Reading the Shadows — The Photography of Roy DeCarava

Ruth Wallen

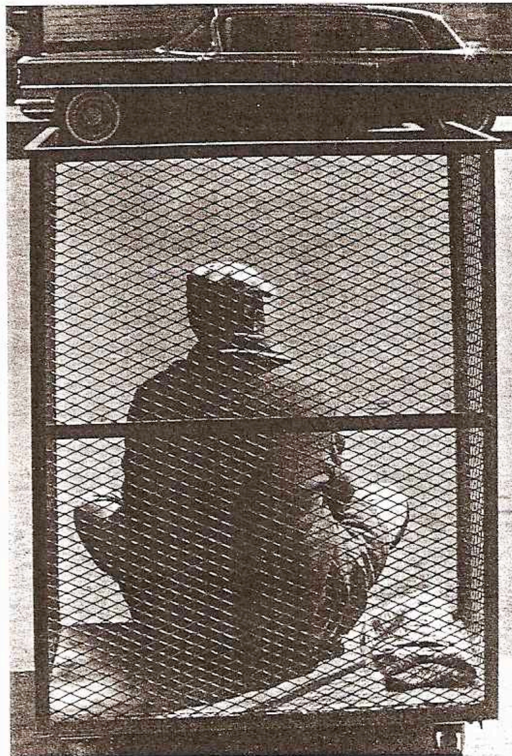

Figure 1. Roy DeCarava, *Man on Cart*, 1966.

At an exhibition of Roy DeCarava's photography, I am struck by one of the images. A black man is sitting in a delivery cart watching a limousine pass by on the street. Simultaneously, I hear a phrase from the videotape that accompanies the show. The artist, Roy DeCarava, is saying that he is trying to depict the "concept of a world shaped by blackness."[1] My gaze returns to the photograph: what a poor man, staring out at the riches of a world he cannot enter (Fig. 1). Indeed, he looks as if he's caged in, surrounded by the chain-link sides of the cart. But DeCarava's words echo in my mind. All I can see is the back of this man. I can't really tell what he is experiencing. The chain-link "fence" separates his body from my gaze. The front of the cart is open; he is free to move as he pleases. The longer I look, the more apparent the question—who is caged in and who is building the fences?

In a review of the exhibition where I first saw his work, at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, DeCarava is hailed as a forgotten black genius.[2] The scant literature about his work is replete with accolades as well as the corresponding laments about the lack of attention which he receives. The work is arresting, sensitive, visually pleasing, and syntactically complex. It deserves the greater audience

and recognition that is finally beginning to develop. But this fashionable, easy-to-merchandize package—"DeCarava the token rediscovered black hero"—comes apart before the ribbons have been tied. It is time to look inside.

Roy DeCarava's images are compelling. From intimate portraits in dimly lit rooms, to streets busy at day and night, to sweating jazz musicians, they describe a rich, vital world. There are no icons of suffering, no Migrant or Minimata Mothers to be appreciated, pitied compassionately from a safe distance. Instead the viewer is asked to peer into the shadows, to look where the image is only vaguely delineated and contemplate that which can only barely be seen. The brilliance of DeCarava's work tempers any tendency toward quick, absolute judgment, demanding a careful reevaluation of the concepts of difference and identity.

A fuller reading of the photographs, while long overdue, is not without its perils. Clearly, if *Man Sitting on Cart* is indicative of the work, DeCarava has something to communicate to all viewers. But since the images deal with the charged issues of racism, racial identity, and difference, the viewer's prejudices assume particular importance. Barthes' claim that "the reading of the photograph is thus always historical; it depends on the reader's 'knowledge,' just as though it were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned the signs" is crucial.[3] As a nonblack writer, my temptation to conceal guilt or loss of privileged position by selectively reading the photographs to create another fence, box, or boundary is all too evident. Aware that his work would be received by a racially mixed audience, DeCarava directly addresses this tendency to cling to misconceptions and racist stereotypes.

The depth of DeCarava's work has been largely unappreciated. Because of the context and limited venues in which the photographs have been shown, the readings have too often conformed to the dominant concerns of the white male photographic canon. For example, DeCarava was fortunate to have his work appreciated and collected by two successive curators of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, both important voices in the shaping of photographic criticism, Edward Steichen and John Szarkowski. Both exhibited and discussed his work in light of their own concerns. DeCarava, through Steichen's lens, became the black photographer, revealing the "humanity" of Harlem. DeCarava's photographs were included in "The Family of Man," but like all the images in that show, they became part of Steichen's grand quilt, and their potency was neutralized.[4] As Szarkowski rose to prominence and countered Steichen's populism and honey-coated humanism, DeCarava became the street photographer par excellence, capturing the bizarre and eccentric.

But Roy DeCarava states that he is trying to depict the black experience. A close look at his photographs will demonstrate that while DeCarava describes the richness of African-American life, his photos do not suggest that blacks are part of one universal happy family. While Shirley Turner DeCarava entitles her essay about her husband's work, "Celebration," this refers more to the joy of discovery or redefinition than to a reassurance of the indelible human spirit.[5] DeCarava did photograph on the street and did use conventions popularized by other street photographers of the day, but when he recorded odd juxtapositions it was not for their own sake, but to depict a world gone mad, or given the gentleness of his style, at least a world out of balance.

DeCarava's work must be read in the frame of black culture. Coincidentally, at the time when I first considered his photographs, I had been reading the work of two African-American writers, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. Both writers pay careful attention to black language. Folktales, the black vernacular, and particularly names help fully develop black characters. In contrast, white characters generally appear infrequently and then are depicted one-dimensionally. When the white yardstick creeps in, it is stripped of all power by language, reduced to its physical form, a toy to be played with, mocked, measured, or discarded in the corner. Both Morrison and Hurston layer meaning. For instance, characters may have official names, but their nicknames, what lies "beneath the names," shape their identity.[6] In the beginning of *Song of Solomon* the events take place on Not Doctor Street. It is explained that the community had named the street Doctor Street after the first black doctor who lived there. As Morrison tells it, after the doctor died, when the city fathers were fighting to have the street properly designated, they put up a sign

saying that the street would:

> *always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.*
>
> *It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street, and were inclined to call the charity hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital . . .*[7]

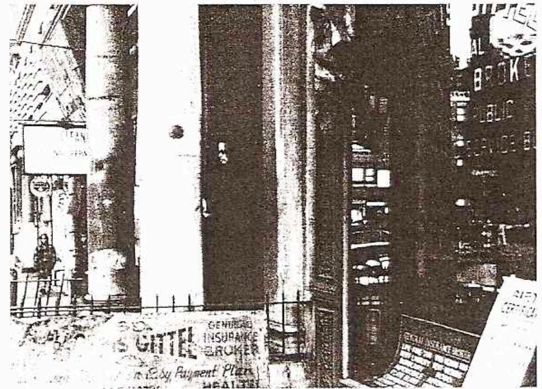

Figure 2. Roy DeCarava, *Gittel*, 1950.

