A Nimble Arc

James Van Der Zee and Photography

Emilie Boone

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Visual Arts of Africa and Its Diasporas
A series edited by Kellie Jones and Steven Nelson

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COVER ART

James Van Der Zee, *Self Portrait, G. G. G. Photo Studio, 2077 Seventh Avenue*, 1937–1943.

$4^{15}/_{16} \times 7\frac{1}{4}$ in. (12.5 × 18.4 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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To Felicie Leonise Lundy
and Dorothy Leona Chesnutt

Contents

Illustrations

Because of the nature of his studio practice, James Van Der Zee rarely titled his photographs; he did, however, occasionally inscribe titles on negatives. While many Van Der Zee works have commonly used titles (for example, *Beau of the Ball*), these are often descriptive or have been applied posthumously by scholars or by Donna Van Der Zee, the artist's widow. She was most responsible for the stewardship of his legacy and estate before the establishment of the James Van Der Zee Archive at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2021. In this book, all titles, including descriptive titles, are italicized.

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INTRODUCTION

To Pivot Lightly

Adding the Vernacular to Art History's Sight Line

A Return to *Family Portrait*

IN 1926 JAMES AUGUSTUS JOSEPH VAN DER ZEE (1886–1983) took a portrait of enduring consequence (figure I.1). A Black woman, formally dressed, sits in a chair, flanked on one side by a tall man in a suit. On the other side, another woman stands, wearing a plaid dress. A plain backdrop and a side table decorated with flowers center the figures. Based on its composition alone, *Family Portrait* can be described as a handsome image, one that fits neatly within Van Der Zee's larger oeuvre of photographs from his Harlem studio business. Yet, through its reproduction in print, the image has been asked to do more than its sitters, Mattie, Estelle, and David Osterhout, could have ever imagined.

FIGURE I.1

James Van Der Zee, members of the Osterhout family, Van Der Zee's maternal aunts (possibly Mattie and Estelle) and uncle, David, often referred to as *Family Portrait*, 1926. This image was included in *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes's consequential book on photography.

10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

For many art historians, *Family Portrait* has made a lasting impression through its inclusion in Roland Barthes's 1981 book *Camera Lucida*.[1] By way of autobiographical reflections and personal reactions, Barthes writes Van Der Zee into a larger meditation that explores what photographs do. In highlighting his own personal biases and fixations, he attends to his concept of the studium and punctum through the Van Der Zee photograph. Numerous scholars have returned to Barthes's discussion of *Family Portrait* to lament and critique his reductive reading of the photograph's Black figures and to offer more generous analyses grounded within art historical methods. Such correctives have kept the portrait in art historians' visual bank of iconic photographs in ways that determine its significance based on, for example, its cultural relevance to the Harlem Renaissance.[2] Yet when neatly slotted within a designated artistic movement, Van Der Zee often becomes pigeonholed within a circumscribed moment and place as opposed to being understood as a Black artist with a broad temporal, material, and spatial reach. *Family Portrait* and other Van Der Zee photographs can be understood through a more comprehensive approach. Given that individual Van Der Zee photographs—like *Family Portrait* or the even more celebrated 1932 *Couple Wearing Raccoon Coats* (figure I.2)—are typically given art historical interpretations centered on the Harlem Renaissance movement and all its defining themes, how might a vernacular turn that examines the larger scope of Van Der Zee's work reinvigorate the very ways that his photographs are understood and valued?

Van Der Zee and his work have repeatedly been framed through the conventional methods of an art history of photography, approaches that persistently structure approaches to thinking about photographs by established photographers. It is common, for example, for scholars to situate an artist within a movement defined by a discrete time period and set of themes, drawing out the exceptional nature of their aesthetic contributions and showing the artist to be exemplary among their peers. While Van Der Zee's engagement with photography spans 1900–1983, such methods frame him as a distinct and important photographer in the approximately fifteen-year Harlem Renaissance era.[3] As a result, his status as the most prominent Black studio photographer within the canon of photography transforms his everyday images from something socially curative and familiar to something exceptional.[4] His photographs are regularly discussed in art history classrooms and frequently appear within academic publications as representative of the Harlem Renaissance era's New Negro subject, even though, remarkably, Van Der Zee had no direct contact with

any of the artistic movements of Harlem during his more than fifty years of operating a studio.[5]

Long cared for within the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), among others, Van Der Zee's photographs garner a distinguished status.[6] Yet existing approaches to Van Der Zee's work leave out defining aspects of photography as a medium. The iconic and singular value attached to his photographs has worked to the detriment of scholarship on his broader contributions, obscuring the range of functions carried out by Van Der Zee's photographs: as interlocutors with the work of peer photographers, as reproductions circulated in newspaper features, as modifications of photographs originating in other studios, and as images repurposed as enlarged exhibition photomurals.

Arguably, Van Der Zee's photographs exist at the crossroads of art and vernacular photographic practice. His photographs are Black quotidian images, but his position within scholarship as a known, celebrated Harlem Renaissance photographer abides by art history's framing. Vernacular photographs, like those made by Van Der Zee, include commercial studio portraits, wedding photographs, pet portraits, news and advertising images, travel albums, school portraits, identification photographs, snapshots, and "pop photographica" such as the photo-backed mirror illustrated in figure I.3.[7] Custom-made fans, blotters, thermometers, and "Negro Art Advertising Company" photo calendars were also among the products offered at Van Der Zee's 2077 Seventh Avenue studio location.[8] These are the photographs of the everyday that operate at the level of the quotidian, "the photographs that preoccupy the home and heart but rarely the museum or the academy."[9] While the history of photography most often begins with the biographical details of named photographers, considerations of vernacular photographs commonly start elsewhere. Interpretations depend heavily on the images' historically specific social uses and viewing conventions, their physical and tactile nature, and the networks enabling their circulation. Scholarship that attends to such details of everyday photographs may highlight material that is too mundane or uncomfortably ambiguous or that may even seem to contradict art history's traditional mores.

Yet, at moments, Van Der Zee's engagement with photography requires an approach that pivots among the kinds of questions art history wants to ask and those that vernacular photography elicits. With such movement in mind, this book remaps the broader importance of Van Der Zee's photographs, tracing the arc of his work chronologically to il-

FIGURE I.2

James Van Der Zee, *Couple Wearing Raccoon Coats, Harlem*, 1932. Many scholars have commented on the elegance, confidence, and success that the image suggests, even in the midst of the Great Depression.

7½ × 9⁵⁄₁₆ in. (19 × 23.7 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: Museum of Modern Art, NewYork.

FIGURE I.3

James Van Der Zee, *Flapper in Beaded Headdress*, 1925. This photo-backed mirror is an example of "pop photographica," a term coined by photo historian Daile Kaplan.

