Metropolitan Dystopia: Color Photographs of Mississippi, Tennessee, and Louisiana, 1968-2005

by

Anna Kivlan

Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies
Duke University

Date: __________________________
Approved: __________________________

Richard J. Powell, Supervisor

Stanley Abe

William R. Ferris

Patricia Leighten

Irene M. Silverblatt

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

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Abstract

This dissertation examines color photographs made in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee between 1968 and 2005 and their relation to evolving racial discourse. My discussion revolves around three photographers: William Eggleston, Birney Imes, and William K. Greiner, who make striking color photographs in the U.S. South. I discuss the critical reception of their work and place it within the context of political and cultural attitudes toward the region and issues of race expressed in the media in the 1970s-early 00's. The important role played by Museum of Modern Art [MoMA] curator John Szarkowski was central in shaping discussions about contemporary photography during this period, placing Eggleston as the herald of the color photography explosion. I explore changing attitudes toward artistic and documentary color photography among photographers, critics, and the general public leading into the 1970s, arguing that these attitudes influenced the reception of the often high-intensity color images of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner, in the decades that followed.

I discuss the critical reception of William Eggleston’s 1976 photography exhibition at MoMA. I examine how Imes’s color photographs of juke joints and roadhouses in Mississippi utilize the expressive potentials of color film to depict these liminal, public/private spaces as sites of boundary crossing in a racially divided culture.
I explore the ways in which William K. Greiner uses color to depict the pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans metropolitan area.

My contribution is to show how Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner employed the expressive, visceral potentials of color photography to interpret and navigate the uncertain moral terrain of the U.S South in the era following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.
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1. Introduction

Eggleston’s South is a place where the horrors of history suggest no solution...¹

When color is needle-sharp...When the screen comes vibrantly alive...you know it’s

Kodachrome film.²

In this dissertation I examine how art world interest in the medium of color

photography and improved technology for producing stable color photographic prints

affected the ways southern photographers communicated about race and regional

identity in the period following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.³ This

period was accompanied by the national press’s shift in focus from civil rights struggles

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http://southernspaces.org/2013/egglestons-south-always-color
³ In her 1991 dissertation, Stein explains that art photographers were slow to turn to color. One reason was that black-and-white film was faster, and processing and printing were cheaper. Furthermore, “the initial chemical process used to develop the film rendered the dyes unstable.” While the problem of stable dyes was largely mitigated by 1939 – the year of Eggleston’s birth – by a new process of development that produced a stable form of color transparency, “photographers quite reasonably continued to wonder about the permanence of Kodachrome’s color rendering.” Sally Stein, “The Rhetoric of the Colorful and the Colorless: American Photography and Material Culture Between the Wars (Volumes I and II) (PhD diss., Yale University, 1991).
in the South to the uprisings and Black Power movement in the urban North.\footnote{Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” The Journal of American History, vol. 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1233-1263: 1235-1236. Hall notes that the “national press’s overwhelmingly sympathetic, if misleading coverage changed abruptly in the mid-1960s with the advent of black power and black uprisings in the urban North. Training a hostile eye on those developments, the cameras turned away from the South, ignoring the southern campaign’s evolving goals, obscuring interregional connections and similarities, and creating a narrative breach between what people think of as ‘the movement’ and the ongoing popular struggles of the late 1960s and the 1970s.”}

Memphis-based photographer William Eggleston [b. 1939] exemplified the use of color photography as an expressive medium capable of visual excess to depict, as historian Grace Hale indicates in the above epigraph, a morally ambiguous “new” South, different but also not entirely removed from the villainous South portrayed in civil rights photography.\footnote{In using the term “visual excess” I am following cultural critic Steven Shaviro, who described the 1989 film Blue Steel as a “powerfully stylized exercise in visual excess.” In this film, he writes, “light and shadow are projections of an intense subjectivity, violently at war with itself.” His observations, I would argue, have parallels in photography. In film viewing generally, Shaviro writes, “there is pleasure and more than pleasure: a rising scale of seduction, delirium, fascination, and utter absorption in the image.” Walter Benjamin argued that the experience of film, like that of Dadaist art work, is ultimately tactile, as Shaviro observes. “It hits the spectator like a bullet, it happens to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality” (Benjamin quoted in Shaviro, 49). Steven Shaviro, The Cinematic Body (University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, 1993). Such tactility, visual absorption and “intense subjectivity” achieved by way of not only light and shadow but also color is present in the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner.} The photographers I discuss here use color for idiosyncratic personal expression but speak to contemporary issues in the South – mass suburbanization, the increasing prevalence of \textit{de facto} segregation, environmental degradation, and the dissolution of southern identity. I argue that southern photographers William K. Greiner [b. 1957], Birney Imes [b. 1951], and Eggleston, possess a characteristic that historian Charles Reagan Wilson has attributed to Georgia
native Jimmy Carter’s 1976 presidential campaign – an awareness of “the moral complexities of life,” a perspective that appealed to Americans after Vietnam and Watergate.⁶

**Historical Context**

Of course an understanding of moral complexity was not new to the 1970s. The robust liberal tradition at the beginning of the 1960s drew from ideas and social reforms rooted in the progressive era and brought to fruition under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. In 1956, the Montgomery boycott was the first mass action crusade for racial equality that would change U.S. society as much as any movement on the left since the one that helped end slavery, according to historian Michael Kazin. “Activists in the black freedom movement aimed to transform not just the racial order in their own nation but the social hierarchy of the unjust world.”⁷ In San Francisco, the same year of the Montgomery boycott, poets were expressing radicalism in works such as *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) by Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg represented a radical voice

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in an era marked by political moderation and an uneasy kind of cultural conformity.”

The radical movement of the 1960s encompassed a variety of causes, including black freedom, Chicano rights, women’s liberation, gay liberation, the rights of the disabled, and others.\(^8\)

**Selection of Artists and Description of Project**

It was important to discuss Eggleston in this project, because of his relationship to Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski, the controversial reception of his exhibition and accompanying catalog *William Eggleston’s Guide*, and his resultant influence on other photographers. I chose to discuss Birney Imes because he is a Mississippi photographer who has produced what I perceive to be stunning color photographs pertaining to African American life in that state. An explorer and journalist, Imes investigated the prairie and Mississippi Delta regions. One of the major reasons I chose to discuss William K. Greiner is because he has stated that Eggleston was a major influence on him. However I also found Greiner’s use of color, especially in his photographs of Louisiana cemeteries, to be beautiful, and concur with Szarkowski’s comment that Greiner’s images achieve an uncanny effect of “airlessness” that is

\(^8\) Kazin, 216.
captivating. All three photographers use color photography to create images that stun us with their beauty. At times the effect is visceral, euphoria-inducing, and surreal.

Using selected examples from the work of Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes, I explore how the increasing quality and accessibility of the medium of color photography affected meaning, given that their photographs depict the southern U.S. between approximately 1968 and 2005. To do this, I discuss how the media presented the South as a region when the major exhibitions and monographs of these artists appeared in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 00’s. In the 1970s, historian Grace Hale notes, the popularity of southern rock bands like the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd was high. Superstars of rock-and-roll like the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin embraced and appropriated the music of Delta Blues musicians. And the clichéd images of the Old South had not yet disappeared. In the 1970s, according to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, tourism promoters in southern states were deploying images of the South little changed from those of the early twentieth century. “Southern states accounted for three of the top five (and five of the top ten) state advertising budgets during the 1970s,” Brundage notes. During that time, “gentility and historical romance were the proffered attractions.” Baton Rouge called itself “Plantation Country,” and a brochure boasted that Natchez, Mississippi, was “Where the Old South Still Lives.” Indeed, Brundage points out, “mansions, white

belles in hoop skirts, and Civil War shrines were the hallmarks of southern tourism during the 1970s.”

While by no means comprehensive, my reference to historical conditions is an attempt to describe the cultural climate within which the work of Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes appeared in order to better understand its reception. I draw from secondary historical sources including books and articles published within the last 20 years on school busing, the emergence of “color blind” conservatism and re-appropriation of the language of the civil rights movement by political conservatives, the continuing racial segregation and suburbanization of the metropolitan U.S. landscape, and the increasing political, economic, and cultural influence of Sunbelt states. My primary sources include newspapers, oral histories, and interviews. My aim is to explore how “artistic” color photographs of the Deep South were and continue to be received in the post-civil rights movement, post-Watergate, post-Vietnam era.

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Color Photography

Throughout this dissertation, I continue the work of Lisa Hostetler, Sally Stein, Sally Eauclaire, and others by exploring what color accomplishes that black-and-white could not in the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner. I explore how these color photographs make metaphorical statements about race and race relations in the Deep South (whether it was the intention of the photographer to do so or not). Historian Grace Hale argues that one of the works displayed at Eggleston’s 2013 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art makes explicit reference to race relations, “a subject that dominates much photography made in the South in the 1960s and 1970s” (figure 8).\(^\text{11}\) I will argue that the topic of race is relevant to many of Eggleston’s photographs, as well as those of Greiner and Imes. I will also suggest that it is impossible to leave the topic of race aside in formulating a “thick description” of their work that is attentive to the politics of memory and the “dialectic of mentions and silences” in history writing (a practice photography participates in).\(^\text{12}\) In this dissertation, I argue for the intertwined nature of color as an aesthetic issue in artistic photography and a social issue in U.S.

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\(^\text{11}\) Ibid. The image she refers to is “Untitled (Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in background),” 1971, which features Eggleston’s Uncle Adyn and his servant Jasper. I discuss this image in chapter one.

\(^\text{12}\) In using the phrase “thick description,” I am referring to the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his method of “sorting through layers of significance to derive the meaning from the native’s perspective.” Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). The phrase “dialectic of mentions and silences” comes from Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), which addresses the politics of memory.
Color photography, which had been eschewed or avoided by many ethically high-minded artistic and documentary photographers in the decades preceding 1970, was malleable in its identity as an artistic medium when Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner were emerging as artists. Because color photography did not bear the association of black-and-white photography with the southern work of the Farm Security Administration’s Historical Section (including that of Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke White, and Jack Delano) and the civil rights movement, I argue that it was well-suited to navigating the morally complex and ambiguous terrain of the post-civil rights movement era South. As an emerging artistic medium, it was primed to assist photographers in sidestepping the southern stories so overexposed in monochrome. In the past, color had signified “mass appeal in a culture of consumption,” tied to an extensive, corporate, depersonalizing marketplace, in the words of film and media historian Sally Stein.\textsuperscript{13} Unlike most of the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, who engaged with color haltingly and with caution, Greiner, Imes, and Eggleston – from Baton Rouge, LA, Columbus, MS, and Memphis, TN, respectively – embraced the medium’s flirtations with consumer culture while palpably wrestling with

\textsuperscript{13} Stein, 298.
the loss of southern cultural distinction.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to the aesthetic and moral ambiguity of color photography, the impact of the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner derives largely from the visceral and emotional pitch of color noted by some photographers and critics – whether that color is saturated, washed-out, sublime, or vulgar. As Stein has observed, more than black-and-white photography, color was historically thought to “stimulate response at an altogether instinctual level.”\textsuperscript{15} In 1969, critic Irv Tybel wrote that “black-and-white images tend to be intellectual and cold, while color is anti-intellectual and warm…Color images seem meant to be caressed with the eyes – to be felt rather than thought about. Sensual. Emotional. Virtually a visual narcotic.”\textsuperscript{16}

Until the 1970s, artistic and documentary photographers often privileged black-and-white over color, as monochrome was thought to possess greater honesty and aesthetic purity. Color often “signified frivolity,” according to Stein, “the site of play, which required less serious reflection.” FSA photographer Jack Delano, for example,

\begin{itemize}
\item Stein cites Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee as two photographers who were “unwilling to consider the way tourism was becoming an integral part of local economies.” Lee in particular was “more inclined to bracket color in the extraneous categories of the foreign, or even worse, the pseudo-foreign, rather than to document the gaudy roadside display as evidence of an emerging social trend,” Stein, 309.
\item Stein, 5. Early twentieth century U.S. advertising theory suggested that “the rhetoric and appeal of color seemed diametrically opposed to that of reasoned, verbal address” far more than black and white photography.
\end{itemize}
once used the name Kodachrome as a synonym for touristic advertising.\textsuperscript{17} In the late 1920s, photographer Edward Weston mused in his \textit{Daybooks} that he did not want color interfering with a picture’s “rhythm, form, and perfect detail.” Black-and-white photography was necessary to achieve “honesty unembellished…”\textsuperscript{18} And in 1933, FSA photographer Margaret Bourke-White argued that the “very blackness and whiteness of photography,” made it “suitable for industrial subjects,” since it is “honest, revealing, and cleancut.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Dissertation Structure}

I begin chapter one with Eggleston, situating his work in the U.S. South of the 1970s, at a time when the media was redefining the region and conservative politicians sought to reinvent their message by “embracing an ideal of formal equality,” and “focusing on blacks’ ostensible failings.” In doing so, they angled to be the “true

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Stein, 307-308. The idea was that “color pictures, like picturesque scenes, rarely told the truth because truth, as the documentary photographers habitually defined it, needed to be extracted from beneath the surface, particularly those surfaces designed to attract attention.”


