der Zee's funerary portraits in *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*. Inspired by her own experience grappling with the death of her son, who had been killed while he was incarcerated, Holloway investigated the rituals, politics, and economics of African American mourning and burial practices. Holloway notes the role Van Der Zee's funerary portraits played in the Harlem Renaissance, and the influence that they had on Morrison, inspiring characters in two of her most celebrated novels, *Jazz* and *Beloved*. This chapter establishes how African-American rituals surrounding death as depicted in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* have been shaped by Christian and African traditions, and the centrality of collective memory and community within these funerary practices.

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[25] Carla Williams, "Assimilation and Aspiration—The Urbanity of Faith in James Van Der Zee's Representations of Religion," in *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, edited by James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill (State College: Penn State University Press, 2017), 144.

Chapter Three examines the goals and development of the Pan-African movement within the United States, and how the achievements of the ancient Egyptians became a source of pride for modern African Americans. Pan-Africanism had a direct impact on the lives of both Van Der Zee and Billops. Van Der Zee spent a summer documenting Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, and Billops lived for a brief period in Cairo in the 1960s, when this city was a center of the movement. Through repeated references to ancient Egypt and Africa, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* draws attention to the ways in which funerary rituals and attitudes surrounding the Black community have been shaped by a number of sources, yet are part of a common culture, which Pan-Africanism sought to underscore.

There is a glaring lack of scholarship available on Billops, despite her enormous contributions to African American art, both through her own work and the Hatch Billops Collection and Archive. While information on her biography and artistic practice is available in Leslie King-Hammond's *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African American Women Artists*, most of the information available on Billops is found in articles, the most recent of which was published in May 2019, one month before Billops died. "The Artist Who Gave Up Her

Daughter," by Sasha Bonét, includes excerpts of a conversation the author had with Hatch and Billops in 2017; it traces Billops's life before and after giving up her daughter Christa for adoption, and the turbulent relationship between the two once they eventually reunited, including the creation of *Finding Christa,* Billops's most well-known film. This chapter mines these biographical sources on Billops in order to uncover the importance of Egypt in her personal life and artistic career, providing important context for both the title and the introduction of *The Harlem Book of the Dead.*

In creating *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, Billops and Van Der Zee wrested his funerary portraits from private use and presented them as an affirmation of African American life and culture. In a society in which African Americans are not always afforded dignity in death, the text and images return dignity back to the deceased and their families, allowing them to take pride in their funerary practices, and the rich history from which these practices are drawn. This thesis reveals for the first time the collective memory that has shaped the funerary practices depicted in Van Der Zee's funerary portraits, and the decisive ways in which Billops linked these practices to the Pan-African movement for the dual purposes of fostering a sense of racial pride and connecting many generations of members of the African diaspora.

CHAPTER ONE

The Harlem Book of the Dead Within the Tradition of Funerary Portraiture

Van Der Zee's work in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* sits firmly within a long and rich tradition of funerary portraiture in the United States. This aspect of the book is addressed in the first section of Billops' interviews with Van Der Zee. She asks him, "Do you know much about the history of taking pictures of dead people? Did they do this kind of photography during the time of the daguerreotype?" Van Der Zee responds:

> Undoubtedly they did. They probably photographed every aspect of life during that time and before that, there was the portrait painters who used to paint pictures of the deceased…I've gotten pictures from the West Indies, that they'd taken there, where they had them in the casket, kind of standing up. The pictures were sent here to me to recopy. I'd recopy them and probably put some of these Biblical figures around them and make the picture look a little more like some of the ones that I had taken.[26]

Van Der Zee's answer shows a deep level of insight for a photographer who was famously self-taught and largely unaware of the work of his contemporaries in the field. Although Van Der Zee's funeral pictures are a continuation of a post-mortem tradition, his use of photomontage in these images represents a radical departure. When asked why he inserted narrative images into his photographs, he replied, "Well, I just put them in to take away the gruesomeness of the picture, to make it look more like 'suffering little children to come unto me and I'll give you rest.' In some cases I put in biblical scriptures."[27]

Although a post-mortem photograph might seem morbid or grotesque to a contemporary viewer, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was a regular component of the mourning process. According to grief counseling experts, memories of the deceased are essential for the mourning process, and a post-mortem photograph can help preserve the memory of the deceased person, family ties, and heritage.[28] During the period when Van Der Zee created his funerary portraits, the practice of post-mortem portraiture was believed to present an opportunity for family members to show their care for the deceased, while such portraiture simultaneously served as a form of release for their own feelings of pain and loss.

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[26] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 3.

[27] Ibid, 4.

Roland Barthes explores this emotional response to photography in his seminal work, *Camera Lucida*. Barthes argues that a critical contemplation of photography can come only after the emotional response evoked by the photograph; central to his discussion is what he calls the "wound," or the "punctum," which will stimulate unanticipated feelings for the viewer. These feelings can collapse disparate times and conjoin material and spiritual cultures.[29] Photographers cannot insert a punctum into an image, as they have unique associations for each individual viewer. According to this theory, the subject of the photograph is the signifier, and the emotional response will have an effect on the signified meaning. Barthes' theory opens up another reading of Van Der Zee's funerary portraits. Whereas the subjects of these photographs are the deceased, the images evoke larger ideas surrounding death in the African American community, challenging viewers to examine how these traditions have remained part of the Black experience in the United States.

In the book interview, Van Der Zee mentions that the genre of post mortem photography is rooted in an earlier practice of posthumous paintings, which first appeared in North America as early as the late 1600s. Death-related portraits can largely be divided into two categories: the posthumous commemorative portrait, which commemorated the death of the famous and powerful, and the posthumous mourning portrait, which was commissioned for private use by the loved ones of the deceased.[30] Scholar Phoebe Lloyd describes the posthumous mourning portrait as follows: "Since the bereaved wished their dead to be restored to them as living presences, it is necessary to define these 'life' portraits as posthumous. And because families commissioned the portraits during the mourning period, the mourning function has been included in the designation."[31] The posthumous mourning portrait thus serves as a symbol for the deceased and is also a reminder of the loss that has been suffered.

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[28] Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 174.

[29] Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photography Between Desire and Grief: Roland Barthes and F. Holland Day," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31-34.

Death and Photography in the Nineteenth Century

In the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. society was preoccupied with death and exhibited this sentiment in a variety of media, such as tombstone sculpture, poetry, paintings, and eventually photography. Parents raised their children with an awareness that young people might not live to adulthood; prior to 1900, the infant mortality rate was a high as 200-300 deaths per 1,000 births, and these rates would fluctuate based on factors like the weather, war, and epidemic disease.[32] Due to the regularity of child death, families who did experience the death of a child had the support of an empathetic community.[33] This social dynamic drove funerary portraiture, at first through painting (Figure 7) to a place of cultural acceptance and prominence. With the onset of the Civil War, death became an unavoidable part of everyday life, as a result of the nearly 750,000 casualties that occurred over the course of the war. Americans began to hang posthumous mourning portraits within the home, typically in the parlor or sitting room.

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[30] Ibid, 27.

[31] Ibid, 28.

[32] "Infant Mortality and Life Expectancy," PBS, accessed July 7, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/fmc/timeline/dmortality.htm.

[33] Barbara Norfleet, *Looking at Death* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1993), 11.

Soon after the advent of photography, photographs of the dead replaced posthumous mourning paintings. There is ample evidence demonstrating how common the practice of posthumous portraiture was, and how it was openly embraced by both photographers and the public. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, professional photographers advertised that they would take "likenesses of deceased persons." Additionally, professional trade journals for photographers contained discussions and tips for photographing the dead; for example, suggesting the use of artificial light to overcome the difficulties of photographing a corpse.[34] During this period, photography had become widespread enough that many Americans wanted to have their picture taken; yet, not all people had access to a photographer. Therefore, when someone died without having had their picture taken during life, a postmortem photograph was a natural way to preserve their memory.

Post-mortem and memorial photographs make up one the largest groups of nineteenth-century U.S. vernacular photographs, from the earliest form of the daguerreotype through cabinet cards at the end of the century.[35] Some companies, such as the "Mausoleum Daguerreotype Case Company" of New York specifically advertised and sold daguerreotype cases designed for

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[34] Ibid, 52-53.

[35] Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1990), 1.

"likenesses of deceased persons, and for sepulchral daguerreotypes."[36] As photographic technology developed, *cartes de visite*, and later cabinet cards, replaced the daguerreotype. Both *cartes de visite* and cabinet cards were albumen prints mounted on cardstock (the cabinet card was essentially a larger version of the *carte de visite*). *Cartes de visite* depicting the deceased were popular in the 1860s, and typically had very simple mats. Designs later became more elaborate, and in the 1880s mourning cabinet cards often had a black mat, and the photograph would be surrounded by a poem (Figure 8). This form of memorial photography, which was meant to aid in the mourning process, was popular through the turn of the twentieth century until around 1905.

Another common form of funerary imagery from this time period includes the memorial still life. Photographers were hired as a part of the funeral ceremony to shoot a still life of the various flower arrangements that were displayed at the funeral, which would then be sent to loved ones who had attended the funeral. The flower arrangements were often shaped into Christian symbols, such as harps, wreaths, or anchors, communicating that the soul of the deceased had ascended to heaven. A photo of the deceased was frequently incorporated into the still life as well, and flowers were used to connote growth and fertility, implying that the soul would continue on. (Figure 9).[37] The shape of the flowers would accentuate these messages, such as the cross in the aforementioned example, which emphasizes the idea the deceased has moved on to an eternal life in heaven. The different elements at play and rich symbolism in these still lives serve as a predecessor to Van Der Zee's montaged images. By incorporating poetry and decorative elements directly into his funerary portraits, Van Der Zee carried on this progression of increasingly elaborate designs used in funerary and memorial photography.

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[36] Ibid, 53.

[37] Geoffrey Batchen, "Life and Death," in *Suspending Time:Life—Photography—Death*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen, Yoshiaki Kai, and Masashi Kohara (Nagaizumi, Shizuoka, Japan: Izu Photo Museum, 2010).

The Styles of Post-Mortem Photography

As post-mortem photography became more common throughout the United States, three distinctive styles developed within the genre. The first became known as "the last sleep." According to scholar Kenneth Ames, the last sleep reflects a dominant belief in nineteenth century America that "death did not really occur. People did not die. They went to sleep. They rested from their labors."[38] Between 1840 and 1880, post-mortem photographs that utilize the last sleep style tend to concentrate on the facial features of the dead person and are often tightly cropped around the face and upper torso. Typically, the body is rested on domestic furniture, although a small number are shown in the coffin.[39] Throughout the forty-year period in which this style was dominant, simple, private family funerals were the norm, and the austerity of the last sleep style complemented these traditions. The style takes a straightforward and documentary approach to capturing the likeness of the deceased person and usually does not convey anything about their personality.

One example of a last sleep style post-mortem photograph can be seen on page thirty-six in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Figure 10). This portrait depicts a young baby, who at first glance would appear to be asleep in her crib. In this tender portrait, Van Der Zee cropped the image closely around the child her crib. Her face appears in profile, with her head rested gently on a pillow. Adding to the illusion that the child is resting, she lightly grips a bottle in one hand, with a teddy bear next to her on the other side. Van Der Zee chose to pose the child like this. He said, "The mother had wanted the child to sleep in the crib, but she had never thought she was old enough to put her in there…in the meantime, the child died of pneumonia."[40]

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[38] Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 63.

[39] Ibid, 66.

The next style that emerged within the genre of post-mortem photography was the casket photograph. From 1880-1910, the most common image within the field of funerary portraiture was that of the entire body, often within a casket, making it impossible to pretend that the deceased were just asleep.[41] As the site of the funeral shifted from the home to the funeral parlor, it became much more challenging to stage a scene of peaceful rest. After the Civil War, the preparation of corpses became the responsibility of local funeral directors, who would take care of all the funeral arrangements, including picking out the caskets and burial robes. The adoption of embalming became essential to the formation of the modern funeral industry, and the role of the funeral director became necessary, offering specialized services to assist the families of the deceased.[42] Instead of taking post-mortem photographs in the home of the deceased, photographers were increasingly commissioned to take them at funeral homes, and two standard approaches to the casket photograph were adopted: either the entire casket was entirely visible, or else, approximately half of the body was seen.

The Harlem Book of the Dead features several casket photographs. One of the most striking and intimate is Van Der Zee's portrait of a young girl, on page thirty-nine (Figure 11). This girl looks to have died at no more than two or three years old, and in her small hand she gently grips a stuffed panda bear. The child wears a white dress and shoes, and her hair is tied with a white bow, which matches the satin lining inside the casket. Van Der Zee took the photograph from an angle, at the foot of the casket, and the resulting photograph is closely cropped, focusing on the subject. Dodson's verse underneath interprets and gives a voice to the young girl, "At least I got me a new dress/An' a hair ribbon/Like a bluebird."[43] Surrounding the casket are beautiful floral arrangements, some of which gently cascade over the lid of the casket. In the upper right-hand corner of the image, Van Der Zee inserted an image of a young angel, whose eyes are lowered so that it appears she is watching over the child. The angel provides a greater level of comfort to those loved ones who mourn the little girl, visually communicating that her soul is with the Lord. While Van Der Zee works within the traditional format of the casket photograph, he subverts viewer's expectations of traditional funerary portraiture by adding inserts in order to visually communicate a belief in the afterlife.

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[40] Van Der Zee, Dodson and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 83.

[41] Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 74.

[42] Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 32-36.

The third style within the genre of post-mortem photography is the representation of the deceased with mourners surrounding them. In the early decades of the twentieth century, attention began to shift away from a concentration of the likeness of the deceased to the social aspects of a funeral, with photographs that idealized and memorialized the family unit, while expressing familial pain.[44] Images were often sent to family members who could not attend the funeral, as a way to include them in the mourning process and to demonstrate that the deceased had been well cared for.[45] Whereas in the nineteenth century these photographs would have been placed in an album and shared with family and friends, or displayed in the home, in the twentieth century attitudes toward death changed such that post-mortem photographs became private objects. By the middle of the twentieth century, dramatic improvements in medicine and public health meant that death was no longer such a constant presence in people's lives. As a result, the socially acceptable period of mourning shortened dramatically, and public displays of grief were generally frowned upon. Mirroring these developments, the post-mortem photograph became a closely guarded, private object shown only to a tight circle of family and friends.

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[43] Van Der Zee, Dodson and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 39.

[44] Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 77.

One example of this third style of post-mortem photography by Van Der Zee includes a striking group portrait of mourners surrounding the deceased in his casket from page seventy-two of *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Figure 12). In this 1948 portrait, the casket stands in front of a stained-glass window with an image of Jesus Christ, a large floral bouquet, and a candelabra. Eleven mourners gather in the scene, with four on the left side of the casket and seven on the right side. In the right foreground, Van Der Zee has inserted a verse from the poem "Thanatopsis," by poet William Cullen Bryant. The word "Thanatopsis," means 'a consideration of death,' and the poem ruminates on the inevitability of death. While the title and subject matter may seem morbid, Bryant uses "Thanatopsis" to encourage reverence for both life and death, presenting the view that death should be embraced as a source of comfort, as it represents the final rest. Van Der Zee included the final lines of the poem, which ends on a comforting note, "Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch/About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams." By inserting, "Thanatopsis," Van Der Zee encouraged loved ones who received the funerary portrait to seek solace in death.

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[45] Lauren Summergill, "Family Expressions of Pain in Postmortem Portraiture," *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication: An International Journal* 2, (no. 1, 2015), 4.

Disappearing from Plain Sight: Death and Photography in the Twentieth Century

Despite these transformations of mourning rituals, there is significant historical evidence that the practice of funerary portraits survives to this day. In a 1982 questionnaire distributed to an association of professional photographers in Pennsylvania, 63% of the respondents said that they had been commissioned to take a photograph of a deceased person, mainly at a funeral home. In a different questionnaire that was sent to members of the Philadelphia Area Funeral Directors Association in 1982, more than 95% of the funeral directors who responded knew that photographs were being taken in association with a funeral, even when they had not witnessed the act in person. Approximately half of the photographers were family members who took pictures of the deceased in the casket, as well as the floral arrangements and activities surrounding the funeral, and most of the directors knew that the photos were for relatives who could not attend the service.[46]

Today, when photography is more pervasive and accessible than ever before, funerary portraits can be taken on iPhones and shared with family and friends on social media (Figure 13). Death photography has been adapted for the twenty-first century through the natural death movement, which seeks to normalize home funerals and natural death practices and encourages the use of photography to memorialize and pay tribute to deceased loved ones. On February 18, 2020, *The New York Times* published an article titled, “The iPhone at the Deathbed,” exploring this phenomenon of families photographing death at home.[47]

Historical evidence further suggests that the continued use of post-mortem photographs is particularly prevalent within the African American community. In *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography,* bell hooks describes the role that photography played in her family. “Growing up in the fifties,” she wrote, “I was somewhat awed and frightened at times by our extended family’s emphasis on picture taking. Whether it was images of the dead as they lay serene, beautiful and still in open caskets, or the endless portraits of newborns, every wall and corner of my grandparents’ (and mostly everybody else’s) home was lined with photographs.”[48] hooks continues to describe how, in black homes, photographs were central to the creation of commemorative altars that paid homage to absent loved ones, whether they were deceased, incarcerated, or lived far away. She also notes that photographs remain a meditation between the living and the dead, and that snapshots or professional portraits were placed in specific settings so that a relationship with the dead could be continued. These anecdotes reinforce the concept within African American society that when a loved one passes on, they become an ancestor and remain a continued presence in the lives of those they have left behind.

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[46] Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 166.

[47] Penelope Green, “The iPhone at the Deathbed,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/style/iphone-death-portraits.html.

Further validation of the cultural significance of this photography for African Americans surfaced at the Hatch-Billops archives at the Rose Library at Emory University. In a 1980 letter from social worker Alice Wendon to Camille Billops, Wendon detailed her personal experience reading *The Harlem Book of the Dead* and taking funerary portraits herself.

> Is ‘enjoyed’ the word to use for experiencing your book?” she asked. “Somehow, that seems inappropriate considering the subject matter. ‘Fascinated and enlightened’ seem closer to the reaction. The subject matter itself is inherently fascinating, the photographs were tasteful and heartrending – I wept over the babies…Your book was enlightening to me because I had never heard of the practice. And liberating because I had always felt guilty and apologetic for photographing Dr. Du Bois and my grandfather in their caskets.

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[48] bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, edited by Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994), 49.

Now I can feel part of a proud tradition![49]

Wendon's account strengthens the notion that post-mortem photographs continue to be taken for private use. By publishing *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, Van Der Zee and Billops made that ongoing practice public, encouraging open conversation about funerary portraiture, a topic which had long been absent from public discourse. Not only does the book create a cultural record of funerary portraiture within African American mourning rituals and traditions, it also presents a radical departure from Van Der Zee's traditional portraiture, and more traditional funerary portraits as well. In Van Der Zee's portraiture, he very rarely utilized photomontage (with a few exceptions), and the method had not previously been applied to the genre of post-mortem photography. While Van Der Zee worked within a previously existing genre, his use of text and found religious imagery creates a narrative quality that is absent in earlier funerary portraits, visually communicating to viewers that they should take comfort as the deceased's soul has moved on to the afterlife.

Examining The Harlem Book of the Dead

Van Der Zee's funerary portraits are singular for their distinctive use of photomontage, which contributes a narrative element not seen in other photographs within the genre of post-mortem photography. Van Der Zee began taking post-mortem photographs in 1920, and the portraits included in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* date through the end of the 1940s. He created memorial allegories by superimposing biblical figures and texts, along with images of the deceased that had been taken while they were still alive.[50] The biblical imagery included in the photos such as angels and images of Jesus Christ are drawn from Victorian iconography, and serve as symbols of comfort and eternal life. Additionally, the inclusion of the portraits of the dead while they were still alive expresses their continuing presence in the lives of their loved ones.[51] Of his distinctive style, Van Der Zee said, “I made a great many funeral pictures. I always tried to insert something to break the gruesomeness of the picture and make it look more [like] the realities of life and the beauty of death. According to the scripture, we should be more joyful at the going out and weep at the coming in.”[52] Van Der Zee’s comments reinforce vital perspectives on death within the African American community, revealing that, as a result of generations of systemic oppression, death is seen as a liberation, and an end to all suffering.

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[49] Alice Wendon, letter to Camille Billops, May 28, 1980. In another letter from Wendon to Billops, dated 9/17/1980, Wendon references a performance that Billops put on in Germany, saying, "I ached for a capsule description to let me know how you were dramatizing your book." The performance she referenced took place in Hamburg, Germany in 1980, and included mourners, a preacher, and props. See Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 122.

The interview with Van Der Zee is divided thematically into sections that introduce the overarching subjects of the images. The first of these sections is titled “Mothers & Prophecies,” honoring and addressing African American motherhood, and containing four funerary portraits and five poems by Dodson. He begins by discussing his relationship with his mother, speaking of her very kindly, as well as his idyllic childhood growing up in Massachusetts. Van Der Zee was surrounded by matriarchal figures like his mother and aunts who always made sure that the family was well taken care of. As Billops comments, they “were very independent people.”[53]

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[50] David Driskell, “James Van Der Zee,” in *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* by David C. Driskell; David Levering Lewis; Deborah Willis (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987), 164.

[51] Willis and Birt, *VanDerZee: Photographer,* 13.

[52] Haskins, *The Picture-Takin’ Man,* 167.

[53] Van Der Zee, Dodson and Billop, *The Harlem Book of the Dead,* 12.

When Billops asked how long his mother lived, Van Der Zee answered, “I think she was about seventy-five when she died. My mother died because she just got tired of living. I photographed her just two hours after she had died in bed.”[54]

Directly following this statement is the funerary portrait of Van Der Zee’s mother that he references, *Funeral Portrait, Susan Van Der Zee* (Figure 14). The photograph is taken in closer proximity to the subject than his other portraits, visually expressing his closeness to the subject of the photo. Directly above Susan Van Der Zee’s head, the photographer has drawn in a light source that appears as if shining in through the window, with smaller beams that descend toward her face. These beams symbolically suggest God’s light shining down on Van Der Zee’s mother, signaling the holy paradise that awaits her. Further reinforcing this notion of his mother’s ascension to heaven are two angels, which dominate the left side of the composition. The angel that is closer to the window extends its wing, its tip resting directly above Susan Van Der Zee’s head. The angel beneath has her head bowed in a modest manner. She appears to have placed flowers on the body and draped it with a silken fabric. Notably, Van Der Zee repeated the image of this angel later in another photograph, as he did with many of his inserts, indicating that he purposefully collected his source materials and returned to the same imagery in multiple funerary portraits taken throughout his career.