Mirror approx. 2¾ × 1¾ in. (7 × 4.5 cm). Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

luminate how the multifaceted uses and registers of photography reveal the quotidian as a central idiom of African diasporic photographic practice. These insights are possible only through recognizing Van Der Zee as an artist whose work takes on a new level of complexity and significance when vernacular attributes are considered. This book aims to change the terms of Van Der Zee's participation in art history by engaging in a vernacular turn; thereby, the shape of the art history of photography changes for other photographers too.[10]

Aside from this book's main contribution to the history of photography, this study adds to African diasporic art history by recentering the quotidian. Although current scholarship in this subfield of art history

tends to focus on the studio practices of contemporary artists, this book, in part, harks back to a longer arc of African diasporic art history in which the utility of popular objects dominated the historiography.[11] And while scholars in this area privilege the global dimension of the Black experience, this often manifests through international exhibitions, artists who travel abroad, and movements or collectives of creative practitioners. In contrast, this study refocuses the international component of the African diaspora in two of the chapters through the circulation and exchange of quotidian images through unassuming channels including the newspaper, the post office, and the movement and reproduction of photographic images. In addition, this book assumes that the African diaspora is an intrinsic part of Van Der Zee's world of Harlem, since the Black experience there draws from various populations of African descent, not only those born in the United States. Against the assumption that Van Der Zee catered strictly to a middle-class clientele, it takes seriously the photographer's description of his clients as being "the high class, the middle class, [and] the poorer class," people who "all looked good on Sundays," the most popular day for studio portraits.[12] Most important, this book builds on the belief that while Black image makers operate in contexts in which their visibility and invisibility within dominant structures of meaning and value endlessly fluctuate, there has always been a rich tradition of visuality among Black viewers, creatives, and patrons, for whom a Black tradition of the visual is centrally located in the quotidian. As scholars of African American studies may term this space as part of a Black interiority, this book is indebted to a commitment to understanding the ordinary as part of the extraordinary, a space that reflects the richness of Black quotidian life.[13]

A Nimble Approach

In describing photographs, the word *nimble* is often linked with speed. People speak of "catching" something in motion—whether troops or an astronomical happening—in describing a nimble photographer's praiseworthy skill in capturing a scene. The word also fittingly connotes decisions that Van Der Zee made about his photographs: the nimble practices carried out by the artist.[14] The photographer's quickness in responding to changes in his clients' needs is notable, as is the sage wisdom evident in the act of keeping an excellent archive for the purpose of delayed returns. At other times, the images themselves can be regarded as entities com-

mitted to their persistent presence in front of viewers, and the images—through their rich "social lives" and shifts in material form—can also be described as nimble.[15]

Yet I primarily use the word *nimble* to specifically describe the ease with which one must transition between art history and vernacular photography—or, stated differently, approaches to both fine art photography and vernacular photography—when considering Van Der Zee's work. The changing contexts of Van Der Zee's photographs require that the reader be nimble in an effort to make sense of Van Der Zee's images, their temporal reach, their material history, and their limits and possibilities within and against current scholarship on the photographer. Photographs are interpreted and used across so many registers: as evidence, art forms, narratives of identity, and political provocations. However, it is uncommon for the images created by one photographer, and one studio-based practice, to do so many things over a span of more than half a century. The work includes gelatin-silver prints (many hand-colored), "real photo" postcards, panoramic representations, and copy photographs, plus large-format glass plate and sheet film negatives, and small- and medium-format roll film negatives housed within Van Der Zee's archive, as well as those found in various contexts such as the visual economy of studios within a one-mile radius, the layout of newspaper pages, and the immersive gallery displays of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This turn to a selection of images that highlight aspects of the material practice of photography shifts the focus of inquiry from questions of representation to questions of materiality.[16]

Through this shift a natural kinship becomes evident. This study is built on the relationship between Van Der Zee's mindful decisions in his engagement with the medium of photography and those instances—as in the case of reproductions—where his photographs were outside of his jurisdiction. It illustrates the malleability of photography, a medium that is inherently mobile and unfixed in ways that parallel the African diaspora. Van Der Zee's photographs are analogous to diasporic identities in that they "are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[17] While the term *diaspora* both spatially and temporally signals the way subject positions are shaped by movement, distance, and time, the term also speaks to the very means through which photographs signify.[18]

A nimble approach captures these shifts and changes in materiality and purpose, which at times are intentional and at other times are a consequence of context. There has always been a tension between pho-

tography's commercial characteristics and the value of a photographer's biography and aesthetic intentions. Any narrative of photography is a moving target and a hybrid affair.[19] However, this discordance is not created by Van Der Zee or his images but by the discourses applied to his work. To extend a practice of agility toward Van Der Zee's photographs over the course of eight decades is to propose a revised framework for his full body of work and, by extension, for the photographic practices of the African diaspora more broadly.

This approach parallels other scholarly projects that are forthright about navigating difference. A 2019 publication on African photography, *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History*, edited by Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, aims to simultaneously hold binary positions that are perhaps irreconcilable. For the editors, recognizing the seen and the unseen worlds captured by photography illustrates its many paradoxes along the planes of the conscious and the unconscious.[20] These positions not only exist but also coexist in ways that cannot necessarily be disentangled. Tanya Sheehan in "On Display: The Art of African American Photography" similarly highlights the inherent duality of photography in the context of the art world's relationship to Black photographers and the possibilities of the vernacular. In parallel ways Tobias Wofford compellingly describes two competing art historical models within African diasporic art history. On the one hand, artworks from the diaspora are often read as stable cultural signs with little agency given to its image makers or the fluidity of meaning in artistic practice. The other method does the complete opposite, focusing instead on the malleability of meaning as derived from the artist and the artist's position in relationship to the experience of, for example, migration. He goes on to write, "Certainly, many art historians and cultural analysts employ a mixture of these methodologies in the same texts. The tension between the two strategies may be more indicative of broader art-historical problems as we attempt to answer questions of identity and difference in art and art making."[21]

A Nimble Arc aligns with these methods in that it brings to light how Van Der Zee benefits from incongruent approaches. However, rather than framing this difference as a conundrum, this book attempts to elicit such nimble movement between art history and the quotidian, not as a problem, constraint, or plane of contention. There is no need to reconcile differences or dichotomous frameworks of address, but instead we can see each approach as part of a constellation, as curator and scholar Okwui Enwezor may elegantly describe it, or as an occasion for opacity, to bor-

row a similarly generative concept from writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant.[22] As cultural geographer Katherine McKittrick insists, "The contradiction and ambivalence, that feeling and expression and thick representation of unresolved uneasiness, is where black aesthetics live."[23] To really see Van Der Zee is to find him within the space of both art history and the vernacular.