\textsuperscript{19} Quoted in Sally Stein, “The Rhetoric of the Colorful and the Colorless” (PhD diss. Yale University, 1991).
\end{flushleft}
inheritor of the civil rights legacy.” I explore the effect of the New Right’s obfuscation of the civil rights legacy on the public perception of Eggleston’s photographic project, which has at times been accused of moral ambivalence and ambiguity. How did curator John Szarkowski’s approach reinforce or undermine this perception, and how did Eggleston’s color itself work against the grain of Szarkowski’s curatorial vision? These are the questions chapter one explores.

Chapter two takes us into the world of Imes, who I argue uses color photography to depict Mississippi juke joints and road houses as magical realist places and to mediate his own boundary crossings into them. Art historian Franz Roh first introduced the term in his 1925 book, Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus (1925) to describe a style deriving from Neue Sachlichkeit, but rooted in late 19th-century German Romantic fantasy. In later criticism, the term has been used to describe painting in which objects are “depicted with photographic naturalism but which because of paradoxical elements or strange juxtapositions convey a feeling of unreality, infusing the ordinary with a

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20 Hall, “Long Civil Rights,” 1237. According to historians like Hall and Matthew Lassiter, the new “‘color-blind conservatives’ reworked the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement for their own purposes...They insisted that color blindness, defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law was the movement’s singular objective, the principle for which King and the Brown decision in particular stood.” Hall, 1237.
sense of mystery.” Magic realism is an artistic device that can facilitate “the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems” that might seem to defy rationality.

In chapter three I address the use of color by Greiner to explore pre-Katrina metropolitan New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and the surrounding areas, depicting an at times dystopic, at times sublime environment. Historians like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall have argued for a historical appreciation of the “long” civil rights movement extending before and after the dominant narrative of the “short civil rights movement,” which begins with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision and culminates with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Perhaps part of the reason why the movement is so often equated with this decade is that many iconic black-and-white photographs sprung from this

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24 According to Hall, the ‘long civil rights movement’ took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s and was intimately tied to the “rise and fall of the New Deal Order.” This movement “accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a ‘movement of movements’ that ‘def[ies] any narrative of collapse.” Hall, “Long Civil Rights,” 1235.
period, made by able practitioners such as Danny Lyon, Charles Moore, Bob Edelman, Gordon Parks, and Bruce Davidson. In the decades following this eruption of photojournalistic work and the 1968 assassination of the movement’s photogenic and telegenic leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner wielded a color photography that was more reliable and user-friendly than ever, an art form coming to increasing prominence in the New York art world. With this medium, they communicated the nuances, complexities, and messiness of their post-Voting Rights Acts southern milieus outside the photojournalistic idiom so closely associated with black-and-white.

Social and Aesthetic Meanings of Color

“It pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it,” Shug Avery remarked to Celie in *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker’s protagonist makes an obvious point vital to this dissertation: color matters – it wants us to notice it, be moved and dazzled by it. It attracts us and makes us feel something. With regard to color photography, the New York art world of the 1970s did just that – it “stood up and

26 Shaviro, 30.
took notice” of the medium, even though artists had been exploring it for decades.\textsuperscript{27} And in the southern U.S., as in many postcolonial environments, skin color has mattered for a very long time. As scholar and religious leader Pauli Murray observed of her childhood in North Carolina, it was “color, color, color all the time...Folks were never just folks. They were white folks! Black folks! Poor white crackers! No-count niggers! Red necks! Darkies! Peckerwoods! Coons!”\textsuperscript{28} In post-bellum America, Sally Stein writes, “race relations and the social obsession with skin pigmentation haunted nearly all references to color, yet there was little consensus among whites or blacks about what group was covered by the term.” Ultimately the expression served as a kind of metonym for exclusion from power.\textsuperscript{29} In photography, Stein suggests, some black-and-white documentary portraits were an opportunity to “fetishize ‘clear oval faces, pale and refined by starvation.” Monochromy “enhanced racial distinctions in the physiognomic norms of documentary portraiture.”\textsuperscript{30}

Undeniably, color has been a contentious issue both aesthetically and socially, and the photographers I discuss here demonstrate that its use in photography can

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[29] Stein, 296.
\item[30] Stein, 343.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
heighten the visceral response viewers may have to images in general.\textsuperscript{31} In the work of these photographers, the color is sometimes bright, appearing supersaturated, as if channeling the “delirious excesses of postmodern vision.”\textsuperscript{32} The visceral possibilities of color are marketed in a 1960 ad for Kodachrome that describes the film’s color as “needle-sharp” – strong and piercing enough to injure. The ad points up color’s power as a provocateur and aggressor, a power that, I would argue, Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner harness to accentuate the gothic undertones and overtones of southern history.\textsuperscript{33}

Their photographs often invite a kind of indulgent, reveling enjoyment that could be regarded as anathema to the moral demands of the black-and-white Farm Security Administration and civil rights photographs.\textsuperscript{34} Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner exploit the expressive potentials of color photography to navigate the moral and social landscape of the post-civil rights movement South. Eluding the moral legibility of black-and-white photojournalism, their work helps make the South harder to “simplify, appropriate, and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31} “We respond viscerally to images,” writes Shaviro, “before having the leisure to read or interpret them as symbols” (Shaviro, 25).
\textsuperscript{32} Shaviro, 8.
\textsuperscript{34} “Like [Russell] Lee, [Jack] Delano also could not avoid speaking of color in connection to cars, and he too deemed it an inappropriate subject for social documentary.” Stein, 311.
\end{flushleft}
contain.”

In chapter one, I examine Eggleston’s show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976, and the accompanying exhibition catalogue, *William Eggleston’s Guide* (figure 1). The catalogue title suggests that this document guides the viewer to something…but to what, or to where? “The title was mine,” said John Szarkowski, Director of the MoMA Department of Photography, “and I liked it for its three-cornered ambiguity. A guide tells one how to find one’s way through a tangle of strange roads, and it also tells one how to use a new machine, and it is a synonym for a teacher, and reminds us of Virgil” (Dante’s guide through hell in *The Divine Comedy*). “Tangle of strange roads” and “new machine” are perhaps metaphors for the use of color photography in art, since the *Guide* was the first book of color photography published by MoMA. But in addition to being

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35 Hall says she wants to make civil rights harder, “harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain.” Hall, “Long Civil Rights,” 1235.

36 William Ferris, *The Storied South: Voices of Writers and Artists* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 192. “The catalog for my exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art used around 50 pictures from a series of 375 pictures,” Eggleston told historian and folklorist William Ferris in 1976. “The museum exhibit and catalogue is a good cross section of that essay. In other words, it would have been impossible to exhibit and publish the whole thing. The catalog is called *William Eggleston’s Guide*. It is a kind of guide, but I do not know how it could be used” (quoted in Ferris, 193).

37 2007 letter from John Szarkowski to author.

38 MoMA press release, May 25, 1976: “On May 25, the Museum of Modern Art will publish its first book of color photography, *William Eggleston’s Guide*, by John Szarkowski.” And, in his essay for the *Guide*, Szarkowski claimed most of the work in color photography that had come before Eggleston had been puerile. “Considering the lack of enthusiasm and confidence with which most ambitious photographers have regarded color, it is not surprising that most work in the medium has been puerile,” Szarkowski wrote (*Guide*, 8). MoMA, according to Sally Stein, had historically been a great protector of a pure black-and-white photography.
a guide to artistic color photography, the Guide also took viewers – many from New York and the northeast – pictorially through the Deep South, a region still considered culturally distinct and even exotic in the 1970s, yet perceived in the media to be on the rise culturally and economically.39 The son of Mississippi Delta plantation owners, Eggleston made the MoMA exhibition photographs in the Delta region, roughly between Memphis and New Orleans (including parts of Alabama, Mississippi, Memphis, and Louisiana).

Why did Szarkowski choose Eggleston for the museum’s first monograph on color photography? Walker Evans had infamously referred to color as vulgar, and Sally Stein observes that the FSA photographers in the late 1930s only felt comfortable using color in certain settings, particularly when they entered county fairs. “On these occasions, color seemed integral to the forms of communal revelry…the photographers stopped worrying and shot color film freely…”40 Perhaps the Deep South of the 1970s – with its highly televised battles over race, its perceived exoticism coterminous with its increasing regional and political assimilation to mainstream American culture – was a

39 In a 1976 article on increasing arts-related activity in the South, reporter B. Drummond Ayres claimed that “the Southern Rim, or Sun Belt, is the arc of Southern and Southwestern states that is accruing economic and political power faster than any other region in the country.” B. Drummond Ayres, “Cultural Activities in the South Grow with its Economy,” The New York Times, November 1, 1976, 24. A photograph of Eggleston with other members of the arts community accompanied Ayres’s article. Eggleston’s MoMA show just six months prior possible contributed to Ayres’s perception that cultural activity was blossoming in the South.
40 Stein, 286.
suitable subject with which to test color photography, a medium of nascent and insecure art world status.

Thus in chapter one I examine how Szarkowski’s phrase “tangle of strange roads” referred not only to a “new” medium of artistic color photography, but also to Eggleston’s photographic navigation of the Deep South in the 1970s. I extend this discussion to the work of Imes and Greiner, whom Eggleston influenced in their color photographic practices. It may be obvious by now that my interest in this project began with William Eggleston. Many observers (including myself) – from the 1970s to this day – consider Eggleston to be of the Southern U.S. both in persona and photographic practice, even if his South is in many ways different from what photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans, Danny Lyon, Charles Moore, and Clarence John Laughlin showed viewers.41 In chapter one, I examine the way in which Eggleston’s use of dazzling color is sometimes perceived to be intertwined with his southernness.

41 Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale incisively describes this difference between Eggleston’s South and the South photographed by Walker Evans in her review of Eggleston’s 2013 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, titled “At War With the Obvious:” Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Eggleston’s South: ‘Always in Color,’” *Southern Spaces* (June 27, 2013), http://southernspaces.org/2013/egglestons-south-always-color. Historian Scott Leslie Matthews observes that Walker Evans and James Agee were themselves creating a new vision of the South and a new definition of beauty in Hale County, Alabama. “The tenant houses of the poor and not the mansions of the planters became beautiful in their eyes,” Matthews writes. He points out that documentary photographers and filmmakers such as Danny Lyon, John Cohen, and Jack Delano “shared a desire to understand the region, to pierce through the romantic stereotypes of conservative white Southerners to reveal the real South and the common folk. Their work, in turn, created a new romanticism, new images of the region outside of time, the South as a reservoir of premodern authenticity.” Matthews, Scott Leslie, “‘Up against the world like it is:’ Documentary Expression in the South, 1925-1965.” PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2008: 3-6.
find it rewarding to think of Eggleston as a blues photographer,” wrote critic Peter Schjeldahl in 2008. “The extraordinary aesthetic discipline of his photographs shimmers with a subliminal knowledge of the hell-bent – although, in a Southern vein…”42 Historian and folklorist William Ferris observes that “Eggleston captures the intense yellow of late afternoon sunsets in the Delta is so vividly that the color is now called ‘Egg yellow’ to acknowledge his eye as the photographer.”43 In his introductory essay to the Guide, Szarkowski made much of Eggleston’s virtuosity with color but minimized his southern aristocratic background. Nonetheless, the curator’s choice of title – which according to Eggleston referenced the Michelin road guides in use at the time – connected color with place, that is, Eggleston’s idiosyncratic, “new” South. I attempt to demonstrate how he and Szarkowski, in the 1976 exhibition and the monograph William Eggleston’s Guide, unite an aesthetic exploration of color photography with a cultural exploration of the South, particularly the Mississippi Delta region. In William Eggleston’s Guide and other projects, including Election Eve (1977), Graceland (1983), The Democratic Forest (1989), and Faulkner’s Mississippi (1990), Eggleston offers the viewer inroads to the hermetic territory of the post-civil rights movement South and the uncertain terrain of artistic color photography.

