

# FROM HARLEM WITH LOVE: AN ALBUM OF LIFE IN *THE SWEET FLYPAPER OF LIFE*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) is the result of the collaboration between the photographer Roy DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes. Both authors were Harlemites, DeCarava was born in Harlem and Langston Hughes made Harlem his home after moving from Missouri to New York City. This essay intends to explore the ways in which *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* depicts a representation of the neighborhood of Harlem at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was just beginning. It will look at the power that DeCarava's photographs and Hughes' text have on creating a specific visuality of African American life, based on the Harlem community, rendering itself to be seen as a family album. The essay will firstly focus on contextualizing the creation and publication of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and afterwards offer a reading of the book using the family album metaphor as a form of agency in the acknowledgment of the African American community, focusing its representation in the aestheticization of beauty, thus distancing itself from the social and racial issues that were usually exposed.

**Keywords:** African American; visual studies; visuality; aesthetics; photography; community.

## COMING A LONG WAY

In 1955, the publication of Langston Hughes' *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* followed *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court's outlawing of school racial segregation in the United States, by just a year. The case was deemed one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement, helping establish the fact that "separate but equal" was not, in fact, equality. The portrayal of discrimination is, however, absent from the narrative, as the book only depicts black people. The narrative takes place at the beginning of the civil rights movement, which gained momentum and expanded into the 1960s — the protests, the black power movement, the "black is beautiful" cultural motto — and the opening line, in the voice of Sister Mary Bradley, shares her will to stay alive and "see what this integration the Supreme Court has done decreed is going to be like" (1).

Given the existing representations of Harlem and the black community at the time, the book works as a countervisuality, which is to say that it positions itself in opposition to most common representations that were presented as the norm, or in

Nicholas Mirzoeff's words, the visuality. Following Mirzoeff's work (2011), "[v]isuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign" (2) thus forming the pre-established authority of visuality. The intention behind this construction of visuality was to present its authority as self-evident and legitimize its domination. This process is not comprised merely of visual perceptions, but rather it is a discursive practice with material effects of organization, categorization, and segregation. Founded in plantation practice, such visuality separated groups as "means of social organization," to "prevent them from cohering as political subjects," while making this "separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic" (Mirzoeff 2011, 3). Thus, countervisuality is "the means by which one tries to make sense of the unreality created by visuality's authority from the slave plantation to fascism ... while at the same time proposing a real alternative ... one that depicts existing realities and counters them with a different realism" (4). We find this different realism in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* through its portrayal of familial representations of the neighborhood instead of focusing on the more common exposure of the poor economic and social conditions endured by many African Americans. This notion is reflected by Maren Stange's words (1996), in "Illusion Complete Within Itself: Roy DeCarava's Photography":

The *Flypaper* photographs are part of a body of work on the daily life of family and community that was without precedent; no one previously had photographed Harlem "from an artist's sensibility," as Sherry Turner DeCarava points out, "no one who lived there" had photographed DeCarava's neighborhood except with "commercial or documentary intent," and "[n]o one had photographed black people in ... [his] manner or even as a subject worthy of art." An early impetus for the project was a desire to photograph his mother's neighbor, and, as Galassi's essay notes, the central sequences on family life were photographed especially in the homes of two families whom DeCarava came to know well. (67)

Even though Roy DeCarava had taken the photographs prior to their compilation in the book, the photographer was not able to get them published until Langston Hughes wrote the text to accompany them. Through his fictional text about an imagined family, narrated by the character of Sister Mary Bradley, Hughes was able to lessen white

audiences' resistance to the pictures while he geared it to an African American sensibility. In his strategy, Hughes is able to appeal to white publishers and the white readership and at the same time speak to African Americans through his "complex network of signifying, conveying meanings that might have escaped many non-African American readers" (Weiner 2012, 156). The result is a piece of work that sold out its first printing of 25,000 pocket-size copies that were soon supplemented by a printing of 10,000 more (Galassi 1996, 22). DeCarava's photographs portray African American daily family life, placing it against the background excitement of the city. African American photographer and filmmaker James Hinton acknowledged DeCarava as the first photographer to devote serious attention to black aesthetic in photography and the black experience in America (Duganne 2008, 187).