Concurrently, this study acknowledges and recognizes that *vernacular* is an imperfect and elastic term, one that has caused much debate surrounding its efficacy and suitability. Implied in the word's meaning is a sense of being less than, separate from, or on the margins of a dominant system of value. When one starts with such a premise, the problem caused by the use of the word makes sense. But the term *vernacular* also puts pressure on the very structures of meaning that have relegated the vernacular to a separate category. The term self-referentially draws attention to a problem. Why not continue to use the word in order to recognize the baggage of hierarchy implicit within the term? In addition to employing the word as an acknowledgment of difference, I also insist that other aspects of what the word connotes, for the purposes of this book, completely supersede any ambivalence caused by the term's pejorative implications. For many scholars, as photo historian Catherine Zuromskis succinctly explains, to study vernacular photography is ultimately to "focus on the ways that photographs are used, the codes of practice that surround them, and their clusters of meanings within quotidian contexts" and to place "valuable emphasis on the practice of everyday life and the way that photography has become a vital part of that practice since its very invention."[24]

An emphasis on the everyday practices of photography is paramount to this study. While considering the limitations of *vernacular*, I insist on its utility within the context of Van Der Zee's work while choosing, through each chapter's focus, to amend its scope of meaning to highlight the Black quotidian.

I use the word *vernacular* to signal to a discourse outside of an art history of photography. I reclaim the word for use, especially when talking about the Black quotidian. The approach I hope to model is about making a new path that is not strenuously constructed but joyfully illuminated by swiftly moving within and between two main frameworks, engaging with their utility, revealing the futility of their stakes, their shortcomings, and their possibilities. Doing so illustrates a way to navigate and move forward with Van Der Zee and his work as guiding beacons.

Through this project's intentional pivots between art history and the vernacular, a fuller range of Van Der Zee's work can be considered. This range expands our understanding of the roles that Van Der Zee and his clients in Harlem—as well as others outside of the neighborhood—asked photography to play at various points in the twentieth century. This book's chapters switch back and forth between Van Der Zee's intentional engagement with his craft of photography and examples of external factors that took over and determined the fate of Van Der Zee's photographs. A consideration of Van Der Zee and his photographs sits neatly within an art historical narrative only when one turns a blind eye to the photographs' multivalent social uses. At the same time, focusing only on a photograph's social uses would mean missing out on a more holistic view of Van Der Zee's work and the terms of its aesthetic value.

Expanding Art History's Sight Line

For the writer and critic Hilton Als, the study of art history begins with a rudimentary understanding of the present's link to the past and proceeds to offer an increasingly intricate framework for coming to terms with a wide range of images. In his personal essay "The First Step of Becoming an Art Historian," he considers what the transformation from a general reader of images to a skilled, learned viewer and interpreter of the visual world entails. While no step-by-step guide transpires within the short six-page essay, Als instead illustrates his musings most forcefully through everyday images, one of which is a vernacular photograph of his mother. Through reflections on this photograph, Als succinctly provides what is arguably one of the most astute explanations of what scholarship about images is tasked to accomplish, and one through which this book finds its purpose. Accordingly, "to see, one must possess a language which directs the eyes to what is being perceived."[25] Although Als implies that art history provides this enchanted language, the more useful direction comes from critically examining where exactly art history has set its sight line and then looking more expansively for a clearer view beyond the field's own hierarchies and biases.

By taking a sidelong glance, this book allows Van Der Zee and his contributions to photography to be perceived more fully through the contexts of their production, modification, and reproduction.[26] Shifting the site

of meaning away from the singular artist allows for an approach that more readily incorporates collaborations among producer, viewer, and object, as African diaspora scholars Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez insist.[27] The distinctness of Van Der Zee's work—and, even more crucial, the distinctness of Van Der Zee's position within art history—allows for this important reframing to take place. The specificity of Van Der Zee's position within art history deserves a close look. To step back and view the current landscape of scholarship on Black artists and the production of art by those from the African diaspora is to peer into a completely different space than, for example, what art historian Darby English had in mind in his 2007 publication critiquing the shortcomings of existing scholarship on Black artists. English's *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* addresses a lack of nuance outside of recurring narratives of uplift and African American advancement that tend to define Black artists while eliding many of the complexities implicit in any creative endeavor.[28] This is a phenomenon that literary scholar Kevin Quashie may regard as the narrative impulse to privilege a public assertion of progress and resistance instead of the intricacy of Black interior life.[29] Arguably, English's book would not be produced today, close to two decades later. The historicity of the text is both a relief and an important reminder of the field's past limitations and its current state.

Nonetheless, orienting Van Der Zee within the conversation that English advances is still relevant: not because Van Der Zee is an African American artist, but because he is not a contemporary one. New methodologies in the field are strongly concentrated within the contemporary art sphere, while artists from earlier moments, like Van Der Zee, are often understood within the recurring conversations English so adamantly critiques. Numerous exceptions do exist.[30] Yet in African American art's focus on contemporary art, the field misses out on a major advantage of studying older works: the longevity of their makers' careers. This study on Van Der Zee leverages an asset that can serve as the driving force behind revised discourses of Black artistic cultural production. This resource is time, and the extensive duration of insight it provides. The exceptionalism of Van Der Zee's long career has not been lost on scholars. Biographer Jim Haskins compellingly captures this point: "[Van Der Zee] has seen photography advance from a primitive process to a highly developed science and a true art form. . . . He could remember when color photography was impossible, when a picture was spoiled if the subject moved, when things that are invisible to the naked eye were also invisible to the camera's eye.

He has taken up photography at a time when the photograph and the camera were rare items and lived to see a time when visual images are perhaps the chief means of communication in the modern world."[31]

Artists whose practices unfold over a lifetime offer art history the benefit of their long engagement with the medium of their choice and the multiplicity of ways that their images function in the world. Not only did Van Der Zee's career significantly overlap with photography's relatively short history, but he diligently produced work as photography shifted from a tool of documentation to an artistic form. His engagement with photography traverses both technological advancements and major changes in its discourse over the years. More specifically, the time between his first photograph, in 1900, and his last, in 1983, overlaps with nearly half of the medium's history, from photography's invention in 1839 to the present moment. Indeed, a history of photography could be told through Van Der Zee.[32] Taking such a perspective gives new resonance to a statement by the photography scholar Joanna Sassoon: "Through its life, the photograph, as both image and object, can potentially move across several spaces, including the sites of production, use, reproduction and preservation, and along with each change in ownership and context, new meanings are acquired."[33] While Van Der Zee's career was incredibly lengthy, his photographs have persisted even longer.

And they persist, in part, because of the artistic quality of Van Der Zee's vision as a photographer. Turn to a comparison of multiple photographs of the same Harlem resident taken at different studios, only one of which is by Van Der Zee. More specifically, three black-and-white photographs depict this same man, in varied compositions (figures I.4, I.5, and I.6). The 1925 photograph *Barefoot Prophet*, by Van Der Zee, captures the nearly seven-foot-tall Elder Clayhorn Martin seated and dressed in a dark suit while barefoot, as was his usual appearance when preaching; he was one of the orators known on the bustling streets of Harlem.[34] As was common in Van Der Zee's aesthetic style and photographic output, the image includes a posed subject with carefully selected props.