43 William Ferris, The Storied South, 176.
Critics have cited the saturated, vulgar, or dazzling aspects of the work of Greiner, Imes, and Eggleston – qualities inseparable from its color – as a means by which they achieve their art. In Time-Life Books “Photography Year 1976 Edition,” a writer describes Eggleston’s work stopping traffic in Cambridge when it was exhibited at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in 1975. “William Eggleston shoots his pictures emphatically in color,” the writer observes. “However, he uses the rich tones not to romanticize his images but to exaggerate their reality – to make their commonplace subjects dramatic.”

In 2008, Schjeldahl described Eggleston’s photographs as being distinctive for hitting “you in the face” and leaving you “confused and happy.” These photographs “pummel” the viewer with “eccentric beauty” and “synthetic gorgeousness,” leaving them wondering about it. The Eggleston effect, he notes, exploits “techniques that seem hardly fair in straight photography – chiefly dye transfer printing, an arduous and expensive process (mooted, of late, by digital technology)…”

Schjeldahl effectively describes the euphoria, even the “high” that Eggleston’s color and, I would argue, the color produced by Greiner and Imes, can elicit. Schjeldahl aptly describes Eggleston’s photograph of a Memphis teenager pushing grocery carts:

45 Schjeldahl, “Local Color.”
“The subject is a dreary fact. The content is erotic truth that Plato would have endorsed” (figure 2).⁴⁶ Writer Richard Ford suggested something similar about Birney Imes in his foreword to *Juke Joint*, comparing Imes’s photographs of juke joints to the juke joints themselves, writing “Very little in them makes me think: yes, life’s just like that,” (figure 3). “Life’s usually not this pretty; its colors are hardly ever this substantial, this bright and chosen.” If Ford himself traveled to these places and viewed them with his own eyes, he predicted, life would be infinitely more quotidian: “pale, hesitant, less noticeable, the light more diffuse, human activity less fixed, more open to speculation.”⁴⁷ And Szarkowski commented on the improbable airless quality William K. Greiner infused into his photographs of New Orleans cemeteries (figure 4). There is “a beautiful, crystal, transparent quality of light and super clarity to the quality of these places that has a very elegiac spirit,” Szarkowski observed.⁴⁸

I would argue that such “erotic,” “elegiac,” bright, crystalline, and “chosen” color in southern color photography sometimes has an uplifting, redemptive, or mind-altering effect on the viewer, a visual equivalent to the 1970s myth of “abrupt and profound moral transformation that would make possible a biracial future unique in the

⁴⁶ Ibid.
nation” identified by Charles Reagan Wilson.⁴⁹ Therefore in my discussion of Birney Imes in chapter two, I explore magical realism, psychodelia, and the fantastic as modes of artistic response sometimes associated with encountering the exotic.⁵⁰ I argue that this mode of expression is present in Imes’s photographs of Mississippi juke joints and road houses. In doing so, I discuss the cultural connections between the Mississippi Delta, New Orleans, and Latin America, a region closely associated with the production of magic realist literature. I situate Imes’s supersaturated practice in the context of the move in the late 1960s and early 1970s “from token to comprehensive school desegregation in the South,” which took place after the glare of the media had “swung away from the region.”⁵¹ Imes was a student at Stephen D. Lee High School in Columbus, Mississippi, when it first began desegregating in the late 1960s.⁵² He told

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⁴⁹ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Flashes of a Southern Spirit: Meanings of the Spirit in the U.S. South by Charles Reagan Wilson,” Church History 81 (September 2012): 730-732. Wilson points out the ways that this myth energized black and white politicians, artists, and activists to “undertake initiatives previously unthinkable in the South,” according to Brundage, providing “a mythic present for unprecedented experiments in biracialism.”

⁵⁰ In a discussion of how color can be seen without the “excitation of wavelengths from the outside,” Faber Birren writes: “As in dreams, afterimages, a blow on the head, pressure on the eyeball, the effects of certain drugs such as LSD (in which fountains of dazzling hues are witnessed), the sense of color remarkably operates from within the human brain and psyche.” Faber Birren, “Color Perception in Art: Beyond the Eye into the Brain,” Leonardo, Vol. 9, no. 2 (Spring 1976).

⁵¹ Hall, 1255.

⁵² The U.S. Justice Department filed suit against the Columbus school district, mandating the integration of the high schools. White parents were opposed to the integration, and for two years the district fought the ruling in the courts. Finally after losing in the 5th District Court of Appeals in New Orleans, the district was given one year to get facilities ready for black students. Imes graduated from Lee High School in 1969, but the school had slowly begun integration by then. High school yearbooks from 1967-1969 feature photographs of black students, and Imes has discussed his friendship with fellow high school athlete Jackie
interviewer Vince Aletti that when this happened, he became friends with a black fellow football and track team member. Through the friendship, he was “introduced to this other world,” and “began to see and question things in a way that he hadn’t before.”

Color and Realism

In all three chapters of this dissertation, the relationship between color and realism or color and naturalism is a recurring theme. As suggested above, this becomes especially important in chapter two, when I discuss the relationship between Imes’s color and magic realism. Indeed, as curator Lisa Hostetler has pointed out, by the time commercially viable color photographs had become available, black-and-white images seemed ‘real’ – viewers overlooked their chromatic deficiencies when they assumed the fundamental truthfulness of black-and-white. As color photographic technologies developed, color was sometimes deemed too artificial to be real; in other contexts it was too literal to be artistic. “Throughout,” writes Hostetler, “the commentary invoked

Ball – the two became friendly during the integration process. The 1968 yearbook was also the first I saw that included color photographs.

various definitions of realism, from surface resemblance to existential truth.”

An association between color and fantasy persisted, even as Kodak emphasized color photography’s beauty and realism in its advertising throughout the 1940s. Black-and-white photography maintained a reputation for greater veracity, due in part to the documentary photographs produced by the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration. Even though FSA photographers worked in both black-and-white and color, there was a prejudice against color when it came to documentary. By removing the colors of everyday life, black-and-white photography was perceived as producing a “leveling effect, creating a sense of parity between disparate phenomena.” Thus, Hostetler points out, documentary suggested that “color was of little consequence to thirties culture, that color had faded with other reckless illusions that characterized an earlier era of prosperity.” By 1942, the authority of documentary’s realist claims was tied to its monochrome appearance – “documentary appeared to present the unmediated truth because it was in black and white, and black and white seemed to signal contemporary reality because it served as the conventional form of

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55 Hostetler, 18.
56 Ibid.
57 Hostetler, 21.
In each chapter, I discuss the meaning of color – saturated and unsaturated, bloody and bloodless – in the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner, respectively. The photographer William Christenberry, Alabama native, friend and artistic influence on Eggleston, has observed that “if the color print seems lurid” in Eggleston’s work, “that’s the way the subject was found. Calm, subtle, uncolorful subjects are photographed in just this way. Nevertheless, the subjects would mean far less if they were presented in black and white.” It is important to note that the palette employed by the photographers I discuss is not always supersaturated, lurid, or visceral, though this kind of color is an important part of my concern. While I agree with Christenberry’s observations about Eggleston’s use of color, I will argue that, whether intentional or not, the color conveyed by these three photographers – whether washed out or eye-popping – heightens the emotional and aesthetic impact of their imagery. As I hope to make clear in this dissertation, I believe this effect has important implications in the post-civil rights

59 Sally Stein, quoted in Hostetler, 21.
60 Elizabeth Avedon, “Portrait William Eggleston by Elizabeth Avedon,” Le Journal de la Photographie. Eggleston said to William Ferris: ”Bill Christenberry’s work has had a big influence on my work. Christenberry works in color. He is one of the few that does,” quoted in William Ferris, The Storied South, 194.
movement “Sunbelt South.”

The Sunbelt and the Southern U.S.

Journalists began using the term “Sunbelt” in the 1970s to denote the “states of the West and the South” that had been, as journalist Steven V. Roberts puts it, “blanketed” by “spectacular suburban growth.” Low corporate taxes, low welfare benefits, and “‘look-the-other way environmental policies,” combined with federally financed highway-building campaigns, attracted northern industry and northern-born, Republican branch managers and other white collar workers to the Sunbelt South in the postwar era. According to Richard M. Bernard, the term “Sunbelt” was first used by political analyst Kevin P. Phillips in his book The Emerging Republican Majority (1969). The Sunbelt concept, Bernard states, “lay dormant and ill-defined until the mid-1970s, when a combination of consensus reports on migration, the growing Republican potential in the South and West, and the presidential candidacy of Jimmy Carter brought the lower tier of states to public attention.” While the definition of Sunbelt at

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that time remained unclear, Bernard notes, most observers included in its definition the area below the 37th parallel, “along the northern borders of North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona and in California below Fresno.65

As historian Matthew Lassiter has demonstrated, the metropolitan Sunbelt replaced the rural Black Belt as the center of political power in the South in the decades after World War II.66 During this time, a posture of “color blindness” emerged among business leaders and the white middle and upper class as a strategy of dealing with racial conflict. According to Lassiter, the civil rights movement had “discredited” overt racism, but color-blind posturing did not require racist expression. Instead it emphasized the values of individual meritocracy and consumer choice, ignoring the effects of structural racism. Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes worked at the center and periphery of a southern space that was organized around this residential language of consumer rights and meritocratic individualism. Their photographs show a regional space becoming less and less identifiably southern. Historians have shown that regional convergence in the U.S. was marked by the parallel suburbanization of Southern and American politics which, in turn, led to a perceived de-centering of the elite fine art world from the urban North. This ideological shift from a centralized northern art world

65 Bernard, 732-733.
66 Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*. Lassiter writes that between 1948 and 1968, suburban residents of the metropolitan regions and white collar migrants to the Sunbelt South increasingly diverged from the racial politics of the Black Belt and converged with the class-based voting patterns of the rest of the nation.
affected the careers of the three photographers I discuss here.

My aim in this dissertation is to track color’s role in depicting the South in the 1970s-early 2000s, when problems related to racism and poverty were often purported to be improving due to the elimination of de jure segregation and the relocation of corporate interests to the Sunbelt. Despite these sea changes, Mississippi still remained the poorest state in the Union as of 2012. Even after the abolishment of Jim Crow, racially motivated choices continued to be made concerning the assignment of students to schools – that is, segregation persisted de facto, without the legal tangibility it had during the movement. As Birney Imes himself wrote in a 2013 column for the Commercial Dispatch, contemporary problems have become increasingly insidious:

“…today, it could be argued, the challenges we face as a nation are just as daunting as

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67 Journalists in the mid-late 1970s commented on this apparent trend, especially after Jimmy Carter, a liberal Democrat from Georgia, won the presidency in 1976. Some journalists perceived a connection between the South’s political and economic ascendancy and the increased respect for artistic production in the Southern “periphery” proffered by traditional art world “centers.” A 1976 New York Times feature referred to the South of the 1970s as “increasingly urbanized and sophisticated,” and observed that arts activity “has increased markedly…as the region has become more and more an economic and political power.” Indeed, the reporter notes, the Sunbelt in the mid-1970s was accruing economic, political, and cultural power faster than any other region. See B. Drummond Ayres, “Cultural Activities in the South Grow With Its Economy,” New York Times, November 1, 1976, 24.