The text in this section includes Dodson’s poem titled, *Allegory of Seafaring Black Mothers*. The poem honors and venerates the strength of black mothers, detailing the many tasks they perform in order to help their children and families succeed. Harkening back to the origins of arrival of African Americans in the United States as a result of the brutal kidnappings that fed the Transatlantic slave trade, the poem includes the lines: “At night they played hymns on their kazoos, or whistled spirituals; the haunted tune. Sometimes whales accompanied them. They dived into the waters (where our ancestors might have died)."[55] The references to spirituals and ancestors draws upon the collective history of African Americans and their roots in Africa, indicating the importance of rituals, and the role that mothers play in establishing and passing them down throughout generations.[56] Dodson and Van Der Zee touch upon the emotional and physical labor that goes into being a mother, and the photographs show that deceased mothers are being cared for by their families. Whether through a fancy casket or an abundance of beautiful floral arrangements, these women are being honored by their loved ones. The section serves as a tribute to Black motherhood, honoring the love and labor that has gone into sustaining generations of African American families.

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[54] Ibid, 12.

The following section of the book is entitled "Fathers & the Better People." This part is quite brief, containing only four questions and answers between Billops and Van Der Zee, two funerary portraits, and one poem by Dodson. In this section of the interview, Van Der Zee discusses how his father was a true gentleman, and had grown up around, and served the "better people," i.e., the wealthy white members of the Lenox, MA community in which he was raised. In this section the funerary portrait on page twenty-three is a rare occurrence where Van Der Zee staged the shot to make the subject appear as if he is resting (Figure 15). This portrait depicts an older gentleman, laying down on a bed with his body extending from the right side of the image. In his hands, he holds a newspaper with the headline "Mills Death Mystery," accompanied by photographs of the actress Florence Mills underneath. While the headline refers to the death of the actress, it provides a visual clue to the viewer that the man is deceased. In the upper left corner, Van Der Zee inserted an image of Jesus as a Shepherd, protecting the man and offering eternal life after death. In the upper right corner, he inserted the previously discussed verse from "Thanatopsis." Underneath the photograph is a verse of poetry by Dodson, reinforcing the man's position as a follower of Christ: "I prayed that on the day I died/Nobody else prominent would be dead/The obituary page was supposed to be all about me today. Florence Mills, the greatest, died on my day/Look-a-here Lord, I was a faithful servant/Over many a money year."[57] The other portrait in this section, on page twenty-two (Figure 16), shares some compositional similarities. The deceased is in a casket, which also extends from the right side of the image. Surrounding the casket on the left side are several large floral arrangements. Just as in the previously discussed portrait, Van Der Zee inserted a verse of poetry, titled in the upper right corner. In this portrait, the poem is titled, "Father," paying homage to the guidance and wisdom of fathers.

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[55] Ibid, 14-15.

[56] A spiritual is a genre of songs created by African Americans that impart Christian values while describing the hardships of slavery. Many of the musical elements of the genre can be traced back to African origins, and are a combination of music and religion from Africa with music and religion of European origin.

Although Van Der Zee talked about growing up surrounded by his loving extended family in Massachusetts, it seems that his attitude toward family became increasingly nihilistic as he grew older. The next two sections of the interview are not separated by funerary portraits. They are titled "James Van Der Zee: The Young Man," and "Children & the Mystery of Birth." These stories are essentially intertwined, since the photographer met his first wife, Kate Brown, at a church fundraising event in New York City when he was only nineteen; they married two years later when Brown became pregnant. Van Der Zee does not have many kind sentiments about his first wife; the most complimentary statement he has to offer is, "She was very nice."[58] When they first married they had very little money, and throughout his interview Van Der Zee seems to have a fear of returning to a life of poverty. He continues to use a detached tone when talking about his children with Brown, both of whom passed away. When talking about his youngest child, Emile, he says, "I think he came when we were living in the Victoria Apartments on Lenox Avenue [in New York City] at that time. He only lived a year, and I didn't get a chance to know too much about him. Yes, I have a couple of pictures of him."[59] It is clear that Van Der Zee did not particularly want to have children as he claims he tried to make the best of what he viewed as a bad situation, and that he saw his plans for the future fall apart after his children were born. When Van Der Zee and Brown divorced, his eldest child Rachel went to live with her mother. It is clear that the photographer savored his independence and his career, and that Kate and the children did not fit into his life plans.

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[57] Van Der Zee, Dodson and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 23.

Billops continues the conversation by asking, "Both of your children died young, didn't they, Mr. Van Der Zee?" The photographer responds by talking about how Rachel died around the time she was sixteen, and how he photographed her funeral. Billops asks if he found it hard to photograph Rachel in the coffin, and he replies, "Not as I recall, because she hadn't been with me at the time. Her mother had taken her up to Maine during the summers." The matter-of-fact tone with which Van Der Zee discusses the death of his mother and children is striking, revealing a detached attitude toward the subject. When asked about his feelings on her funeral, he commented, "I really don't remember. It was a beautiful funeral 'cause all the young girls there

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[58] Ibid, 27.

[59] Ibid, 29-30.

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were about her age. She belonged to some club they belonged to. It was a very nice funeral."[60]

Despite the seemingly emotionless tone, Van Der Zee's portrait of Rachel (Figure 17) is one of the most tender photographs in the book. Similar to the post-mortem photograph of his mother, it is taken from a very close distance, focusing on her face and upper body, and obscuring the casket in which she rests, except for its satin lining. Rachel holds a bouquet of flowers at her chest, and behind the casket is a large floral arrangement that occupies almost the entire background. On the right side of the image, Van Der Zee included three inserts: a profile photo of Rachel from when she was alive; and in the upper right corner, a photo of a painting of Jesus, who appears to be looking tenderly down below at Rachel; and a typed verse from the poem "Crossing the Bar," by Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poem is a fitting choice, as it describes Tennyson's acceptance of death. Furthermore, the word "crossing" holds dual meanings, referring to crossing oneself as a religious gesture, and crossing over into the next world after death. The combination of images suggests that Rachel remains a continued presence in the lives of those who loved her.

"Children & the Mystery of Birth" is the most dense and varied section of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, comprising eight photographs of children (including the portrait of Rachel) in a range of styles. Some of the images in this portion are extremely experimental, such as the portrait on page thirty-two (Figure 18). In this image, the small baby in her casket appears at the very bottom of the shot; Van Der Zee chose a large, arcing insert of a religious tableaux that extends far above the small child, suggesting an altarpiece. Billops asked Van Der Zee why he decided to place such a large insert in this picture, and he responded, "I thought it most appropriate for that one because it was just a small child and there wasn't many flowers, and in order to fill it up I put that particular insert in there. As I see it now, this photograph is a little unusual."[61] Once again, Van Der Zee has used religious imagery to suggest that the subject of the portrait has reached the afterlife, with the angels as intermediaries greeting the young child, and the Virgin Mary as a guide for her transition to the heavenly realm.

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[60] Ibid, 30-31.

In stark contrast to this photograph is the family portrait seen on page thirty-seven (Figure 19), in which the father sits in an armchair, cradling his small baby, with the mother sitting on the arm of the chair, looking down at them, in a pose reminiscent of depictions of the holy family. Although they appear to be within a domestic interior, the picture was taken in a funeral home. Billops asked Van Der Zee how the couple felt about holding a dead child, and he said, "Well it was their baby, they never had any objections. Most of these babies they all died of pneumonia; chest gets filled up with colds because they were living in cold flats. It was a very common thing in those days for people to be without heat.[62] Although Van Der Zee is most well-known for his glamorous portraits of Harlem's middle- and upper-class residents, this quote highlights the level of poverty that existed in Harlem at the time. As a result of the Great Migration, which was the movement of millions of African Americans out of the rural South to urban centers in the North, Midwest, and West, the rapid increase in Harlem's population led to widespread poverty. As a result of such conditions, the experience of losing a child, conveyed by the couple in the photograph, was collectively understood by the surrounding community.

Scholar Karla FC Holloway wrote of the significance of post-mortem images of children within the black community during the Great Migration. Black children were particularly vulnerable during this period, as malnutrition and infectious disease were rampant in the North as well as the South, and exacerbated by travel between the two areas. Holloway connects Van Der Zee's funerary portraits of infants to the work of photographer Richard Samuel Roberts from South Carolina, noting the shared cultural aesthetic between the two.[63] Like Van Der Zee, Roberts created studios portraits of members of the Black middle class, however he worked in the deep South during the era of Jim Crow. Funerary portraits were an important part of his practice, as seen in Roberts's representation of a deceased girl (Figure 20). In this stirring portrait, Roberts closely cropped the image around the young child, who appears almost doll-like in a white dress, with a white carnation next to her heart. Holloway argues that in framing these images in a manner that emphasizes a feeling of intimacy and peaceful rest, the funerary portraits of Van Der Zee and Roberts evoke the cultural familiarity of death in the African American community.

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[61] Ibid, 83.

[62] Ibid, 83.

Whereas "Children & the Mystery of Birth" is the longest section with photographs, the following section, "Women: Wives & Friends," encompasses the largest portion of the interview with Billops, along with four funerary portraits and four poems by Dodson. Van Der Zee's lukewarm feelings toward his first wife are even more evident here. When Billops points out that it did not sound as if he was very happy about being married to Brown, he does not necessarily deny it, saying, "Well, it kind of came on ahead of time. I don't think that I had enough outside experience before I was married."[64] Unlike his marriage to Brown, Van Der Zee's marriage to his second wife Gaynella Greenlee was a long and happy union. However, they fell on hard times and their home went into foreclosure in 1968. As Van Der Zee says, “It caused the Missus to lose her mind.” Van Der Zee describes how Greenlee lost her memory, and when she passed away in June of 1976, he was so distraught that he could not even bear going to the funeral. He asked a photographer named Frank Stewart to take a picture of Greenlee for him; this picture is the only one in the book that was not taken by Van Der Zee (Figure 21). Stewart’s portrait is much more traditional than Van Der Zee’s unique funerary portraits. In this photograph, Greenlee’s casket is in a beautiful funeral home with stained glass windows and is flanked by two lamps on either side. Stewart took the portrait straight on, with two large floral bouquets in the right foreground. Van Der Zee lived with this portrait in his home, demonstrating the important role that funerary portraits serve in keeping alive the memory of the deceased.[65]

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[63] Karla FC Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28-29.

[64] Ibid, 45.

The final portions of the interview circle back to the subject of death, discussing the practice of funerary portraiture and Van Der Zee’s ruminations on religion and mortality. These sections are presented in immediate succession, without any funerary portraits separating them; the first is, “Mourners & the Posing of the Dead,” and the second is, “Man is the Head of Everything Big on Earth.” Billops asks why mourners do not smile in pictures with the dead, when, as Van Der Zee points out, a soul goes to God after someone passes, demonstrating a central tenet in African American beliefs surrounding death. Van Der Zee answers by saying,

> I guess they didn’t smile because it would look like a joke. I did have some of the mothers and father smile, when they posed with their dead children, for the ‘last’ picture. But that seemed to be different. It’s as the man said when he was dying, he said, ‘My tears are not of joy, but of sorrow.’ He said he hated to go because he was sorry that he couldn’t take them along.[66]

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[65] Following “Women: Wives & Friends” is a short section titled “Soldiers,” which will be discussed in-depth in Chapter Three.

[66] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 64.

While the conversation touches on fantastical themes, asking, for example, whether Van Der Zee ever saw people try to jump into graves with their loved ones, or if the deceased have even sat up, the text takes an especially poignant turn when Billops asks when was the time when people stopped posing with the dead. Van Der Zee responds by saying, “I didn’t know they had stopped. They’re still doing it today. Sometimes the family wanted to be there to show the other relatives just how the deceased had been put away.”[67]

In “Man is the Head of Everything Big on Earth,” Van Der Zee converses about his views on religion. While he always identified as a Christian, he changed denominations many different times. He was raised in the Trinity Episcopalian Church, and later joined Saint Marks Methodist Church. When he married Greenlee, he converted to Catholicism, which was her lifelong religious affiliation.[68] Van Der Zee carried these Catholic beliefs with him, describing God as, “the three-in-one, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”[69] Eventually, the conversation transitions to what happens after a person dies. Van Der Zee says that, “They say the soul and the life leave the body, and after that it’s ‘dust thou art and to dust returneth.’ You can kill the body but you can’t kill the soul.”[70] Altogether, this conversation proves how Van Der Zee shares with the African American community a very spiritual attitude towards death, despite his shifting Christian beliefs. Furthermore, this portion of the conversation verbalizes what many of Van Der Zee's funerary portraits visually communicate to viewers; that although the soul has passed on from the body, it will continue on in the spiritual realm and remain with loved ones left behind.

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[67] Ibid, 65.

[68] Williams, “Assimilation and Aspiration,” 145.

[69] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 69.

[70] Ibid, 70.

The six photos that follow this section of the interview are not organized according to a theme as in the earlier sections; they contain examples of funerary portraits with mourners, as well as casket photographs of children and adults. The image on page seventy-five (Figure 22) depicts a woman standing next to her deceased husband in his casket. The pain in her eyes is palpable, and she holds one hand over her heart, while looking off into the distance. Van Der Zee inserts a text above the casket as if to give voice to the woman, with the last lines of the poem emphasizing her spirituality and belief in the afterlife, "I know you are not dead/You went to live with Jesus/In a home beyond the sky."[71] The portraits in this final section depict subjects that are of different ages, genders, and ethnicities, speaking to the inevitability of death.

The Harlem Book of the Dead compiled and presented Van Der Zee's funerary portraits taken over his lifetime for public viewing for the first time. While Van Der Zee borrowed from previously existing conventions within the genre of post-mortem photography, his photo-montaged images are unlike any others. In these works, Van Der Zee memorializes the deceased, while also celebrating the fact that their soul has moved on to something greater, which is part of a longstanding belief of the afterlife within the Black community and has shaped funerary rituals. Driven by this notion, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* repeatedly returns to the idea that death should not be feared, but instead is something we should take comfort in. By combining funerary portraits with an autobiographical interview of Van Der Zee, including information on those who he has lost throughout his life, the book further reinforces the notion that preserving and celebrating the memory of the deceased is deeply important within the African American community. While the interview is revealing of Van Der Zee's life, it opens up a broader reading of the photographs, indicating how mourning rituals from Van Der Zee's Harlem have been passed down through generations.

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[71] Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 121.

CHAPTER TWO

Visualizing Christianity in Funerary Practices

Just as Billops opens her interview with Van Der Zee on the subject of death, the interview comes full circle, and the final question that Billops asks is, "How do you see death, Mr. Van Der Zee?" The photographer responds by saying, "So when one more clean shirt lasts me the rest of the time. When I pass out on this long last journey that I shall ever make and I cease to soothe with soft words and song a heart in which there is an ache, I trust that tears will dim few eyes and those who do weep will soon forget."[72] Van Der Zee's answer is haunting, as if he has been ruminating on these thoughts for quite some time, especially after experiencing the deaths of many loved ones, including his parents, his two young children, and his beloved wife. He seems quite certain that his death will not impact very many people, hoping that those who do mourn him will not do so for very long.

Furthering these musings on loss and mourning is Dodson's final poem, entitled *The Pastor*, which contemplates what happens to us after death. "Oh let it be the wheel of resurrection…watch wisely for Jerusalem, my dears, And every bleeding lamb from Ararat." Dodson concludes *The Harlem Book of the Dead* on a powerful note, tying together themes that are pervasive throughout the text and the images: that the soul lives on long after the body expires. While Van Der Zee seems to have an apathetic view toward death and religion, the prevalence of religious imagery reflects the centrality of Christianity, and a belief in the afterlife, to life in Harlem.

Throughout *The Harlem Book of the Dead,* Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops each repeatedly reference the idea that death is not the end, and that the soul transcends the body after it expires. The narrative elements inserted in the funerary portraits visually reinforce this notion. The pervasive use of Christian iconography demonstrates how deeply intertwined religion and mourning are, as the funeral home and the church both serve as fixtures in the black community. Intimate associations often exist between the church, black morticians, and funeral directors, and the preacher often plays a pivotal role in arranging funerals and burial services for bereaved parishioners.[73] For these reasons, it is imperative to trace the development of funerary practices and Christianity in the African American community in order examine how they intersect in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.

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[72] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 80.

The African American Way of Death

The profound relationships that African Americans have with death and the funeral experience extend all the way back to the earliest days of the transatlantic slave trade. When African slaves first arrived in America, many believed that death was the only way for their spirits to return home to Africa. During slavery, African Americans viewed death as the ultimate freedom from a life of oppression. Historically, as a result of the horrific conditions of slavery, death in the African American imagination was embraced as the ultimate “home going” and seen as a journey to a spiritual existence that would transcend the pain and suffering of the mortal world.[74] Consequently, death was not only mourned, but also celebrated, and this attitude toward death has continued through today.

Historical and ethnographic data confirm the cultural emphasis on a respectable burial and funeral ceremony across the African diaspora. Funerals hold a position of critical importance in the African American community because untimely death has marked the African American experience from its beginning. Among several measures of mortality, including childhood morbidity, suicide, maternal death in childbirth, cardiac-related deaths of elders, and death at the hands of police, the rates among African Americans have been, and remain, significantly higher. Holloway has theorized that the omnipresent nature of death in the African American community has contributed to shape a cultural haunting, or a "re-memory," throughout the generations.[75] The high rates of preventable and untimely death in the black community have made grief and mourning so deeply familiar and well known that Holloway refers to it as a "racial memory."

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[73] Holloway, *Passed On*, 22-25.

[74] Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 17-18.

One photograph that demonstrates the way that re-memories resonate and are transmitted across time can be found on page fifty-three in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Figure 23). Taken from a slight distance, this photograph depicts a woman in a casket, draped in a sheer canopy with a large bouquet of flowers placed on her chest. In front of the casket are three floral arrangements, one of which is shaped like a cross, and Van Der Zee inserted an almost ghostly, slightly translucent image of Jesus holding a lamb above the casket. Although Van Der Zee could no longer remember the subject's name, he recalled her tragic death:

> She was the one I think was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun. She complained of being sick at the party and friends said, "Well why don't you lay down?" and they had taken her in the room and laid her down. After they undressed her and loosened her clothes, they saw the blood on her dress…For the picture I placed flowers on her chest.[76]

Van Der Zee's compassionate act of placing flowers on the woman's chest for the photo demonstrates the importance of honoring and caring for the dead.

Furthermore, this story has had literary repercussions in the African American community. Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* reconstructs this young woman's story, naming the character Dorcas.[77] In Morrison's tale, Dorcas is shot dead by her lover, Joe, whose wife seeks revenge by going "to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face" while she lay in the coffin. Despite the fact that this murder had taken place many decades beforehand, the story clearly resonated with both Van Der Zee, who recounted it decades later in his interview with Billops, and Morrison, demonstrating what Holloway refers to as the cultural dimension of African Americans experiences with death.

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[75] Holloway, *Passed On*, 5-6.

[76] Ibid, 84.

Just as African American attitudes toward death were shaped by the collective experience of enslavement and institutionalized racial violence, so too were funerary practices. Mourning customs traveled to the New World from West and Central Africa and tremendously influenced the traditions of slave funerals from the colonial period until Emancipation. In African cosmologies, the dead and the living are always connected and never separated from one another, and religious beliefs envision deceased ancestors as spiritual forces that will continue to guide the living.[78] As a result of the belief that one's deceased ancestors would have authority over the lives of their descendants, funerals took on a profound significance in African society as a way to properly honor those who passed away. Key elements of African mortuary practices included offering of libations, bathing of the corpse, presentation of gifts to the deceased, public wailing, and a celebratory memorial service that was typically held weeks after the burial.

Until emancipation, African American slave funerals served a central role in helping to sustain African traditions. The funeral was one of the few religious ceremonies in which slaves had a small degree of freedom from the Enslaver's control. Funerals typically took place late at night in secluded, usually wooded places near the slave quarters, which were known as hush harbors. The ceremonies served as an important refuge, where slaves could find a brief respite from the horrors of slavery, while forging familial bonds during a time of loss and grief. Slave funerals incorporated a number of West African burial rituals, including traditional preparation of the body, the procession to the grave for burial, post-burial feasting, and a more elaborate second funeral that was held after the burial, inspired by the celebratory memorial service. [79] After the Civil War, the importance of funerals in communities of newly-emancipated slaves served as the cornerstone of several elements in African American life, including the black church and the organization of burial societies, which provided burial insurance in order to provide members with burial plots and a dignified funeral, and later developed into an early form of black entrepreneurship through the establishment of funeral homes.

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[77] Ibid, 141-142. Morrison also said that *The Harlem Book of the Dead* was one the inspirations for her novel *Beloved.* See Olin, *Touching Photographs,* 123.

[78] Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 19.

The importance of religion in African American life can be traced back to the times of slavery as well. Enslaved Africans and their descendants relied on their spiritual understanding of life, death, and creation to help them adjust to their chaotic and brutal environment. There is a complicated history between African Americans and Christianity, largely related to the system of slavery that was in place and that was used to violently convert African slaves to Christianity. Religion has played a significant role in the process of racializing people, and many Europeans used the Bible as a justification for slavery, applying a specific reading of Genesis 9:20-27 that positioned Africans as cursed "sons of Ham." Additionally, slave owners viewed conversion to Christianity both as a means of salvation and as a means to appease the enslaved.[80]

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[79] Ibid, 26-31.

[80] James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill, "Hidden in Plain Sight—Christ and Christianity in African American Art," in *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art*, edited by

Since the late eighteenth century, Christianity has been the dominant form of religious expression among African Americans.[81] Many slaves and freed men and women applied lessons from the Bible, drawing inspiration from the story of Exodus, which tells about the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt, their liberation from bondage by Moses, and their journey out of Egypt towards salvation. Adding another complex layer to this history, Christian abolitionists maintained that slavery went against Christ's emphasis on universal brotherhood. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both race and religion defined the boundaries of "civilization" in American culture—black people were seen as uncivilized due to the color of their skin, and white Americans of European descent saw it as their God given duty to civilize others through Christianity.[82]

The Dual Importance of the Church and Funerals in the Black Community

After emancipation, newly freed African Americans worked together to meet the needs of their communities, and churches and black undertakers opened funeral homes. After the Civil War, African Americans continued to view the funeral as one of the most sacred communal acts they could perform. The massive death toll of the Civil War brought about the modern American funeral industry. Until the war, doctors and scientists mostly practiced embalming, but during the war, undertakers started setting up shops near battlefields, selling their wares and ensuring

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James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 6.

[81] Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 11.