There is an elegant aesthetic quality to Van Der Zee's photograph; as in so many of his portraits from this period, in figure I.4 Van Der Zee incorporates a carefully arranged setting evocative of Victorian mores. From the hazy painted domestic backdrop of a wall, an ornate column, and pulled-back curtains revealing a pastoral scene, to the throne-like chair the figure seems to claim, to the small additions to the side table on which he rests his elbow to support his head, deep in thought, this photograph

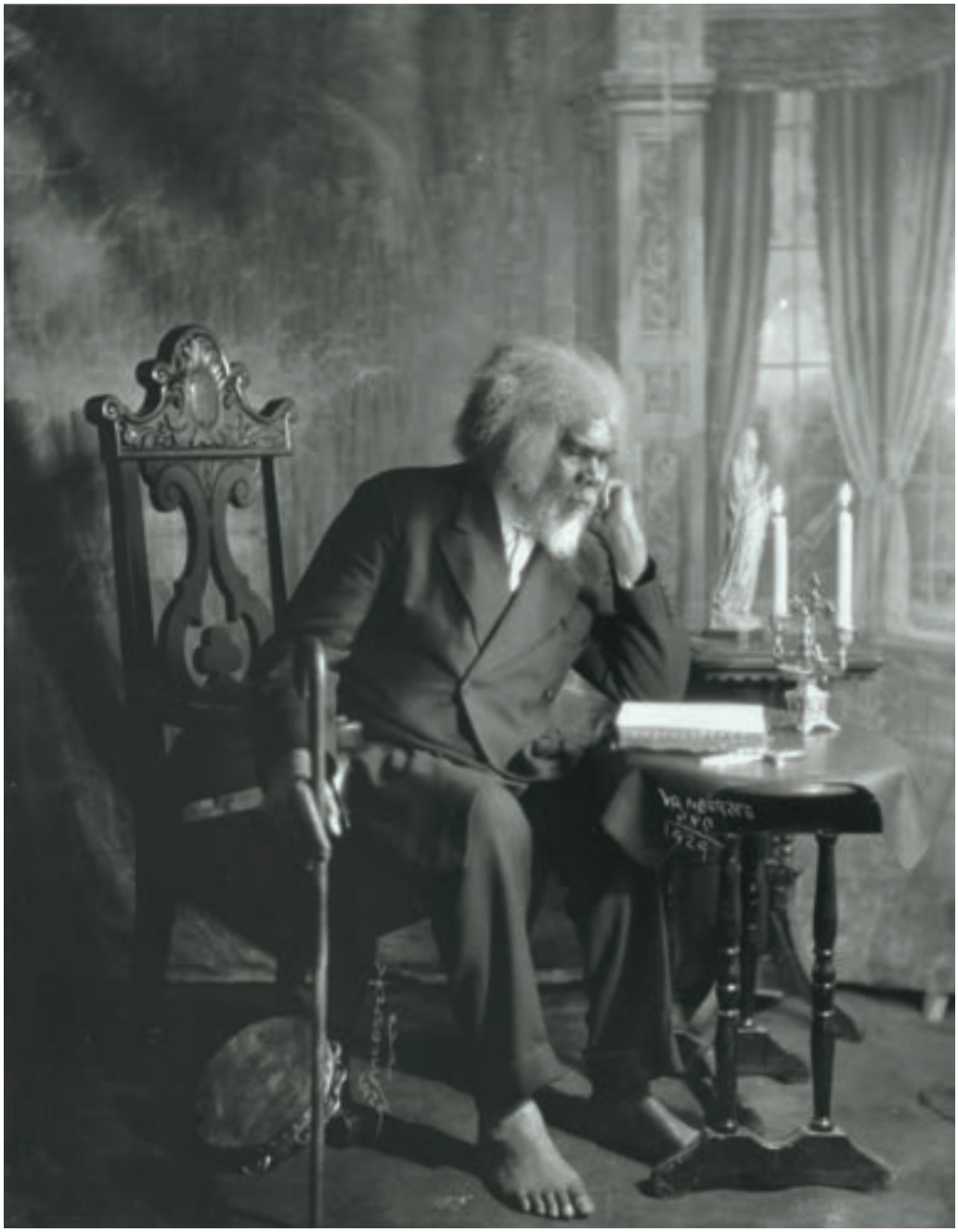

FIGURE I.4 (opposite)

James Van Der Zee, *Barefoot Prophet*, 1929.

9½ × 7⅜ in. (24.1 × 18.8 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

FIGURE I.5 (above, left)

Unidentified photographer, *Barefoot Prophet with Woman and Children*, ca. 1930.

5 15⁄16 × 3⅞ in. (15 × 9.9 cm). Source: Robert Langmuir Photography Collection, Emory University Archives, Atlanta.

FIGURE I.6 (above, right)

Unidentified photographer, *Barefoot Prophet*, ca. 1930.

conveys the utmost sense of respectable style and sensibility. As a portrait conjuring the character of the figure, it is made complete with the walking staff and tambourine, two objects that were dear to the Barefoot Prophet. In addition, Van Der Zee's handwork adorns the photograph's surface through the added enhancements of light rays emanating from the two lit candles.

Undeniably, the composition of figure I.4, carefully posed and situated within the space, along with the natural and compelling countenance of the sitter, sets this portrait apart from two other undated photographs of the Barefoot Prophet. In the first of these (figure I.5), the Barefoot Prophet is accompanied by four children (two of whom hold tambourines), a woman, a drum set, and a larger tambourine, which is identical to the one in Van Der Zee's photograph. The second (figure I.6) bears no date and is from an unidentified source. Its composition is simple and direct and lacks the pictorial impact of Van Der Zee's version. Despite the abundance of props and figures involved, figure I.5 lacks the lighting quality, sharp focus, and contented expression on the Barefoot Prophet's face in figure I.4. Given the busy scene and the positioning of the figures, figure I.5 depicts the group as stiff and awkward. In comparison, in figure I.4 Van Der Zee combines features from the other two photographs (the bare feet and the tambourine) with his skillful composition and technical mastery.

Photographs like *Barefoot Prophet, 1925* illustrate, in true art historical fashion, Van Der Zee's signature style and aesthetic as distinct from and superior to his peers. When scholars write about Van Der Zee, they frame his merit through certain aesthetic aspects of his images. Art historian Victoria A. T. Sancho has written about the tactile surface of his photographs and the way his employment of combination printing carried him beyond the use of props.[35] Performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz continues by analyzing the narrative impulse in Van Der Zee's combination printings, in which images are superimposed in his portraits as a way to draw out a story line.[36] Art historian Mary Schmidt Campbell comments on the stillness and quiet assurance that Van Der Zee's images evoke, while art historian Deborah J. Johnson notes that "more than any other photographer, his works carry the mark of the craftsman and artist who turned to photography primarily because of the speed and efficiency with which it facilitated art."[37] Art historian Miriam Thaggert insists that his photographs arrest time so that the subjects are caught in an anachronistic moment of "New Negro-ness," a period of great artistic originality.[38] Van Der Zee is continuously praised for his creativity and innovation.[39]

However, defining Van Der Zee's significance through his aesthetic exceptionalism has overshadowed the diversity of his photographs' forms and the kinds of relationships, transformations, and modifications that cast them anew. Too often, the terms of Van Der Zee's significance have simultaneously buoyed the high regard for and popularity of Van Der Zee's distinctive photography and prevented the full range of his output from being considered. To trouble narratives of Van Der Zee is to see outside of what is familiar and known.