69 “Eggleston made the photographs on display here [2013 exhibition of his work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art] in a particular historical moment: after mass activism, the passage of landmark civil rights laws, and the urban rebellions of the 1960s transformed the South and the nation. Officially, at law, the U.S. was a desegregated country.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Eggleston’s South.”
they were in 1963, maybe even more so. The evil loomed large and obvious before us then. The challenges today are more insidious, with less obvious solutions: dysfunctional political institutions, runaway debt, polarization of society.”

During the period of artistic activity that this dissertation addresses – 1968-2005 – ideological wars were brewing over how to narrate southern history. At the U.S. bicentennial celebration in 1976 (the same year as Eggleston’s MoMA exhibition), “the exploits of southern white men…remained in the spotlight.” The white southern narrative still defined the South in 1976, despite the efforts of bicentennial planners “to promote national unity after the civil rights movement and Vietnam.”

But by the late 1970s, critics were protesting the lack of African American history at Williamsburg and other southern museums. “Visitor discontent with the avoidance of the topic of slavery at some heavily visited sites became evident, especially after the publication of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* in 1976, and the airing of a twelve-hour television adaptation in January 1977,” historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage observes.

Furthermore, as the school busing crisis made plain, the problems of racial inequality and conflict could not be neatly circumscribed to the South. In this volatile and mercurial context, seemingly concrete definitions – of the South, race, and segregation –

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72 Brundage, 295.
were subject to continuous and sometimes violent revision. By means of color, Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner addressed race and southern suburbanization in an ambiguous moral and aesthetic terrain.

**History of Color Photography**

As curator Katherine Bussard has outlined in her 2013 essay for the catalogue accompanying “Color Rush,” a 2013 exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the first commercially available color photographic process, the autochrome, was introduced by the Lumiere brothers in 1907. This process made it possible to photograph automatically in color and then develop one’s own transparencies. Prior to the 1970s, when the art world took greater notice of color photography, the medium was rarely used in an exclusively ‘high’ or ‘low’ manner.73 “Even after color photography arrived on the art market in the 1970s, it enjoyed a fluidity of boundaries between high and low art forms...which occurred at precisely the same moment that photography in general was being celebrated for a similar permeability.” In 1907, as Bussard notes, Alfred Stieglitz referred to color photography as an “accomplished fact.” At that early date – nearly 70 years before Eggleston’s exhibition— Stieglitz observed that “the seemingly everlasting

question whether color would ever be within the reach of the photographer has been definitively answered.” Still, there were problems with autochromes – namely their cost and fragility, which made exhibition and reproduction difficult. But Stieglitz displayed them at 291 Gallery in September 1907 and went on to publish three in the April 1908 issue of *Camera Work*. Replaced by more refined technical developments, the Autochrome began to disappear in the 1920s. By the 1930s, color plates had become common in magazines – it became difficult to imagine a magazine without them – and developments in color photography continued to accelerate throughout that decade. “In 1935, Kodak debuted its first commercially successful amateur color film, Kodachrome, which “required long exposures but was otherwise easy to use and broadly distributed.”74

Yet despite the introduction of the relatively successful Kodachrome, color photography was considered to be a difficult artistic medium to work with, at least through the 1960s. Indeed, it was the most difficult art medium of them all, according to photography critic Bruce Downes. “The photographer must contend with mechanical, optical, and chemical processes over which he can have only partial control,” he wrote in 1960. “No man, however skillful, can predict precisely what a color photograph will

74 Bussard, 2-3.
really look like at the time of exposure.” The high risk of inaccuracy in color photography was alluded to in a 1960 ad for Anscochrome: “Problem:” the ad stated, “To record deep rich textures and bright highlights without losing detail or distorting color values.” “We’ll never be able to control the color process as an artist controls paint… but how close can we come?” asked Downes. As a fine arts medium, he contended, “color photography is undoubtedly the most complex and frustrating process ever invented by man.” He continued:

The basic problem in any art is mastery of the medium. In painting, the artist is confronted with simple things – paint, brushes, and canvas, all of which are under his own control. It is his manual skill that determines the success or failure of his picture. Would that this were the case with color photographers, who labor at the mercy not only of their own limitations, but of a process that is by nature exasperatingly unstable.

Downes listed everything that could go wrong: improper exposure, departures from the required color temperature of light, slight deviations from correct developing times and temperatures, or physical changes in the processing chemicals. All of these factors, he noted, would alter the colors, and none could be accurately predicted. Such

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78 Downes, 21.
pitfalls, wrote Downes, “are alarming to the photographer who is seriously trying to master his medium. They are what cause photographers to suffer the agonizing tensions of anxiety during the period between exposure and the unfinished picture.”\textsuperscript{79} Another difficulty Downes noted was that a color reversal transparency, such as the Kodachrome, could only be viewed by transmitted light in a hand viewer or by projection on a screen. “In effect, unlike a painting or a piece of sculpture, it is incomplete in itself. It is not something you can hang on the wall and look at. This is a big frustration, and a big reason why over the years there have been so few exhibitions of color photography.”\textsuperscript{80} For exhibitions, the transparency must be translated into a print, “which introduces another string of potential deviations besides being for most of us prohibitively expensive.”\textsuperscript{81} Some photographers, wrote Downes, are “resigned to the idea that color photography is a bastard medium and have confined themselves to black-and-white.”\textsuperscript{82}

While there were concerns about and limitations on the medium, the artistic choice to use color became increasingly attractive in light of postwar improvements in color film technology, particularly with regard to the control of hue and preservation of

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Downes, 21.
\textsuperscript{81} Downes, 22.
\textsuperscript{82} Downes, 23.
color in prints. \(^83\) “Between what Kodachrome and Technicolor made possible, color photography’s multifaceted mass consumption was completely assured at the dawn of World War II,” writes Bussard. \(^84\) Photography magazines were abuzz with the latest developments in the late 1950s and 1960s. “In color products,” wrote photographer David B. Eisendrath, Jr. in a special 1960 issue of *Popular Photography*, “perhaps the most talked about, and certainly the one with the most visible effect on amateurs and professionals, was the introduction in March of Eastman Kodak’s High Speed 35-mm Ektachrome.” The Kodak material, with its high speed of 160, wrote Eisendrath, “its pushability to even higher speeds, its great latitude and fine color rendition, truly heralded the fact that available-light color photography was really here.” The Tungsten material “allowed the fast-lens owners to photograph *in color* almost everything and anything they could see.” \(^85\) Eisendrath described the degree of anticipation for a faster, better Kodachrome: “For several years photographic technicians who watch the

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\(^83\) Kodak unveiled the dye transfer process for “making color prints from three-color separation negatives” in 1946. Eggleston used this process, which is highly stable from an archival perspective and allows for great control of color saturation. Kodak released Ektachrome transparency sheet film in 1946, which was the “first color film that could be processed by any photographer.” In 1963, Kodak introduced the first instant color film (Polacolor Type 48) and the Cibachrome silver dye-bleach process for making prints from color transparencies. Fuji film was established in 1965 and released their first ASA 400 color negative film in 1976 (from the Timeline of Color Photography related to the Leopold Godowsky, Jr. Color Photography Awards, Photographic Resource Center, Boston University, http://www.bu.edu/prc/GODOWSKY/timeline.htm. Accessed August 26, 2013).


movements of manufacturers with great interest and speculation, who read the patent announcements, and draw conclusions and play hunches, have known that a faster Kodachrome was somewhere in the offing.”\textsuperscript{86} In 1963, the Swiss chemical company Ciba introduced the Cibachrome silver dye-bleach process for making prints from color transparencies. Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner would each experiment with this printing process. In 1971, Kodak introduced the Big Shot Land Camera, which took flash color portraits (Andy Warhol purchased a Big Shot camera in 1970). In 1972, Kodak released the SX-70 Land Camera, the first single-lens reflex camera for instant color prints.\textsuperscript{87}

As the technology became more reliable and user-friendly, great strides were made in bringing color photography to the art world. In 1950, MoMA had its first survey of the medium, comprising more than 300 images by 85 photographers, curated by Edward Steichen.\textsuperscript{88} “Throughout the war years, MoMA continued its initial and diverse enthusiasm for displaying color photography,” writes Brussard.\textsuperscript{89} By 1971, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was displaying the work of Stephen Shore, five years before Eggleston’s show at MoMA (figure 5).\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{86} Eisendrath, 18.
\textsuperscript{88} Bussard, 5.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Museum Exhibitions 1870-2010, Compiled by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010.
Eggleston began experimenting with color transparency film in the mid-sixties, about four years after Kodak introduced ASA 25 Kodachrome II film, with an improved color, greater light sensitivity, and finer grain than the original Kodachrome.

Eggleston’s wife Rosa remembers being awestruck when she saw his first slides beam out of their home projector, a quintessential “amateur” moment after the road trip, a travelogue (or, alternatively, how one might vet images for a fashion shoot before printing them for publication). “It was so saturated and so intense,” she said. “It was astounding to see color like that.”

Around that time, Eggleston’s hobby was to watch thousands of rows of amateur snapshots being developed at the local photography lab. He remarked in a 1993 interview for *History of Photography*:

> On a typical evening, maybe we might see twelve pictures on a ribbon a few inches wide, a continuous roll of paper. Maybe at one minute we might see twelve or fifteen pictures that two people made on their first trip after having been married, and they forgot to have them developed. And years later they sent them over and here I was looking at them….it was one of the most exciting and unforgettable experiences as a whole—and educational for me.

When I asked Eggleston in 2007 how viewing amateur photographs in a lab could influence the making of artistic photography, he spoke with emotion, placing the amateur

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91 Interview with Rosa Eggleston, February 17, 2007.
photographs he had viewed somewhere in an idyllic past, which, coupled with their small size and grainy look, heightened their exquisiteness to him:

I had a close friend who worked there, not an artist, he managed a certain color lab, produced endless amounts of people’s snapshots, loved to see them come off the machine. He gave me a great many ideas. But this fellow was not an artist at all. He just managed this lab...they would develop a lot of rolls that people had taken many years back, on a honeymoon and were so beautiful, almost kind of grainy, but the prints were beautiful — little tiny, small prints. I would enjoy spending time with him, I still love him. I would drop in and watch what was coming out.93

Despite its magic, a problem that continued to plague color photography through the 1970s was the lack of permanence of prints, which were notorious for fading. Dye transfer, by contrast, was a permanent process, and Eggleston was one of the first to situate it in an art world context.

Methodology

This dissertation also examines how historical pressures affected art historical and critical discussions about the artistic color photographs made by Greiner, Imes, and Eggleston. Did contemporary criticism of the work affirm or deny the relationship between the photographers and the southern past or present? My approach has been influenced by anthropological theory. Franz Boas, whose work has been described as

93 April 14, 2007 phone conversation with Eggleston.
historical particularism, believed that cultural customs should be examined from three fundamental perspectives: environmental conditions, psychological factors, and historical connections. History was most important of these, since Boas believed that historical factors greatly influenced the shape societies took.\textsuperscript{94} I have tried to examine the environmental and historical factors relevant to the photographs I discuss. I also attend to “psychological” or more precisely biographical considerations. In chapter two I consider Imes’s decision to photograph juke joints and roadhouses in the context of his experience of desegregation in his Mississippi hometown. In chapter three I consider how the climate of apprehension and fear in pre-and-post-Katrina New Orleans and Baton Rouge may contribute to our understanding of Greiner’s photographs.\textsuperscript{95}

My approach is also influenced by symbolic and interpretive anthropology as practiced by Clifford Geertz, who believed the proper method of symbolic analysis was “thick description” – the process of breaking down ethnographic information, “sorting through layers of significance to derive the meaning from the native’s perspective.” Geertz believed that anthropologists should try to position themselves within the same

\textsuperscript{94} R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, \textit{Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History} (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 129. The authors note that Marvin Harris came up with the term “historical particularism” in the 1960s to explain what Boas was doing. According to the authors, Harris used the term “historical particularism” because “Boas focused on the specific histories of individual societies.”

\textsuperscript{95} I am aware of the pitfalls of the “biographical approach” to art history, but I have come to the conclusion in my research that the political events through which these photographers lived perhaps affected their own respective visions but certainly affected my understanding of the works they produced. For a critical discussion of the hazards of the biographical approach, please see: Charles G. Salas, ed. \textit{The Life & The Work: Art and Biography} (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007).
cultural context as their informants. He also focused on how symbols affect the way people think about their world, and how they “operate as vehicles of culture.” These ideas have been especially helpful to me in thinking through the ways in which Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner’s photographs have been understood by viewing publics and what their photographs might mean beyond their own artistic intentions.