[82] Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, 11.

embalmed bodies could make the journey home without decomposing.[83] The commercialization of the funeral industry made it a lucrative business opportunity, which attracted a number of black entrepreneurs. The funeral industry's major trade association excluded blacks from membership, however, and as a result, black funeral directors played a critical role in their community, providing respectful burials to members where white-owned funeral homes would not. The opportunities available within the funeral industry demonstrate how death and funerals continued to represent a symbol of hope and freedom within black communities.[84]

As a result of the Great Migration, between 1910 and 1930, urban centers like New York, Chicago, and Detroit became home to an estimated 1.5 million black migrants, many of whom had left their families behind in search of greater economic opportunity.[85] As the movement reached its apex during and after WWI, a great demand for churches ministering to migrants who faced formidable challenges in their new cities emerged, and new churches of many different denominations quickly rose to the occasion. Both Northern and Southern churches took on central roles of community leadership, applying the ideas of the social gospel movement, which emphasized emulating Jesus' life by caring for people, rather than focusing on the afterlife. Black churches and religious organizations engaged with their congregants to harness their funds and energies toward improving the social and economic conditions of African Americans. In the North, Black congregations took on a number of different functions, serving as welcoming stations, relief agencies, and an employment bureau for migrants.[86]

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[83] Tiffany Stanley, "The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/black-funeral-homes-mourning/426807/

[84] Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 39.

[85] Paul, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, 79.

The first photograph in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Figure 24) encapsulates the dual role played by the Church—as both a community center and a site of mourning. This depiction is the only one showing a closed casket and the only photograph that is devoid of human figures, either living or deceased. The casket is in the center of the scene, surrounded by numerous ornate arrangements of funeral flowers, within a striking altar. Above the scene, the word "Welcome" is written in large block letters. Van Der Zee and Billops very deliberately selected this image as the first in the book. Although readers may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with funerary portraiture, the Church serves as a respite for many, putting their minds at ease. By opening with this photograph, Van Der Zee and Billops utilize the Church as a symbol of community and familiarity in order to usher readers along on their journey, while also emphasizing the necessary and foundational role that funerary rituals play within this community.

As segregation and racist oppression intensified during the Jim Crow era, both churches and black funeral directors used their platforms to provide political leadership. In 1937, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. took charge of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, which was one of the largest Protestant churches in the country with over 10,000 members. He used the church as a power base to stage boycotts and pickets of local stores that discriminated against African American customers. Because black churches were involved in racial advocacy, they became the targets of vitriol and hatred from white racists. One of the most despicable examples of white supremacist terrorism targeting churches was the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham in 1963, in which members of the Ku Klux Klan planted dynamite, killing four young girls. Furthermore, funeral directors also played an important role in the civil-rights movement. They cared for those who died in protests, lynching, and other conflicts, and staged large-scale funerals for figures like Emmett Till and Medgar Evers, spurring Americans to join the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, funeral directors provided bail money for Civil Rights activists who had been jailed, offered their businesses as a site for meetings, and gave hearses and funeral-home cards as a means of discretely transporting civil-rights leaders around the South.[87] Some black funeral directors even used their status and political connections to enter politics at the state, local and national level.

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[86] Ibid, 85.

African American Funerary Traditions

As the roles of the church and funeral directors expanded, a distinctive form of funerary and mourning practices developed within the Black community. As these funerals represent a posthumous effort to exhibit the dignity denied to African Americans in a white supremacist society, providing a proper funeral for loved ones is tremendously important. Social scientists Paul Rosenblatt and Beverly Wallace completed a study of African American funerals in 2005. They determined that funerals shared many of the same characteristics and were often rooted in Christian traditions, with the body displayed in an open casket, often with photographs of the deceased nearby.[88] Collective community plays a vital role, with friends, family, and Church members providing help in the form of emotional support, funeral participation, financial assistance, and bringing food or other items of comfort to those who are grieving. In addition to serving as a site of mourning, funerals also functioned as sites of celebration within the black community, including joyful moments of sharing memories and anecdotes about the deceased.

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[87] Stanley, "The Disappearance of a Distinctly Black Way to Mourn."

[88] Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, *African American Grief* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 29.

A meaningful service within the Black Christian community is the homegoing, or the going home of the deceased to the Lord. The ceremony was the family's opportunity to demonstrate through the quality and length of the service and mourning that they were giving proper weight and attention to the moment.[89] The ceremonies begin with a weeklong visitation period, in which family, friends, and neighbors can visit the bereaved family to offer their condolences, followed by a wake, which is held prior to the funeral. On the day of the funeral, a procession takes place, in which the family of the deceased is driven to the service in limousines or fancy cars, lending a sense of pomp and pageantry.[90] While there is some evident overlap with Euro-centric traditions, within the Black community there is a much greater emphasis on an emotive, as well as a celebratory nature that is not seen in the more somber, white funerary traditions. At the church, the body is viewed in an open casket that is richly adorned with elaborate floral arrangements and opulent fabrics. The high-energy service typically includes family members singing Christian spirituals, performing funeral readings, and eulogizing the deceased. According to Holloway, "To give a peaceful, celebratory homegoing, it's the whole idea of a celebration of life, it is a contradiction to the ways in which many black bodies come to die."[91]

The African American church has continued to serve as a vital institution to help meet the spiritual needs of those who are grappling with loss and mourning. At the turn of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois referred to the black church as the “social center of Negro life,” and it has since held a critical position in determining the shape of black culture.[92] Churches created social relationships and community networks that functioned like an extended family support system. As a result, it was not uncommon that if church members knew the person who died, they would also know the whole family and extend whatever help they may need in their time of mourning. In the popular imagination, African American churches are a site of dramatic, performative displays of worship. Given the anguish caused by the epidemic of untimely deaths in the black community, and the fact that the church often served as the site of the funeral, it is natural that the passionate and emotive nature of worship would carry over to mourning practices. In African American churches, last rites had over a century of cultural expectation that encouraged emotional display.[93] Ultimately, the church provides a community and leaders who inherently understand the challenges of being African American in a racist society, and funerals provide a moment of collective catharsis and racial solidarity for congregants.

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[89] Holloway, *Passed on*, 174.

[90] Jakara K. Griffin, "Home-goings: A Black American Funeral Tradition," April 17, 2017, https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/gravematters/2017/04/23/home-goings-a-black-american-funeral-tradition/.

[91] Stanley, "The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn."

Representations of Christianity in the Harlem Renaissance

Christianity was prevalent in Van Der Zee’s Harlem; by 1930, forty-three percent of Harlem residents were church members. In the midst of the Great Migration, religious affiliation was an important marker of class, and often could identify someone as either a native to the city or a recent migrant. Membership in a large, traditional institution such as the Catholic or African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church commonly indicated one’s social standing as a member of the middle or upper classes who had assimilated to city life, whereas the less affluent often belonged to storefront churches, which were congregations established in commercial structures that had affordable rent.[94] As the membership of black churches grew, so did their financial resources, which allowed the larger congregations to purchase prominent buildings to house their sanctuaries. In March 1925, George E. Haynes published an essay titled, "The Church and the Negro Spirit," in the Harlem edition of *Survey Graphic.* Haynes located the expansion of the black church within the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance and celebrated the development of urban churches as symbolic of black spiritual, economic, and personal growth.[95]

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[92] Holloway, *Passed On,* 150-151.

[93] Ibid, 162.

Migrants who moved from the South and Caribbean brought their religious beliefs and practices with them. In Harlem, the black population was largely comprised of two distinct groups: African Americans and West Indians. The West Indian population mostly belonged to Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Moravian, and Protestant churches, whereas the African American migrant population was largely concentrated in Baptist and Methodist congregations.[96] For migrants, the membership fees of northern urban churches were often far more expensive than their home churches. For this reason, the lower- and working-class southern migrants were often associated with the many storefront churches that arose throughout Harlem. Sidewalk preaching was typically tied to the rise of a small church. A preacher would begin his or her preaching in the street; once he or she had achieved a following, he would find an affordable storefront to rent. The proliferation of churches in Harlem reflected a newly formed collective identity and determination that marked the black experience in the interwar years.

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[94] Phoebe Wolfskill, "Migration, Class, and Black Religiosity," in *Archibald Motley Jr. and Racial Reinvention* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 66-67.

[95] Ibid, 73.

[96] Williams, "Assimilation and Aspiration, 145.

Many of the most celebrated visual artists during the Harlem Renaissance engaged with Christian themes, approaching the subject matter through different modes of visual expression and exploring religion as a reflection of identity. In African American art, depictions of Christ and other biblical figures reflect a multifaceted network of factors, including religious and racial, personal and social. Often themes of spirituality and religion manifested themselves as references to the Bible, either through illustrations of spirituals, or as references to specific scenes. Leslie King-Hammond, who is one of the leading art historians on biblical themes in African American art, has noted that, "The narrative and moral parables of this sacred text provided…visual artists…with contextual and thematic strategies to express artistically their response to the awesome and incongruous realities of the African-American experience."[97] By centering Black subjects alongside Christian iconography, Black artists aimed to subvert traditional Western representations of Christianity, which had long excluded African Americans.

Artists such as Malvin Gray Johnson and Archibald Motley Jr., among many others, employed Christian themes to reflect upon their own relationships to religion. Between 1927 and 1934, Johnson executed a series of nine paintings inspired by the history of African American spirituals, the most famous of which is *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (Figure 25). Johnson utilized a moody color palette of deep violets and reds, along with a modernist, slightly abstracted style, to depict the Old Testament narrative in which the prophet Elijah is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Of this work, Johnson said, "I have tried to show the escape of emotions which the plantation slaves felt after being held down all day by the grind of labor and the consciousness of being bound. Set free from their tasks by the end of the day and the darkness they have gone from their cabin to the river's edge and are calling upon their God for the freedom which they long."[98]

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[97] Lowery Stokes Sims, "The Black Church and Modernism: Spirituality versus Religiosity," in *Challenge of the Modern: African American Artists 1925-1945* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2003), 92.

Archibald Motley Jr. examined religious figures and practices without biblical metaphors in his portraits and genre scenes. In arguably his most important portrait, *Mending Socks* (Figure 26), Motley depicted his grandmother, Emily Sims Motley, at the age of eighty-two. Engaged in the act of mending the family's socks, Emily Motley is surrounded by objects that reflect her values and life story. These objects include the crucifix hanging on the wall and the Bible on the table, which she read daily. Motley and his grandmother were both devout Catholics, and he used these symbols to suggest that her Catholic identity informed not only her piety, but also her education and middle-class status.[99]

Motley also depicted scenes of religious practice, as seen in his 1929 painting *Tongues (Holyrollers)* (Figure 27). Motley painted this canvas while visiting relatives in rural Arkansas. The scene shows a Pentecostal church, with the parishioners, minister, and three-piece band communing with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues. Many of the figures are swaying and throwing their hands up, making the energy in the room palpable to the viewer. The church is sparsely decorated, save for the phrase, "Jesus Saves" painted on the wall, signifying the centrality of salvation after death to the African American Christian tradition.

Van Der Zee's Representations of Christianity

Throughout his career, Van Der Zee captured the people and places of worship that defined Harlem’s religious communities. Although he was not a particularly religious man, churches were an integral part of his life in New York City. He has cynically claimed that his “first real customers were the churches,” as many of his church portraits were commissions. “In 1915, I started a photographic business in New York,” he recalled, “At that time I did quite a lot of work for the Catholic Church.”[100] Rather than focusing on the individual congregant, his religious portraits focused on crowded houses of worship, demonstrating the collective component of spiritual identity and reflecting class structure and self-presentation in Harlem. These images focus not only on expressions of faith, but on the social and economic contexts in which these communities exist, emphasizing mobility and urban life in the midst of Harlem’s evolving demographics. Instead of depicting the more traditional components of religious institutions, Van Der Zee turned his lens on the institution’s followers.[101]

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[98] Jacqueline Francis, "Making Race in American Religious Painting," in *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 64.

[99] Romaine and Wolfskill, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, 11-12.

One such example can be seen in *The Moorish Zionist Temple of the Moorish Jews*, 1929 (Figure 28). In this group portrait, the members of the congregation stand together outside the front entrance to the synagogue. The building itself appears to be rather simple, with a window with a painted Star of David surrounded by Hebrew writing, the banner underneath declaring the address of the synagogue and the name of the congregation along with a transliteration in Hebrew.[102] Underneath the banner, partially obscured by the men pictured in the foreground, is an American flag draped next to the Flag of Zion. In this scene the costuming is important, as congregants dressed in some of their finest clothes for worship, and Van Der Zee’s decision to photograph them on the street showed their visibility in the community, while establishing their respectability. Another example includes, *Church Group with U.S. Flag* (Figure 29). In a similar fashion to *The Moorish Zionist Temple*, Van Der Zee captured the dozens of members of the group positioned outside the Church. Members are posed along the street in front of the Church and lining the staircases, with the doublewide doors splayed open as a sign of welcome to passersby on the street. Centrally positioned in the scene is the American flag on full display, hanging from the railing. These images both communicate the sense of community provided by belonging to these congregations, while also capturing the myriad groups that made Harlem such a vibrant neighborhood.

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[100] Reginald McGhee, *The World of James Van Der Zee: A Visual Record of Black Americans* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

[101] Romaine and Wolfskill, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 11.

[102] The Hebrew writing on the window was written and meant to be viewed from the interior of the synagogue, so it appears backwards for those viewing it from the street. It reads “House of Zion” and “Teaching of Torah.”

Van Der Zee also photographed many of Harlem's most prominent citizens, including religious leaders. He altered many of these images by manipulating the negatives or creating photomontage. *Daddy Grace and Children*, 1938 (Figure 30) depicts a faith healer and the founder of the predominantly African American United House of Prayer for All People. Through his unique worship style, he amassed a devout following, and many of his congregants claimed to have witnessed miraculous acts of healing at his services. In Van Der Zee's photograph, Daddy Grace is on stage, holding a child in one hand and a staff in another, while looking up at the heavens. Four young followers sit in front of him, gazing up at the leader. This is one of the few photos outside of his funerary portraits in which Van Der Zee utilized photomontage; in the upper left corner, Van Der Zee superimposed an image of Christ surrounded by young children and followers, as if Daddy Grace had conjured it, presenting viewers with a metaphor for Grace's power as a spiritual leader.[103] Additionally, the image creates visual parallels between

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[103] Williams, "Assimilation and Aspiration," 147. This same image of Christ and children can also be found in the upper left corner of a photo of a deceased child on page 33 of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.

Christ and Daddy Grace, as both of the men are presented as benevolent and loving leaders, enlightening the younger generations. Each of these scenes of religious congregants demonstrates Van Der Zee's inclination toward capturing community and leadership, rather than the specifics of religious practice.[104]

Other examples of religious imagery combined with photomontage manifest in unexpected ways in Van Der Zee's oeuvre. The 1926 photograph *Future Expectations (Wedding Day)* (Figure 31) depicts the newlyweds, dressed in their wedding clothes, situated in front of a painted backdrop in his studio. The wife is seated on an elegantly carved wooden chair and looks directly at the camera, with her husband resting on the arm of the chair, gazing down at his bride. In front of them, Van Der Zee used photomontage to insert an image of their future daughter, playing with a baby doll; the young girl is translucent, reminiscent of nineteenth century spirit photography. The image of the little girl in *Future Expectations* relates back to Van Der Zee's funerary portraits, particularly the photographs in which he montaged a picture of the deceased while they were still alive. In this case, as Louise Siddons points out, the bride evokes the traditional figure of the Virgin Mary, as the veil cap and sweeping train suggests Mary's traditional robes, with the husband as a stand in for the devoted Joseph. According to Siddons, the image actually contains a double Madonna, with the young girl practicing the skills of motherhood before she has even been born.[105]

As Van Der Zee's funerary images make explicit, Christianity and mourning rituals have been intimately linked among Black Americans for generations. Many African American notions surrounding death are derived from African cultural and religious traditions, including an enduring belief in the afterlife. Furthermore, Van Der Zee's use of images of the deceased while they were still alive visually express this belief, communicating to viewers that although the subject has passed, they will continue to be a presence in the lives of their loved ones. Van Der Zee, like many other artists of his time, drew on Christian iconography heavily in his funeral pictures. The text, religious imagery, and photos of the deceased while they were living that Van Der Zee printed in these pictures can be read as symbolic offerings, as the religious symbols, texts, and even photos of the subject are analogous to what would be displayed at the funeral itself.[106] All in all, Van Der Zee's singular style of funerary portraiture simultaneously expresses the African-American way of death and mourning, and the centrality of Christianity to these beliefs and practices.

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[104] Ibid, 145.

[105] Louise Siddons, "The Future of the American Race: Reproducing the Racialized Nation in Print Media, 1925-1940" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2005), 40.

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[106] Ibid, 49.

CHAPTER THREE

Camille Billops and the Pan-African Elements of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*

In the title and the introduction to *The Harlem Book of the Dead,* co-author Camille Billops makes repeated references to ancient Egypt. As she writes,

> The Harlem rituals of death have parallels with those of the ancient Necropolis of Egypt. They are in the continuum of those on the Nile of four thousand years ago. Today, a kindly God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or newly arrived Allah, have replaced Osiris, god of the underworld; the *Bible* with its chants and songs has replaced the old texts of the *Book of the Dead*.[107]

The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is an ancient collection of mortuary texts, consisting of spells intended to enable the soul of the deceased to navigate the afterlife. The title of *The Harlem Book of the Dead* references these mortuary texts directly. As early as the Third Dynasty of Egypt (c. 2670 – 2613 BCE) through the Ptolemaic Dynasty (323 – 30 BCE), the spells, along with accompanying illustrations, were written on papyrus and placed in tombs alongside the dead. Millenia later, the fascination with ancient Egypt spread throughout Europe and North America, aided by the translation of the *Book of the Dead* into English in 1842. In drawing inspiration from these important texts for the title of the photobook, Billops and Van Der Zee emphasize the importance of properly caring for the dead, linking this belief back to the kingdoms of ancient Egypt.

In her Introduction, Billops posits contemporary African-American funerary rituals as an evolution of those of ancient Egypt. She writes,

> Death is the moment called quittin' time, when we freeze in place like tomb figures or ancient wall paintings or photographs on a mantelpiece in Harlem. Family and friends witness the moment when the preacher sings out the life of the deceased, hoping to

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[107] James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Dobbs Ferry: Morgan & Morgan, 1978), 1.

> distract Satan or Anubis, with his great scale, from weighing the bad deeds against the good. The morticians in Toppins' or Micky's South Carolina funeral parlors, with no memory of Thebes, still prepare pots of paint to decorate the dead for the afterlife. Shabby viewing rooms become mock burial chambers for king- and queen-size tucked satin coffins.[108]

Billops links the caskets, funeral parlors, and more broadly, the funerary portraits that the viewer will soon see, to the tombs and tomb paintings used throughout ancient Egypt, which has been hailed as one of the richest and most sophisticated civilizations throughout human history. Furthermore, Billops connects Harlem, the hub of African American cultural life, to Thebes, the venerated capital city of ancient Egypt. Thus, in the introduction, she makes clear that African-American funerary rituals and beliefs toward death are part of a long, rich history, extending all the way back to ancient Egypt.

Similarly, in the foreword to *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, Toni Morrison links Van Der Zee's funerary portraits and Dodson's poems, and their focus on the dead to African attitudes toward the deceased:

> The narrative quality, the intimacy, the humanity of his photographs are stunning, and the proof, if any is needed, is in this collection of photographs devoted exclusively to the dead about which one can only say, "How living are his portraits of the Dead."… That this remarkable concert of Black subject, Black poet, Black photographer, and Black artist focuses on the dead is significant for it's true what Africans say: "The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember.[109]

Morrison's writing demonstrates the interconnectedness of Pan-Africanism and the African American perception of death and rituals and signifies the importance of passing down traditions throughout the Black community. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, those beliefs toward death rooted in African tradition explain that the soul of the deceased will be liberated from the body and live on among family and friends; that death should not only be mourned, but also celebrated; and that community has an involvement in the funeral ceremony. The continuation of these traditions embodies one of the central tenets of Pan-Africanism, or the belief that the African diaspora retains a shared history, collective memory and culture.

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[108] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *Harlem Book of the Dead*, 1.

[109] Toni Morrison, "Foreword," in Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 1.

After its publication, critics took notice of the ways that *The Harlem Book of the Dead* allowed African Americans to connect death rituals in Harlem with their African heritage. One photographic historian called *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, “a symbol system detailing the continuity of black culture,” connecting Van Der Zee’s funerary portraits to funerary beliefs in Africa and Haiti.[110] Another reviewer wrote about Van Der Zee, “Our elders have always been our wise men, our founts of wisdom, an integral part of our African heritage. Oral history is our tradition.”[111] According to Olin, these reviews take note of the ways that the text and images in the book reveal how these mourning practices have been adapted from African sources and have been transmitted across generations.

The Early Days of Pan-Africanism

Linking the achievements of African Americans to those of ancient African civilizations (and the African diaspora more broadly) is common within Pan-Africanism, a worldwide political and intellectual movement that arose at the turn of the twentieth century among Africans and Black people around the world who sought to strengthen bonds of solidarity between indigenous and diasporic groups of African descent. The core focus of Pan-Africanism was to promote feelings of racial solidarity through a new racial self-awareness, encouraging Black people to see Africa as their homeland, without necessarily calling for an actual return to Africa.[112] Pan-African ideals also stressed political independence and cultural unity for African nations, because at the time the movement began, much of Africa remained colonized by European countries. Another primary concern of the movement was the desire to modernize Africa in order to achieve economic equality with colonialist oppressors. In order to accomplish these goals, Pan-African political movements advocated for either close political collaboration between African countries, or outright political unity throughout the continent.

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[110] Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 125.

[111] Ibid, 125.

The roots of Pan-African ideals in the United States and Europe can be traced back to enlightenment principles of equality and democracy. As an ideology of emancipation, Pan-Africanism viewed itself as the direct descendant of the abolitionist movement. Accordingly, Pan-Africanism maintained that all people are created equal, regardless of race, and therefore should enjoy equal rights.[113] In the United States, Pan-Africanism provided a strategy through which African Americans could reconcile their African heritage, which had been stripped away through the violence of slavery. Emancipation had freed Black Americans from slavery, but had left them to fend for themselves, without any land, money, or formal education.