The Black Quotidian and States of the Mundane

The question of even considering Van Der Zee's work as vernacular may arise. Unlike many photographers whose work is identified as vernacular, Van Der Zee is named as the creator of his works, a distinguishing characteristic of a fine artist. In contrast, the anonymous makers of many photographs comparable to the ones Van Der Zee produced are lost to history. In addition, Van Der Zee is known as a portraitist of artistic intent, a practitioner of a genre that fits neatly within art history as one of the discipline's representational touchstones. Only a few scholars have used the term *vernacular* to describe his work; the phrase *vernacular artist*, used on at least one occasion, highlights the ambiguities that always arise when trying to define a term.[40] Nonetheless, the term *vernacular artist* contradicts the vernacular's assumed distance from fine art forms.[41]

Sources on Van Der Zee and his self-referential status as an artist offer inconsistent accounts. For example, figure I.7 shows a 1940 Van Der Zee photograph capturing a display of his portfolio prints for sale, all of which have the words "Van Der Zee, artist" located in the lower right-hand corner (figure I.7).[42] In contrast, during a 1980 interview, Van Der Zee admitted, "I really don't consider myself an 'artist' now as far as that's a concern." Then he stated that all of his family engaged in artistic work, so he just "followed in line and continued doing what the rest were doing," implying that he did indeed consider his image making as part of a creative endeavor, even though he might have had some ambivalence toward using the term *artist*.[43]

Yet unlike the term *art/ist*, the word *vernacular* is more strictly tied to a historical era and to a niche audience. While the word *art* is omnipresent, *vernacular* is not. Although it aims to serve as an umbrella term for utilitarian, domestic, and popular photographs, *vernacular* as a word

FIGURE I.7

James Van Der Zee, *Liggett's Drugstore Window with Van Der Zee Photo Display*, ca. 1940.

8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

does not have an expansive reach.[44] As applied to describe architecture starting in the 1940s, the term *vernacular* would not have been applied to Van Der Zee's photographs within his lifetime. The vernacular as a site of serious photographic discourse starts around 2000, nearly two decades following Van Der Zee's passing.[45] The exact definition and application of the term *vernacular* have remained consistently debated for decades now. Some scholars apply the word and all its implications wholeheartedly, some use it tentatively and sparingly, and others aim to remove the term from their vocabulary. For example, the diversity of perspectives found in the

2020 publication *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography* represents a microcosm of the kinds of conversation that exist and arguably will continue to take place about photographs that are considered vernacular.[46]

What remains consistent among the varying definitions of *vernacular photography* is a commonness or everyday nature, the fact that the images do not always fit within art historical narratives, and their prevalence at the core not only of photographic production but of the visual culture of the modern era more broadly.[47] Yet there is nothing mundane about Van Der Zee's photographs or, for that matter, any vernacular photographs of Black sitters. Within the context of the Black quotidian, the everyday and its visual culture always incorporate the extraordinary because Black life is contingent on extraordinary historical circumstances of subjection and precarity that operate in pervasive ways, named and unnamed, seen and unseeable. This is how conventional portraits become radical evocations of Black everyday life.[48] Van Der Zee's photographs—and Black portraits in general—have been interpreted as radical, given the history of Black representation in which images of progress, uplift, and respectability have fought against dominant representations of Blacks as inferior.

Photographs by Black artists become a counternarrative within this context, and the visual ambitions of Black photography studios, in particular, served at the forefront of what can be described as a war over the representation of the Black subject.[49] In similar ways, vernacular photographs in general can be understood as defiant, in that vernacular photographs intrinsically defy convention.[50] They are the ultimate renegade images, sidestepping art history's conventions just as the radicality of Black subjects within studio photography took shape through their own refusal of the way things were for Black individuals.

However, a small pause is in order here. Quashie has warned about the consequences of privileging resistance as central to Black life. He writes, "Part of what hinders our capacity to see [character qualities such as vulnerability and interiority] is a general concept of blackness that privileges public expressiveness and resistance. More specifically, black culture is mostly overidentified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience and that has political aim; such expressiveness is the essence of black resistance."[51] He provocatively asks, "Simply, what else beyond resistance can we say about the shape and meaning of black culture and subjectivity?"[52] While he outlines a theory of Black quietness through a range of Black cultural expression, this book aims to spotlight aspects

of Black quotidian life that come into view specifically through Van Der Zee's photographs. Aligned with Quashie, I move away from a paradigm of understanding Blackness through resistance or as a counternarrative to Black subjection. Instead, this book insists that the shape and meaning of Blackness exist in the mundane fabric of everyday life—a sense of interiority and dimensionality most forcefully expressed through vernacular Black photography.

Therefore, another kind of refusal modeled throughout this book is a turn away from the iconicity of Van Der Zee's prototypical Harlem Renaissance photographs toward the noniconicity of the Black quotidian. This book's objective relies on a range of Van Der Zee's photographs, and not only those that can easily be read as clear indications of a higher moral or cultural good.[53] The Black quotidian encompasses all of Van Der Zee's photographs and their multiple ambivalences. Just as "vernacular photographs refuse to be organized or analyzed according to the paradigms that have guided traditional historical studies of photography" so, too, do I choose to deny the validation of Van Der Zee's photographs through only one configuration of meaning.[54]

A Nimble Arc departs from traditional art historical models of a monograph as a "scholarly treatise devoted to the sustained examination of a single clearly identified subject."[55] Its main claim is not grounded within an exhaustive study of Van Der Zee's oeuvre and the choices he made as an artist but instead in a focus on key chronological moments that remap the significance of his photographs and the way they operate in the world. Important developments in Van Der Zee's career are missing from this study, such as his foundational early years in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Phoebus, Virginia. Instead, it aims to contribute to a conversation that is more urgently needed when reimagining what future studies of Black photographers can look like by letting the complexity of African diasporic photographic practices—their creators, viewers, networks, and enablers and, too, the causes for their erasure—redefine the significance of a photographer's work.