Symbolic anthropologists believe that culture lies in individuals’ interpretations of events and the things around them, that we “construct our cultural reality,” and their focus is on the analysis of meaning. In this dissertation, I’m interested in how the meanings of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner’s photographs are shaped by changing conceptions of the Southern past, and I have been influenced by scholarship on the politics of memory. My understanding of the relationship between photography and competing narratives about nationhood and regional identity has been influenced by the work of Irene Silverblatt, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

Silverblatt, a cultural anthropologist, has used sermons, catechisms, diaries, and correspondence from Peru’s Inquisition to show how the origins of the modern world extend back to the late sixteenth century, when Spanish bureaucrats were installing

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* McGee and Warms, 525.
civilization throughout the colonies. Civilized was “defined by and inseparable from Catholicism – along with race-thinking designs.” Spain was not somehow “marginal” to the progress of Anglo-American modernity, she writes; there was no gulf between Spain and the “true dawning of modern life.” She argues for the very opposite; that “both Spanish colonialism and the Spanish Inquisition attended civilization’s birth.” Her thinking has been influenced by Hannah Arendt’s concerns about the dangers of fusing bureaucratic rule and race thinking. “State magic,” according to Arendt, made race thinking even more powerful and damaging. State bureaucracies, writes Silverblatt, used race thinking to organize power and the conduct of daily life. Thus, with regard to race and color, priests preached a so-called “natural order” fueled by a “race-thinking notion that blood carried stains.” These blood stains dictated not only of “character traits and intelligence,” but also “political rights, and economic possibilities.” Inquisitors adopted race-thinking designs in their work, which affixed color to political and economic privilege, “(negro = slave; indio = brown = tribute-payer; espanol = white = exempt from tribute).”

As has been demonstrated in works such as Joel Williamson’s *A Rage for Order*,

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103 Silverblatt, *Inquisitions*, 120.
John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, and John Hope Franklin’s *The Free Negro in North Carolina*, “race-thinking” and “state magic” also came together in the antebellum and Jim Crow South, when hierarchies and power differentials between people were colorized. After slavery was eradicated, Williamson observes, “blackness” remained “perpetually unmanageable.”104 In the Revolutionary era and “for at least a century after, culture was tied directly to color and blood.” The founding fathers saw in the physical mixing of white and black a dilution of European culture. Indeed, Williamson points out that many of them “thought that they saw precisely that phenomenon occurring in Latin America.”105 In the antebellum period, Williamson writes, southerners had expansive images of branching out to the West, Latin America, and the Caribbean, “because they thought they had found a new and better order for humanity and felt that order should be spread.”106 To realize these aspirations, on a practical level, the planter elite “had to move into place three great classes of people, each more or less dissident: Negroes, non-slaveholding whites, and women,” particularly plantation women. Threats to an organic society included “negroes,” and “mulattoes,” a substantial number of them free. Slaves were becoming lighter in color – some slaves were indistinguishable from whites, and this was a problem. “Slavery and

whiteness were incompatible,” Williamson points out, so in the final years of slavery, the myth that one drop of black blood made a person black was manufactured to impose order onto the chaos of miscegenation.  

In his 1995 book, *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot discusses what he calls the “dialectics of mentions and silences” that obtain in the production of all historical narratives. He discusses the past’s unfixedness and ontological ties to the present, offering the suppressed story of the Haitian Colonel Sans Souci, the Haitian Revolution, and the celebration of/challenges to Columbus’s legacy as three main examples. One’s access to the production of historical narratives, a direct result of his or her degree of social/political/economic Power, always attends to the production of history. Like Michel Foucault, Trouillot stresses that the ultimate mark of power is invisibility and that the ultimate challenge is to ‘expose its roots.’ In acknowledging this, we must accept the distinction between the past as a socio-historical process and the past as what we say about it.  

W. Fitzhugh Brundage has pointed out that in no other region of the United States has the “reactionary use of memory been more fully charted.” But as he points out, southern mythologies might not always be conservative. In a review of *Flashes of a

*Southern Spirit*, a 2011 volume of essays edited by historian Charles Reagan Wilson, Brundage refers to the patently liberal myth of the “abrupt moral transformation” black and white southerners believed the region had undergone during the 1970s. This transformation was thought to have made “possible a biracial future unique in the nation.” According to Wilson, this myth was wishful thinking, but it had traction nonetheless.

No doubt, the myth of the blossoming new chapter in southern race relations beginning in the 1970s to some degree informs my own interpretation of the photographic practice of Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes. Even if it was only a myth, it nonetheless encouraged black and white artists to “undertake initiatives that had previously been unthinkable in the South,” as Brundage suggests, providing “a mythic present for unprecedented experiments in biracialism.”

As previously mentioned, Eggleston’s exhibition coincided with the 1976 campaign and subsequent election of Jimmy Carter, which, according to Wilson, signaled a major change in the nationwide perception of the South. “The negative 1960s image of the South as the place of civil rights conflict gave way to the more favorable image of a land of charming eccentricities,” writes Brundage, “a pleasant lifestyle, traditional small-town American

values, and a booming Sunbelt economy.” Mythmakers themselves, the photographers I discuss here sometimes depict their South as an almost spiritual world of ethereal color, a place of warm and jewel-bright light beckoning people of all races.

But as I have already suggested, depictions of the South by Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes were not always so uncomplicated, wholesome, or cliché. When he brought Eggleston to visit with his students at Yale University in 1976, historian and folklorist William Ferris noticed how the photographer’s imagery seemed to disturb them. Eggleston’s films depicted people who were, in the photographer’s own words, in “various states…during the popularity of Quaaludes and alcohol.” The color photographs from William Eggleston’s Guide and the MoMA exhibition depict seemingly contradictory scenes of decaying southern interiors on the one hand and new Sunbelt suburbia on the other. More bizarrely, they show nightmarish red rooms featuring nude men and nonsensical graffiti (figure 6). Ferris writes: “My students were clearly disturbed by Eggleston’s photographs and films. They capture worlds that are far different from the scenes of rural southern life photographed by Walker Evans and

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111 As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out, the ability of the civil rights movement to rally participants, defeat enemies and “break through the fog of the Cold War came largely from the prophetic tradition within the black church.” Southern civil rights activists drew upon the themes of “justice and deliverance from an ‘otherworldly religion.’” The prophetic vision of the movement gave believers the courage to engage history as an ongoing process of reconstruction, to risk everything for ideals they might never see fulfilled.” Hall, 1251.
William Christenberry.”  

Of the people in the films, Eggleston told Ferris’s students: “The man who sang ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ is in jail for bank robbery right now. One was murdered. Three committed suicide. They were kind of headed that way, I guess.” Ferris observed that Eggleston’s photographs take viewers into “surreal, frightening worlds that are both rural and urban.”

The nude man in the red room photograph (discussed in chapter one) was T.C. Boring, a dentist from Greenwood, Mississippi. The red ceiling, one of Eggleston’s most iconic images, was located under T.C.’s roof. Horribly, Boring was murdered in his house – according to Eggleston, someone hit him in the head with an ax and set the house on fire. “He was a dentist. He loved drugs,” said Eggleston in a 2009 BBC documentary. “That could have been what the murder was about.” As some critics have observed, it’s like the walls are bleeding in the photograph. “I think red is a very difficult color to work with. It’s as if red is at war with all the other colors.” Historian Grace Hale effectively sums up this side of Eggleston’s South: “Threat in Eggleston’s South ’lurks not under a Klan hood but inside a red room where a drug-addicted dentist lives his last days. A tricycle is monumental but also ominous, and a Confederate

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112 William Ferris, The Storied South, 192.
113 William Ferris, The Storied South, 196.
114 William Ferris, The Storied South, 176.
flag can work as a compositional device.”117 Or as Ferris puts it, “Eggleston’s photography and film capture the edgy underbelly of the contemporary American South. He pushes us to see color, landscape, and people in new and exciting ways.”118 This dissertation is about how Eggleston, Greiner, and Imes use color to reinterpret violence, danger, threat, and beauty in the South. Made in the post-civil rights movement era, the frequent absence of people and attentive focus on the emptied southern landscape almost seem to suggest the horrors of the southern past by the inclusion of crime-scene-like details (figure 7). As Grace Hale said of Eggleston’s work, threat in the world of these three photographers is not so overt as photographs of Ku Klux Klan members and lynchings.

I argue that the work of all three exploited color’s ability to “push emotional buttons.”119 Greiner uses Photoshop to pump up the color in his prints, while Imes overexposed color and black-and-white negative film to decrease the grain and achieve a high degree of saturation. Eggleston used the expensive and richly toned dye transfer process.120 As one reviewer noted, expensive dye transfer prints, “provide the deepest

118 Ferris, 192.
120 “I have a lab to do dye transfers,” Eggleston told historian and folklorist William Ferris. “It takes lot of time. Otherwise, it would take all my time just to print. I would have no free time to take pictures. When I am not working with photography, I play the piano. I take it easy. And I worry.” William Ferris, The Storied South, 194.
tones and sharpest definition obtainable in color. Even though the pictures are enlarged 16 times from 35mm transparencies, they have a clarity that can make a dirty pickup truck in an empty lot seem to jut out the paper it is reproduced on.” 121 These photographers have created compositions of blood and bloodlessness that evince a canny form of color consciousness. They use color to achieve an emotional, sometimes even spiritual register.

Eggleston and Greiner have photographs that seem to be explicitly “about” whiteness or the absence of color, an aesthetic but also social and cultural issue in the U.S. (figure 9). How is the meaning of such a photograph affected by its titular connection to Memphis, Sumner, MS, or New Orleans? Thirties progressives, according to Sally Stein, sometimes used the term “colorful” to promote a “cohesive vision of cultural diversity.” From time to time they used the word colorful to discredit “the fetish of racial purity” as a “morbid, and purportedly un-American, obsession.” Progressives in this period also occasionally made use of the word ‘colorless’ to “portray the deadening effect of segregation on both whites and blacks.” 122 As I will discuss later, it could be argued that Eggleston and Greiner’s dominantly white and gray, paradoxically colorless color photographs, make similar statements about attitudes toward color in the

In an interview following a 2008 Eggleston retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curator Elisabeth Sussman said that she’d heard that civil rights leader Julian Bond had visited the Eggleston exhibition. “I wish I got more stories, but I heard one that really touched me. Over the weekend somebody I know called me and said she had been following Julian Bond around the exhibition. And that really said something to me.”  

In an email to me, folklorist Bill Ferris, a Mississippi native, said that he has “no doubt that Bill Eggleston’s photographs resonated with Julian in a powerful, personal way. I think Julian probably responded to the intense color and sense of place that Bill captures in his work, rather than to social change and politics.” Nonetheless, Bond’s presence at the Eggleston exhibition furnishes a convenient metaphor for the connection between the aesthetic and social ramifications of color. The power of all three artists – Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner – lies in part in their ability to unite these ramifications in a way that speaks to the conditions of the contemporary U.S. South. Although Peter Schjeldahl quipped that Eggleston is an aesthete, not a propagandist, Schjeldahl nonetheless conceded that the “emotional key” to Eggleston’s genius may be “a stoical loathing, unblinking in the face of one scandalously uncongenial otherness after

124 Email from William Ferris to the author, June 27, 2013.
another.”¹²⁵ Schjeldahl was referring to Eggleston’s alleged contempt for the ugliness of the postwar suburban landscape – the shopping centers, strip malls, and tract houses. It is not so implausible that Eggleston’s contempt extended to the racial issues his home state of Mississippi was notorious for.