While the US continued to gain in wealth, power, and influence at the end of the twentieth century, African Americans found that their social and political status had deteriorated, as they were subjected to brutal campaigns of lynching, racial violence, and discrimination.[114] As a result, African Americans felt a constant tension between assimilation and segregation. The cultural and intellectual movements that comprise Pan-Africanism first appeared among African Americans around 1900, when the first Pan-African Conference convened in London to discuss strategies to fight against British imperialism, which included W.E.B. DuBois as one of the representatives from the United States. Prior to the first Pan-African Conference Du Bois had made a name for himself as a Civil Rights activist and intellectual, advocating that African Americans could best achieve social progress by educating themselves and assimilating with white society.

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[112] Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa,"* trans. Ann Keep, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1974), 3.

[113] Ibid, 96.

[114] "The Pan-African Movement," American Historical Association, accessed December 21, 2019, https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-

After the first Pan-African Conference, World War I proved to be a milestone in the development of African nationalism and Pan-Africanism in particular. The war greatly weakened the imperial powers, and by its end, the colonial system was in disarray. Masses of people throughout Asia and Africa became politicized after hearing President Wilson's proclamation of the principle of national self-determination, which he announced in his Fourteen Point Plan on January 8, 1918. During the war, 134,000 Africans, most of them from French West Africa, fought in Europe alongside their colonizers and about 42,000 African Americans were deployed to France to serve in segregated regiments. The 369th Regiment, known as the "Harlem Hell Fighters," was one of the most celebrated, and the French awarded them the "Croix et Guerre" for their valor.[115] Serving overseas broadened the horizons of both African and African American soldiers, who were exposed to new cultures that exhibited much less outward racial animus. After the war's end, many African American ex-servicemen felt disillusioned returning

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historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/through-the-lens-of-history-biafra-nigeria-the-west-and-the-world/the-colonial-and-pre-colonial-eras-in-nigeria/the-pan-african-movement

[115] Iris Schmeisser, *Transatlantic Crossings Between Paris and New York: Pan-Africanism, Cultural Difference and the Arts in the Interwar Years* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), 31.

home to a country that treated them with open hostility and virulent racism.

Working with these soldiers had a profound impact on the career of Van Der Zee; after the draft was declared, they flocked to his studio to have their portraits taken, helping him to establish his reputation as a photographer. A brief section of *The Harlem Book of the Dead* is titled "Soldiers," featuring two funerary portraits, two poems by Dodson, and interview questions where Van Der Zee discusses his experience photographing soldiers. On photographing the 369th Regiment, Van Der Zee commented, "When they went over there, they were supposed to be American soldiers, but they wouldn't let them fight with the American Army. They put them in the French Army. It's because they hadn't integrated them with the other white American soldiers. The French Army had a lot of those African soldiers in it, too."[116] In the two funerary portraits of soldiers for *Harlem Book of the Dead*, Van Der Zee incorporated collaged imagery from popular culture, such as scenes of soldiers on the battlefield or returning from war, in addition to the religious imagery seen in his other works.

In one of his most visually complex funeral images (Figure 32), Van Der Zee depicts a deceased soldier in uniform in his casket, draped with a customary burial flag, and surrounded by floral arrangements. Above the soldier and to the right, Van Der Zee inserted a printed image of cherubs looking down at the man. To the left is a found photograph of soldiers marching and returning from war, and beneath this image is an illustration of a soldier in uniform in a cemetery, bowing his head in prayer for his fallen soldiers. Van Der Zee explained the process that led to this montaged image: "The funeral parlor supplied the flag for the military and I arranged the setting of the flowers and included the inserts, which sometimes showed the soldiers on the battlefield."[117] The use of photomontage in this image lends a narrative quality to the photograph, referencing scenes from the soldier's time of service, and the deep sense of loss felt by his fellow soldiers as a result of his passing, as well as indicating that he has been welcomed to heaven for his valor and bravery.

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[116] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 59.

Black Leaders in the US and Pan-Africanism: W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

After WWI, W.E.B. Du Bois continued his leadership within the Pan-African movement by organizing the first of four Pan-African Congresses, which was held in Paris in 1919.[118] Du Bois's Pan-African philosophies advocated self-government for Africans in Africa, and he considered the liberation of the "Negro race" as an extension of the efforts of African Americans to improve their own position in the United States.[119] By organizing the Pan-African congress, Du Bois sought to achieve political cooperation among all groups of African descent worldwide. In order to accomplish this goal, he convened fifty-seven political leaders and intellectuals representing fifteen different countries from the diaspora and Africa. Out of their shared experiences of oppression and a variety of forms of racism, delegates realized the need for a common international organization in the interest of achieving greater political and cultural autonomy. Resolutions adopted by the Congress called for racial equality, and for Africans to take part in governing their countries, which were still under colonial control. Subsequent Pan-

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[117] Van Der Zee, Dodson, and Billops, *cit.*, 84.

[118] Subsequent Pan-African Congresses were held in 1921 (London, Paris and Brussel), 1923 (London and Lisbon), and 1927 (New York). See Schmeisser, *Transatlantic Crossings,* 29.

[119] Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement*, 172.

African congresses would continue to promote racial equality and cultural and political unity among people of African descent throughout the world.

Marcus Garvey arose as a rival figure to Du Bois's Pan-African Congress movement, developing an imperial Pan-Africanism that came to be known as "Garveyism." Born in Jamaica in 1887, Garvey spent a number of years as a young man traveling through Central America before moving to London, where he worked at *African Times and Orient Review*, a magazine that advocated for self-determination for British-occupied Egypt. When Garvey returned to Jamaica in 1914, he established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), declaring its commitment to "establish a brotherhood among the black race, to promote a spirit of race pride, to reclaim the fallen, and to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa."[120] Garvey called for the unity of African nations and all Black people throughout the world. In stark contrast with DuBois' Pan-African politics, Garvey was committed to the Back-to-Africa movement, envisioning that the African diaspora would 'return' to its homeland and enjoy self-government, land, and education.[121] Another central tenet of Garvey's ideologies was the belief that African Americans needed to secure financial independence and security, separate from the white-dominant society in which they lived. These ideologies separated Garvey from Du Bois's more moderate, assimilationist platform, which was complemented by the new African Nationalism and self-awareness that lay at the heart of Pan-Africanism.

In 1916, Garvey arrived in Harlem and started espousing his ideas as a soapbox orator. In the following years, UNIA membership grew rapidly, and Garvey established a commercial arm for the group, known as the African Communities League, and a weekly newspaper called the *Negro World.* In 1919, he became President of the Black Star Line shipping and passenger company, which was to be operated only by Blacks, and was designed to strengthen connections between the North American African diaspora and Africa. In August 1920, Garvey hosted the first UNIA convention at Madison Square Garden. The convention was a success, attracting tens of thousands of people, and delegates from over twenty-five countries. Garvey elected himself 'Provisional President of Africa' and established the African legions, a uniformed paramilitary component of the organization, which reflected his militaristic tendencies.[122] Throughout the conventions, he held dramatic parades in Harlem, presenting UNIA officials, choirs, bands, and hundreds of cars –impressive shows that simultaneously bolstered racial pride among residents and demonstrated the strength of the organization.

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[120] Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 54.

[121] Bridget R. Cooks, "Pan-African Politics in African American Visual Art: Where Have We Been? Where are we Going?" in *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 2, no. 2, 185.

In 1924, Garvey hired Van Der Zee as the official photographer of UNIA, requesting that he create as complete a photographic record as possible of the group's activities, which demonstrates Van Der Zee's familiarity with the movement. In the year prior, Garvey had been convicted of mail fraud for illegally selling stocks for the Black Star Line and was awaiting sentencing. Scholar Roger Birt notes that Garvey was one of the twentieth century's first political visionaries to consciously employ photography in order to shape his image and communicate his political message. Within this context, Garvey's hiring of Van Der Zee could be seen as an attempt to revive his reputation, which had been damaged greatly by the trial.[123] By

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[122] Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement,* 268.

[123] Roger Birt, "For the Record: James Van Der Zee, Marcus Garvey, and the UNIA Photographs," *The International Review of African American Art* 8, no. 4 (1989), 39.

1924, Van Der Zee was well known throughout Harlem for his portraits of the Black middle class and for photographing Harlem's most prominent residents; the conservative pictorial aesthetic utilized in these portraits lent a bourgeois feel to his portraits. Garvey likely hoped that in hiring the photographer it would lend him an air of respectability, countering the negative effects of the trial.

In an effort to remake his image, Garvey no longer presented himself as a staunch radical, instead opting for a softer, more refined public persona. In addition to working as a commercial portrait photographer, Van Der Zee also worked as a street photographer capturing the social, religious, and fraternal organizations that made up the Harlem community. His street photographs strike a delicate balance; capturing the liveliness of the community while still creating formal images that capture aspects of ritual and ceremony. He brought this style to many of his UNIA portraits.[124] One of the most iconic images of Garvey by Van Der Zee is *Marcus Garvey, Universal Negro improvement Association (UNIA) Parade, Harlem, New York*, 1924 (Figure 33). In this image, Garvey rides alongside other UNIA leaders in a town car, dressed in his full admiral's regalia that he wore as his uniform. The architecture behind him is quite cosmopolitan, projecting an image of Garvey as a worldly, distinguished leader, capable of galvanizing a movement.

Over the spring and summer of 1924, Van Der Zee made several thousand prints of UNIA activities and members. The prints can largely be divided into three different categories: portraits of Garvey with high-ranking leaders of local branches (as seen in Figure 33), drill field exercises of the African Legion and parades in Harlem (Figure 34), and formal studio portraits of

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[124] Deborah Willis, "They Knew Their Names," in *VanDerZee, Photographer, 1886-1983* by Deborah Willis and Roger C. Birt (New YorkL H.N. Abrams, 1993), 24.

UNIA members and their families (Figure 35).[125] Although he immersed himself in the group and their activities while he was photographing them, he never ascribed to UNIA philosophies himself. As Van Der Zee later stated, “Now it seems that Marcus Garvey’s coming back again. Everybody wants to hear about him and his purpose and what kind of a speaker he was. But I never attended any of the lectures at any of the meetings. I used to go there and make the pictures. An as soon as I accomplished what I came there for, I was out and back to the studio.”[126] This quote suggests an ambivalence to Garvey’s organized form of Pan-Africanism, demonstrating that Van Der Zee was not interested in the politics or the movement, simply seeing his work with the UNIA as just another job. While Van Der Zee’s funerary portraits were created beginning in 1920, *The Harlem Book of the* Dead was produced decades later, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, in which Pan-Africanism played an important role.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was fully engaged with African affairs, and incorporated many Pan-African philosophies in his activism. This important point has been largely overlooked by scholars and historians, as King’s work is not often examined in an international context. King started the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, when he was only twenty-six years old, which catapulted him onto a national platform, and established his role as the best-known leader of the Civil Rights movement. Two years later, on March 6, 1957, King attended Ghana’s Independence Day celebration after receiving an invitation from Ghana’s first post-independence Prime Minister, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. King further immersed himself with Pan-African leaders in Africa including Nnadami Azikwe, the first president of Nigeria; Oliver Tambo, the anti-Apartheid leader of South Africa's African National Congress, and Tom Mboya, a founding father of the republic of Kenya.[127] King ardently embraced his African heritage, and spoke out against all forms of racism, apartheid, and colonialism, calling for African independence, peace, and justice.

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[125] Birt, “For the Record,” 44.

[126] Haskins, *The Picture-Takin’ Man*, 141.

In several later speeches and writings, including the Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), his "Beyond Vietnam" speech delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, and The Centennial Address honoring Dr. Du Bois delivered at Carnegie Hall on February 23, 1968, King continued to espouse and promote Pan-African ideals. The Letter from Birmingham Jail.an open letter written by King on April 16, 1963, is widely acknowledged as a foundational text of the American Civil Rights Movement. In a portion of the letter, King expresses a central argument within Pan-African thought, the "intertwining of black freedom and inspirational struggle between the Civil Rights Movement, the decolonization movement, the Pan-African freedom struggle for independence, including against South African apartheid."[128] In the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, legal scholar Henry J. Richardson claims, King "internationalized" the Civil Rights Movement by arguing that the U.S. cannot truly support equality at home while promoting oppression through its foreign policies.[129]

King's Pan-African ideals were informed by the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, whom he greatly revered as the father of Pan-Africanism. Notably, his last major speech was the International Cultural Evening on the 100th birthday of Du Bois. King recognized that members of the diaspora were ancestral kin, and in the speech he argued that, “[f]or the American Negro there is a special relationship with Africa, it is the land of his origin.”[130] King’s consistent engagement with Pan-Africanism demonstrates the importance and relevance of the movement in the decades leading up to the publication of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, particularly as Billops was coming of age.

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[127] Jeremy I. Levitt, "Beyond Borders: Martin Luther King, Jr., Africa and Pan-Africanism," *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal,* 31, no. 1 (2017), 322.

[128] Henry J. Richardson III, "From Birmingham's Jail to Beyond the Riverside Church: Martin Luther King's Global Authority," Martin Luther King Day Lecture, Temple University January 20, 2014, 11.

[129] Ibid, 2.

Egyptomania, Pan-Africanism and the Arts

Within the broader movement of Pan-Africanism, ancient Egypt served as an important touchstone for African American cultural identity. Western countries have long had a fascination with ancient Egyptian culture, and during the nineteenth century, historians actively debated the ethnicity of Egyptians. Scholars within the African American community claimed the blackness of Egyptians, which refuted racial hierarchies and offered an alternative to the white historical discourse that ranked Egypt alongside Greco-Roman civilization.[131] Asserting that ancient Egypt was a black civilization countered the white hegemonic notions that blacks had no culture and were biblically destined to be slaves, while also providing African Americans with a source of pride in their lineage.[132]

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[130] Levitt, “Beyond Borders,” 311-312.

[131] Renée Ater, “Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller’s ‘Ethiopia’,” *American Art* 17, no. 3 (2003), 20

[132] Christian slaveholders often drew from the Old Testament in order to justify their actions. In the story of the Sons of Noah (Genesis IX 18-27), Ham (the father of Canaan) saw his father Noah drunk and naked. In the Biblical version, Noah wakes up and curses Canaan to be a slave to his brothers. In an alternative version of the story, Canaan is removed from the story, Ham was black, and his descendants were Africans. See Noel Rae, “How Christian Slaveholders Used

In 1922, the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb sparked a renewed public interest in ancient Egypt that many referred to as "Egyptomania." British Archeologist Howard Carter discovered an ancient Egyptian tomb, which had been undisturbed for over 3,000 years and belonged to King Tutankhamen. The discovery received worldwide attention in the press, and was dubbed to be 'the first truly modern media event,' stimulating a craze for all things Egyptian.[133] Major motifs of Egyptian art such as hieroglyphs, obelisks, the sphinx, and pyramids were pervasive throughout popular culture, appearing in advertising, film, photography, and popular music. Modern mass production led to the proliferation of Egyptian-inspired art deco design, fashion, and architecture. This aesthetic is reflected in the art deco style chosen for the cover and frontispiece of *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (see Figure 1), with a geometric design framing the photograph, title, and authors' names. Given that art deco had long gone out of fashion by the time the book was published in 1978, it is likely that Billops and Van Der Zee deliberately chose this aesthetic framing to reinforce the allusions to Egypt in the title.

Leaders of the Pan-African movement like Du Bois and Garvey utilized the notion of a black Egyptian civilization to intervene in debates on nation building, leadership, and colonialism. Starting in the latter half of the 1910s, Du Bois reported regularly on Egyptian nationalism in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP. His insightful analysis of contemporary political developments in Egypt cut against the sense of nostalgia that imbued much of the commentary on ancient Egypt by encouraging his readers to look at Egypt as a

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the Bible to Justify Slavery, *Time Magazine*, https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/

[133] Rachel Farebrother, "Thinking in Hieroglyphics: Representations of Egypt in the New Negro Renaissance," in *Afromodernisms: Paris, Harlem and the Avant-Garde*, edited by Fionnghuala Sweeney and Kate Marsh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 208.

modern nation engaged in a struggle against colonialism.[134] In 1939, Du Bois published *Black Folk, Then and Now*, which explained the evolution of ancient Egyptian culture and argued that the cultural achievements of the ancient Egyptians are linked to African American culture. Garvey employed the rhetoric surrounding Egypt to promote his brand of imperial Pan-Africanism. To reinforce this notion, Garvey used visual symbols of ancient Egypt throughout his movement; the great sphinx and pyramid at Giza are represented on the master-head of *The Negro World*, and the sphinx was also worn on the insignia on the caps which were part of uniform for the African Legion.[135]

The wave of Egyptomania that occurred in the 1920s happened concurrently with the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of African American visual and literary arts in urban centers throughout the United States. Artists sought to articulate new modes of black self-representation in their work, and many of them turned to the achievements of Egyptian history and Christian Ethiopia as symbols of black liberation.[136] Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this symbolism is Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's allegorical sculpture *Ethiopia*, 1921 (Figure 36). Du Bois commissioned Fuller to create this work for the "America's Making" exposition, which was intended to celebrate the contributions of immigrants to the United States. The statue depicts a woman wearing a Pharaoh's headdress and wrapped up like a mummy, awakening after a long sleep and slowly unwinding her bandages. The imagery employed by Fuller references a broader awakening of African consciousness. In a 1921 letter, Fuller wrote that she was alluding to a period in Egyptian history when "the Negro kings ruled," a reference to the reign of the Kushite kings in Egypt from 712 to 664 BCE.[137] Due to the place that Egypt occupied in the popular imagination, contemporary African American viewers would have understood Fuller's sculpture as an object that argued for the significance of African Americans' cultural contributions.

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[134] Ibid, 220.

[135] Robert A. Hill, "Making Noise: Marcus Garvey *Dada*, August 1922" in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, edited by Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994), 181.

[136] Ater, "Making History," 13.

African American artists also fused Egyptian imagery and symbols with a more modernist style, creating a tension between the ancient and contemporary. The painter Aaron Douglas combined art deco techniques with ancient Egyptian styles to develop his signature style of flattened silhouettes, concentric circles, and layered geometric shapes.[138] Another example of an artist who synthesized Egyptian and African American themes to express ancestral connections and social progress is Lois Mailou Jones. Her 1932 painting, *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (Figure 37), tells the story of African Americans, tracing their roots from the time they lived in Africa, through their journey to the United States. Jones uses the figure of a Pharaoh and pyramids to represent the structural element for African American achievement in the visual arts, music, and dance, presenting the relationship between ancient Egyptian and modern African American creativity as a direct connotation.[139]

Although Van Der Zee did not directly include Egyptian imagery in his work, scholar Louise Siddons has argued that his photograph *Identical Twins*, 1924 (Figure 38) contains multiple allusions to Egypt and African heritage.[140] In this portrait, twin adult women sit next to each other on a sofa in front of a painted backdrop, surrounded by props including a pile of books, a telephone on a desk, and a vase of flowers on a table. They wear long dresses and many accessories, including necklaces, rings, head wraps with a sunburst pattern, and arm bands. For casual viewers, the portrait would communicate familial, economic, and educational success. For the audiences at the time, the headwrap and arm bangle were signifiers of enslavement. Siddons notes that in the work of African American writers during the Harlem Renaissance, however, the sun symbolized the reign of Egyptian pharaohs, and by extension, the cultural authority and power of Black people. Therefore, the headbands provide evidence of the sitter's engagement within a broader African American celebration of Egyptian culture, adding a layer of Pan-African symbolism to a photograph that primarily references African American history and modernity. [141]As Van Der Zee worked closely with the subjects of his portraits, it is indeed possible that he was conscious of these meanings.

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[137] Ibid, 17.

[138] Farebrother, "Thinking in Hieroglyphics," 210.

[139] Cooks, "Pan-African Politics in African American Visual Art," 190.

[140] Louise Siddons, "African Past or American Present? The Visual Eloquence of James VanDerZee's "Identical Twins," *African American Review* 46 (no. 2/3, 2013), 450.

Camille Billops's Connections to Egypt

Camille Billops had a multifaceted career, working as a filmmaker, visual artist, scholar, and former professor. In her creative life, Egypt was a place of deep personal significance. In 1960, Billops graduated from Los Angeles State College, where she majored in special education, and the following year she met James Hatch, who was a Professor of Theater at UCLA.[142] In 1962, Hatch received a Fulbright scholarship to teach at the High Cinema Institute in Cairo, and Billops left her job as an occupational therapist to accompany him. After a brief return to the US in 1963, Billops moved back to Cairo, where she started to blossom as a sculptor. In 1965, Gallerie Akhenaton there staged the first solo show of Billops's work, which was comprised of a small collection of ceramic pots and sculptures modeled on those close to her.[143] Additionally, Hatch and Billops created their first collaboration while they were in Egypt, co-authoring a volume of poetry with Ibrahim Ibn Ismail called *Poems for Niggers and Crackers*, illustrated by Billops.

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[141] Ibid, 442-452.

[142] Connie Winston, "Through the Looking Glass; An Interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch," *Black Masks* 16 (vol. 5, May-June 2004), 5.

Her experience in Egypt greatly influenced her work. As she remarked, "I had a lot of images that had sort of an Arabic flavor, and I also did tiles. I did bells that looked like Arab dances. I was doing small puppets that did an array of things."[144] The culture of Egypt also shaped Billops personal style, which has been described as vividly printed clothing, beaded cornrows, and thick black eyeliner that resembled the ancient Egyptian symbol known as the Eye of Ra (Figure 38).[145] This performance of identity was informed by multiple cultural influences, putting forth an image of liberation from cultural norms.

Billops sustained an interest in Egypt long after she left the country. In 1976, she gave a lecture on contemporary Egyptian art at Western Michigan University titled "Talia Halim – Her Life and Work", and she also drew upon Egyptian imagery in what is arguably her best-known work, the 1991 film *Finding Christa.* The film is a 55-minute documentary chronicling Billops's reunion with her daughter who she had given up twenty years earlier. The film combines Billops's parents' home-video footage, present-day interviews, and staged reenactments to recreate the mother-daughter pair's twenty-year journey from separation to reunion. One of the scenes includes archival film footage of Egypt, which shows a little Egyptian girl who became a substitute for Christa.[146] As Billops is both the filmmaker and the subject, she retains control of the narrative throughout *Finding Christa*. As a result, the Egyptian imagery contributes a visual expression of self-empowerment, both in her art and her performance of identity.

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[143] Sasha Bonét, "The Artist Who Gave Up Her Daughter," *Topic Magazine*, Issue No. 23, May 2019, https://www.topic.com/the-artist-who-gave-up-her-daughter

[144] Samella Lewis, "Camille Billops: An Interview with Samella Lewis," *The International Review of African American Art* (1993, 24).

[145] The Eye of Ra is a being in ancient Egyptian mythology that serves as a feminine counterpart to the sun god Ra. She can be personified by a variety of Egyptian goddesses, and plays many roles, acting as a sibling, consort, mother, and daughter of the sun god.