But, simultaneously, the particular quotidian turns taken through this book are possible only because art history validated James Van Der Zee in the first place. As one approach hinges on the other, the only way to do Van Der Zee and his work justice is to selectively do both. While this book advocates for a more comprehensive view of Van Der Zee, it would be remiss not to recognize the numerous monographic exhibition books on Van Der Zee that have made a certain advantageous visibility of his

work and cultural cachet possible. It is through art history that Van Der Zee has gained visibility as a photographer of exceptional aesthetic facility.[56]

In fact, he may be considered *hypervisible*, especially to those familiar with photography.[57] This term describes the phenomenon of being always seen or referenced through the circulation of particular photographs; in the case of Van Der Zee, through his representation within major museum collections, and the sustained return to his photographs within scholarship. The term also captures how Van Der Zee's photographs are, at times, consumed in ways that are characterized by a kind of excess, to the point that the mention of his name leads to visual associations, often with photographs that are not even of his own making. Van Der Zee becomes so overly associated with the Harlem Renaissance that he comes to mind with any black-and-white photograph featuring Black subjects of the jazz era. These factors have simultaneously buoyed the high regard for and popularity of Van Der Zee's photography and also the assessment of photographs that look like Van Der Zee's, while preventing the full range of his images from being considered.

To be clear, the iconic nature of Van Der Zee's photographs is to be celebrated, especially since there are visual economies within the broader African diaspora for which few iconic photographs exist. The artist Albert Chong makes this pressingly apparent in his question "I wonder, where are the great photographs of the Caribbean, the iconic pictures that have become part of the visual memory of the people?"[58] Within African American visual culture, iconic photographs exist along an extended chronological curve, with a number of Van Der Zee's photographs, such as *Family Portrait* and *Couple Wearing Raccoon Coats*, among them. Nonetheless, for a selection of his work to be hypervisible is for other works not to be seen at all.

This book recognizes and is indebted to such scholarly framing and contributions. The privilege of working on a canonical photographer means attending to not only the prevailing circumstances of the work itself but also an assortment of publications, exhibitions, and mainstream recognition. This is the call-and-response structure that canonical artists can build.[59] Van Der Zee offers the rare example of a Black photographer whose recognition is secure within the art history of photography. For sure, arguments can be made about the extent to which Van Der Zee has failed to be fully celebrated, but there is no doubting that he has a place, albeit belated, within the canon of the art history of American photography. Notably, in no way was Van Der Zee written into the early history of the medium through collecting efforts, journal articles, or important publications

such as Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*.[60] Regardless of exactly when Van Der Zee emerged, among Black photographers practicing in the mid-twentieth century he has gained a level of visibility within the photography world comparable only to Roy DeCarava, Gordon Parks, Malick Sidibé, and Seydou Keïta.

As opposed to making space for Van Der Zee to be seen and recognized, it is time to set new discourses for how to critically attend to his photographs.[61] Therefore, this book offers one possibility among new histories of photography. Yet creating such histories requires more than shifting approaches. In a certain sense, writing such a history necessitates engaging with the past in order to reimagine a new way forward.[62] It is impossible to unhinge Van Der Zee from the art historical version of him found in various books, articles, and exhibitions on his work, nor does this book aim to do so. In fact, such materials essentially buttress this book's focus and make its ensuing argument possible. To imagine something anew requires that something was imagined in the first place. Similarly, to pivot, one must have something to push against. This book recognizes, and is indebted to, what art history has done for Van Der Zee.

At a time when there are frequent calls to decolonize art history, this book respects that call while arguing that instead of rewriting the art historical narrative, it may be more useful, for this book at least, to recognize the foundational ways art historical methods have gotten Van Der Zee's reputation to where it is today and build on that, by taking a vernacular turn for the purpose of rebalancing and expanding how his significance—and the importance of his photographs—is determined.[63]

Chapters along the Arc

The light box on which the glass plate negative is placed brings the image to life (figure I.8). The material of glass has a different weight and texture from the pages composing Barthes's 1981 edition of *Camera Lucida*. *Family Portrait* still depicts three figures. Also, within this context, Barthes's musing on photography falls to the wayside as a framework. *Family Portrait* can now be positioned side by side with another glass plate from Van Der Zee's studio. Both images are from a set of photographs that Van Der Zee took in his Harlem studio while in the company of his family members, presumably during their visit from his hometown of Lenox, Massachusetts. Within the second glass plate negative, an identical background

FIGURE I.8

James Van Der Zee, glass plate negative picturing two of Van Der Zee's maternal (Osterhout) aunts, 1926.

10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm). © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

frames two female figures from the Osterhout side of his family, while the man does not appear in this version. One sits; the other stands. As we peer into the details, light and dark tones are deceptive, as everything gets flipped once the image is processed; white becomes black, and vice versa. Positioning also is flipped, offering an alternate viewing experience of looking. Such a reframing parallels the interpretive shifts this book encourages of its readers.

For example, with few exceptions, scholars have long positioned Van Der Zee as a singular phenomenon. This individual status is reified in ways that obscure the intersocial operations of the artist and his neighborhood. Decentralizing the singular artist narrative common to art history can open up a productive space for other photographers, a space in which Van Der Zee becomes one among many, to the benefit of his photographs' significance. In the first chapter, I contend that Van Der Zee's photographs were able to function to the extent that they did specifically because Van Der Zee was not the lone photographer in Harlem. This chapter brings attention to the surprisingly large number of photography studios within a very small geographic area. Evidently, Van Der Zee had to shape and modify his business according to the circumstances of the neighborhood, and it was within this context that Van Der Zee was able to establish and differentiate himself. In addition, instead of thinking of Van Der Zee's work as a collaboration between the sitter and the photographer standing behind the camera, a larger field and network of often hidden considerations come into view in which the multiplicity of photographers and their images becomes key.

The following chapter focuses on images made by Van Der Zee during the summer of 1924, when he served as the official photographer for Marcus Garvey, the Pan-African leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). It considers the format, arrangement, and circulation of Van Der Zee's UNIA images in international print media in order to illustrate the impact of the photographs' translation into print and thereby the impact of their mass reproduction. In addition, although Van Der Zee took the photographs, editorial decisions made on behalf of UNIA were not necessarily in Van Der Zee's purview as the commissioned photographer. Also, an image by an unidentified photographer upends the larger themes of veracity and authority through a crucial case of mail fraud, which demonstrates the larger context of Garvey's employment of Van Der Zee's photographs.[64] Therefore, this chapter is very much about how UNIA's print media used Van Der Zee's photographs, as opposed to solely what Van Der Zee intentionally crafted as a photographer with an in-depth photographic

practice. The chapter shows how reproductions of Van Der Zee's photographs, adapted for Garvey's newspaper, were strategically used to reach a global diasporic audience outside of Harlem during the 1920s. A different kind of photographic vision is animated specifically through Van Der Zee's photographs' reproduction in print, one in which a photographer's lack of control over how his photographs are viewed enables new ways of thinking beyond the photographic image's accrual of value through the intentional choices made by Van Der Zee alone. The images' social uses, material form, reproduction, and circulation illustrate a different understanding of Van Der Zee's photographs.