**New Topographics**

Each of the three chapters in this dissertation – although attempting to grapple with the time periods of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s/00’s respectively – pivot around recurrent themes. These include racial relations, rural vs. urban relations, and representations of the U.S. South as a cultural entity. Suburbanization, sprawl, and the Sunbelt phenomenon of economic development brought the artists of this region into greater physical and cultural contact with other parts of the country, such as New York and Boston. The careers of artists like Christenberry, Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner were, to varying degrees, intertwined with the northern/New York/Washington D.C./California art world.¹²⁶ The postindustrial economic boom of the Sunbelt has a dark side, not the least of which is its effect on the environment and climate change, as well as


¹²⁶ For example, Imes wrote the following note to John Szarkowski: “Again – thanks for your interest and support of my photography; F.’s Oxford-Jefferson; Stop by for chitlins if you’re ever down this way; Best wishes, Birney Imes.” Szarkowski purchased several of Imes and Greiner’s images for his permanent collection.
its exploitation of relaxed labor laws in the South. A critique of heedless commercial and suburban development is perhaps latent in the work of Eggleston and Imes, but in chapter three, I read an environmentalist critique more aggressively into the work of Greiner, who relocated to Baton Rouge from his New Orleans home after Hurricane Katrina for his family’s safety.

As Charles Reagan Wilson has pointed out, in the context of the South, the term “sense of place” implies an organic society. The expression has a negative connection to the notion of keeping African Americans “in their place,” Wilson notes, but it is also used to describe the relationship between southerners and their local communities, among their families, and in history. “Southerners developed an acute sense of place as a result of their dramatic and traumatic history and their rural isolation on the land for generations.”127 The interest in place evident in the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner is also present in the work of the New Topographics photographers, whose work emerged as an “especially cohesive (and remarkably generative) synthesis of key artistic and social concerns,” in a landmark 1975 exhibition at the George Eastman House. The works offered, according to curator Britt Salvesen, “cool resistance,” similar to the

apathetic gaze curator Kevin Moore attributed to Eggleston’s 1976 MoMA show.\textsuperscript{128} The viewer of “New Topographics,” writes Salvesen, “searches in vain for conventional aesthetic hooks of expression, story, and beauty.”\textsuperscript{129} The turn away from the conventionally picturesque in the work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner is historically tied to the work of the New Topographics photographers (figure 10).

Indeed, in the mid-1970s, the picturesque landscapes of Ansel Adams and color photographs filling the pages of \textit{National Geographic} had to some extent fallen out of fashion in contemporary art photography. \textit{New Yorker} critic Janet Malcolm sneered in 1974 at Edward Weston’s late period photographs of farmland and icicles as a “kind of Sierra Club Realism.” This manner of photographing, she wrote, “was pushed to even greater heights of artlessness, by West Coast followers such as Ansel Adams,” and it “represents a reversion to early photography rather than a development of the medium.”\textsuperscript{130} \textit{New York Times} photography critic Gene Thornton distinguished between the “new” color photography and the “old,” in 1977, writing that the old way “celebrated the Wonders of the Wilderness Unspoiled by Man. It is what used to appear

\textsuperscript{128} Kevin Moore, \textit{Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980} (Hatje Cantz, Cincinnati Museum of Art, 2010). Moore has insightfully observed that it was not just the color of Eggleston’s photographs but the apparent ambiguousness and indifference of his posture that annoyed many observers. Eggleston’s “refusal to declare a clear attitude toward Southern contemporary life or his own revealed a palpable apathy, a sense of decadence that shocked many northerners when the work was shown.”


in the pages of Life and still does appear in Sierra Club publications. It is Ansel Adams in color….The new color photography, on the other hand, is what is shown at the Museum of Modern Art, and the smartest East Side and SoHo galleries. It is picture postcards and snapshots and various kinds of commercial photography seasoned with Walker Evans and Atget and turned into Art.”

In her assessment of the 1975 New Topographics exhibition, Salvesen points out that attention to the mundane elements of the landscape had been articulated within the field of cultural landscape studies since the 1950s. John Brinckerhoff Jackson founded the journal *Landscape* in 1951, expanding the definition of “landscape” to include what had previously been ignored. Jackson suggested that readers try to recognize the origins, utility, and appeal of parking lots, motels, mobile homes, gas stations, and billboards. He contended that it was parochial to dismiss these elements of the landscape as beneath scholarly notice. Such an attitude was embraced by Eggleston and Greiner in their artistic practice. In the 1970s, the new scholars of cultural landscape studies questioned the idealization of the American small town, focusing instead on the inner cities and suburbs of their own day. Photographers similarly went to these “decidedly

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132 Salvesen, 20.
unpicturesque places for new kinds of surveys.”

John Szarkowski, with his interest in street photography and the work of “New Documentarians” Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander, had a part to play in this turn away from the traditional picturesque in photography. The MoMA curator was Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962-1991 and his choices and vision deeply influenced the careers of all three photographers I discuss in this dissertation. His curatorial program also influenced the New Topographics photographers, as he helped sustain the prominence of Walker Evans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Salvesen points out. This gave artists ample opportunity to learn from Evans’s example. Evans’s aesthetic was “crisp” and “flat,” according to historian Grace Elizabeth Hale, and he was “direct and frank and clear.” Evans produced photographs that “worked as an ideology” and “stripped himself and his emotions from his images,” Hale writes. This style dovetailed with a mid-twentieth century art world, “ready to break with the studied artifice of earlier art photography and the Romantic landscapes of Ansel Adams and others” (figure 11).

The work of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner is part of a vernacular, straight

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133 Salvesen, 21.

134 Katherine Bussard points out that New York and the Museum of Modern Art have historically had the most concentrated and consistent embrace of the photographic medium, even if other major institutions, such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the George Eastman House, regularly mounted photographic exhibitions. Bussard, 6-7.

aesthetic that owed much to the examples of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

“Evans, of course, is an influence,” Eggleston told Bill Ferris. “You cannot forget images like his. It is impossible not to be influenced.” This influence is evident in Eggleston’s reflection to Ferris that, “some of my work…deals with the way a sign is held up with wires, or the way unplanned architecture comes about, like a grocery store nobody really designed.”

Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner extend to the “new” South the “New Topographics” approach to photographing un-romanticized, alternative, stark, or “ugly” landscapes. “My work is about the New South,” Eggleston told Bill Ferris. “There are a lot of new buildings down there and new roads. There are not many people down there. A lot of them have left. That is about the way it is as far as I can see today. There are a few big cities down there that have industrial complexes around them, but there is not really much out there.”

Imes photographed mostly interior spaces for which a vast visual archive was lacking, while Greiner photographed strip malls and parking lots, run-down movie theaters, and suburban developments.

The apparent erasure of history in photographs of the suburban South is consistent with what historian Matthew Lassiter describes as the refusal among many

136 Ferris, Eggleston, 192-193.
137 Ferris, The Storied South, 194.
parents of the suburban South to acknowledge the public policies that created and
reinforced profound patterns of residential segregation. I will argue that, despite the
appearance at times of ambiguity and apathy in some of this work, race and history
erupt. To make this claim, I will rely upon literary scholar Teresa Goddu’s contention
that the gothic is not an escapist form but is intensely engaged with historical
concerns. I will demonstrate how these photographs, like the American gothic, are
haunted by race, even when empty of people and depicting so-called mundane subject
matter. The photographs often burst with color – bloody reds, sickly greens, and neon
blues. This super-saturation of hue is audacious, kitschy, and sometimes grotesque. The
resultant color work seems to confront, rather than merely aestheticize or repress, the
issue of race in the New South. The subtle maneuver of using bold and bloody color to
navigate the New South enabled these photographs to communicate about this terrain in
a meaningful way after the heyday of black-and-white photojournalistic expression and
the iconic moments of the civil rights movement. As historian Grace Elizabeth Hale so
aptly puts it, “in the post-civil-rights movement South…even the contradictions lacked

clarity.” Eggleston, Imes and Greiner, “offered bleeding colors.”

2. William Eggleston

This chapter will examine the critical reception, political climate, and financial circumstances surrounding the Memphis, TN-based photographer William Eggleston’s (b.1939) color photography exhibition, “Photographs by William Eggleston,” at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1976. Many critics at the time said the show was the first endorsement of color photography by the institution, but color photographs had been appearing at MoMA for several decades. These included Eliot Porter’s color flashlights of birds in 1943 and Edward Steichen’s all-color group show in 1950. MoMA had exhibited color and black-and-white photographs in “Recent Acquisitions” (1960) and in a show of “50 photographs by 50 photographers” in 1962. That same year, the museum opened an Ernst Haas show titled “Color Photography.” As the critic A.D.

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1 Museum of Modern Art Press Release, “Museum of Modern Art Opens Two Exhibitions of Photography,” March 4, 1943. The press release described Porter’s works as a “remarkable series of color flashlights of birds. By remote control he has been able to catch the movement and activity of birds in and around their nests...the Museum will show twenty-seven of the color flashlights and eleven in black and white...” p. 2.

2 Museum of Modern Art press release, “Museum’s First Exhibition of All Color Photography to be on View May 10 through June 25,” May 4, 1950, p.1. Photographs by Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Walker Evans, Elliott Erwitt, Paul Outerbridge, Russell Lee, and Paul Strand were included among the 85 photographers featured in the show. Kevin Moore, 18. “Despite Steichen’s progressive and ‘integrationist’ intentions, the show only emphasized what was commonly believed: color was a commercial and amateur medium not suitable for art.”


4 Museum of Modern Art press release, “Schedule of Exhibitions and events,” July 1, 1962. This was the day of Szarkowski’s assumption of the directorial post. The Haas exhibition was billed to include the photographer’s Images of New York, Bull-fight essay, studies of motion (water skiing, the rodeo, car racing and football) and a series on American landscape and “abstraction in nature.”
Coleman has observed, by the time of Eggleston’s MoMA show in 1976,” color was entering creative photography in a big way.”\(^4^\)

Nonetheless, the medium was slow to be accepted unequivocally as an art form within the high art photography community. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was difficult and even health-hazardous to make one’s own color prints. “I knew just about all of the people in NYC making their own color prints at that time,” said Coleman, whose weekly column on photography, “Latent Image,” was published in the *Village Voice* during the 1970s. “There were three of them, as I recall” Coleman recalled. “Murray Alcosser, Dorothea Kehaya, and Charles Pratt.”\(^5^\) Many photographers chose black and white, according to Coleman, because it was a more forgiving process, less dangerous, the prints could be controlled and nuanced in the darkroom, and there was a wide variety of papers available, “enabling the production of more sensually appealing objects.”\(^6^\)

When they worked in color, most photographers had their work printed by someone else and even then, the options were few and expensive, with less than desirable results. However, William Eggleston found a process that was quite apart from these underwhelming options. Lush, beautiful, and expensive, dye transfer was his

\(^4^\) A.D. Coleman, email to author, April 2012.  
\(^5^\) Ibid.  
\(^6^\) Ibid.
method of choice for exhibition printing. Eggleston didn’t make the prints himself. “It takes a lot of time. It would take all your time just to print,” he told a group of viewers at Yale University in 1976. Through this process, the saturation of color could be tightly controlled, as in painting, and the results were astonishingly rich.

Visceral and lush photographic color takes on gothic and horrific associations in the hands of Eggleston, a white southerner, in the New York art world of the post-civil rights movement, post-Vietnam 1970s. An example of such horrific color is one of Eggleston’s best-known images, an untitled photograph that appeared in the 1976 exhibition. It was allegedly made in a room belonging to one of Eggleston’s friends, a

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7 In a 2012 email to the author, James Browning, a contemporary photographer who uses the dye transfer method, said that in the 1970s, a dye print might have cost several hundred dollars. The process has always been expensive due to the large amount of labor involved as well as the materials. Type C prints in the mid-1970s started to be of high quality, but prior to that they weren’t. Cibachrome became more popular when Kodak discontinued dye transfer in the mid-1990s. Cibachrome is a fairly difficult medium to use well, but is still much less expensive than dye transfer, said Browning. Many people did make their own DT prints rather than sending out to a lab, the original cost of which could vary from fairly basic and inexpensive. The main impediment, he said, is the skill level needed to produce a good dye transfer print. Still, there were a few fine art photographers who did it themselves, including Eliott Porter and Charles Cramer, he said. “I think everyone who has seen a DT print along with either a type C or a Cibachrome would find the DT to be much better looking (assuming it was a well made print),” he said.