Cairo in the 1960s was an important center of the Pan-African movement, with many young American artists and activists developing strong ties with African countries. Malcolm X was a vocal advocate that African Americans should create cultural, philosophical, and psychological ties with Africa in order to strengthen bonds across the diaspora.[147] Fulfilling these ideals, he made two different visits to Egypt, the first in 1959, and the second in 1964, where he arrived in Cairo and traveled to the suburb Alexandria to meet with President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Malcolm X had great admiration for Egypt, describing it as home to the oldest civilization in the world, and his presence in Cairo increased political activity in the city, as many young Black expats sought him out there.

During this period, Egypt experienced a cultural and technological renaissance, and its unique combination of the ancient and modern made it a destination of choice for international travel. In 1960, David Du Bois, the stepson of W.E.B. Du Bois, arrived in Cairo and later became a journalist, adopting the city as his second home. Of his early experiences there, Du Bois said, “I fell in love with Egypt. I got here and discovered that everybody looked like me, and I looked like everybody else. I was accepted as a human being without any reference to the color of my skin. It was an overwhelming experience. I found myself invisible.”[148] Later on, Du Bois hired Maya Angelou to work as a poet alongside him at the Middle East Feature News Agency.

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[146] Barbara Lekastas, "Encounters: The Film Odyssey of Camille Billops," *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (no. 2, Summer 1991), 399.

[147] Rita Kiki Edozie, "Malcolm Omowale X (Re)Turns to Africa: Pan-Afriacnism and the Black Studies Agenda in a Global Era" in *Malcolm X's Michigan Worldview: An Exemplar for Contemporary Black Studies*, ed. by Rita Kiki Edozie and Curtis Stokes (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 288.

When Hatch and Billops left Egypt, they traveled to the Ivory Coast, Sudan, and Ghana; in Accra they made the acquaintances of W.E.B. Du Bois, David Du Bois, and Angelou. In an interview with Hatch, Billops said, “To distinguish black from ‘white’ art, some wrote of the African continuum, a cultural tradition extending four hundred years back to ancestors. By social or genetic pattern, this black aesthetic had been passed down.” Later in this same interview, Hatch described Billops’s travels in Africa, noting that, Billops, “like many artists of that time, made her ‘hadj’ to Africa, to find those roots.”[149] While Billops and Hatch do not explicitly use the term “Pan-Africanism,” their statements reflect many of the core tenets of the ideology. Billops discusses the collective ancestral connection that Black people share with one another, and Hatch describes her travels in Africa as a pilgrimage, or a homecoming, to discover those roots.

In 1972, Hatch and Billops established the Hatch-Billops collection, which was incorporated as a library in 1975. The mission of the collection was to preserve primary and secondary resources in the Black cultural arts; to provide access to these materials to artists, scholars, and the general public; and to develop programs in the arts that would use these materials.[150] Shortly after the collection's establishment in New York City, Billops met Van Der Zee.[151] After the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition in 1969, Van Der Zee had become a celebrity; however, he was going through financial hardships and was on the brink of foreclosure. In 1975, Ruth Sherman created the "Friends of Van Der Zee," a group that hosted fundraisers to assist him. Billops was a part of this group and helped get Van Der Zee back on his feet, including arranging his return to photography.[152] Their collaboration on *Harlem Book of the Dead* began in 1976, and was integral to their friendship. In a radio interview with WCW 88.1 FM, Billops explained how the project came into being:

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[148] Carol Berger, “In Cairo, an Expatriate Black American Recalls Malcolm X,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 10, 1992, https://www.csmonitor.com/1992/0210/10111.html.

[149] “Hadj” refers to the pilgrimage to Mecca, which every adult Muslim is supposed to make at least once in his or her lifetime. James V. Hatch, “The Sorceress of Broome Street,” *Black American Literature Forum* 19 (no. 1, 1985), 4.

> We were assisting [Van Der Zee] with his photographs of the friends of James Van Der Zee, I was assisting him at the time because he was having hard times, and we got his photographs out of storage. And I came across these portraitures of the dead, and I said 'Mr. Van Der Zee, these are startling,' and I said, 'you know has anybody ever published these?' And he said no, and I was over a friend's house, Leo Hameli, and he said why don't you publish those, why don't you try and do a book? And we got Owen Dodson to write the poems. I called Owen, and I said 'Owen, would you write?' And he said, 'Oh child, I know all about death.' And so Owen wrote the poems, and Mr. Van Der Zee, I did an interview with him, and it was an extraordinary experience.[153]

It is significant that Billops spearheaded the collaboration, a factor that has been largely overlooked and under-acknowledged in most scholarship on this publication. In many ways, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* is the epitome of her unique oeuvre, as it allowed her to work with and promote the work of an artist and writer who came from different generations and held unique perspectives. The project is a very natural fit within Billops's multifaceted body of work, promoting African American artists, most of whom largely overlooked by the art world establishment. By referencing Egypt in the title and throughout her introduction to *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, Billops makes obvious references to the Pan-African movement, which sought to empower members of the African diaspora worldwide by emphasizing a shared cultural history. In doing so, Billops establishes an important foundation for the funerary portraits that the reader will see, pushing them to consider how the mourning rites and attitudes surrounding death that Van Der Zee captured in his photographs have evolved from customs that can be traced back to the African continent. These examples of rituals, transmitted across centuries, continue to ensure that the dead are properly cared for and fulfill a central tenet of Pan-Africanism. By making these connections, Billops encouraged Black readers of *The Harlem Book of the Dead* to take pride in their heritage, and the great civilizations from which they descend.

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[150] Winston, "Through the Looking Glass," 5.

[151] In 2002, Billops and Hatch donated much of the materials in the Hatch-Billops collection to the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library at Emory University.

[152] Roger C. Birt, "A Life in American Photography," in *VanDerZee, Photographer, 1886-1983* by Deborah Willis and Roger C. Birt (New YorkL H.N. Abrams, 1993), 67.

[153] Camille Billops, "Reel to Reel," interview by Milony Levitt, WCW 88.1 FM, June 20, 1985, audio.

Conclusion

The Harlem Book of the Dead occupies a place of singular significance within the history of photography as – arguably – the best-known compilation of post-mortem photography. While the book presents a snapshot of a specific cultural practice that was common during (and before) the Harlem Renaissance, its significance transcends its historical context by illuminating the ways in which mourning rituals and Pan-Africanism are linked. These connections, in turn, demonstrate the continuity of a unique tradition of mourning in African American culture.

Although Van Der Zee's funerary portraits might seem exotic to contemporary viewers, the practice has a rich history within American photography. From the early days after the invention of the camera, the lens was turned on the deceased as a subject. The resulting post-mortem photographs were often the only surviving images of the deceased, and they played an important role in the mourning process for the friends and family who were left behind. When Van Der Zee created these images, funerary portraits were considered to be extremely private and were rarely talked about, let alone shown publicly; before he met Billops, Van Der Zee had never thought about publishing these images. By changing the context in which these images were seen, and publishing photographs which had never been intended for public consumption, the book transformed the images into an emblem of the African American community, creating a cultural record of the practice.[154]

While Van Der Zee's funerary portraits operate within previously established conventions, he subverts the viewer's preconceived notions of funerary portraits by using photomontage and the insertion of poems, Christian imagery, and photos of the deceased from their lifetime. In so doing, Van Der Zee visualized the African-American attitude toward death, which can be traced back to beliefs originating from West Africa, dictating that death is the ultimate form of liberation. Even after death, the soul will live on and remain with loved ones as an ancestor.

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[154] Ibid.

The complexity of Van Der Zee's funerary portraits is informed by the multifaceted ways that Christianity and funeral traditions have been intertwined throughout the history of African Americans in the United States. While the history of African American Christianity began largely with forced conversions of enslaved Africans, Christianity quickly came to occupy a central position within the spiritual life of African Americans, offering a sense of hope and the possibility of liberation. As African Americans further developed their own unique funerary practices, they were shaped by both Christian beliefs and mourning rituals that originated in West Africa. Van Der Zee's funerary portraits visualize the beliefs surrounding death from these different sources: while they pay tribute to the deceased, they are also a source of comfort to the friends and family of the deceased by preserving their memory in order to ensure that the deceased will remain with them through the entirety of their lives.

Importantly, the snapshot-in-time of Harlem described in Van Der Zee's and Billops's words – and depicted in his stirring portraits – was as heterogeneous as the sources that have shaped these funerary practices. The vibrant population consisted of native New Yorkers, new residents from the American South and the Midwest, as well as immigrants from the West Indies and Africa, among other places. Despite this multicultural backdrop, viewers of his funerary portraits would have had an inherent understanding of the rituals and beliefs being depicted. This shared culture amongst diasporic groups demonstrates one of the central arguments of the Pan-African movement, that descendants of Africans share a common history and heritage. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* deliberately draws attention to the commonalities between these two seemingly disparate concepts, revealing the ways in which the African-American way of death and Pan-Africanism are linked to one another.

Immediately following the book's publication, critics and readers detected the references to ancient Egypt in the title and Billops's introduction, noting that it contributed a Pan-African element to the publication. African American viewers could embrace these references and reclaim their African roots through recognition of mourning rituals that connected the culture of Harlem to its residents' African heritage.[155]

Scholars have largely overlooked Billops's contributions to the book, discussing the references to Pan-Africanism without reference to her text. In reality, the book's Pan-African theme should be firmly attributed to Billops, rather than to Van Der Zee. The photographer wanted to call the book *Passing Over,* because the central subject for him lie in the universal and religious experience of death, rather than in African American identity.[156] In selecting *The Harlem Book of the Dead* as the title, and returning to Egypt multiple times throughout the text, Billops continued a longstanding tradition within the movement of Pan-Africanism, fostering a sense of pride in African American cultural heritage. Furthermore, Billops's contribution positions Van Der Zee's work within the broader context of Pan-Africanism, making explicit the link between the mourning rituals depicted in his photographs and longstanding African mourning traditions.

This thesis expands upon previous discussions of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, rightfully positioning it as a central work within the careers of both James Van Der Zee and Camille Billops. Most writing on Van Der Zee only briefly mentions his funerary portraits, without dedicating a full analysis to their complexity, and scholars have largely overlooked Billops's own work an artist. Billops was a tireless champion of African American artists, and the influence of her time spent in Egypt on both her personal style and her artwork has been noted by scholars; nonetheless, the commonalities between the movement and the funeral practices have not been examined. Simultaneously, Van Der Zee's funerary portraiture has never before been studied within the framework of post-mortem photography. Finally, the relationship between text and images has rarely been analyzed before. While the interview between Billops and Van Der Zee reveals the story of the photographer's life and detailed information about the practice of his funerary portraiture, the poems by Dodson provide a voice to the deceased, straddling a line somewhere between life and death.

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[155] Olin, *Touching Photographs,* 101.

[156] Ibid, 125.

As funerary portraits are beginning to circulate widely through social media in the form of videos of police violence, it is more imperative than ever to understand how Van Der Zee took a previously existing visual language and manipulated it in order to express an understanding of death that is intrinsic to African American culture. While these images are horrific, they continue to be an important tool in the struggle for civil rights, forcing Americans to confront the brutality that Black Americans have faced at the hands of the police for centuries. The U.S. today finds itself in the midst of the largest civil rights movement in the country's history, with protestors calling for widespread political and social changes, spurred by the horrific video of the murder of George Floyd, and sustained by the videos that continue to surface, such as Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, and Breonna Taylor, among countless victims whose names we have yet to know. Political Scientist Daniel Q. Gillion said of the current moment, in which the latest urgent drive for civil rights intersects with the Covid pandemic, "With being home and not being able to do as much, that might be amplifying something that's already a powerful catalyst, and that is the video…if you aren’t moved by the George Floyd video, you have nothing in you.”[157] Images of African American death by police violence are making their way into the art historical canon as well, for example Henry Taylor’s 2017 painting of Philando Castile’s murder, titled *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING FAST ENOUGH!* (Figure 39). In contrast to these necessary depictions of violence, Van Der Zee’s funerary portraits serve as a foil, demonstrating the great care provided to the deceased, regardless of the circumstances of the subject’s death, and providing readers with a sense of hope, that after death they will find a peace in the afterlife that had previously been denied as a result of systemic racism.

The manner in which people experience death and grieving is a vital component of cultural identity, revealing the ways in which a community can come together to lift each other up during their difficult, painful moments. This circumstance was especially profound for enslaved African Americans, and remains so today in the face of police violence and hate crimes. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* provides a lens for understanding the African American culture of grief and mourning in a way that had not been publicly discussed prior. Above all, the book offers its readers a critical perspective: that African Americans’ cultural framework surrounding death is fundamental to the collective experience of this community.

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[157] Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History, *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html

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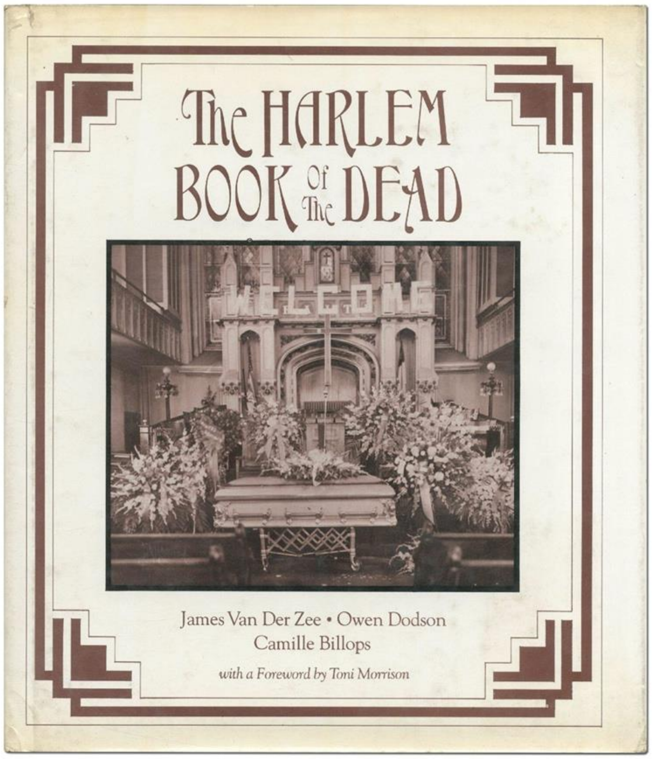
Images

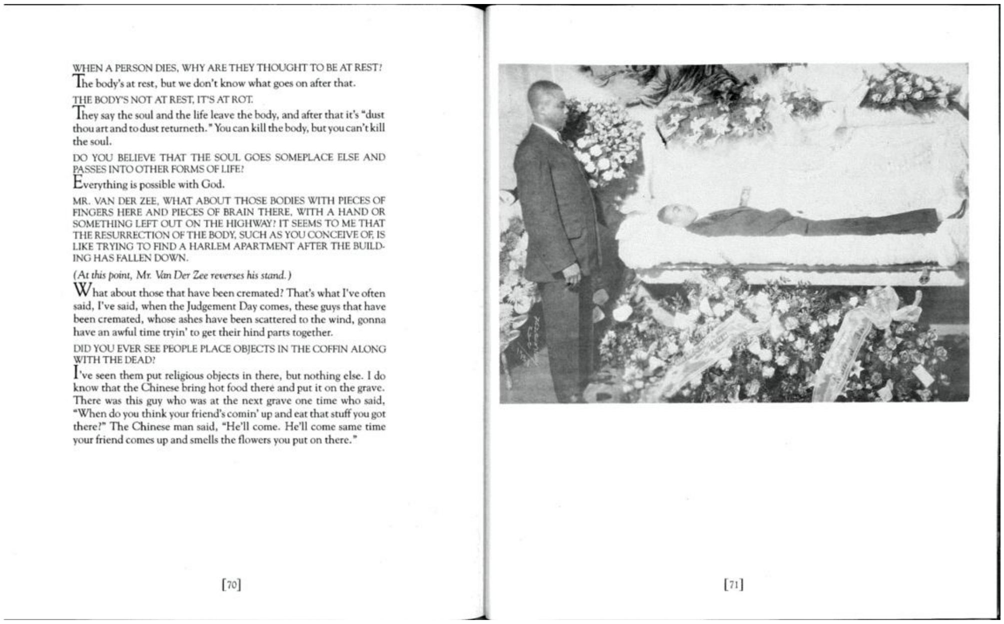


The HARLEM BOOK Of The DEAD

James Van Der Zee • Owen Dodson
Camille Billops

with a Foreword by Toni Morrison

Figure 1: Cover, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 1978.



WHEN A PERSON DIES, WHY ARE THEY THOUGHT TO BE AT REST?

The body's at rest, but we don't know what goes on after that.

THE BODY'S NOT AT REST, IT'S AT ROT.

They say the soul and the life leave the body, and after that it's "dust thou art and to dust returneth." You can kill the body, but you can't kill the soul.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE SOUL GOES SOMEPLACE ELSE AND PASSES INTO OTHER FORMS OF LIFE?

Everything is possible with God.

MR. VAN DER ZEE, WHAT ABOUT THOSE BODIES WITH PIECES OF FINGERS HERE AND PIECES OF BRAIN THERE, WITH A HAND OR SOMETHING LEFT OUT ON THE HIGHWAY? IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY, SUCH AS YOU CONCEIVE OF, IS LIKE TRYING TO FIND A HARLEM APARTMENT AFTER THE BUILDING HAS FALLEN DOWN.

(At this point, Mr. Van Der Zee reverses his stand.)

What about those that have been cremated? That's what I've often said, I've said, when the Judgement Day comes, these guys that have been cremated, whose ashes have been scattered to the wind, gonna have an awful time tryin' to get their hind parts together.

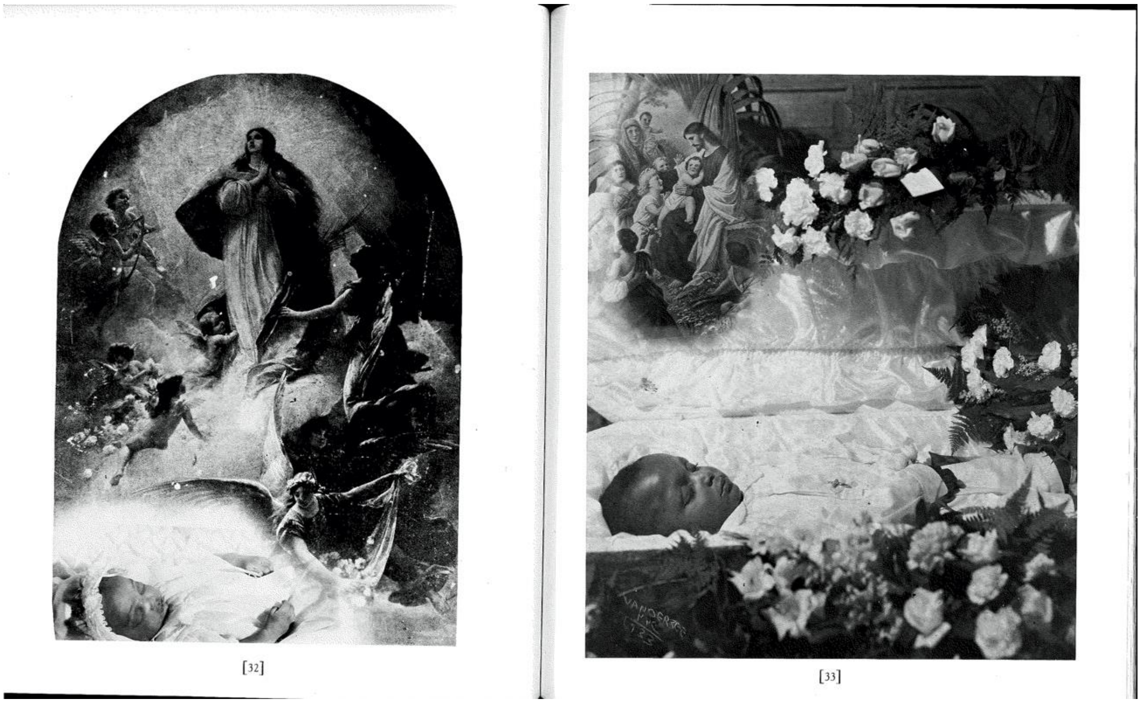
DID YOU EVER SEE PEOPLE PLACE OBJECTS IN THE COFFIN ALONG WITH THE DEAD?

I've seen them put religious objects in there, but nothing else. I do know that the Chinese bring hot food there and put it on the grave. There was this guy who was at the next grave one time who said, "When do you think your friend's comin' up and eat that stuff you got there?" The Chinese man said, "He'll come. He'll come same time your friend comes up and smells the flowers you put on there."