Through language, these writers construct a black identity. Not only do they use language differently, but one is asked to read differently as well, to understand a rhetorical strategy where meaning, as understood as standard white middle-class English, is called into question.

The rhetorical strategies employed by Morrison and Hurston are most fully explicated in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*.[8] Gates undertakes a thorough examination of the writers' strategy, which he convincingly argues is central to African-American literature–Signifyin(g). In brief, Gates argues that signifying, written as "Signifyin(g)" both to distinguish it from the white "signifying" and to acknowledge the importance of its place in black vernacular, is a complex renaming ritual, a verbal play where the signifier is doubled and redoubled, presenting both standard and new definitions of a term simultaneously. Gates cites Gary Saul Morson's elaboration of Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse to describe the process as follows:

> *The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position")* and *the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view.*[9]

One says one thing but simultaneously comments on the literal utterance. Opposing points of view are presented together, thereby subjecting standard meaning to immediate revision. The doubling of the signifier is crucial, as it breaks the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Once this relationship is ruptured and opposing signifieds ascribed to the signifier, the "concepts signified by the signifier" are shown to be "arbitrary."[10]

Gates suggests that this rhetorical strategy has its roots in tales of the signifying monkey that originated in slavery. In these tales the monkey is "the great signifier" constantly tricking the lion, his physical superior, through his skillful use of the black vernacular. Like any trickster, the monkey never confronts the lion directly, but always ascribes the source of his insults to a third party–the elephant. By provoking two opposing, and more equally matched, forces he turns the lion against the elephant, who in turn literally squashes the lion for his ridiculous accusations. Through the monkey's skillful use of language–of irony, humor, punning, double meaning, rhyming, repetition–the lion's position as king of the jungle is called into question.

Gates persuasively argues that Signifyin(g) is the "black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures." Signifyin(g) subsumes many black rhetorical tropes including "marking, loud talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on."[11] By revising, or offering a commentary on the standard English (white middle-class) signifier, meaning is dislodged from its hegemonic position. Signifyin(g) gets right to the core of the issue, offering a critique of "the nature of (white) meaning itself" and challenging "the meaning of meaning."[12] As Gates suggests, the retention of "the identical signifier argues strongly that

the most poignant level of black-white differences is that of meaning, of 'signification' in the most literal sense."[13] The lineal relationship between signifier, signified, and concept is broken by an array of double-voiced rhetorical structures that create an alternate black system of meaning.

In his discussion of the signifying monkey tales, Gates stresses the importance of the third party and cautions against the tendency "to reduce such complex structures of meaning to a simple two-term opposition."[14] It is always the elephant that reduces the lion to a pulp, while the monkey simply plays provocateur. The monkey stands outside the duel of physical prowess and by doing so disrupts standard logic and notions of cause and effect. Who can be blamed for the lion's demise?

Similarly, in Hurston's *Mules and Men*, a collection of African-American folktales, the tellers call their tales "lies."[15] Of what power are the charges of falsehood or quaint naiveté when the liar freely admits to their untruths? By calling their tales "lies," they undermine the standard dichotomy of truth/falsehood. As Robert Hemenway observes in his introduction to the book, these "lies" are not "reactive phenomena," simply to "be interpreted in the light of white oppression," but independent creations.[16] These tales are interspersed with vivid stories about the wild parties during which they were collected. The distinction between the tales and the supposedly scientific processes of collection becomes blurred; neither is more real or true.

None of the tales posits a simple role reversal where black slaves suddenly become the rich, powerful "Massas." Instead, in the many tales about John and his Massa, the slave John, like the signifying monkey, outwits Massa by trickery. Massa's blind faith in the absolute nature of truth and of his place in it leads to his demise. For instance, in one tale John repeatedly whips Massa's horse and allows his grandmother to ride in Massa's buggy, actions inappropriate to John's slave status.[17] Each time Massa finds out he punishes John, first by killing John's horse, then his grandmother. Every time, John says that if the punishment is carried out "ah'll beatcher makin' money." And indeed, he always does. Massa, in turn, assumes that there is a lineal relationship between the punishment and the monetary reward. Avariciously, he responds by killing his own horse and then his grandmother, receiving only grief and ridicule in return. What he never figures out is that John makes his money by using the hide of his dead horse to tell white peoples' fortunes about the evils about to befall them. It is the white folk who provide John's riches. And it is these same people who ridicule Massa when he comes to town expecting to sell a horsehide or a corpse for sacks of gold. Ironically, these white folk become the third party against whom Massa fails to measure himself. Massa's lineal understanding of cause and effect proves short-sighted; ultimately he, not John, ends up at the bottom of the river.