In the 1996 retrospective on Roy DeCarava's work, Peter Galassi, curator for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), mentions how Hughes is able to mask the meanings of the images, through the accompanying text he provided them (Galassi 1996, 22), stating that the photographs carry so much meaning that Hughes' text can dilute some of their power. However, understanding how the text influences our reception of the photograph is very helpful to observe the way in which the narrative is relatable to African American audiences and comfortably read by a white readership, as it provides alternative interpretations to pictures by focusing on a familiar story with intercommunity characteristics, i.e., characteristics shared by multiple communities. The consequence of this construction is a book that does not victimize black people but at the same time depicts them realistically, with due aesthetic concerns, but with a textual sentimentality that resonated with a white audience. As Gillian Rose points out (2001), in *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, looking carefully at images entails looking at how they offer particular visions of social categories (11), going on to quote John Berger on how images of social difference work not simply by what they show, but also by the kind of seeing they invite (12). More than 20 years before Berger's considerations, DeCarava and Hughes were able to create a piece work that was inviting to a white readership allowing a comfortable

approximation of the realities between communities without overly disturbing the social order of the time.

It is, therefore, important to distinguish what marks the difference between DeCarava's photographic register of the African American community and what other photographers had done before him, whether one is talking about white or black photographers. For this we need to look at black representation in photographic registers made by white people and at black representation in photographic registers made by black people.

As Sonia Weiner summarizes in "Narrating Photography in 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life'" (2012), up until this point, pictures taken by white photographers often included representations of naked slaves, slaves working in the plantations or at the home (tending to the white families' children) and even photographic registers of the lynchings. These registers perpetrated humiliating stereotypes and instilled notions of poverty and displacement. On the other hand, prosperous members of the African American community in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were eager to show off their status. Yet, their photographic registers had minimal circulation in white mainstream media, being published in local African American papers like *Our World*, *Ebony* and *Sepia* (Weiner 2012, 158).

The collection presented in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* shows a reversal from the 1930s documentary procedures, where quotes and accompanying narrative were used to provide context to the social conditions and regional affiliations of the subjects documented. As Caroline Blinder (2018) points out, DeCarava's photographs of Harlem are more lyrical than informative, rendering an intimate vision of community more usually seen as dispossessed and disenfranchised than as neighbors and equals (194).

DeCarava's endeavor was to distance his work from the documentary form that preceded it and furthered condescending and paternalistic attitudes which deepened the notion of African Americans as the 'Other.' The photographer's artistic focus goes along with Susan Sontag's considerations on the instrumentality of art, "an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" (Sontag [1966]

2018, 40). I will expand on how DeCarava instrumentalized his art, balancing aesthetics and politics, in the next section.

#### “TANGLED UP IN LIVING”

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is a reminder of the delicate meanings one can find in art, a fineness of sensibility that eludes a blatantly political reading. Not that DeCarava’s images will escape those readings entirely; most of his subjects are black, which means that much of the response to his images will have a sociological impact, addressing the so-called marginalization of the people depicted. But there is no such thing as the marginal in DeCarava’s photographs. Women, musicians, vegetation, Harlem: all of it is alive with the experience of being (Als 2019, 67).

What DeCarava did was (re)present African Americans as humans; as a community that was not simply defined by multiple forms of victimization, poverty, and hard life conditions. On top of that, the narrative that Hughes created to frame the photographs is so realistic and convincing that the text can easily be read as factual, granting credibility to Sister Mary’s narration, thus deepening the connection with the reader. With *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, DeCarava and Hughes were able to portray a sublimation of life in Harlem through the representation and perspective of its largest community, the African Americans, by building the narrative in ways that differed from the typical negative representations, focusing on positive and familial aspects of the neighborhood.

In its organization, the book consists of 140 pictures spread throughout about 100 pages, in different sizes and framings, each accompanied by text that helps to bring out additional meanings to every photograph. Just like a family album, the book gives the reader a story of the people of Harlem not by following a plotted narrative but by displaying moments and situations charged with descriptive emotion that defines Harlemites in the moments they are captured by the camera: by reopening the pages of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, one can pick-up right where we left of and glimpse at Harlem life then and there.