[70]

[71]

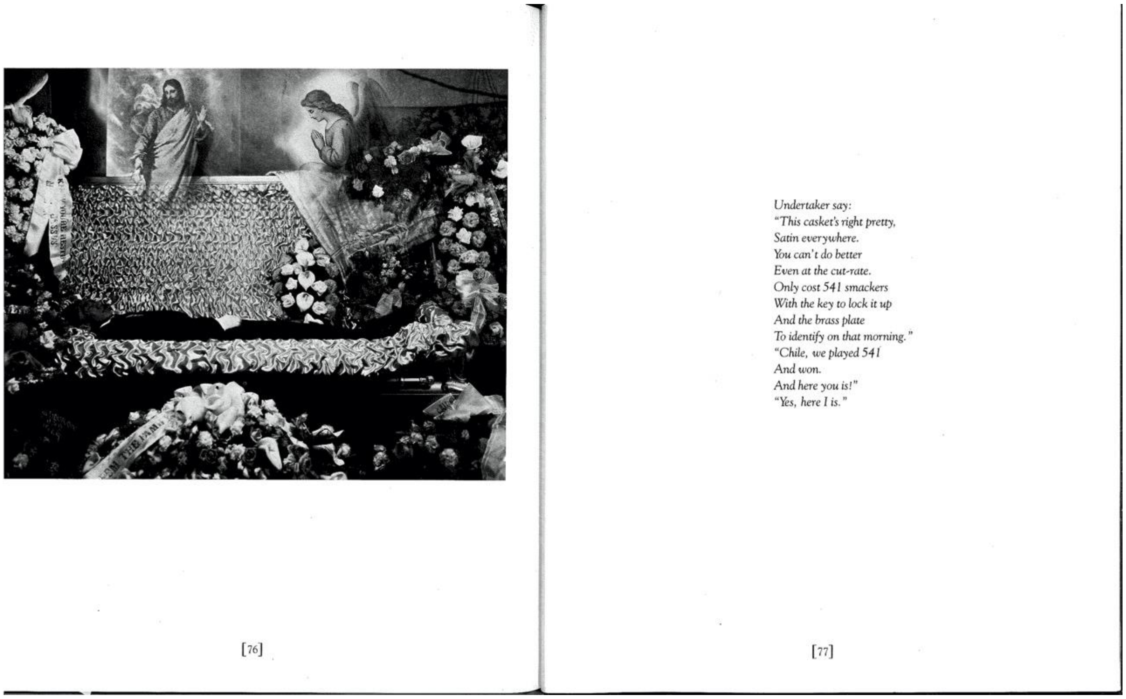
Figure 2: Spread from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, pages 70-71



[32]

[33]

Figure 3: Spread from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, pages 32-33

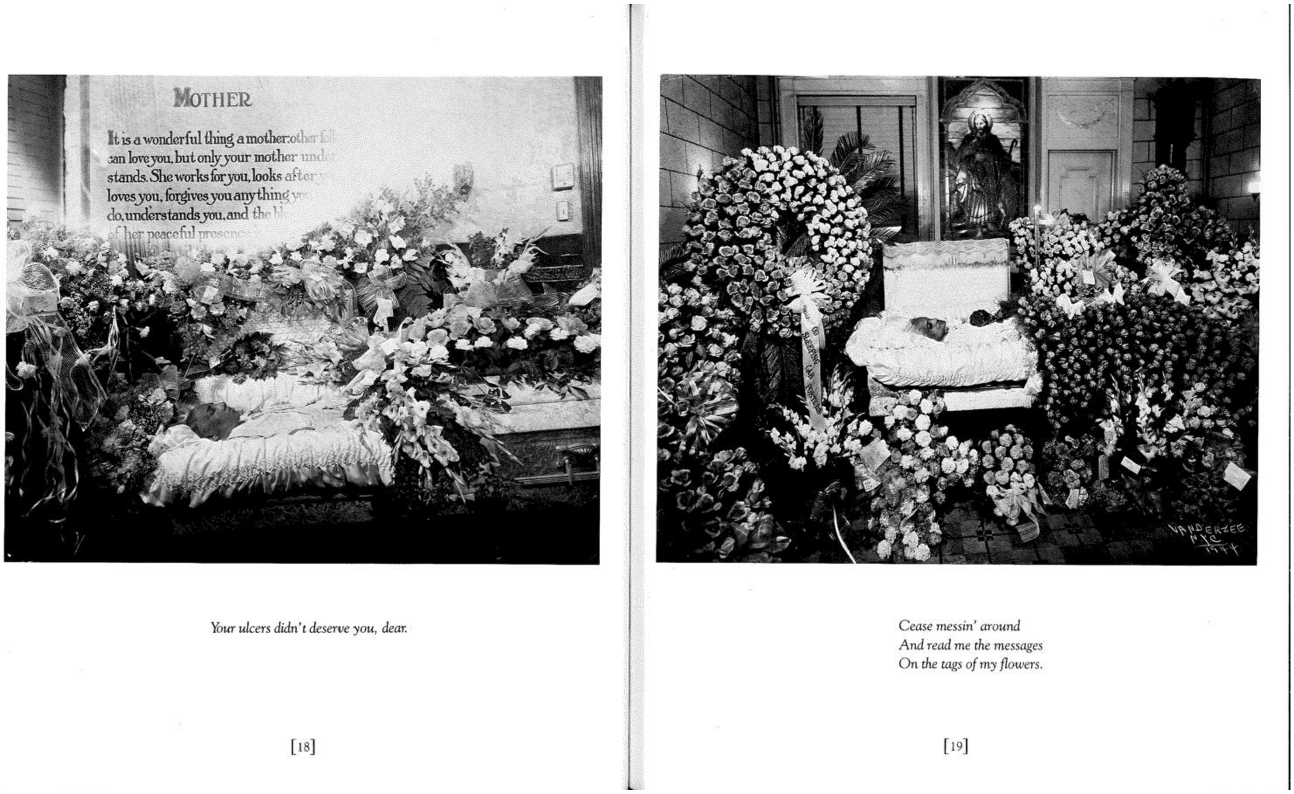


Undertaker say:
"This casket's right pretty,
Satin everywhere.
You can't do better
Even at the cut-rate.
Only cost 541 smackers
With the key to lock it up
And the brass plate
To identify on that morning."
"Chile, we played 541
And won.
And here you is!"
"Yes, here I is."

[76]

[77]

Figure 4: Spread from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, pages 76-77


MOTHER
It is a wonderful thing a mother: other
can love you, but only your mother unde
stands. She works for you, looks after y
loves you, forgives you anything yo
do, understands you, and the bl
of her peaceful presence

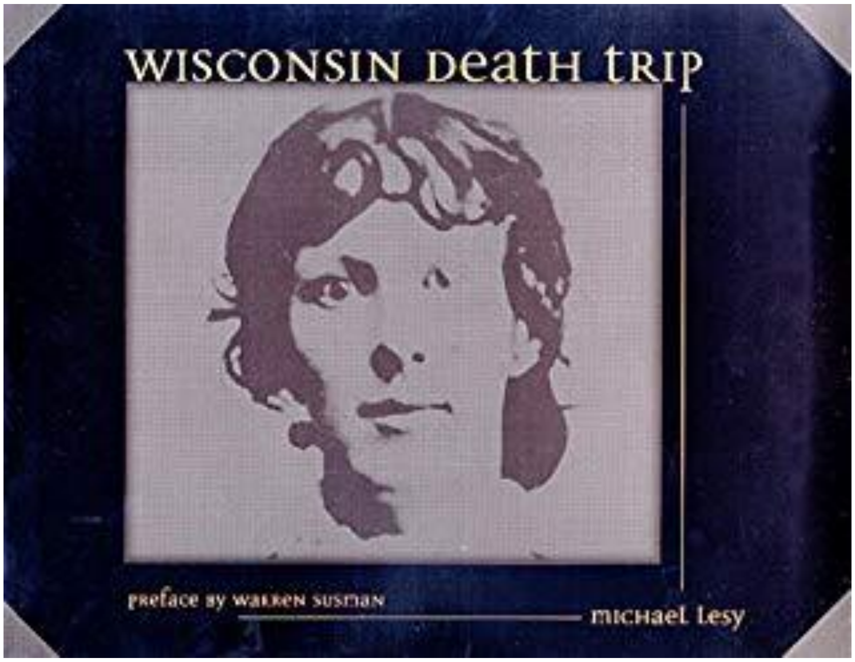
Your ulcers didn't deserve you, dear.

[18]

Cease messin' around
And read me the messages
On the tags of my flowers.

[19]

Figure 5: Spread from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, pages 18-19



WISCONSIN Death TRIP

preface by warren susman

michael lesy

Figure 6: Michael Lesy, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, photobook, 1973

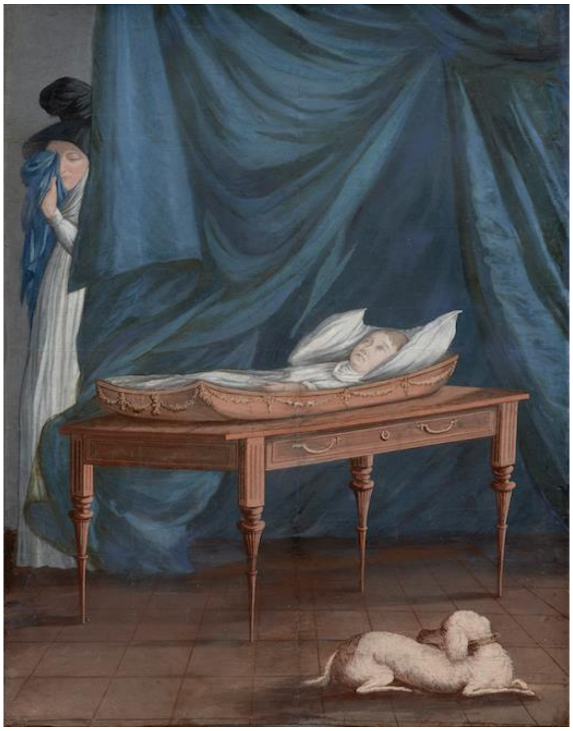
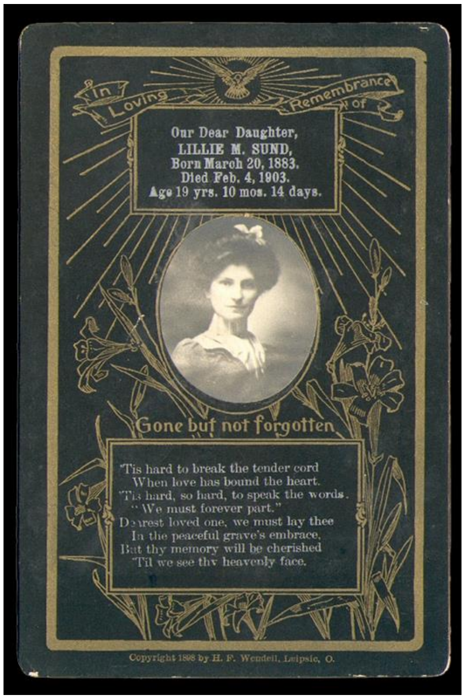


Figure 7: Michael Felice Cornè, *Death of William*, watercolor and gouache on paper, c. 1807



In Loving Remembrance of

Our Dear Daughter,
LILLIE M. SUND,
Born March 20, 1883.
Died Feb. 4, 1903.
Age 19 yrs. 10 mos. 14 days.

Gone but not forgotten

'Tis hard to break the tender cord
When love has bound the heart.
'Tis hard, so hard, to speak the words.
"We must forever part."
Dearest loved one, we must lay thee
In the peaceful grave's embrace,
But thy memory will be cherished
'Til we see thy heavenly face.

Copyright 1898 by H. F. Wendell, Leipsic, O.

Figure 8: H.F. Wendell, *Memorial Portrait of Lillie M. Sund*, Albumen photograph on card (cabinet card), 1903, ©Stanley B. Burns, MD & The Burns Archive

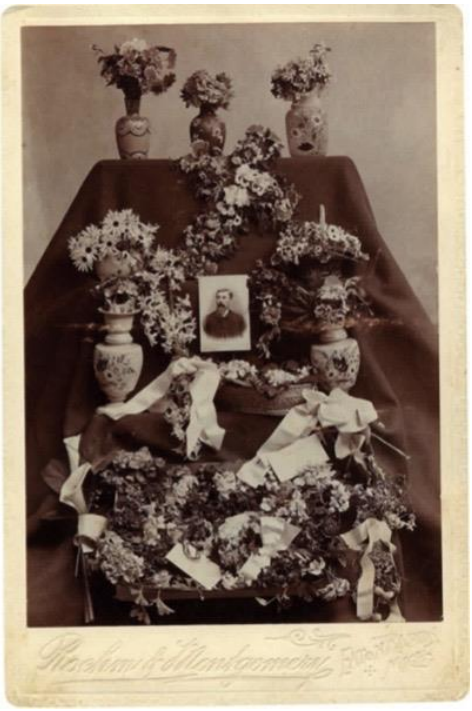


Figure 9: Roehm & Montgomery, *Floral Tributes with Ribbon and a Photograph*, Albumen photograph on card (cabinet card), c. 1890

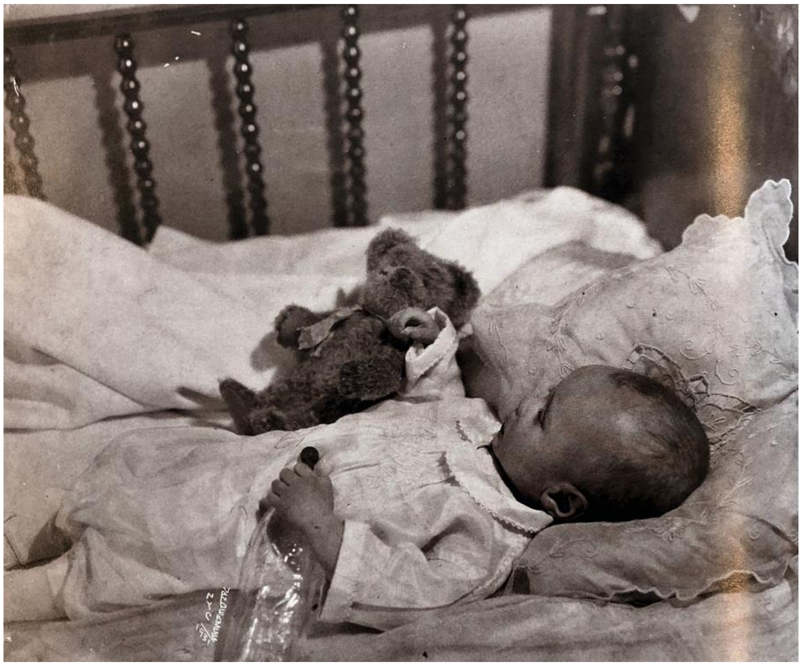


Figure 10: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 36

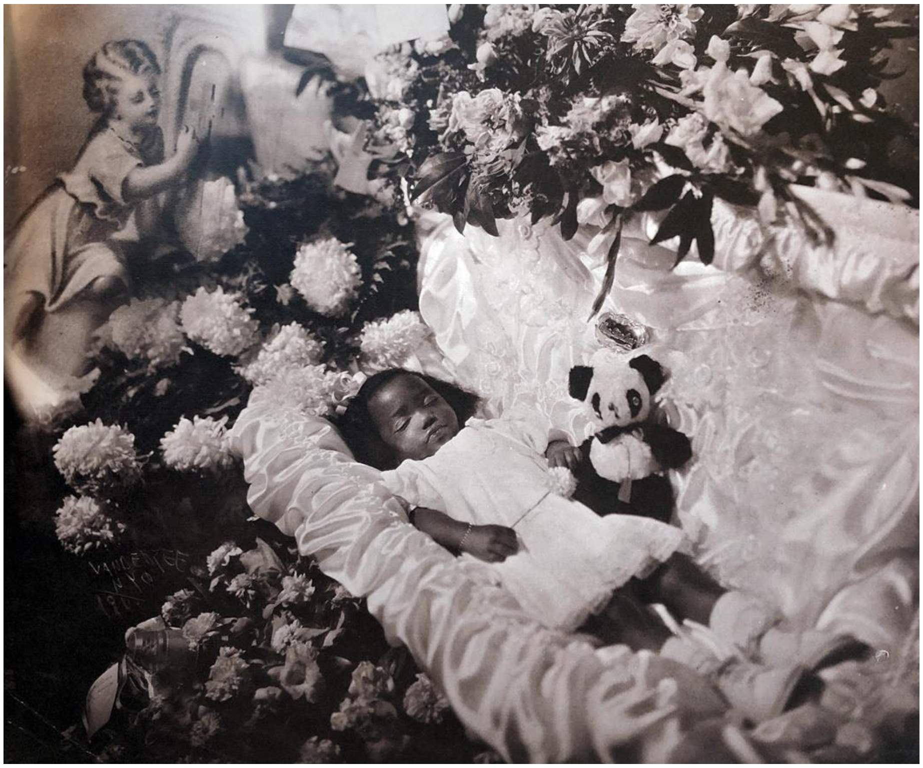


Figure 11: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 39

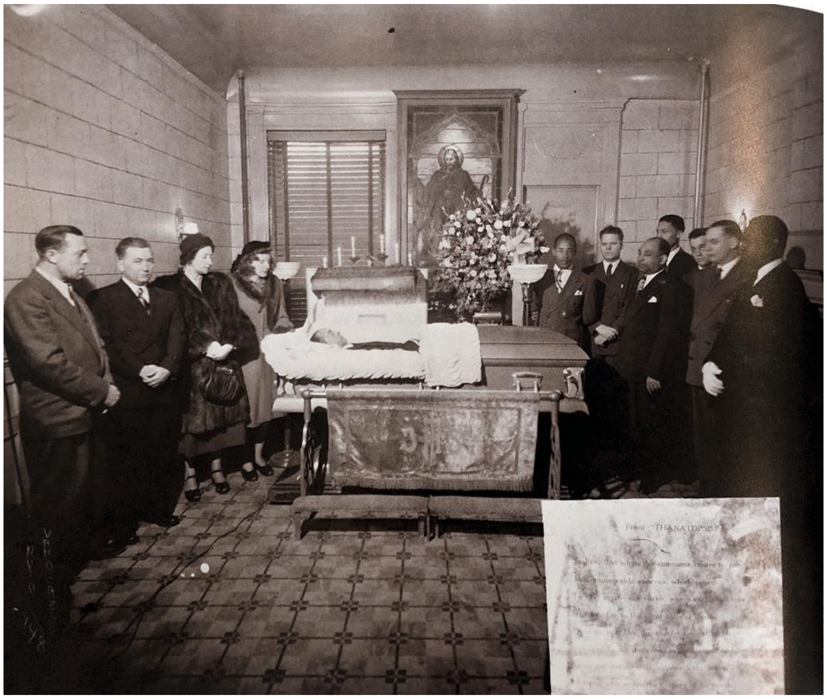


Figure 12: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 72

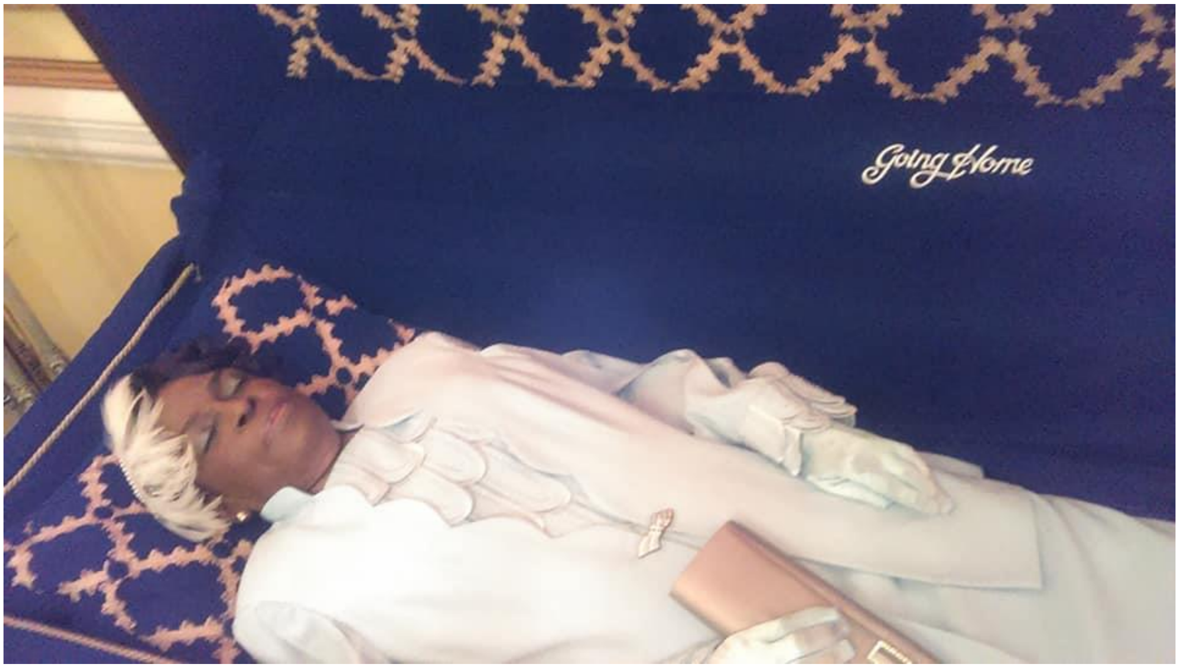


Figure 13: Bam Truesdale, *Funerary Portrait of Cynthia Cummings*, 2016

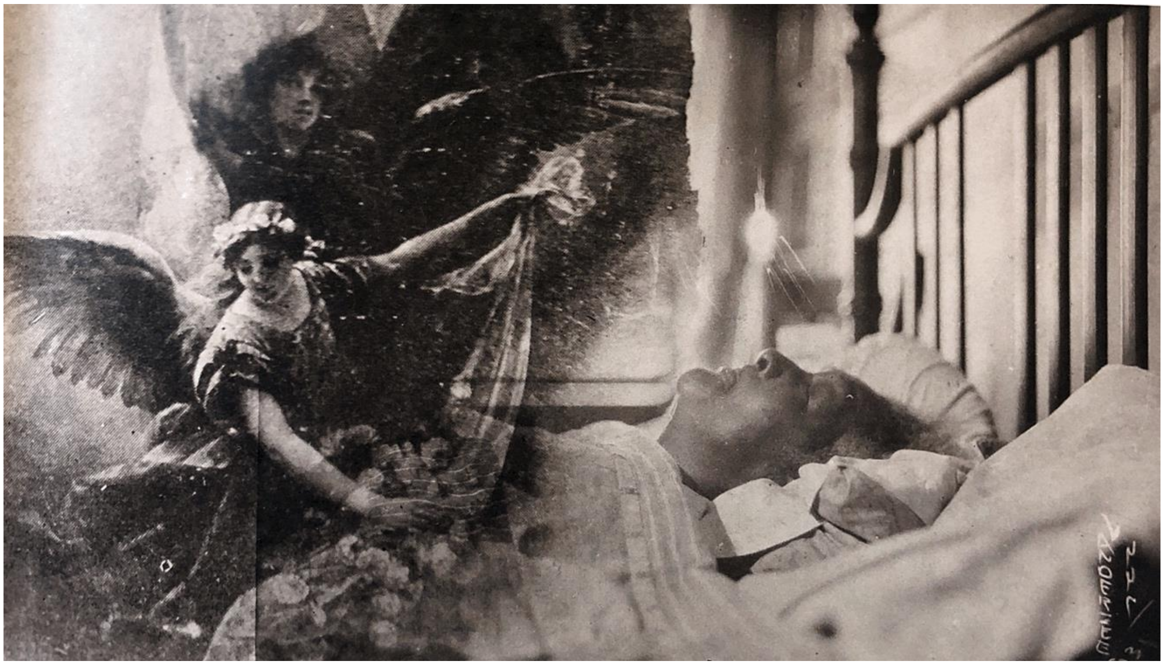


Figure 14: *Funeral Portrait, Susan Van Der Zee* (1931), from *The Harlem Book of the Dead,* page 13