The binary oppositions of truth/falsehood, good/evil, powerful/oppressed, smart/stupid, rich/poor, white/black, and insider/outsider are all called into question in this tale. When John tells fortunes that prove to be accurate, are these predictions, uttered while beating a horse's hide, the truth? Is he either smart or stupid in telling his tales, or his white audience smart or stupid in believing them? If he can foretell white folk's fate, who is more powerful? John's clever fortune-telling benefits from an accurate knowledge of white society's habits and fears as well as superstition, cunning, intuition, and likely a bit of luck, strategies that do not fit into rigid dichotomies. To Massa a horsehide is an object to be sold or traded for money. John broadens the field, using the hide as a means to provide a service for which he gets paid. Gates, like other postmodernist critics of lineal history, points out that a crucial attribute of Signifyin(g) is that it includes "everything that must be excluded for meaning to remain coherent and lineal."[18]

John brilliantly signifies on the whole white obsession with money. Massa will do anything to get rich and the townspeople will pay anything to protect their possessions. Ironically, John walks away with more horses, livestock, and sacks of gold than any thief could steal. Without directly competing with white folk, John becomes a rich man. Gates argues that in the context of Lacanian theory John's alternative strategies are designated as "other," an "otherness" that white discourse is invested in maintaining. Black slaves are excluded from commerce; their daily toil benefits only their masters. So John strikes obliquely at the white obsession with material possessions and

walks off with the loot, only to further enrage his master because he has refused to play by the rules. Through a strategy of double-voiced inclusion, the hegemonic power of white truth, central to the reification of difference and corresponding justification of black oppression, is dismantled. At one point one of Hurston's characters says "you gointer hear lies above suspicion."[19] What makes a good lie authentic? Perhaps how well it signifies, how well it dislodges the signified from the signifier and demonstrates the arbitrariness of standard meaning.

While Gates focuses his argument on African-American literature, his analysis is crucial to understanding Roy DeCarava's work and probably that of other African-American photographers as well. To take the image cited at the beginning, of the man in the cart, which appears to be a cage, it is no longer clear whether the chain-link signifier refers to entrapment or protection. Or perhaps more cleverly, what was initially thought of as entrapment may be reread as protection from the overly curious outsider. This new interpretation then suggests a further dislocation, as the meaning of the sign is questioned. Does the loss of privilege occur to the one who is caged in or to the one who is caged out?

Employing African-American literature as the inspiration for such readings raises the question of the relationship between rhetorical strategies used in fiction and photography. Certain strategies, such as the use of metaphor, are common to both. But I am not arguing that photographic imagery constitutes a language, metalanguage, or half-language, other than to suggest that the photographs themselves are texts, containing signs, which, following Barthes' lead, we can read according to our cultural biases. African-American writers can provide a new context, an example of signification that may allow us to "isolate, inventoriate and structure all the 'historical' elements of the photograph" in a new way, to read the photograph in a fresh light.[20]

With a camera as his tool, Roy DeCarava seeks both to explore and recreate his world. Initially his position is not unlike Zora Neale Hurston's. He does work in his community but also answers to a white New York establishment. Interestingly, in one of his early photographs, *Gittel,* DeCarava addresses the power of language to invent reality (Fig. 2). Gittel

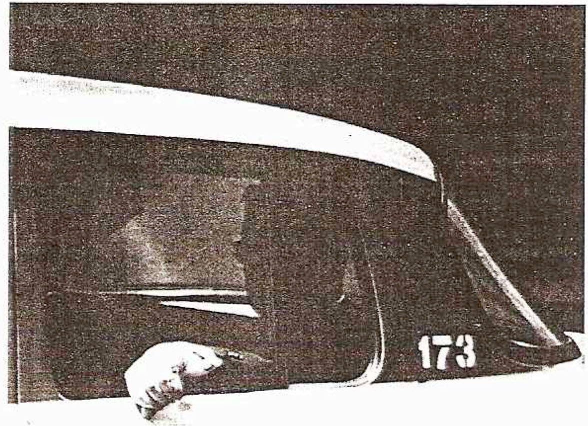

Figure 3. Roy DeCarava, *Cab 173,* 1963.

is everything–an insurance broker, a notary public, a lawyer, a private licensed service bureau, and more. One sign advertises, in English and Spanish, insurance for everything one could imagine, from "life, fire, taxi, rent, liability, burglary, automobile, plate glass, compensation ...," continuing until it becomes unreadable. Another sign openly promises that "we can help you in obtaining your birth certificates especially if you were born in the south." Gittel will guide one through the world of documents, help one to obtain the power and privilege associated with the right words, the right papers. In a similar way, DeCarava uses his photographs to lead the viewer through his world. His rich imagery provides for a fresh reading, where signifiers are continually doubled, as black codes are imposed on top of white codes and meaning is redefined.

The majority of DeCarava's images are of African-Americans, whom he portrays in an engaging, complex manner. This black world, the world often associated with evil and shadows in contemporary white culture, is alive and multifaceted. In marked contrast, when DeCarava turns his camera on the white world, he depicts an overly materialistic, rigid society, deliberately assailing white values and logocentrism. Perhaps DeCarava's richest images are those that depict dichotomies, either literally with black and white figures, or figuratively, using shapes and symbols. These images are loaded with found text and complex metaphors, providing for a reading that mocks simplistic, dualistic interpretations of these comparisons. Overall, a close reading of DeCarava's

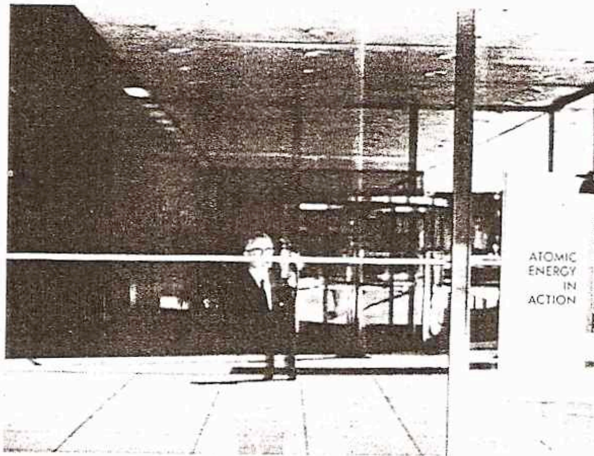

Figure 4. Roy DeCarava, *Atomic Energy*, 1963.

work suggests that he signifies on racism and the dualistic logic of difference by which it is be justified.

DeCarava literally explores the world of blackness. From jazz clubs, to subway stations, to dimly lit tenements, to the street at night, many of his photographs are taken where there is very little light. His prints are placed almost entirely on the lower end of the gray scale. Various shades of blacks and dark grays predominate, with only an occasional streak of light. Even when he photographs during the day, the images are often printed to emphasize the dark gray tones. But the range of emotions is hardly monochromatic. DeCarava may photograph the isolated man pensive by the window, or workers waiting for the subway, but there are also many images of people playing and partying.