It is my perspective that reading DeCarava's and Hughes's work as an album can be helpful in establishing the familial connections not just between Sister Mary's relatives, but between the whole community. It is the voice of Sister Mary that claims "I'm proud of me and mine, children, relatives and all! I got some fine people in my family, just like we got some fine people in our race" (34), followed by a small ensemble of photographs of people with artistic professions, like music, acting, and painting, appealing to a cultural sensibility and alluding to the Harlem Renaissance.

When approaching *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from the aforementioned perspective, I believe it is important to consider the manner in which the captions of the photographs that build fragments of the narrative create a link between the past, the present, and the future. For instance, Sister Mary tells how she can still be persuaded to sing the blues and how, when she does, she remembers her husband and the love she felt for him, comparing it to the love her daughter Melinda feels for her husband, Jerry. By doing so, Sister Mary effects a form of agency that is remote to so many African American women; a form of agency in the telling of her story, and in its more or less hidden meaning, the story of her community: "My blues ain't pretty./ My blues don't satisfy -/ But they can roll like thunder/ In a rocky sky" (45).

Sister Mary's blues are the African American community's blues. They symbolize the community's background of cruel oppression and violent discrimination, but they carry with them a strength, resilience, and endurance, longing to speak louder than an inhumane history. In "Reading the Woman's Face in Langston Hughes's and Roy DeCarava's 'Sweet Flypaper of Life'", Thadious M. Davis (1993) quotes R. Baxter Miller's idea that "what made the black woman central to Hughes' world was her role as griot and keeper of memories" (23). The narrative is intergenerational, not letting go of the memory of a communal past, but maintaining a focus on the changes the future may bring.

The connection with the past is a very deep-rooted African American issue, as historical racial issues are still very present in how they spill into the present. In *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Barack Obama reflects on how the

African American family carries on its back the weight of a history of oppression, struggle and repulse by the white gaze:

I saw that my life in America – the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago – all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright. (Obama [1995] 2004, 430)

So, despite DeCarava's own rendition of his work in artistic terms, it is inevitable to say that *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* has underlying social meanings, conveyed by both image and text. As Carolyn Finney (2014) stated,

The power that images and words have in stigmatizing a people or community can have far-reaching psychological and material consequences. How one's identity is constructed through representations calls into question whose social realities are maintained and sustained by such representations and who benefits from the perpetuation of these depictions. (67)

Approximating the narrated reality to the audience, DeCarava gives the reader images of the New York subway as the means of transport that “at rush hour mixes everybody – white, black, Gentile, and Jew — closer than you ever are to your relatives” (28). This is a good strategy to instill the notion of closeness to the audience as people do come together at various stages of their life or their day. The African Americans photographed here are not a distant reality to the white readership.

The passage dedicated to the New York subway shows a photograph of a woman at the top of the stairs of the subway (29) which can render more than one interpretation. The older woman is in most likelihood a lower-class worker, someone whose work imposes physical exhaustion on her body, and she has, at the end of her day, to climb the stairs of the subway to make her way home. However, the light is focused on her as the photograph is taken from below. DeCarava is portraying the black will ascending, especially after the outlawing of segregation. The importance of ascending, in terms of social status and respectability, has been represented in African American culture for many years before integration in 1954. Even after the end of

tiresome working days, Sister Mary and many others still make the effort to change from their work clothes to present the best version of themselves at home, exposing the strife for dignity and dignified appearance. In the aftermath of the outlawing of segregation, DeCarava distances the representation of Harlem from prevailing stereotypes of the black community.