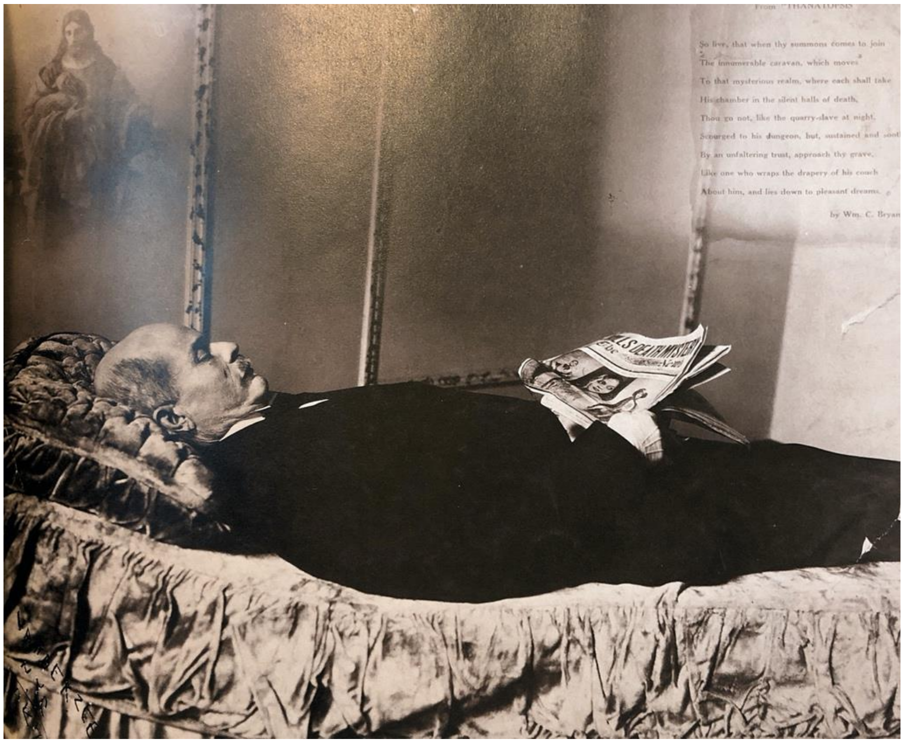

From "THANATOPSIS
So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and sootl
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.
by Wm. C. Bryan

Figure 15: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 23

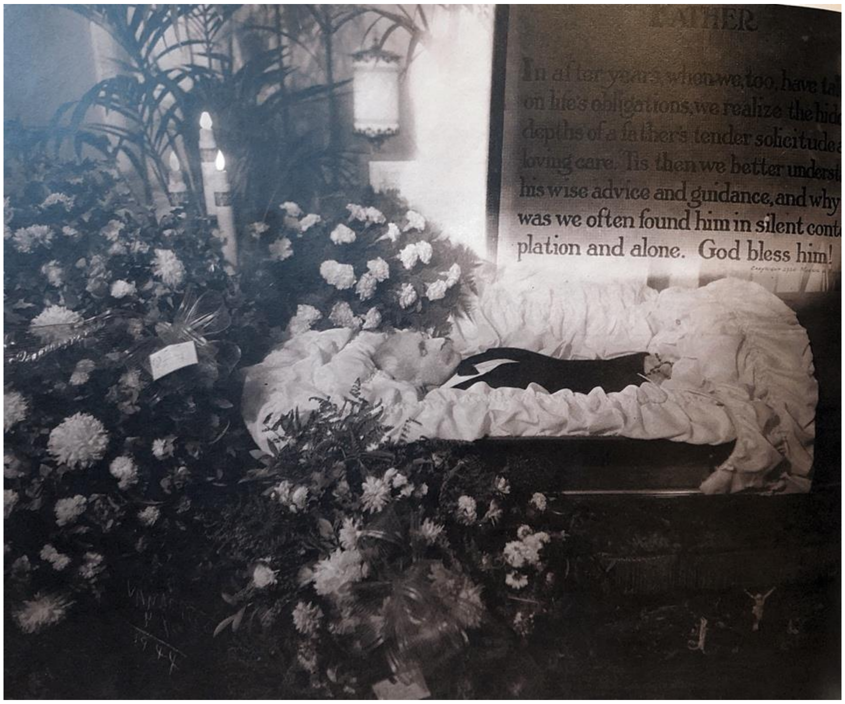
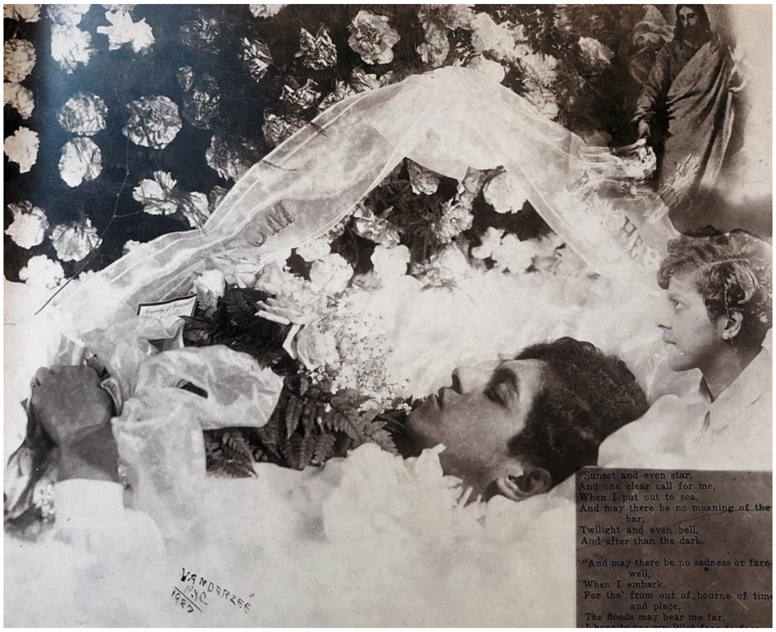

FATHER
In after years, when we, too, have ta
on life's obligations, we realize the hid
depths of a father's tender solicitude a
loving care. 'Tis then we better underst
his wise advice and guidance, and why
was we often found him in silent cont
plation and alone. God bless him!

Figure 16: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 22



"Sunset and even star,
And one clear call for me,
When I put out to sea.
And may there be no moaning of the
bar,
Twilight and even bell,
And after than the dark.

"And may there be no sadness or fare-
well,
When I embark.
For tho' from out of bourne of tim
and place,
The floods may bear me far,

Figure 17: *Rachel Van Der Zee* (1927), from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 31

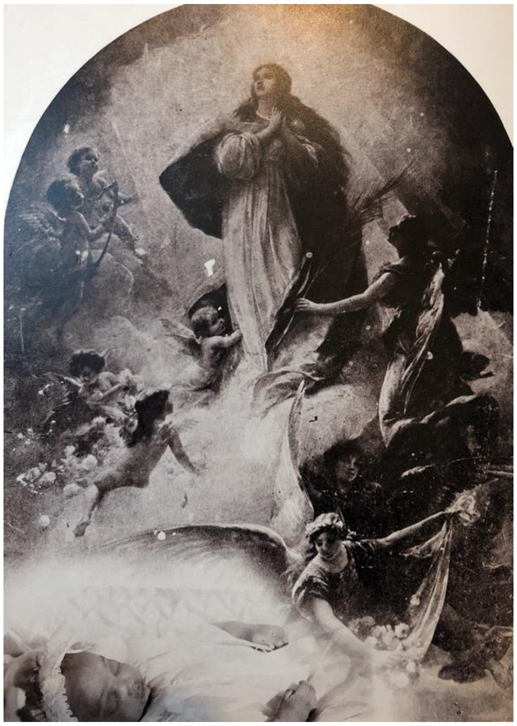


Figure 18: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 32

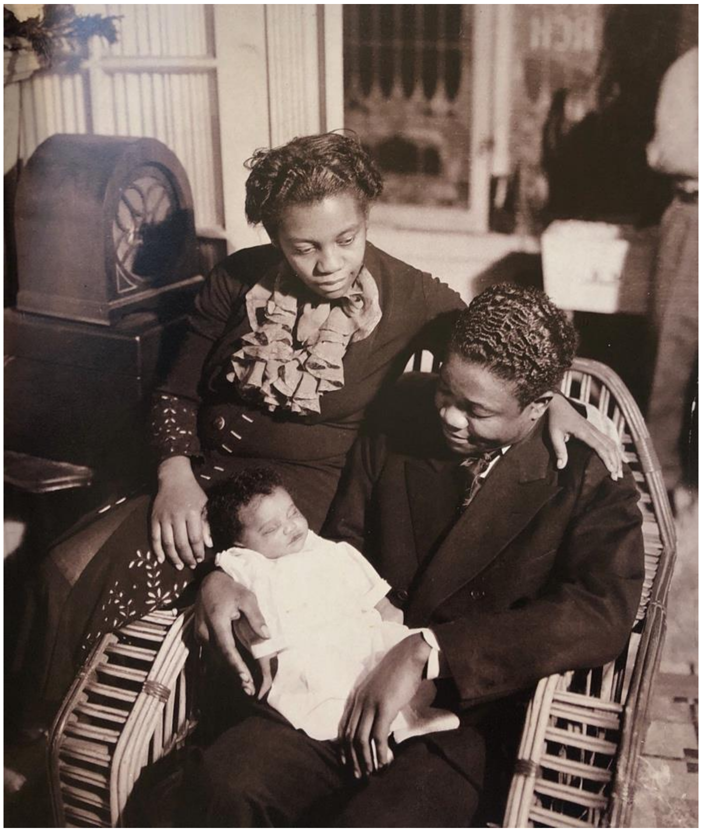


Figure 19: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 37

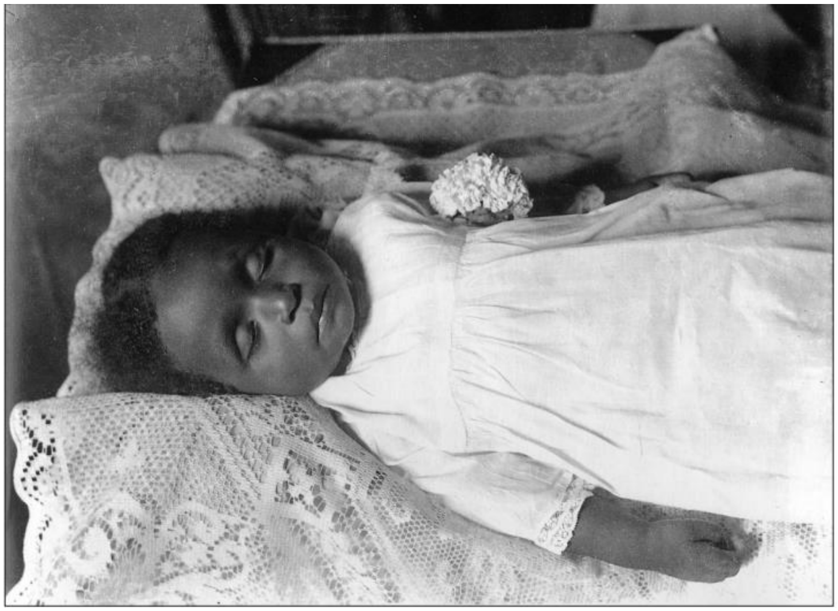


Figure 20: Richard Samuel Roberts, *Portrait of a Deceased Girl*, Gelatin silver print, n.d.

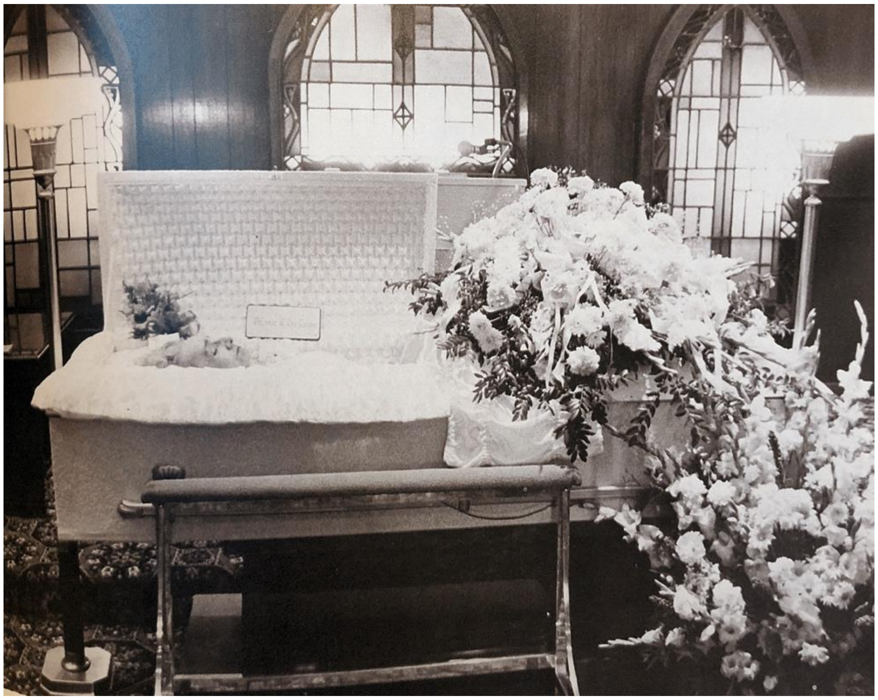
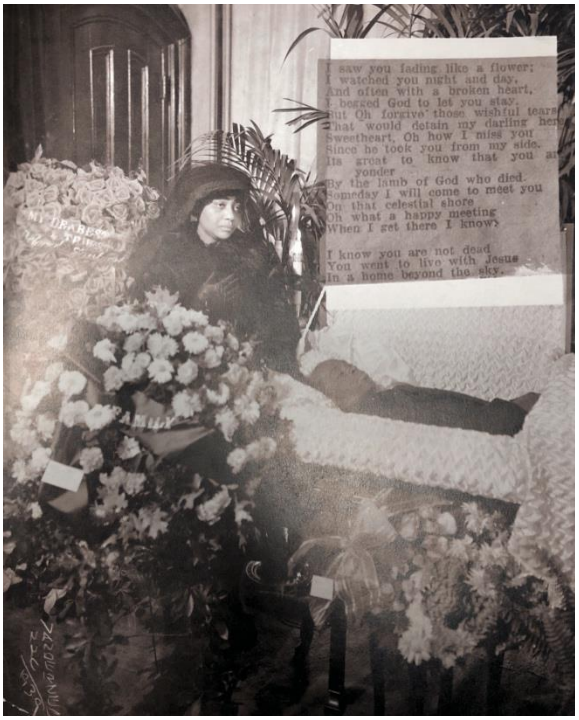


Figure 21: Frank Stewart, Funerary Portrait of Gaynella Van Der Zee, from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 51



I saw you fading like a flower;
I watched you night and day,
And often with a broken heart,
I begged God to let you stay.
But Oh forgive those wishful tears
That would detain my darling her
Sweetheart, Oh how I miss you
Since he took you from my side.
Its great to know that you ar
yonder
By the lamb of God who died.
Someday I will come to meet you
On that celestial shore
Oh what a happy meeting
When I get there I know›

I know you are not dead
You went to live with Jesus
In a home beyond the sky.

Figure 22: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 75

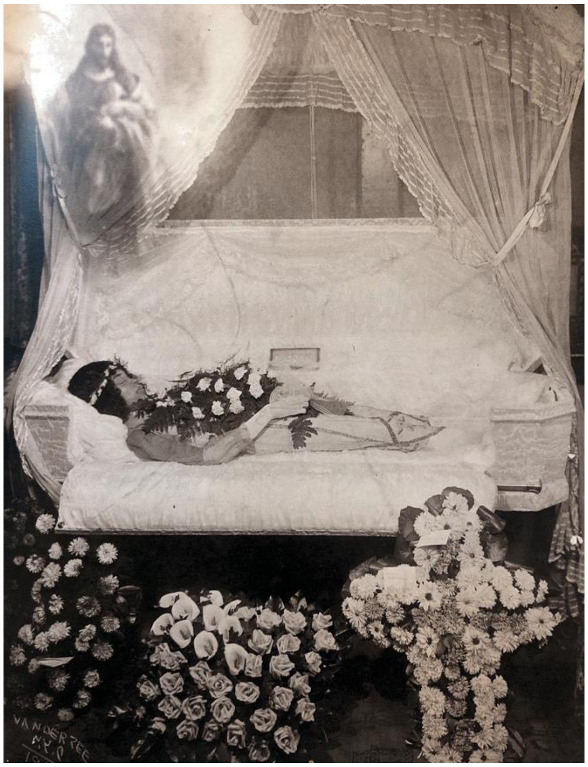

VAN DER ZEE
N.Y.C.

Figure 23: Funerary photo, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 53

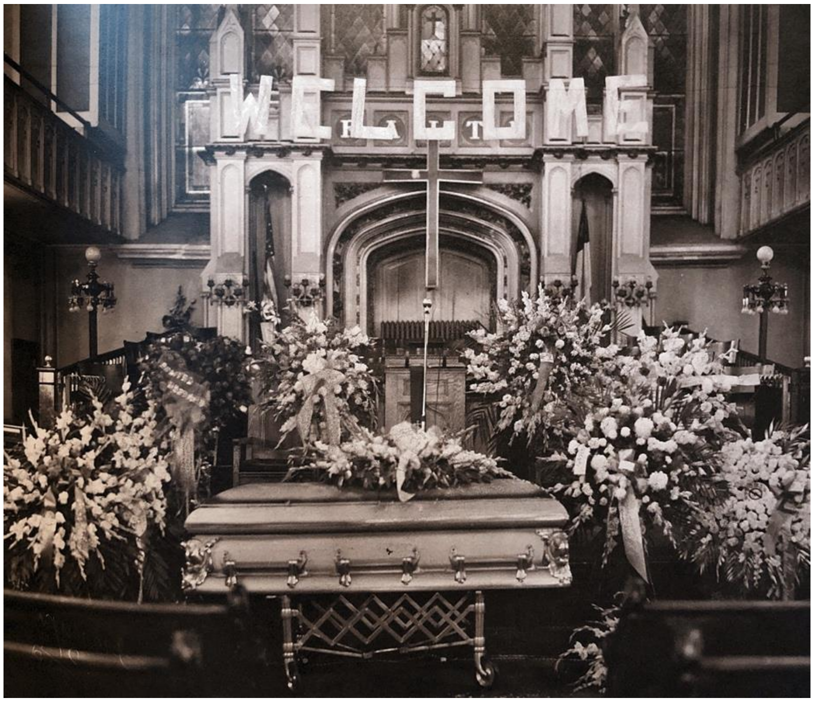


Figure 24: *Untitled*, from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 7

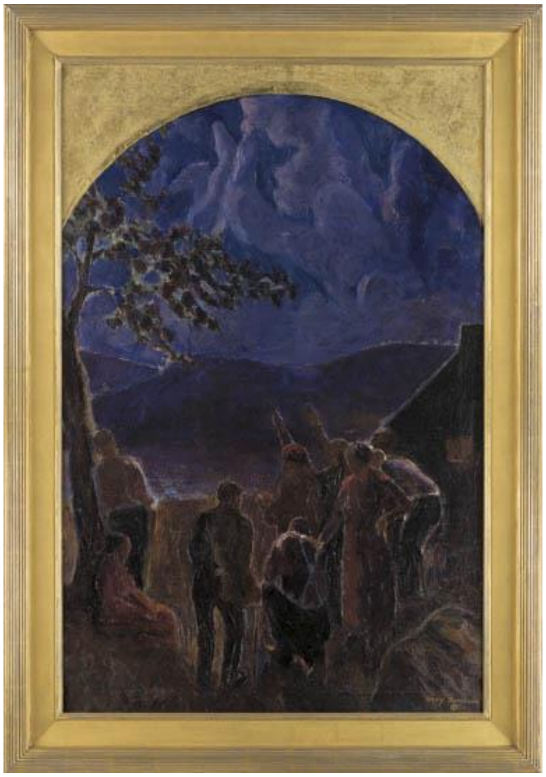


Figure 25: Malvin Gray Johnson, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, Oil on canvas, 1928-29

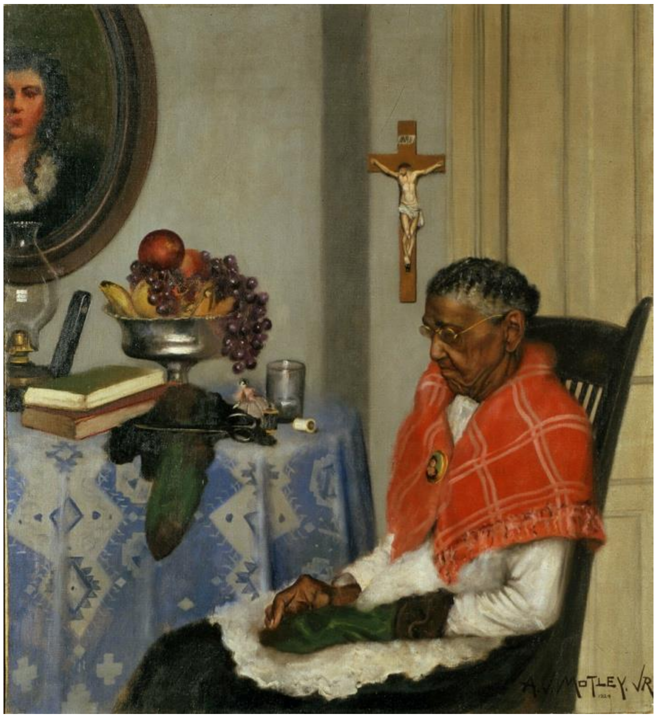

A.J. MOTLEY. JR
1924

Figure 26: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Mending Socks*, Oil on canvas, 1924

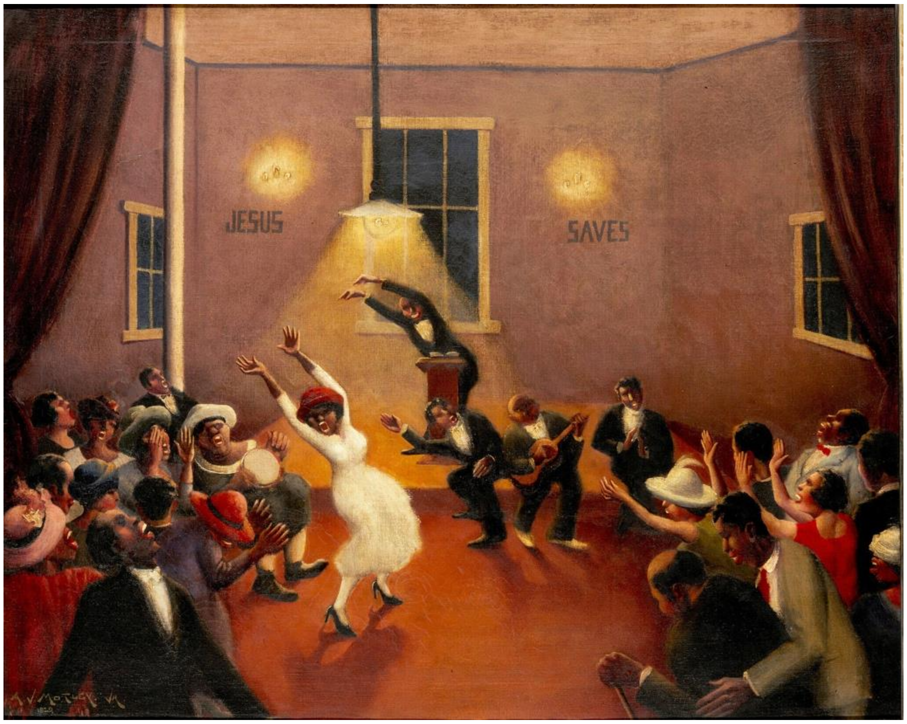

JESUS
SAVES

Figure 27: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Tongues (HolyRollers),* Oil on canvas, 1929