The white world, in contrast, is presented as bleak, sterile, and one-dimensional. Like Morrison and Hurston, DeCarava focuses a relatively small portion of his work on this world, but when he does white people are depicted as dispassionate, cold, hardened apparitions–even the children. Faces, if shown, are generally covered by dark glasses. There is no warmth between figures. The backgrounds, if any, are lifeless offices or denuded trees. In one photograph, aptly titled *Child and Bowl of Fruit*, both sit on the table, perfectly still, neatly arranged, meticulously coiffured. With new patent leather shoes, a ruffled white dress, and carefully arranged blond curls, the child is picture perfect, on display, a doll neatly added to this domestic still life.

The power of the white presence and dominant cultural values are literally dismembered. Often the photograph is cropped to show only a portion of a figure. In *Cab 173* all that is visible is the passenger's hand with glittering cuff links, watch, and large ring protruding from the dark interior of the cab's rear window (Fig. 3). The glittering gold status symbols are the only synecdoche given for the white man's being. But DeCarava has included the taxi's number, 173, stamped clearly in the corner of the image. The individual status and power commonly signified by the gold accouterments are undercut by this anonymous reference.

In *White Glove*, DeCarava crops the image to include only the woman's lap. While her lovely, seemingly innocent, flowered dress forms a border for the image, the central focus is her white purse and white-gloved hand, menacingly holding a white cigarette. *Two Men with Packages, Talking* depicts the torsos of two dark-suited businessmen, facing each other, clutching folders and briefcases. *Three Men Walking* shows them from the rear, cropped at the chest, briefcase, cigarette, and gold-tipped cane lagging behind their dark figures. Finally, in *Lunch Hour* DeCarava includes their faces. But they have been shot facing the bright sun and all but one wears glasses. What is visible of their faces looks like an ugly, squinted scowl.[21]

In *Manikins,* DeCarava lays out all the pieces even more graphically.[22] Strewn around a shop window are disassembled manikins–legs, arms, and smiling faces with blond wigs. It is evident how it could all be put together; knobs poke out at the waist, there are gaping sprocket holes at the arms, and scissors, ribbon, and thread are left lying about. Amid the clutter, legs are propped in enticing stances, faces are frozen seductively, and hair is meticulously permed–the vestiges of glamour. But the poses are literally in pieces, each a vain, lifeless object.

Whiteness is more closely equated with absence than presence. *White Glove* is one of the few images where the lighter tones predominate, but they become eerily ghostlike in their rendition. In *Two Men with Packages,* the image centers on the empty space between the two black-clad figures. Another photograph, *Unknown Head*, includes only a white ghostly oval blur in the center with two smaller ovals underneath on either side. The blurred ovals suggest a

deathly poison, a skull and crossbones, or the horror that lurks behind the white face. (Less one wonder whether I am reading too much into this image, DeCarava himself, in a talk about his work, referred to this image as a white skull.)[23] *Atomic Energy* presents the same theme more literally (Fig. 4). In the window of a modern glass building displaying the sign "Atomic Energy in Action" is the reflection of a well-dressed, middle-aged white man. Inside, reflections of the metal latticework repeat endlessly. It is as if the man simultaneously is looking into and reflected by a transparent hall of horrors. Lee Friedlander's game of photographing reflections takes on a sudden potency.

Like the "play toys" Hurston puts out for the white man to fondle, the playful oddities of DeCarava's images of white folks are amusing as well as sinister.[24] One of these images is the only representation of DeCarava's work in three of Szarkowski's books, *The Photographer's Eye*, *Looking at Photographs*, and the recently published *Photography Until Now*.[25] Prominently displayed in the center of this untitled image is the familiar black briefcase (Fig. 5). Again the figure is cropped; the briefcase is held behind his back and only his white fingers curled underneath are visible. Describing this photograph in relation to the tradition of street photography Szarkowski writes:

> *Plot has become increasingly tenuous, action has become progressively arbitrary. . . [street photography] seemed to concentrate more and more on the odd and unexplained fragments of life, the mysterious pieces that are left over when we thought the kit was fully assembled.*
>
> *DeCarava's picture is a case in point. Our reaction is suspended between terror and nervous laughter: What is this strange misbegotten creature, clinging precariously to the ledge of its briefcase? Perhaps it is a chessman in contemporary dress, a bishop perhaps, his folio filled with laws and Latin words. To which square will his principal move him next?*[26]

Szarkowski's language is unnecessarily, perhaps defensively, mystifying. In the context of DeCarava's images of white businessmen, this char-

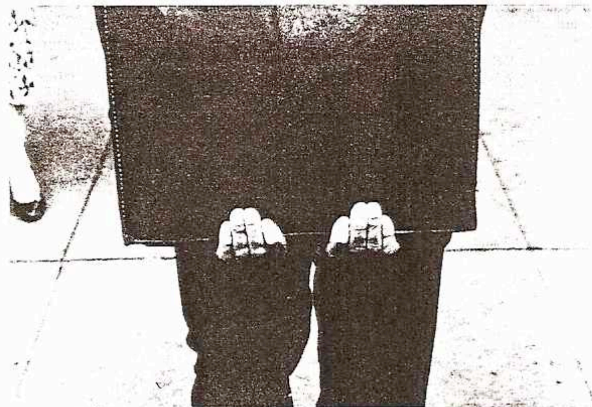

Figure 5. Roy DeCarava, *Untitled*, 1959.

acter is clearly recognizable and the plot identifiable. Like the businessman dangling his ring and gold watch out the cab window, we see all that we need to see–not an isolated fragment, but a simple loaded metaphor. Prominently placed in the middle of the picture, the black ominous briefcase is hardly a symbol for the "precarious," "strange," or "misbegotten." Szarkowski's reaction may be one "suspended between terror and nervous laughter," but if so perhaps he is afraid of seeing something of himself in the picture. DeCarava is playing the game that Hurston describes so well–playful evasiveness. "Smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries" and art-world hype, his imagery is presented in two codes, one to be read by the fashionable art world and another which, rereading the first, more bluntly expresses his experience.[27]