I then trouble the importance of authorship by highlighting Van Der Zee's practice of reproducing and modifying images. The third chapter reframes Van Der Zee's talent, and the elements of his work that are considered notable, by examining the application of his talent to other people's work. It continues to move chronologically into the decades following the Harlem Renaissance era by considering Van Der Zee's resourceful strategy of cultivating a clientele both locally and internationally through his enlargement and retouching services. The labor of photography, as opposed to its genius, is considered. Initiating one of the predominant forms of engagement with his photographic practice during this later period of the 1940s and 1950s, Van Der Zee invited his clientele to bring or send him their photographs made by other proprietors for the purpose of reprinting, resizing, or adding enhancements to the surface. He also advertised this service through ads placed in different print media, which led to his receipt of various new clients through mail arriving from places as far away as Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Often mentioned as an afterthought to his career, when considered at all in scholarship, the body of work examined in this chapter illustrates the full scope of the changing forms and functions that thread throughout Van Der Zee's long career. By enlarging his clients' photographs and enhancing their surface, Van Der Zee adapted his engagement with photography to serve the needs of his clients in ways that can redefine how we value Van Der Zee's relationship to the medium.

The following chapter considers the rediscovery of Van Der Zee's photographs in the late 1960s and the implications of their display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 *"Harlem on My Mind": Cultural Capital of Black America 1900–1968* exhibition, a highly criticized show in which Van Der Zee's photographs were featured. He gained the title of the leading singular contributor with more than fifty enlarged and reproduced

images in the show. Many scholars have addressed the show through the lens of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's missteps in excluding the voices and works of Black artists and the resulting repercussions from those urgently calling for reform. When addressed in relation to Van Der Zee, the show is regarded as the moment that spearheaded his photographs' discovery for a larger audience and the emergence of his recognition. Instead of setting its sights on what happens to Van Der Zee and his career following the exhibit, this chapter asks the reader to return to the show. It centers the recollections of two people, Deborah Willis and Dawoud Bey, who visited the show individually as young adults, as a starting point for reimagining how to interpret the context of Van Der Zee's validation as a photographer. The chapter frames the potential moment of encounter between a mural-sized Van Der Zee photograph and a viewer who had never seen these kinds of photographs before as a generative site. By reclaiming the power of Van Der Zee's images outside of an art world context, this chapter offers a way to read the *Harlem on My Mind* show as an occasion of defiance on the part of the images' persistent presence through their enlargement and reproduction. Doing so highlights the possibility of an impactful experience for viewers, for whom photography's meaning is always open to interpretations outside of a museum's missteps and faltered framing. In many ways, this last chapter is the culminating example of how pivoting between the spaces of the vernacular and art history, and thus attending to different kinds of viewing practices, gives Van Der Zee's images dynamic opportunities for meaning and interpretation.

A Nimble Arc and its chapters focus on the relational and material dimensions of Van Der Zee's photographs across the twentieth century, from his early years in Harlem to the moment of the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibit. In doing so, the book offers insight into the changing role of photography as art, the very hierarchies that define art, and the terms through which an artist becomes an icon. I have described my approach as nimble, moving comfortably back and forth between art history and the vernacular to reexamine Van Der Zee and his work most fully. The coda explores yet another kind of nimble movement, this time through a rewinding motion back in time to circa 1994 to witness an occasion of multivalence. Such multiplicity inspired this book and can more broadly encourage other studies in photography and African American visual culture. It does so not necessarily to propose new approaches, but to consider old ones in different arrangements of address. I engage three interconnected examples constituting this period: the essay collection *Picturing Us: African American*

Identity in Photography, edited by Deborah Willis; *Van Der Zee, Photographer, 1886–1983*, a major exhibition of Van Der Zee's work at the National Portrait Gallery; and Lorna Simpson's homage to Van Der Zee's practice and legacy through *9 Props*. I aim to illustrate that often what is needed to expand studies on African American photography is already in the historiography. To nimbly rewind is to explore and refine which groupings of ideas are worth reengaging in tandem. The coda offers but one example by turning back in time to circa 1994. Doing so highlights the kinds of diverse evidentiary materials that can create compelling constellations of ideas for redirecting scholarship.

For the study of photography of the African diaspora in particular, such flexibility is necessary. Indeed, photography's distinct attributes include its unmanageability, given its scale and growing ubiquity; its very mobility, which makes it slippery; and its endless plasticity and capacity to become unfixed.[65] By following a nimble arc, Van Der Zee serves as an important anchor, a tether through which photography's multivalences can be further explored.[66] This reframing requires—to borrow a phrase—an act of wrestling with the image, given the unresolved tensions that always arise specifically with Van Der Zee's work.[67] Yet, unlike that metaphor, which implies a laborious task of will and strength, this book encourages a lightening of one's feet and a sense of possibility.

Notes

Introduction

1 See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43. An earlier reproduction of *Family Portrait* is included in the 1974 publication *Harlem, 1900–1929: Spiritual Home of Black America*, an exhibit portfolio edited by Louise Broecker on behalf of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The 1977 French version of Walter Benjamin's 1931 "A Short History of Photography" provides a second example. Titled "Les analphabetes de l'avenir" (The illiterates of the future) and published in the journal *Le Nouvel Observateur: Special Photo*, the essay included many of the photographs that appeared later in Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*.

2 Powell, "Linguists, Poets, and 'Others,'" 17; S. Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*; and Olin, "Touching Photographs." Also see the questions about scholarship's constant return to Barthes's idea of the punctum that are posed by Patricia Hayes in her conference paper "Photography and African History: Rethinking 20th Century Categories." Hayes, "Photography and African History," quoted in Gupta and Adams, "(Vernacular) Photography from Africa," 2.

3 Rodger Birt writes on the photographs of the period between 1900 and 1904 as exhibiting Van Der Zee's early mastery of exposure, development, and printmaking. Birt, "Life in American Photography," 30. Van Der Zee passed

away on May 15, 1983, while in Washington, DC, to receive an honorary degree at Howard University. His final photographic sitting, on February 5, 1983, captured the art historian and close friend Regenia Perry as his subject. Van Der Zee, Lawrence, and Perry, *Roots in Harlem*, 40.

4 The description of portraits as "something socially curative and familiar" is from Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 177.

5 Willis, *Reflections in Black*, 42.

6 In December 2021, the Metropolitan Museum of Art established the James Van Der Zee Archive in collaboration with the Studio Museum in Harlem.

7 *Pop photographica* is a term coined by Daile Kaplan. Among her many publications on the topic, see Kaplan, *Pop Photographica*.

8 See advertisement for "Negro Art Photo Calendars, Fans, Blotters, Thermometers. Negro Subjects artfully posed, home scenes, beautiful women and children for advertising your business in a modern way." Negro Art Advertising Company, Cathedral 8–4070, 2077 Seventh Avenue, New York City, *Crisis*, May 1935, 130.

9 Batchen, *Each Wild Idea*, 57. Also see Cutshaw and Barrett, *In the Vernacular*; Campt, *Listening to Images*; and Campt et al., *Imagining Everyday Life*.