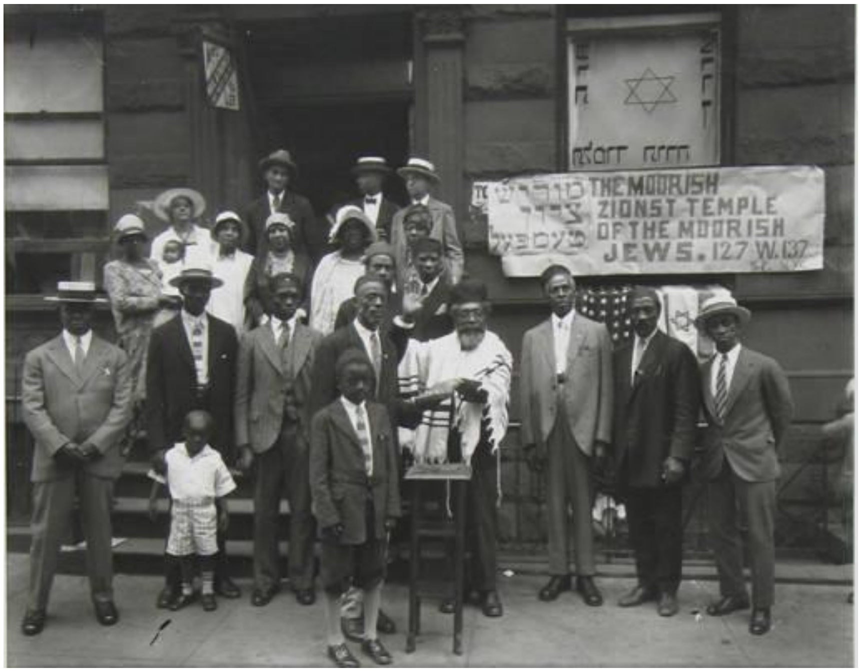

THE MOORISH
ZIONST TEMPLE
OF THE MOORISH
JEWS. 127 W.137

Figure 28: *The Moorish Zionist Temple of the Moorish Jews,* Gelatin silver print, 1920

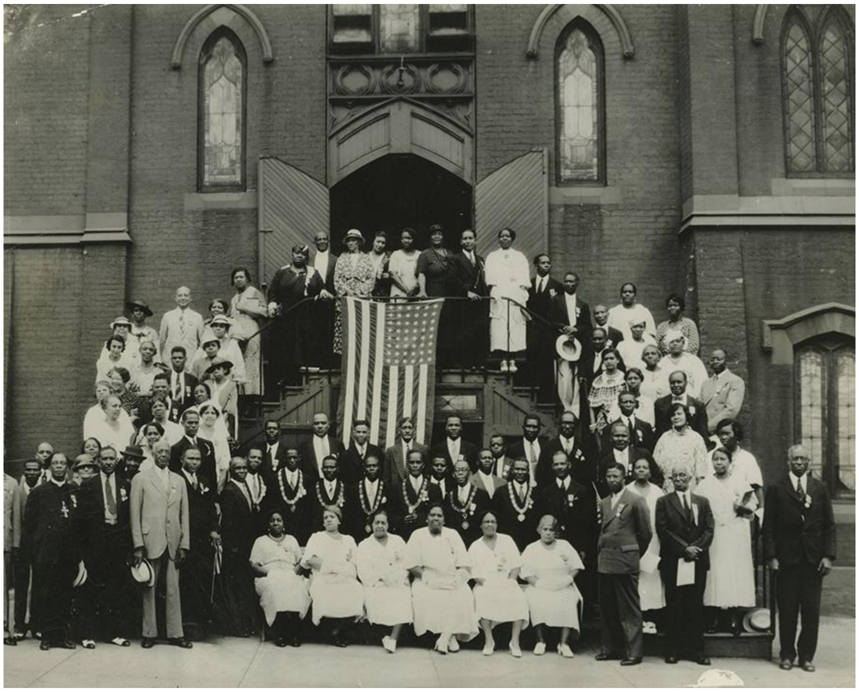


Figure 29: *Church Group with U.S. Flag*, Gelatin silver print, n.d.

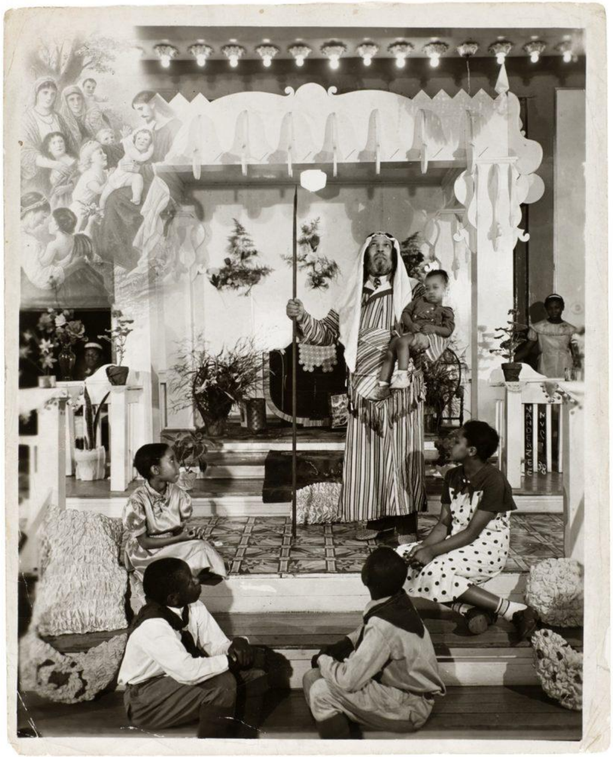


Figure 30: *Daddy Grace and Children*, Gelatin silver print, 1938

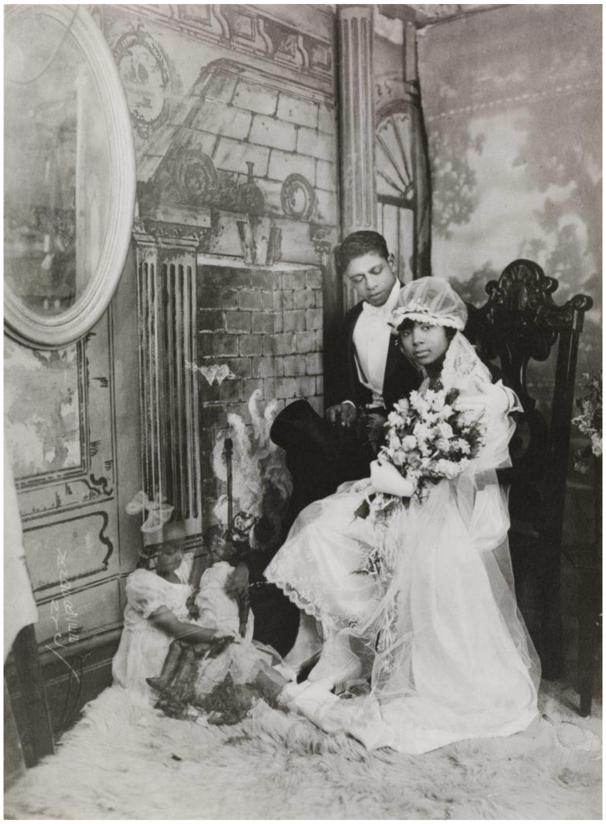


Figure 31: *Future Expectations (Wedding Day)*, Gelatin silver print, 1926

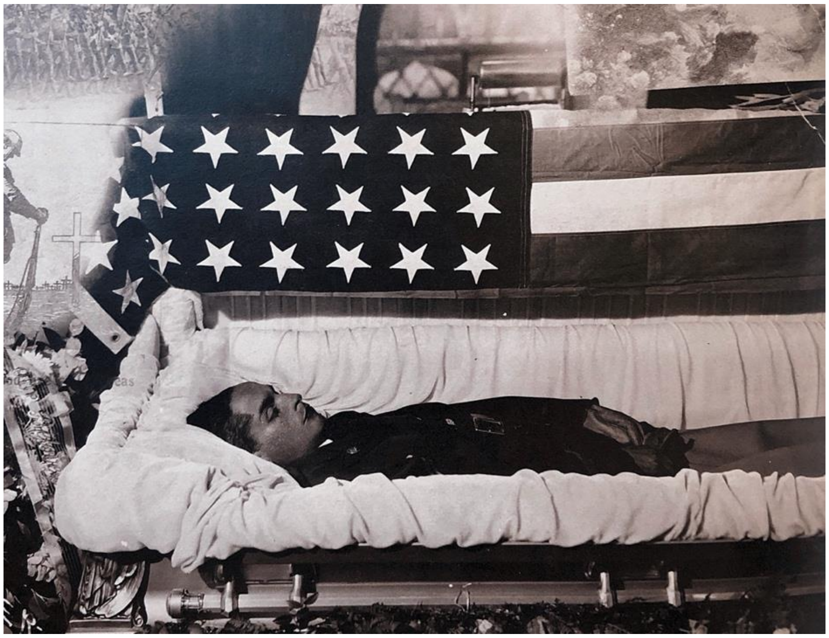


Figure 32: Funerary photo from *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, page 58

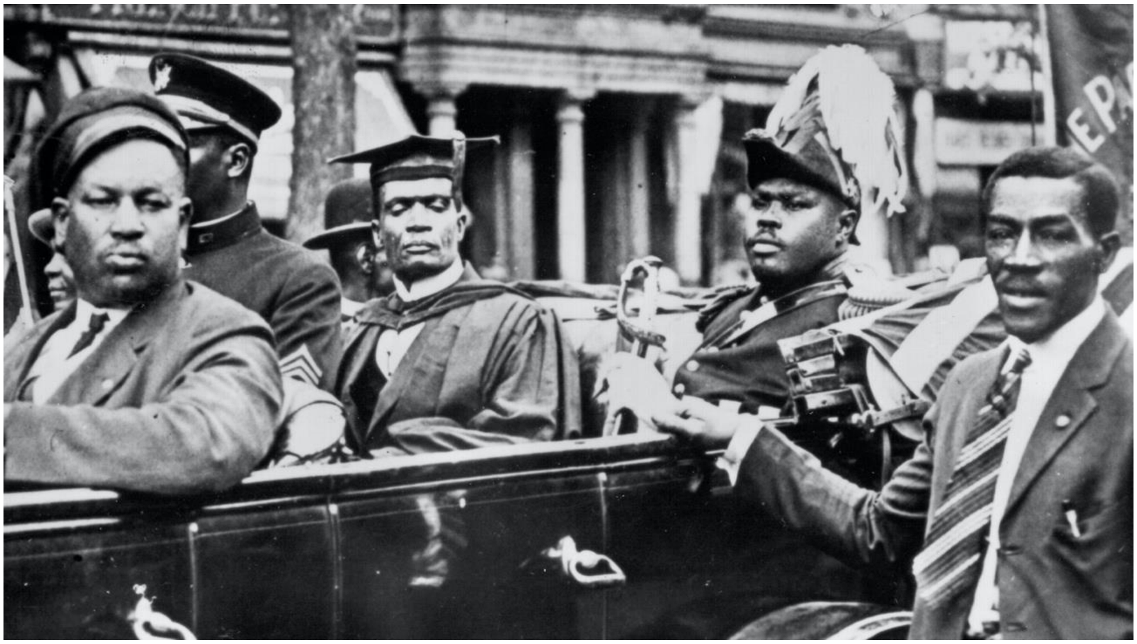


Figure 33: *Marcus Garvey, Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Parade, Harlem, New York*, Gelatin silver print, 1924

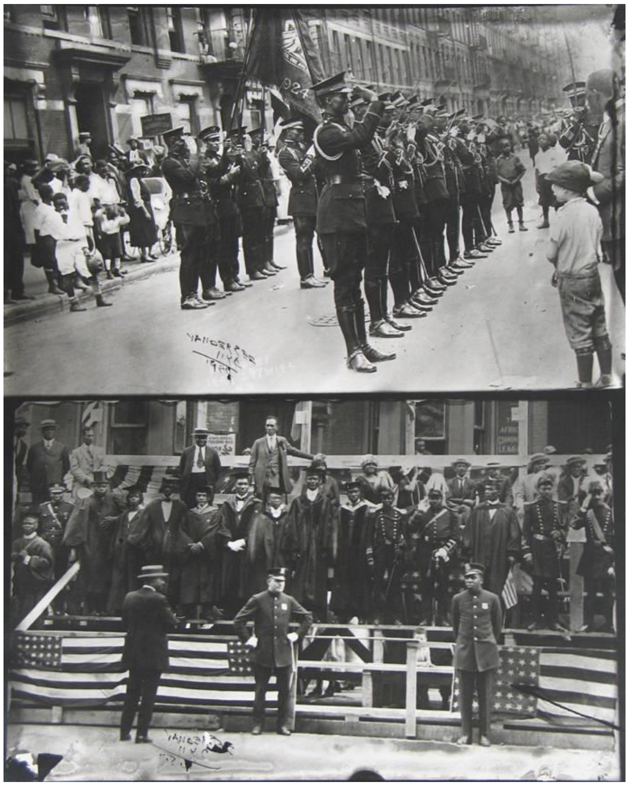


Figure 34: *Untitled*, Gelatin silver print, 1924

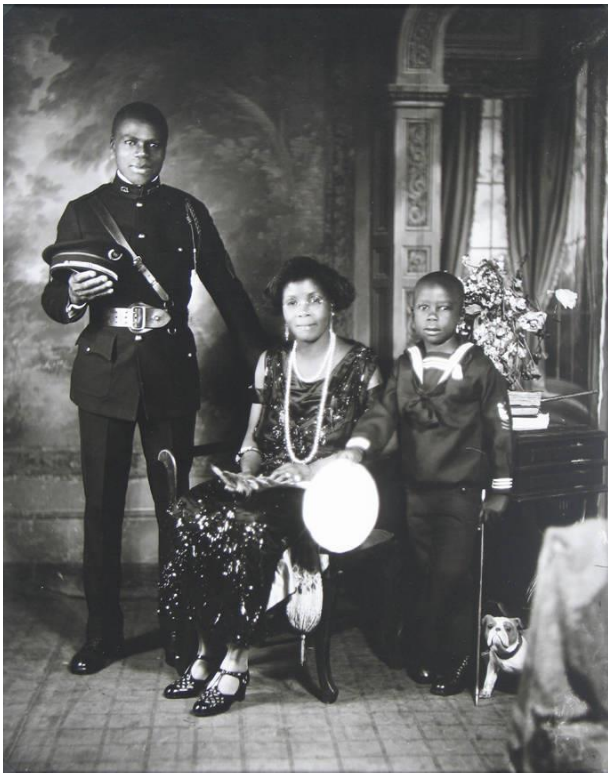


Figure 35: *A member of Garvey's African legion with his family,* 1924, Gelatin silver print, 1924

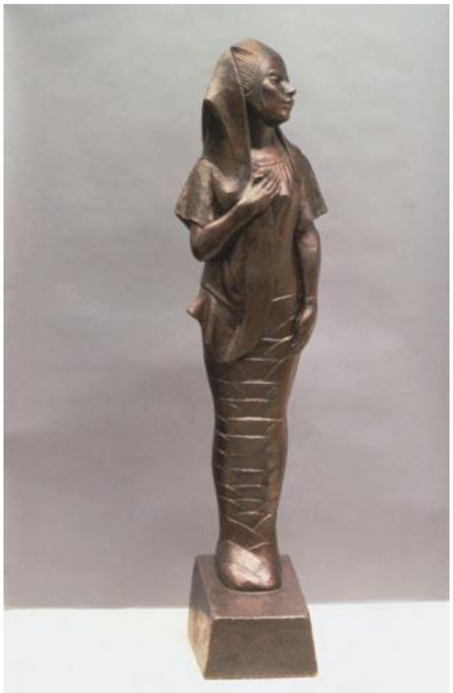


Figure 36: Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, *Ethiopia,* Bronze, 1921

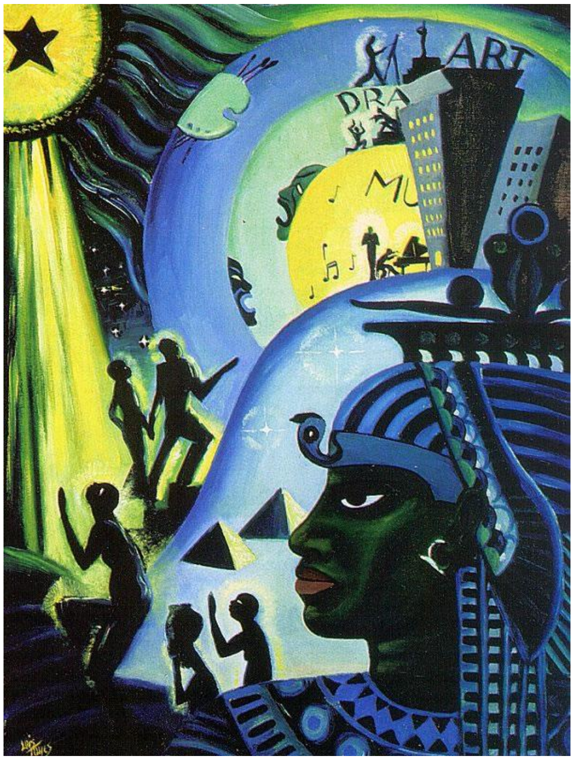


Figure 37: Lois Mailou Jones, *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, Oil on canvas, 1932

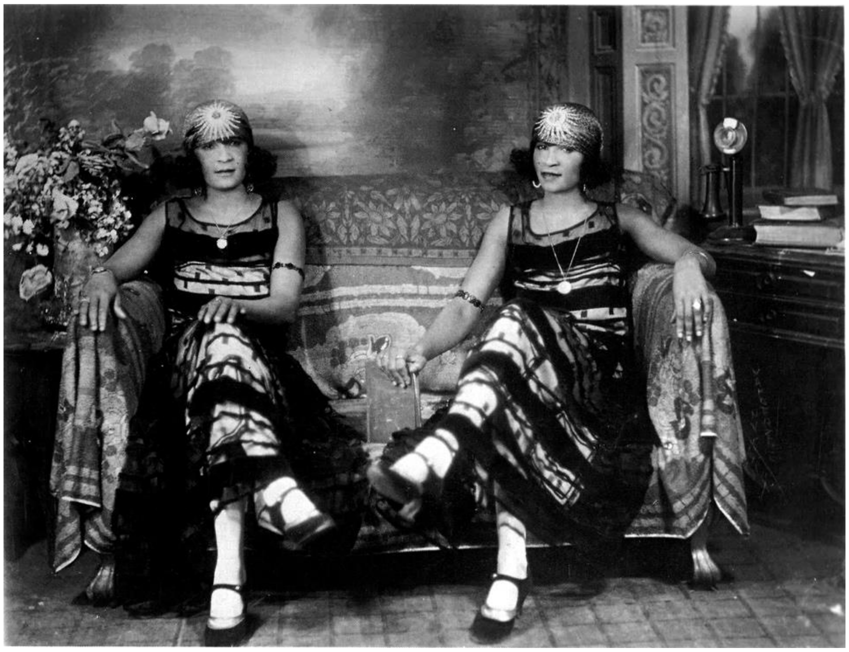


Figure 38: *Identical Twins*, Gelatin silver print, 1924

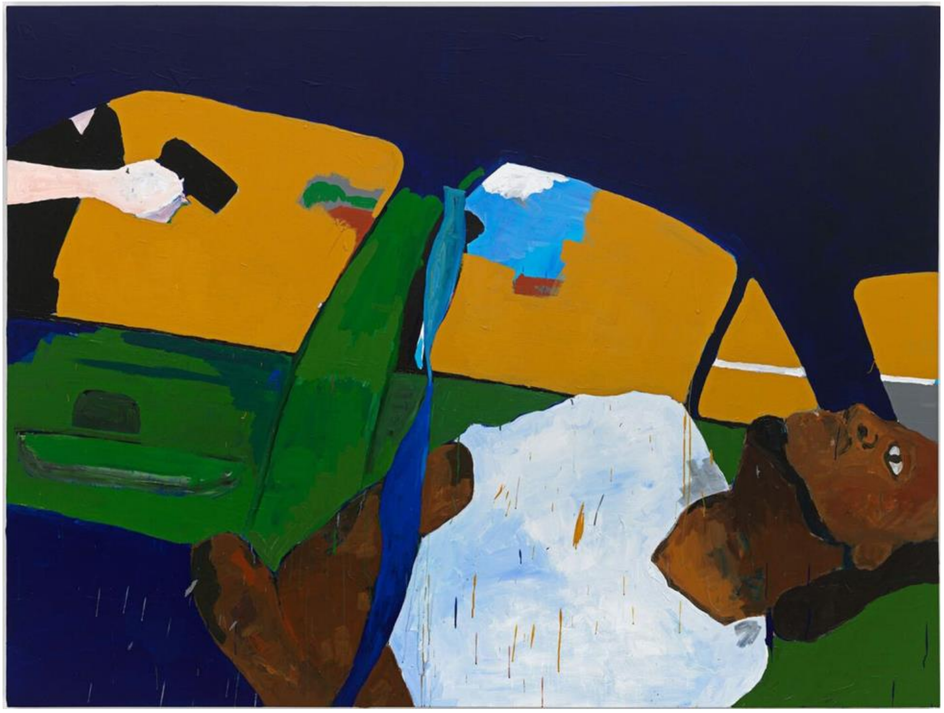


Figure 39: Henry Taylor, *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!*, Acrylic on canvas, 2017