By Signifyin(g) on white folk, DeCarava robs white status symbols of their potency. He continually undercuts the glory of power, privilege, and glamour. And like the trickster, DeCarava stands outside the opposition he draws. In the image that fascinates Szarkowski, a woman's leg with high-heeled shoe is barely visible in the upper left corner. So is there some drama being played out between these two figures? Like most of DeCarava's images of white people, the photograph is a meticulously framed close-up. While the convention of the isolated, abstracted fragment frequently denotes high art sophistication, DeCarava employs it to magnify the signifiers. These "unexplained fragments" or "leftover" pieces are laid out in a blunt, overstated, humorous way, depicting the closed system, the mutual vacuous attraction of

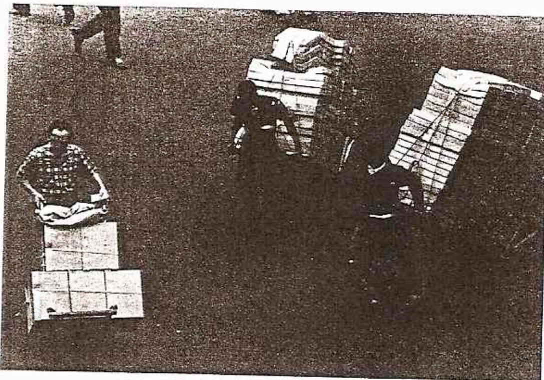

Figure 6. Roy DeCarava, *Three Men with Hand Trucks*, 1963.

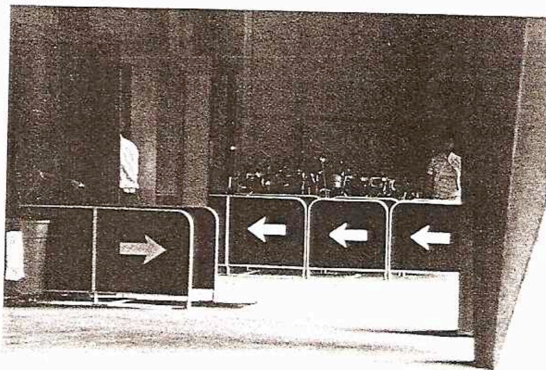

Figure 7. Roy DeCarava, *Four Arrows and Towel*, 1975.

glamour and power. This image, like others, does not compare the races to each other but instead provides a critique of dominant white values. DeCarava photographs businessmen and well-dressed women, the "best" of white society. Images of wealth, prestige, and power are isolated, magnified, and ultimately deflated to lifeless apparitions. It is almost as if DeCarava is playing the dozens, a particularly derisive form of Signifyin(g), on white folk, but no one understands the game.[28]

Only a few of DeCarava's works directly address inequity or oppression. In *Three Men with Hand Trucks* (Fig. 6), or in *Asphalt Workers*, blacks sweat while whites look on or shoulder only a light load.[29] Aloof white bosses and hard-working black men–the inequity is blatant. The images could also be read as simple reversals of virtues stereotypically ascribed to both races, the blacks depicted as honest and diligent and the whites as lazy cheats. But as Audre Lorde states, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[30] Role reversal does not end oppression.

DeCarava seldom directly depicts inequity. Instead, dichotomies are shown metaphorically, in terms of lines in the street, arrows, opposite sides of subway stations, light and shadow, or inside and outside. Some of DeCarava's images are almost abstractions. In *Four Arrows and Towel, Washington D.C.* (Fig. 7) there are four white arrows on four black partitions. Three arrows point left, and one, in front, points right. The area behind the three arrows is jammed with bicycles and other equipment. A woman stands off in the back right corner. The space in front of the arrows is empty except for two men and a trash can in the opposite front corner. The image is full of oppositions, left and right, back and front, men and women, and emptiness versus clutter. Open doors on one side of the image and concrete columns on the other provide even more planes of focus, more possible divisions and literally many exits from the composition. So what does it all mean? There are so many divisions, everything is balanced. Each suggestion of motion is cancelled by another. The significance of any one dichotomy is minimized by the presence of so many. The image suggests that any interpretation of this highly constructed composition is arbitrary.

In other images DeCarava confronts racial stereotypes head on, depicting a stereotypical presentation of difference, but simultaneously doubling the signifiers to provide many possible signifieds. At the center of the composition in *Boy Playing, Man Walking* (Fig. 8) is a black man with his face turned toward the viewer. Next to him is a spray-painted image of a skull or ape's head. In one sense it is as if the man is daring the white viewer: "So you think that I really look like that!" But the black outline of a head is spray-painted on a white wall. Is it a white or black skull? In front and to the side of the man is a white child. His face is turned sideways and covered with the ubiquitous glasses. Is the boy young and innocent? The graffiti may have been painted by a boy not much older than this one. How young do belief systems start? Reading it from another angle, it posits that we all are alike, have skulls, and are descended from apes. Yet the black figure is manly, with the courage to face the viewer, whereas the white figure is childish and

will only look away.[31]

Another photograph, *Sun and Shade*, (Fig. 9) can be read as a direct argument against the black adoption of white codes. In this picture the sun casts a shadow through the middle of the image, dividing the pavement into a dark and a light section. On the lit side, a boy is running. It looks as if he is holding a soda can in one hand and with the other is pointing a gun at the raised hands of a defenseless female child in the dark. Though in most of his photographs sunlight symbolizes whiteness, here DeCarava places a black figure in the sun.

The photograph is reminiscent of a passage in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. One of the main characters, Guitar, is obsessed with getting revenge on the callous white man. He joins a group of seven men, called the Days, dedicated to avenging murder by white people. Any time a black person is killed, the man assigned to the day of the week on which the murder took place is responsible for killing a white person in as similar a manner as possible. Guitar's friend, Milkman, responds upon hearing of the plans, "it's a habit. If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody."[32] By the end of the book, Guitar has just killed Pilate, Milkman's aunt and purveyor of black folk wisdom, and is aiming a rifle at his buddy's head.

Like Guitar at the end of *Song of Solomon*, the boy in *Sun and Shade* seems to be bullying and taunting the other child. He has the gun and the soda can. Robbery, rape, murder–this image can be read as a condemnation of black-upon-black violence. DeCarava seems to suggest that to replay oppression perpetrated by white society is inherently dangerous and will only result in continued suffering.