#### DEMYSTIFYING STEREOTYPES — “SOME FOLKS MAKE THE PUZZLE, OTHERS TRY TO SOLVE THEM”

One of the main achievements of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is the demystification or erosion of stereotypes towards African Americans, and the way the book is able to do so through the aestheticization of the life of those represented either through the photographs or the accompanying text. As pointed out before, the prevailing representations of the black community often focused on humiliating stereotypes and on images of violence that strengthened stereotypes and prejudice. The following section focuses on how *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* tackles two of those stereotypes: the myth of the vagrant black father and the subjugation of black women. In its familial, yet complex, depictions and intertwining of characters as fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, grandmothers and neighbors, DeCarava and Hughes create a narrative that helps approximate those characters' lives to the life of anyone who reads them, shining a light upon a majorly black neighborhood which cannot escape racial objectification.

One central point of the narrative is Rodney Belle, one of Sister Mary's grandchildren. He is compared to his brother Chickasaw who, unlike him, has goals of achieving higher status, is hard-working and well adjusted:

He always goes to work dressed up. Chick's as different from Rodney as day from night. Could dress his self when he was three years old. Gets up early in time to take the bus all the way downtown to work, don't like subways. But Rodney don't hardly get to work at all no kind of way, says daylight hurts his eyes. Never will integrated with neither white nor colored, nor work, just won't. (17)

Once again, the political issue of integration is present, as Sister Mary recognizes her grandchildren's different possibilities towards it. The ability to work and the aspiration to professional success, however, is not stated in racial terms, as Rodney's inability will



not allow him to be integrated with the colored either, conveying the hard-working and endurance facet of the African American community.

In its reconfiguration of racial representation through a focus on positive aspects, the book tackles the issue of the absent black father figure that has been very present in different forms of American media. Throughout the book, there are photographs of fathers spending time with their children, being close to them. Sister Mary gives the example of her son-in-law Jerry, married to her daughter Melinda, who hosts parties every Saturday night. When the party is over and one of the babies cries, Jerry is the one who goes and takes care of it, as he “laughs and loves that child to sleep” (46-49). The whole section displays photographs of Jerry embracing his children, carrying many of them on his lap. Despite the faults he may have, he is a family man “crazy about his children – and his children are crazy about him” (48).

There is, here, a subversive representation to the stereotype of the black, single-parent household, building a counternarrative — something that serves as resistance to hegemonic narratives and stereotypes — to a prejudiced notion that lives to this day, without turning it into a one-leveled issue, but rather showing its complexity by contrasting different realities within the community<sup>1</sup>. The work is also a good example in the subversion of the more common representation of African American women, which is a worthy theme to be explored. After all, the voice of the narrative is female, as it is signed by Sister Mary at the end, displaying her picture in her best clothes: “Here I am” (98). Despite not being ready to die, at that point Sister Mary has declared her old age many times and how tired she is after having worked all her life to take care of her family and extended family, so it is easy to read her character as the typical black

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<sup>1</sup> A 2020 article from *The Washington Post* states that “data from the National Center for Health Statistics shows that the majority of black fathers do, in fact, live with their children. The same study also showed that black fathers are more likely to feed, bathe, diaper, dress and play with their children on a daily basis than their white and Hispanic counterparts.” The article follows the Dad Gang movement, an initiative that aims to debunk the misconceptions about black fatherhood, created by Sean Williams, a stay-at-home dad, who after being repeatedly congratulated for “sticking around” created an Instagram page to “showcase the reality of black fatherhood and rewrite the narrative,” exposing and fighting the racist myth of the missing black father that lives on through an album of family representations. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/06/19/dad-posted-joyful-photos-black-fathers-shatter-stereotypes-then-it-became-movement/>.

mammy from the more usual representations of African American women up until then. Thus, it can be surprising to regard the photograph of a well-dressed woman, with a brim-hat, jewelry, and a brooch, standing straight in front of a building, not with a defeated look but with a calm semblance and elegant manner.

The same happens with other women depicted in the book. Chickasaw's girlfriend, much like him, is a girl from a respectable family who lives in the building with an elevator (18). In her photograph we see a young woman with posture, empowered, and gazing deeply, penetrating the camera into the eyes of the watcher. Sister Mary's middle daughter is portrayed smiling, joyful and beautiful, not lingering in the failure of her marriage and letting herself be defined by her divorce, "she laughs about that – so I reckon it didn't hurt her none" (33). These are not the prevalent representations of the African American woman in American literature. In literary and photographic depictions black women had been placed at the mercy of white masters and mistresses and of the black men in their lives. The representations of women that we find in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* go against the representations that rooted the victimization of black women in images of passivity, poverty, and subjugation, thus strengthening DeCarava's endeavor to not portray the community from an underprivileged perspective, and fostering my reading of the work as a family album that is focused on positive aspects.