10 This statement parallels ideas addressed in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 274–75.

11 Thompson, "Sidelong Glance," 23–24.

12 Crawford, "James Van Der Zee," 50.

13 For a compelling consideration of Black interior life, see Alexander, *Black Interior*. I use *Black quotidian* in ways that resonate with historian Matthew Delmont's use of the term in his book and digital humanities project *Black Quotidian: Everyday History in African-American Newspapers*. See https://blackquotidian.supdigital.org/bq/overview, accessed December 15, 2022. The Black quotidian for Delmont illuminates instances that go beyond the iconic figures and key moments that commonly represent the definitive importance of African American history. Although Delmont uses the Black press as his entry, I turn to Van Der Zee and his practice in order to attend to photography's role in the complexities of everyday, mundane Black life. Also see scholar Nicole Fleetwood's scholarship on noniconicity and artist Derrick Adams's exhibition catalog for his show *Buoyant*. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; and Adams, *Buoyant*.

14 Alternately, Campt uses the phrase "nimble and strategic practices" to describe the quotidian practices of refusal on the part of a photograph's subject in order to undermine the categories of the dominant. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32.

15 I use the term *social life* here as Christopher Pinney does in his publication *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, to mean the social practices in which photography is embedded as though each photograph has a life on its own.

16 E. Edwards, "Material Beings," 67.

17 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 235.

18 See Arabindan-Kesson, "Caribbean Absences," 64.

19 Lee, "American Histories of Photography," 4.

20 Hayes and Minkley, "Introduction," 3–4.

21 Wofford, "Whose Diaspora?," 79.

22 Enwezor, "Postcolonial Constellation," 58; and Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 62.

23 McKittrick, "Dear April," 4.

24 Zuromskis, "Vernacular Photography," 1610.

25 Als, "First Step," 28.

26 See Thompson, "Sidelong Glance."

27 Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez, *Migrating the Black Body*, 5.

28 For a less extensive precursor to this argument, see Smalls, "Ghost of a Chance," 7.

29 See Quashie, "Trouble with Publicness."

30 See, among others, VanDiver, *Designing a New Tradition*; and Monahan, *Horace Pippin*.

31 Haskins, *James Van DerZee*, 10.

32 Thanks to curator Jeff Rosenheim at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for bringing this point to my attention.

33 Sassoon, "Photographic Materiality," 192.

34 Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee, Photographer*, 128.

35 Sancho, "Respect and Representation," 56.

36 Muñoz, "Photographies of Mourning," 347.

37 Campbell, "Foreword"; D. Johnson, "Black Photography," 18.

38 Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism*, 159.

39 The general acceptance of Van Der Zee as exceptional was hard-won within the early historiography by scholars including Regenia Perry and Deborah Willis. For example, for an account of how an editor in the early 1990s criticized Willis's description of Van Der Zee as inflating his artistic achievements and innovation, see Willis, "Why Deborah Willis Thinks the Photobook Can Be Transformative."

40 Examples, among others, include Powell, *African American Art*; and Hagen, "Black and White."

41 Cheroux, "Introducing Werner Kuhler," 23.

42 For another photograph of the Liggett's drugstore window display, this time by the photographer G. W. King, see Cutshaw and Barrett, *In the Vernacular*, 80.

43 Crawford, "James Van Der Zee," 51.

44 Cheroux, "Introducing Werner Kuhler," 25.

45 Writers used the phrase *vernacular photography* well before 2000. However, Geoffrey Batchen's canonical essay marks the start of a deep consideration of the phrase's implications and meaning. Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies."

46 Campt et al., *Imagining Everyday Life*.

47 Brian Wallis writes, "Vernacular photographs comprise the core of the visual culture of the modern era." Wallis, "Why Vernacular Photography?," 17.

48 This point builds on the following statement by Willis: "Van Der Zee's photograph of Marcus Moziah Garvey (1887–1940) at a 1924 UNIA parade depicts a popular, confident, self-assured black leader, a radical depiction for the time." Willis, "Photography (1900–1970s)," 113.

49 See Mooney, "Photos of Style and Dignity"; and Gates, "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura," 50, 51.

50 Tousignant, "Relocating the Vernacular," 69.

51 Quashie, "Trouble with Publicness," 329.

52 Quashie, "Trouble with Publicness," 336.

53 As art critic Antwaun Sargent writes, "The Black body . . . so routinely has his or her value tied to distress, labor or a moral, higher good such as liberty or equality." Sargent, "Derrick Adams," 10.

54 The full quote is "Vernacular photographs refuse to be organized or analyzed according to the paradigms that have guided traditional historical studies of photography." Cutshaw and Barrett, "In the Vernacular," 11.

55 "Monograph," *Oxford Reference*, accessed February 3, 2023, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100206229. For information on how the College Art Association, the major US-based association for professional art historians, has approached monographs within their focus and roster of publication initiatives, see Houser, "Changing Face of Scholarly Publishing."

56 Of course, it is also through his clients that Van Der Zee has gained his visibility as a photographer of exceptional aesthetic facility.

57 The term *hypervisible* has also been used to great effect and for different purposes by several scholars, including in Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*.

58 Chong, "Photograph as a Receptacle of Memory," 130.

59 Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance*, 4.

60 It should be noted, as Rodger Birt has, that Van Der Zee is included in H. W. Janson's *History of Art*, "what some would consider the 'official' history of art albeit as a source of 'great documentary value.'" Birt, "Life in American Photography," 191n89; Janson, *History of Art*, 801.

61 As Anna Arabindan-Kesson writes regarding African American art, "Our field need no longer be focused solely on gestures of space-making, but it seems, now, must consider what its position within academia entails. We have reached a point in which it is possible to make space to review the field, take its measure, probe its limits." Arabindan-Kesson, "Caribbean Absences," 68.

62 Sheehan, "On Display," 101.

63 This interpretation of decolonizing art history reflects the model offered by curator and photographer David A. Bailey: "When I was working on the Harlem Renaissance exhibition *Rhapsodies in Black* in the 1990s (with Richard Powell and Roger Malbert for the Hayward Gallery) our main concern was not to write and curate a counter black art-historical narrative but to produce one that was cohabited by multiple and diverse artists—black and white." Bailey, in Catherine Grant and Price, "Decolonizing Art History," 10. For other decolonizing art/history models, see Sifford and Cohen-Aponte, "Call to Action"; Holton, "Decolonizing History"; and Copeland et al., "Questionnaire on Decolonization."

64 For a full explanation of the mail fraud, see chapter 2.

65 Hayes and Minkley, "Introduction," 2.

66 See discourse on the importance of naming artists (and subjects within the art and visual culture) of the African diaspora, including text/projects by art historian Charmaine Nelson, artist Theaster Gates, author and activist Randall Robinson, and curator Denise Murrell. Nelson, "Introduction"; Theaster Gates, "To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 16–August 1, 2010; R. Robinson, "Introduction"; Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, October 2018–February 2019.

67 See Cozier and Flores, *Wrestling with the Image*.

Chapter 1. "More, Many More"

1. Davis, "Photography and Afro-American History," 27. Davis's statement resonates with Kellie Jones's assertion, written years later in 1990, "It is baffling to consider that in most art historical texts, a handful of practitioners rep-