In *Sun and Shade*, positions are solidified; the boy points the gun at the upraised hands of the girl. Standing in the lit portion of the image, he has adopted the position of power, of the insider. Unlike the trickster, who adopts a stance that is constantly in motion, constantly changing, this boy adopts a rigid pose: "stick 'em up." He is stuck in his oppositional role.

In contrast, consider Zora Neale Hurston, an especially skilled trickster. She never holds still long enough to be typecast in a set role or position, but is constantly strategizing, adopting whatever voice is most appropriate for the moment. Barbara Johnson persuasively argues that Hurston's dexterous structures of address undercut oppositions such as the insider/outsider, while commenting on "the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference."[33] In support of her analysis, Johnson cites Hurston's com-

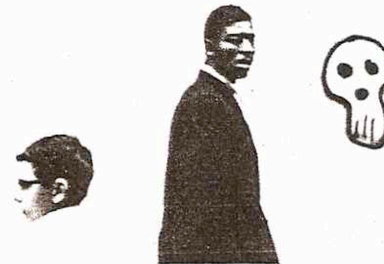

Figure 8. Roy DeCarava, *Boy Playing, Man Walking*, 1966.

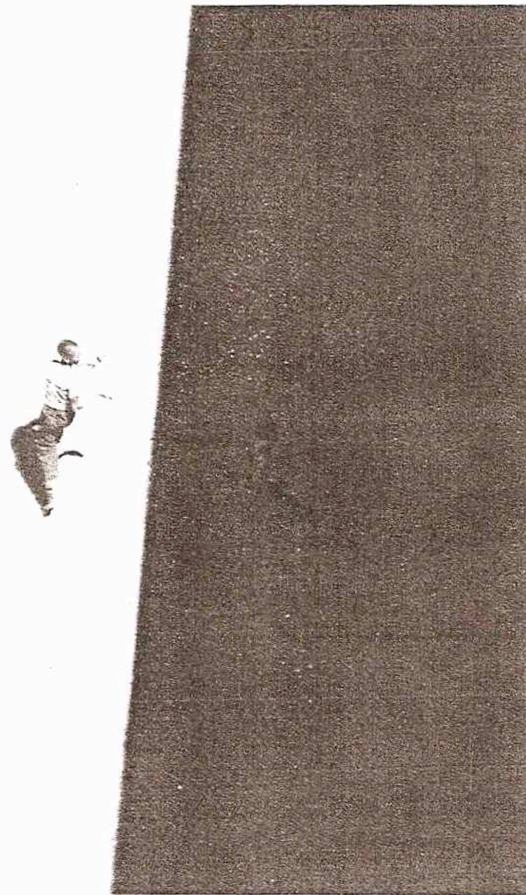

Figure 9. Roy DeCarava, *Sun and Shade*, 1952.

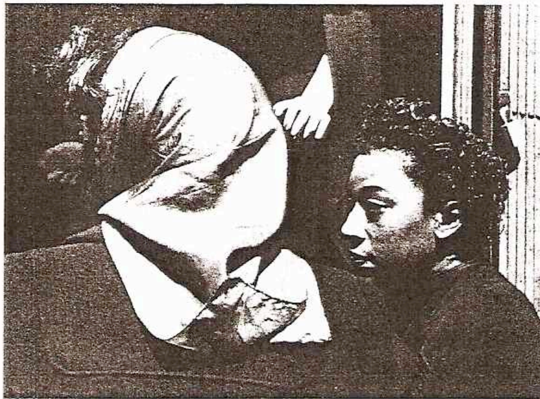

Figure 10. Roy DeCarava, *Two Women, Manikin's Hand,* 1950.

ments on how to collect folklore. Hurston writes:

> *the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.*
>
> *The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."*[34]

One minute Hurston mimics white authority. The next minute she acknowledges her black identity and submissively tells the white reader, "you see we are a polite people ..." And in the next paragraph, again adopting the authoritative third person, she scrutinizes the white man. As Barbara Johnson has concluded, "Hurston suspends the certainty of reference not by erasing these differences but by foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction."[35] There is no universalized "other."

By constantly shifting her position, Hurston challenges the reader's position as well. Similarly, DeCarava in *Man on Cart* presents a man caged in, outside the nonblack viewer's experience, and simultaneously moves the viewer to a safe distance from the man's world. The provocation for alternate readings undermines the solidity of basic categories and commonly held prejudices.

Another photograph which challenges the viewers' position by provoking a multiplicity of readings is *Two Women, Manikin's Hand* (Fig. 10). Two black women walk by a white manikin in a store window. But the viewer does not see a smartly dressed manikin in clothes too expensive for the women's wallets. Or black women eyeing something beyond their means. Instead of staring at the window, the women, comfortably dressed in warm coats, look off to their left. All that is visible of the model is a stark white hand reaching out from a dark coat–the menacing white apparition, reminiscent of *White Glove*. DeCarava himself called it "the ghost hand."[36] Beside the hand, at the edge of the window, is a metal grating, pushed back, with a padlock in clear view. Is the padlock to keep out the black thieves at night? Or will the women outside be protected from the ghastly white materialist menace? Are the women denied access to the material world, or is this world largely an illusive, potentially evil apparition? Just who is really inside and who outside? Again, does the cage offer protection or entrapment? Or, void of their connotations of power and privilege, are the categories of insider and outsider meaningless? Just who can be said to be "other?"

In both *Two Women, Manikin's Hand* and *Man on Cart*, the black subjects of the photograph look off to the side, past the frame of the picture, and not to an object identified with the white world. The viewer is placed in the position of making the comparison between the races, not the protagonists. We are not shown the protagonists' faces and can only guess at what they are thinking.