8 Southern Folklife Collection, FT – 10204 LC, Southern Folklife Collection, William R. Ferris Collection 11-10-1976

9 A series of Eggleston’s large-scale, digital pigment prints auctioned for $5.9 million in March 2012: Memphis Commercial Appeal, “Auction of William Eggleston Works Nets $5.9 Million,” March 13, 2012. “At a Christie’s auction yesterday that was intended to expand the appeal of William Eggleston’s work to a much broader range of contemporary art collectors, 36 recent prints by the photographer brought in a total of $5,903,250. It was the first time Eggleston created digital pigment prints, a departure from the dye-transfer process he has used since the 1970s, which offered Eggleston a deep color saturation that became a defining characteristic of his work. The tricycle photograph, “Untitled, 1970” brought in $578,500, more than doubling the previous auction record for the artist of $275,000.” Conor Risch, “Eggleston’s First-Ever Large Pigment Prints Earn $5.9 Million at Auction,” Photo District News (March 13, 2012).
dentist with large sexual appetites or at least a sense of humor. In Eggleston’s photograph, red paint on the wall of this room appears as thick as shellac with a tacky sheen where the light hits (figure 12). The supersaturated room calls to mind the waves of blood that splashed through the halls of Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining (1980). Yet unlike that uncontrollable geyser, the composition of the “Red Ceiling” is tightly disciplined. Its focal point is near dead center, with three white lines spreading diagonally into the far corners. To say the diagonal lines mimic the crisscross of the Confederate flag is not a stretch. Indeed, Szarkowski claimed that Eggleston said he based his compositions on this controversial symbol of the Old South. Given this comment, which was repeated in the exhibition catalogue for the 1976 show, the red ceiling photograph is an uncomfortable fusion of symbols – the Confederate flag, a blood-red room, and uninhibited sexuality. The extent and nature of this sexuality is left to the viewer’s imagination, since the action seems to be taking place out of sight.

Eggleston’s photographs and those of the other photographers I examine in this study demonstrate color consciousness – an awareness of the emotional shock of color, its visceral quality, surrealism, and socio-political dimensions. As curator of the Eggleston exhibit, John Szarkowski sought to control but also to exploit the shock of

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10 Sexuality is hinted at in the lower right hand corner of the image. Here we glimpse the top of a poster depicting sexual positions
color in the 1976 exhibition. Szarkowski knew that Eggleston’s work (75 prints of negatives made between the late 1960s and 1974) would garner critical attention. The MoMA photo department director fanned the flames by boldly declaring that Eggleston’s use of color was the most successful in the history of art photography, the efforts of photographers Haas, Porter, and Helen Levitt notwithstanding. It was understandable therefore that some critics erroneously reported that this was MoMA’s first major exhibit of photographs in color. The 112-page exhibition catalogue, titled William Eggleston’s Guide, was, after all, the first monograph the museum published for a color photographer.


12 The first exhibition of color photography at the Museum was of photographs by Ernest Haas, in 1962. This exhibition had been proposed – either by Grace Mayer or by Szarkowski’s predecessor Edward Steichen, but Szarkowski approved it, and it was mounted shortly after he arrived at the Museum. “Haas’s work was handsome, even inventive,” said Szarkowski, “but was dedicated to a basically familiar idea of beauty, one very indebted to painterly traditions. Levitt and Shore, and Sternfeld – he a little later, I think – did superb original work in color, and I think the Museum paid substantial attention to all of them.” Letter from John Szarkowski to the author, February 22, 2007.

13 Hilton Kramer, “Art: Focus on Photo Shows,” New York Times (May 28, 1976). In his review of the show, Kramer said the publication of a catalogue was evidence that Szarkowski wanted to emphasize the historical import of the show. In response to Szarkowski’s description of the work as “perfect,” Kramer quipped: “Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly. A perfect example of what, for Mr. Szarkowski and many like-minded connoisseurs of contemporary photography, is now a la mode.”
Rolling Stone, Interview, Smithsonian, Esquire, Interview, The Atlantic Monthly, and Mademoiselle were notified of the May 25–August 1, 1976 exhibition. Ponder & Best/Vivitar supplied $500 for the opening cocktail reception and $15,000 for the exhibition and publication of the Guide.

In his essay for the catalogue, Szarkowski declared that all prior color work had been “puerile” and that Eggleston’s photographs were “perfect.” Such unilateral declarations, penned as they were by a careful and considered writer, seem designed to provoke. And provoke they did as accompaniments to Eggleston’s apparently blasé color depictions of Old South decadence and New South suburbia. As Eggleston told viewers at Yale University in 1976, “this is the New South! There are a lot of new buildings down there, new roads, not many new people down there…A lot of them have left.”14 The show was the talk of the art world in the spring, summer, and fall of 1976, eliciting critical responses from dozens of publications in the U.S. and abroad. Even as he panned the show, New York Times critic Hilton Kramer admitted that it had to be seen to be believed.15

Some critics dismissed Eggleston as a manufactured star and Szarkowski as an emperor with no clothes, while others called Eggleston’s color remarkable and beautiful,

15 Kramer, “Photo Shows.”
the images poetic and elegiac. A July 1976 arts report in *Mademoiselle* described color photography as “the new craze among serious photographers” and 36-year-old William Eggleston as the man to watch. His “deceptively spare, eerily hermetic studies of family and friends, neighborhood streets, side roads, and local trivia from Mississippi’s Tallahatchie County area...spin a private tale about American life,” the writer stated.16

Because *William Eggleston’s Guide* and the 1976 MoMA exhibition were collaborations between Eggleston and Szarkowski (himself a photographer), this chapter will consider Szarkowski’s role as director of photography at MoMA prior to 1976 and his efforts to obtain funding for the showcasing of Eggleston’s work during a time of economic crisis for the museum and the nation. As A.D. Coleman has observed, questions emerge when the editing process is turned over to someone else, as it was, at least partially, for the Eggleston exhibition.17 Eggleston said in a recorded conversation with Yale students from November 1976 that he had a smaller part than Szarkowski in the editing process of the *Guide*.18 Szarkowski’s comments in a 1967 article for *Aperture* reveal his belief that, with the onset of the miniature camera and the photographer’s

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ability to shoot more negatives faster, the editor had assumed a greater role in defining the meaning of mass media photographs.\(^{19}\) Although he was not referring to a fine arts museum curator’s role, Szarkowski’s comments about the importance of photo-editing in magazines and newspapers prompt some questions in my mind. To what degree were the meanings that audiences derived from Eggleston’s 1976 show at MoMA and exhibition catalogue *William Eggleston’s Guide* brought out in the process of editing and selecting?\(^{20}\) Did those meanings stick in the ensuing critical reception of Eggleston’s work or did audiences reject those meanings and ascribe new ones? How does Eggleston’s work itself seem to conform to or undermine the narrative that framed it in the 1976 exhibition?

What can we say about the selection of images for the 1976 exhibition at MoMA?

For one thing, all of the images were made in the Deep South, mostly in the Mississippi Delta region. But by the time of his 1976 exhibition, Eggleston was no yokel. He was, rather, a cosmopolitan artist who had traveled cross country with the likes of curator Walter Hopps and actor Dennis Hopper. He’d trysted with the actress Viva from Andy

\(^{19}\) “The photographer who once shot twelve negatives in a day may now shoot thirty-six times that number. This freedom and flexibility of response has produced many magnificent and startling images beyond the read of the deliberate procedures of the large camera photographer. It has also diluted the photographer’s role in defining the meaning story’s meaning and increased the authority of the editor, who has assumed much of the critical burden that was once the photographer’s.” John Szarkowski, “Photography and Mass Media,” *Aperture* 13 (1967).

Warhol’s factory. “Photographers such as [Lee] Friedlander, [Garry] Winogrand, Tod Papageorge, and Stephen Shore…visited Eggleston in Memphis on their cross-country trips,” writes curator Thomas Weski. “At the end of the sixties and the start of the seventies, Eggleston also stayed often and for fairly long times in New York. There he met Joel Meyerowitz, who had been photographing street scenes since the midsixties using Kodachrome film,” Weski points out. Furthermore, Eggleston had made a voluminous collection of color photographs, many of them from outside the South. Szarkowski emphasized the connection between the photographer and the Mississippi/Memphis/Louisiana region through his selection of photographs. He chose to include some images that hinted at racial content (figure 13) but excluded others.

Szarkowski insisted upon the preeminent importance of form in all the exhibition images, including those with more explicitly racial overtones. But in addition to these images, Eggleston made other photographs that confronted racial issues, and Szarkowski was likely aware of them, given the process by which he and Eggleston chose the images for the show and catalogue. The curator said that and Eggleston worked together, beginning with seven or eight carousel trays – 560 or more slides.22 “Little by little we would with mutual regret eliminate this one, and then that one, until

after many sessions we got it down to one tray, which I showed many times to various museum committees.” Szarkowski stated further:

I think that I edited the last tray down to about fifty plates for the book, and sequenced them. I showed the sequence to Eggleston, and he said fine. I think he liked it and then came to like it even more as time went by, although it was of course a severe abridgement of his vision, which -- although constantly shifting -- would have required hundreds of pictures, and probably a theatre with an organ. I never asked him whether he was happy with the principle of the sequencing, but I believe that he was.23

Whether or not Eggleston was happy with the selection of images or sequencing, the briefest of glimpses through his published images from the same general time period indicate that the photographer made pictures that blatantly took race as their subject. Made by a white man from the Mississippi planter aristocracy, these images would perhaps have provoked even more controversy among 1976 New York audiences. One is a ground-level close-up of a row of lawn ornaments – stereotypical depictions of wide-eyed, grinning black men holding partly eaten watermelon and several chickens. The photographer’s opinion of these decorations is not altogether clear (figure 14).

Another image excluded from the exhibition is a head-on view of an unsmiling black man buttoning the top button of a shirt (figure 15). This man could have been one

of the two black servants that worked at Eggleston’s childhood home in Sumner. A blood-red shed entraps him on the right side of the composition, the fence at his back, Eggleston’s lens to his front. In yet another image not in the exhibition black woman and two children pose for a camera outside the frame in front of a coastline or waterway (figure 16). Seemingly unbeknownst to them, Eggleston also takes their picture from a hidden location to the side, with the stealth of a sniper, the tight group appearing as sitting ducks, like so many civil rights workers murdered throughout the South in the 1950s and ’60s.

Sequencing of photo exhibitions was a hotly debated topic in the 1970s. For example, a 1972 show curated by the photographer Minor White at MIT’s Hayden Gallery irritated and annoyed photographers and critics alike. Among its critics was A.D. Coleman, who reviewed the book version of the show published in 1973. Coleman wrote that White chose the work to support his own interpretation of the exhibition’s theme, that each work became a cog in White’s totalitarian “intellectual machine.” Photographers featured in the exhibit were not able to maintain their individual identity.24 Minor White was an important figurehead in the 1970s, but some of the photographers who participated in the exhibition were angry with the way he framed

their work as part of his own narrative about the relationship between photographs and prayer.

Thus, sequencing was a well-known form of overt manipulation in the 1960s and 1970s. Making a conscious effort to distinguish himself from such precedents, Szarkowski insisted in a 1978 interview with photographer Jerome Liebling that the curator should be hands off. As a curator, he claimed, he was a follower, not a leader, and certainly not a tastemaker capable of shaping aesthetic values through personal preference. "I wouldn’t have any interest in this job if I thought that’s what it was about,” Szarkowski told Liebling. “If I didn’t want to be a follower and wanted to be a leader, I’d go back to being a photographer.” Despite his avowed attempt to avoid a leadership role, the fact remained that Szarkowski was, by 1976, considered the most influential man in the medium of creative photography, the “lone figure standing there with his hand on the switch,” according to writer Sean Callahan. Szarkowski’s judgments seemed to determine either canonization or obscurity for countless aspiring photographers. According to Callahan, photographer Richard Avedon once referred to the curator as “the first viceroy of photography.”

Although Szarkowski was likely given much free reign to follow his own

27 Callahan, 31.
aesthetic (due to his formidable reputation as a power broker and tastemaker by the mid-1970s), this aesthetic was inevitably influenced by the social and economic pressures of the 1970s. Furthermore, it is conceivable that Szarkowski’s curatorial decisions were in part shaped by MoMA trustees. As artist Pablo Helguera astutely observed in a satiric screed on the contemporary art world, museum directors censor exhibitions they deem inappropriate for their institution or offensive to the trustees. Good directors are able to disguise this censorship process, and sometimes do this by changing “the premise of the exhibition in order to exclude the offensive works from the thematic content of the show.”