#### HARLEM STATE OF MIND

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is a love letter to the Harlem community from the perspective of the insiders. Sister Mary, the narrator, is originally from South Carolina, which she is "planning to visit once more before she die[s]" (1) to see how the Supreme Court ruling of integration would work there. The pictures, along with the text, give the viewer a different perspective from life in the South to life in New York.

The rhythm of Harlem is imprinted in the book, both in pictures and text transpiring the motions, the bustle of the city where something is always happening. "New York is not like back down South with not much happening outside. In Harlem something is happening all the time, people are going every which-a-way" (58) — this

is the caption of a photograph of a woman contemplating the streets from her window. A very deep sense of intimacy is created with the people pictured in the book as we enter the living space of the extended family, navigating their lives into tight intimate interior spaces crammed with people. Contrary to Blinder's opinion that by focusing on the interiors the book does not move towards a liberating vision of the African American's desire to break out (197), I believe that its power derives precisely from the blurring of limits between those who are represented and those who watch, as the reader is, in this way, allowed to step into the privacy of the family's home.

It is also a comparison in terms of quality of life and opportunities; New York is more developed than the South in this regard and should offer more opportunities for African Americans. Racial politics are, therefore, not entirely missing from the book. In the descriptive passage (72-84) of how much is going on in the streets, the reader is immersed in photographs of people working in physical jobs like construction and coal-shoveling (73-74), people buying and selling, picket lines and street meetings "talking about "Buy black' ... 'Africa for the Africans' ... And 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand'" (79-82). The picket lines photograph (79) carries an uncanny resemblance to Margaret Bourke-White's *The Louisville Flood*<sup>2</sup> photograph from 1937, taken after the Ohio River flooded Louisville, Kentucky. Bourke-White's register

shows African Americans lined up outside a flood relief agency. In striking contrast to their grim faces, the billboard for the National Association of Manufacturers above them depicts a smiling white family of four riding in a car, under a banner reading "World's Highest Standard of Living. There's no way like the American Way. (Whitney Museum)

As a powerful depiction of the gap between the propagandist representation of American life and the economic hardship faced by minorities and the poor" (Whitney Museum).

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<sup>2</sup> Whitney Museum of American Art. <https://whitney.org/collection/works/8061>.

## IN CONCLUSION — “SOME JUST SET ON A PARK BENCH ... AND HOLD THEIR HANDS”

As *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* reaches its conclusion, the comparison between life in New York and life in the South lingers as Sister Mary mentions how “it’s too bad there’re no front porches in Harlem” (66). The reader is then guided through a section of photographs (of a man holding a baby, sitting in front steps of a building, an older woman and a young boy leaning on a doorway and an entire family even just sitting in patio furniture in the street, in front of a wall where the phrase “God is Holy Jesus” is written on – perhaps a soft reminder of the more religious environment down South (66-70). Through its textual distinction but photographic approximation with the South, this section provides a solid notion of the sense of community that exists in Harlem, maintaining the idea of an extended family as the foundation and of the book.

In conclusion of this essay, I want to highlight the depth that visual elements provide to literary stories, and vice versa, as a powerful device to shape interpretation. A feeling of belonging can emerge from the values that are formed beyond the understanding of race. DeCarava’s and Hughes’ work functions as resistance to more common representations of the African American community — as countervisuality and counternarratives —, defying stereotypes and challenging the self-validated authority of the depictions of the community that propagated thus far. The representations at stake focus on aesthetics and sociocultural values that were able to appeal to wider audiences. The choice to portray intimate representations of familial images in DeCarava’s photographs weaved through Hughes’ accompanying text is a very empowering tool in establishing the African American community’s claim for visibility and representation in the United States. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* is a portrait of African American resilience and an album of endurance that places family at the center as the foundation of the community.

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