Generally only when DeCarava photographs black people in their own world, in their own homes,

does he include their faces. Then their expressions reflect a world that is alive, multi-faceted, and vibrant. This facet of his work is most thoroughly presented in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a book made in collaboration with Langston Hughes.[37] As a grandmother surveys the neighborhood, the reader is led on a journey through black Harlem. There is a whole series of Jerry with his children (Fig. 11). The children are smiling, laughing or dozing off, alternately crowded at his feet, sitting on his lap, held up to the camera, or flung over his shoulder. All of the shots look candid, unposed, as if DeCarava was a frequent visitor. DeCarava also photographs the family eating at the table or partying in the kitchen with the neighbors. Women are shown taking care of kids, ironing, washing dishes, trudging off to work on the subway, reading the paper, or getting dressed to go out on the town. There is no simple compositional formula in these shots. Unlike pictures of whites, when the black figures are cropped, faces and torsos are included in the pictures. When there is more than one figure, they are often touching each other with some suggestion of intimacy.[38]

Whatever our race or ethnicity, in these intimate photos we see people just like ourselves. Thus Steichen could easily employ them to emphasize the essential humanness in all of us. But in a world where African-Americans are all too often seen as "other" and somehow different, these vital photographs of the black family, when coupled with DeCarava's images that addresses difference, total a radical body of work. As Zora Neale Hurston observed forty years ago, "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America."[39] DeCarava photographs black life in a style too varied to be reduced to a simple essence and reserves stereotyped depiction for pictures of white people, a stereotype "to play with and handle" which is ultimately divested of its potency.[40]

DeCarava takes the task of photographing African-Americans quite literally, concentrating, in many of his images, on black life in the shadows, his visual signifier for blackness. In his jazz photographs DeCarava takes this exploration furthest, employing abstract visual strategies. Printed primarily in blackness, often with blurred focus, these photographs include only a glimmer of light, a hint of motion, or a pouring of sweat. These images depict, mirror, the passion and the pathos of playing jazz. The shadows come alive, pulsating with brilliance. They present a powerful image of exuberance in the shadows, of a literally black experience and an African-American identity.[41]

And that baby had ruther set on his lap than nurse its mama
Never saw a baby so crazy about its daddy:

Figure 11. Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955.

Graduation, one of DeCarava's strongest images (much too potent to be included in "The Family of Man") fully examines the richness of the black world of shadows (Fig. 12). Again, while superficially indulging in simple stereotypes, this photograph poignantly depicts the complexity of the black subject's experience. A black woman dressed in a lavish white gown strolls past an empty trash-filled

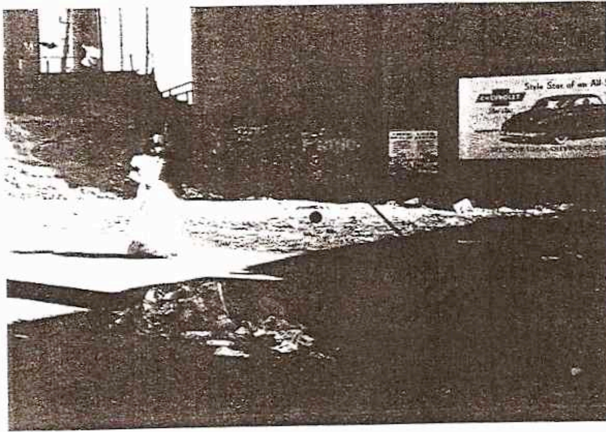

Figure 12. Roy DeCarava, *Graduation*, 1949.

lot. Though bathed in sunlight, she is heading into the shadows. Cinderella at midnight. At first glance the image looks depressingly pessimistic. Here is a young woman, her future ahead of her, walking into a shadowy dump. But even in this desolate scene, the shadowy world is rich in imagery. On the wall behind the empty lot is the word PRINC(E), a poster with a heading "EL GRITO DE UNA MUJER EN LA NOCHE" (the scream of a woman in the night), and most prominently, a large poster advertising Chevrolet, "Style Car of An All-Star Line." Beside the curb is a pile of trash including a newspaper with a headline about the Korean War and what appears to be a portable trash can. This shadowy world is full of both dreams and perils. The girl may meet her prince and drive a brand-new Chevrolet, or scream in the night as she is raped, her new-found love is killed in the war, or both are buried in poverty. The trash may be cleaned up and carted away, or ignored and allowed to accumulate.

To follow the fairytale, how often is Cinderella's dainty foot thought of as black or her abode as a slum? Who is the unjust stepmother in this tale? Who is the prince? Can the economically privileged viewer passively look at this image and expect others to effect the princely rescue? Less one be carried away by liberal self-righteousness, another reading would question the girl's need for a fairy godmother. She may succeed on her own. Though the contrast of her gorgeous white gown and the littered surroundings is quite striking, in her world hope and fear, poverty and potential have coexisted for some time.

Such an image again illustrates Roy DeCarava's tendency to double the signifiers. At first glance it is hard not to pity the girl. While she is wearing a beautiful dress, bathed in sunlight, she is headed into the shadows. But are these shadows so threatening? There is trash in both the lit and shadowed portions of the picture, but all the imagery pertaining to the future, both positive and negative, is placed in the shadows. The shadows house the riches as well as the dangers. DeCarava's persistent focus on life in the shadows demands that they be read in a new way, as fertile ground full of possibilities.

However, the focus on the individual journey, of the singular nature of the passage to adulthood, so well illustrated in *Graduation*, represents a potentially troubling aspect of DeCarava's work. Contrast this image to the the end of *Song of Solomon*, where the protagonist, Milkman, struggles to make sense of his world, to establish an identity richer than the hopelessness thrust upon him. His journey becomes a search for roots. Through his discovery of family and community he learns new codes, new ways of telling, and is empowered. In a similar way Jaime, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, finds her own voice when she learns to play games and participate in black vernacular life.[42] The limited sampling of available DeCarava photographs, those that have been published in books or catalogues or have been exhibited, do not tend to place this same value on community. There is a preponderance of images that, like *Graduation*, depict solitary protagonists and isolated quests. Does DeCarava believe that new codes can be established in isolation, or is his focus on the individual simply due to the influence of prevailing modernist practice? Only in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, where Hughes, a black writer, chose the photographs, is there a much higher proportion of group shots. Hughes' writing evinces a deep appreciation for the black family and accordingly he includes many more of these images that are perhaps undervalued by other curators.[43] Furthermore, in this book, pictures of individuals are often placed together on the same page, undercutting the isolation, or uniqueness of a particular image (Fig. 11). Without access to DeCarava's full body of work, it is unclear how much he personally emphasizes the individual journey and how much this seeming emphasis is due to curatorial and publishing bias. Langston

Hughes reads DeCarava's images with a writer's appreciation for black language and black rhetorical strategies. Similarly, an understanding of the rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) allows for a richer reading of DeCarava's photography that might affect future curatorial decisions.

A careful reading of DeCarava's work has led me to reconsider the potential impact of a photograph. Like many photographers practicing in what is often called a postmodernist mode, juxtaposing image and text, I am skeptical of the power of the single, seemingly documentary, photograph. While it is preferable to examine DeCarava's images as a whole and not as isolated examples, within this context the work has a striking potency. Both within and between images he employs a strategy of juxtaposition that has a deconstructive impulse, provoking the viewer to question the singular authoritative reading in a manner similar to much postmodernist work combining text and image.

Roy DeCarava's images can be read in a way that relates strongly to contemporary concerns. Gates' theories themselves, upon which I have so heavily relied, are rooted not only in an African-American tradition, but also in contemporary critical discourse. Like work extolled by postmodernist critics, DeCarava's photographs critique the idea of mastery, of master narratives, of singular determinate readings. Meaning is relative, contingent on the viewer's position and biases. The tyranny of the signifier is exposed as signifieds are multiplied. Positions of address are situational; the roles of insider/outsider are interchanged until the opposition is, at least momentarily, rendered meaningless. Many critics point to the importance of feminist art and criticism in the development of a critical theory that provokes this multivalent reading.[44] Craig Owens, for example, suggests that the recognition of difference, a "difference without opposition," creates space outside standard dichotomous thinking, thereby giving the feminist critique its potency.[45] The description of difference without opposition provides for the possibility of creating work with indeterminate readings.

Much of DeCarava's work was created in the fifties and sixties, before the rise of postmodernist critical thought. His work does evince certain modernist conventions, including the seeming tendency to focus on the individual experience. But as an African-American artist, DeCarava never had the privilege of white modernist mastery. Though his position is distinct from that of feminists, he, too, recognizes and names "difference." But this recognition leaves the viewer with more questions than answers, shattering the hegemony of a world view based on simple oppositional thinking. The contemporary theoretical discourse still rarely examines the works of artists of color, an inclusion that is essential to a fuller understanding of the potential of the postmodernist critique.

Thanks to Marguerite Waller for her generous suggestions and encouragement. Photographs by permission of Roy DeCarava, New York.

Endnotes

1 Carroll Blue, *Conversations with Roy DeCarava* (a production of Carroll Blue and the television laboratory at WNET, 1983).

2 Michael McManus, "Recognition for the Invisible Man," *Artweek*, 18 (Jan. 17, 1987), p. 1. See also A. D. Coleman, "Roy DeCarava: 'Through Black Eyes;'" *Popular Photography* (April 1970), reprinted in A. D. Coleman, *Light Readings: A Photography Critic's Writings, 1968–1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 18–28.

3 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 28.

4 Four of DeCarava's photographs were included in the book. Two depict couples embracing and are part of larger page spreads illustrating the universality of male/female attraction. Another shows a man trudging up-stairs as part of a spread on work, and the fourth includes a bass player and is coupled with other images showing how "music and rhythm find their way into the secret places of the soul" (p. 101). Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), pp. 8–9, 72–73, 102–103, 130–131. See also Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Photography Against the Grain Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), pp. 77–101.

5 Shirley Turner DeCarava, "Celebration," Introduction to *Roy DeCarava Photographs* (Carmel: The Friends of Photography, 1981).

6 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 333.

7 Ibid., p. 4.

8 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

9 Ibid., p. 50.

10 Ibid., p. 47.

11 Ibid., pp. 51–52.

12 Ibid., p. 47.

13 Ibid., p. 49.

14 Ibid., p. 55.

15 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1935).

16 Robert E. Hemenway, Introduction to Hurston, *Mules and Men*, pp. xxvi–xxvii.

17 Ibid., pp. 45–49.

18 Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 50.

19 Hurston, *Mules and Men,* p. 21.

20 Barthes, "Photographic Message," p. 28.

21 Alvia Wardlaw Short, *Roy DeCarava: Photographs* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1975), pp. 47, 51–53.

22 Ibid., p. 50.

23 Lecture at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, California, January 1987.

24 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 5.

25 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966); *Looking at Photographs: One Hundred Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976); and *Photography Until Now* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990). Only in *Mirrors and Windows* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978) does Szarkowski include two different photographs, *Hallway* and *Self-Portrait*.

26 Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs*, p. 178.

27 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 4.

28 Playing the dozens refers to making humorous derogatory comments about another's family members, typically beginning with, "Your mama..."

29 *Roy DeCarava Photographs*, plates 57 and 72.

30 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown MA.: Persephonie Press, 1981), p. 99.

31 Carrie Mae Weems tackles this issue even more directly in a recent series aptly titled *Ain't Joking*, where she juxtaposes text and image in an examination of stereotypes of black people. The work both illustrates and deconstructs the pernicious history of such associations.

32 Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p. 162.

33 Barbara Johnson, "Threshold of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985). Reprinted in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: Chicago University Press,1985), p. 318.

34 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p. 4.

35 Johnson, "Threshold of Difference," p. 328.

36 S. T. DeCarava, "Celebration," p. 10.

37 Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1955).

38 The contrast of DeCarava's photographs with those of many white photographers is striking. See for example Bruce Davidson, *East 100th Street* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Though Davidson diligently returned to this street daily over a two-year period and shared his work with his subjects, his photographs still have the look of a distanced white compassion. Figures are often carefully posed in the middle of a frame with the space around them exaggerated by the short focal length lens to emphasize the barrenness of their surroundings. They stare out at the viewer with bare breasts, broken hearts, and to be fair, sometimes Sunday best, ready for the viewer's consumption.

39 Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *Negro Digest* 8 (April 1950): 85–89, reprinted in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury N Y: The Feminist Press, 1979), p. 173.

40 Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p 5.

41 *The Sound I Saw, the Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava* (New York, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985).

42 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1978).

43 For instance seven of the photographs of Jerry and his children are included in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. The Houston Museum of Fine Arts catalogue and The Friends of Photography book, *Roy DeCarava Photographs*, each include only a single image from the series.

44 For example see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions–Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Screen* 28:3 (Summer 1987), and Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Aesthetic Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend WA.: Bay Press, 1983).

45 Owens, "The Discourse of Others," p. 62.

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