This is precisely what Szarkowski did when he insisted upon the strictly formal content of Eggleston’s work. In his essay and wall text for the exhibition, Szarkowski insisted upon the private and idiosyncratic nature of Eggleston’s images, discouraging readers from viewing the photographs as social documents and statements about the southern U.S., race, and class. Furthermore, Szarkowski guided readers to view Eggleston’s color in an abstracted and formalist way, following, I would argue, the example of Clement Greenberg’s analysis of abstract expressionist painting.

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29 According to A.D. Coleman, “Szarkowski’s aesthetic was a late-to-the-party version, for photography, of the Greenberg/Rosenberg proposition that AbEx painting was painting about painting (ditto for AbEx sculpture) – that photography’s true subject was the medium itself. (A refinement of ‘The power of any medium is dependent on the purity of its use’ – Paul Strand). Because, unlike AbEx painting, most lens-derived photographs describe identifiable stuff in the real world, to make that argument you have to hold that the superior photographer’s proper attitude toward the stuff at which he or she pointed the lens is
Ultimately, Szarkowski did not acknowledge the symbolic charge of color in the late 1970s.

The meaning of color, both as a social issue and as a type of photography, had undergone drastic changes between 1960 and 1976. Within this context, Szarkowski’s abstraction and diminishment of social content in the work of William Eggleston, a white, aristocratic artist from Mississippi and Memphis, was an aesthetically and socially conservative curatorial posture. Such a posture leant itself to garnering financial support from corporate America and the federal government in exceedingly lean financial times – even if this was an unintended result of his conservatism. As A.D. Coleman has observed, “The explicit and repeated assertion that most of what [MoMA] showed, and certainly what they emphasized, was entirely unpolitical in its content and formalist in its concerns could only have reassured corporate patrons looking to put their money into non-controversial projects.”

And as Pablo Helguera explains, museum directors must “make special implicit deals with sponsors in order to provide neutral and detached – no position, no involvement, no advocacy, no ‘concern,’ certainly no politics. And you have to hold to that thesis consistently, by choosing photographers whose work seems to fit that model. Arbus – a woman, not insignificantly – is perhaps the closest he came to an exception to this rule.” April 2012 email from Coleman to author.

A.D. Coleman, April 2012 email to author.
the museum with key financial and operational support.”

Szarkowski’s diminishment of the social meaning of race and color in Eggleston’s photographs depicting the Deep South in the years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act happened to coincide with the “color blind conservative” approach to race relations that accompanied the rise of the New Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “Color blind conservative” is a term I borrow from historian Matthew Lassiter, who uses the term “color blindness” to describe the tenor of the argument adopted by organized groups of parents arguing against court-ordered two-way busing in Charlotte, North Carolina in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Appropriating the language of the civil rights movement, this color-blind conservative argument attacked the two-way busing on the grounds that it was undemocratic: “Why should a child’s color deprive him of the opportunity of choosing where he will attend school?,” a flyer distributed by the Concerned Parents Association (CPA) asked in 1970. The flyer’s language, Lassiter argues, provides a “concise portrait of the color-blind ideology and populist stance of the antibusing movement from the southeast Charlotte suburbs.” Lassiter writes that, “In seeking to preserve ‘freedom of choice’ and evade accusations of racism, the CPA attempted to transform the rhetoric of the civil rights

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31 Helguera, 12.
movement into a race-neutral constitutional mandate\textsuperscript{32}

Szarkowski’s diminishment of race and color in Eggleston’s work no doubt made it more palatable to corporate sponsorship. As curator Kevin Moore has pointed out, corporate schemes to provide respected photographers with color materials proliferated during the 1970s. The purpose of such schemes was to promote sales among amateurs to keep the photo market booming. These schemes were not without precedent – an earlier example was in 1946, when Kodak asked Edward Weston to photograph Point Lobos with daylight Kodachrome film – 8 x 10-inch color positive transparencies.\textsuperscript{33} Color photography as an art form emerged alongside a late 1960s and early 1970s embrace of the snapshot, a vernacular photographic form associated with innocence and unpretentiousness.\textsuperscript{34} It appeared to be a “democratic” medium, indistinguishable from advertising, the boring color slides of the neighbors’ vacation and the Polaroids in a family photo album.\textsuperscript{35} “Innocence” was also a posture adopted by business leaders and

\textsuperscript{32} Lassiter, 149.

\textsuperscript{33} Moore, 13.


\textsuperscript{35} In his essay, “Mama Don’t Take Our Kodachrome Away,” A.D. Coleman argues that our understanding of color photography does not derive from “photo-based art” but from the intensely saturated reds in the Mai Lai massacre photographs, or the “breathtaking spreads in magazines such as \textit{Life}, \textit{Look}, and \textit{Vogue}. Coleman points out that there is evidence in the literature of photography to suggest that a color imaging
the white middle-to-upper class in the emergent Sunbelt metropolises of Charlotte, North Carolina and Atlanta, Georgia in the late 1960s, according to Matthew Lassiter.36

Seemingly complicit with Szarkowski’s formalist packaging of his work, Eggleston himself was said to have been impervious to social movements. He was born in Memphis in 1939 and grew up a two-hour drive away, in the Mississippi Delta town of Sumner, Mississippi.37 “I grew up in the northern…what’s called the Delta region. A long way away,” Eggleston told the group of Yale visitors in 1976. The photographs in the exhibition, he said, ranged from Memphis to New Orleans, and included a little of Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana.38 Eggleston’s maternal grandfather, Judge Joseph Albert May (1883-1949), was a judge in one the Tallahatchie County courthouse located in Sumner. He had married Minnie Maude McMullen (1884-1983),

system was the goal for the inventors and innovators of photography. If a technically viable form of color photography had been achieved early on, “the medium might never have passed through the monochrome phase that still comprises the bulk of its history – or might have experienced it as little more than a minor offshoot.” Monochrome photography became available to the general public in 1888 with George Eastman’s first Kodak. Kodachrome did not appear until 1936. Photocritical International: AD Coleman on Photography and Related Matters. http://www.nearbycafe.com/artandphoto/csprint/essays/kodachrome.html

37 Richard B. Woodward, “Memphis Beau” Vanity Fair (October 1991): 240. Seeing no problem with taking an assignment in South Africa, Woodward said Eggleston could identify “to a disturbing degree with the Afrikaners.” The photographer observed that the country was no more segregated than the world he grew up in, and that most of the violence was black-against-black anyway.”37
whose family first came to Tallahatchie County in 1839. The family lived on the Cassidy Bayou in Sumner and built a house on their plantation in the 1940s. The 10,000-acre plantation was roughly fifteen miles outside of town and at one point divided between Judge May and his brother. Judge May renamed his portion Mayfair. This land neighbors Parchman Farm, now the Mississippi State Penetentiary. Eggleston’s paternal grandfather was a doctor who lived at Wannalaw Plantation, the place name for at least one photograph in William Eggleston’s Guide (figure 13). Eggleston’s father, William Joseph Eggleston (1909-1966) and his mother, Catherine Ann May (1911-1995), had Eggleston, the eldest of three children, in Memphis, in 1939. The photographer’s father joined the Navy shortly after he was born, serving as chief gunnery officer on a destroyer in the Pacific during World War II. Eggleston’s mother lived in Florida during this time, and until the age of 11, he went back and forth between Florida and Sumner where his grandparents Judge May and Minnie Maude May lived.

Eggleston’s father returned to Sumner and the family moved into a house on the Mayfair cotton plantation. Eggleston attended Sumner Public School as a child. Because he suffered from asthma, he spent time inside playing piano, drawing, and playing with electronics as well as stamps and guns. Judge May bought a house in Sarasota, Florida,

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40 Welch, “Chronology,” 269.
and the Eggleston family often spent winters there. As a result, Eggleston took classes at the Ringling School of Art in Sarasota. He received his first camera – a Brownie Hawkeye – at age 10. Judge May died in 1949 and Mayfair was divided up. The Eggleston’s stayed in their house there, but the Eggleston children spent most of their summers in the May’s family home in Sumner, on Cassidy Bayou.\(^{41}\) When Eggleston was a teenager, his father had a stroke, and he started going to a private boarding school in Bell Buckle Tennessee. He met his future wife, Rosa Kate Dosset (b. 1941), who was from an “affluent, plantation-owning family near Beulah, Mississippi…”\(^{42}\)

Journalist Richard B. Woodward wrote in a 1991 article on Eggleston for *Vanity Fair* that “the social movements that have transformed the country since the sixties, such as civil rights and feminism, seem to have barely grazed [Eggleston’s] consciousness.”\(^{43}\) There was a perception among Eggleston’s observers that he had a sense of distance from his environs from early on.\(^{44}\)

But let’s look at Eggleston from a different perspective. Although his drinking, gun-collecting, and references to the Confederate flag coyly played into Southern stereotypes, Eggleston was a cosmopolitan artist whose circle of friends and associates included art and film stars and intellectuals. Despite his laconic nature and the lack of

\(^{41}\) Welch, “Chronology,” 270.
\(^{42}\) Ibid.
\(^{44}\) Woodward, “Memphis Beau,” 240.
on-the-record statements explaining his political views, it seems unlikely that Eggleston would lack them totally. Additionally, why would someone oblivious to the social and cultural changes in his environment bother to take up photography at all? Eggleston was an avid musician and prolific composer of abstract drawings. Through these artistic expressions, Eggleston could have burrowed himself in abstraction and lived comfortably on his inherited wealth. Indifference or apathy surely does not prompt someone to relentlessly photograph his surroundings, crawl on all fours, lie on the ground, and squeeze into awkward positions to do so.

The photographs selected for the 1976 exhibition and Guide remixed familiar southern tropes – poverty, agriculture, race – into a modernist idiom that, when compared with the radical engagement of black-and-white civil rights photography, or Robert Frank’s 1959 photo-essay, The Americans, seemed to be disengaged, or to have shifted the political and social focus. While politics and social context are not disregarded by critics discussing Eggleston’s work, there is little consensus on where the photographer or his work stand on these matters. Moore observed that it was not just the color of Eggleston’s photographs but the apparent ambiguousness and indifference of his posture that surprised some observers. His “refusal to declare a clear attitude toward Southern contemporary life or his own revealed a palpable apathy, a sense of
decadence that shocked many northerners when the work was shown.” According to Corcoran Gallery of Art director Jane Livingston, Eggleston’s photographs display a “paradox: of brutal directness, their willingness to present the reality of things not only unflinchingly but perhaps a little perversely…” And Leo Rubinfein opined that, “Bill Eggleston passed up the public scene, as a subject, for the private. The conflicts that had lately torn America seemed to mean nothing to him.”

Federal and corporate support for Eggleston’s work indicates that whatever seemed to be “apathetic,” “decadent,” and “perverse” about Eggleston’s work in the 1976 exhibition, while a bit shocking, also aligned with an increasingly conservative, color blind stance in government and race relations that was emergent in late 1970s and early 1980s politics. That the attitudes expressed in Eggleston’s photographs by 1976 had aligned with the times is something Moore has suggested, pointing out that Szarkowski wanted to exhibit Eggleston’s work in 1967 but was delayed until 1976. “The delay suggests that color’s maturation was more a matter of culture than technology,” Moore

45 Moore, 26-28.
writes. “It is impossible to know what Szarkowski saw in the pictures in 1967,” but in 1976, “the attitudes expressed in Eggleston’s photographs had aligned with the times. Nixon had resigned in 1974, the stock market crashed in 1975, and inflation was at 12 percent. In Szarkowski’s eyes, Eggleston was now ready for a show.”

The photographs in the MoMA exhibition depicted Eggleston’s family, friends, and personal life, and the Guide was designed by Carl Lannes to look like a family photo album or Michelin Road Guide. In some ways, Eggleston’s photographs were in keeping with photorealism’s aestheticization of Middle America, and the book design acknowledged a connection between Eggleston’s photographic practice and the photographic practices of every middle class American. The craze for Kodachrome, instant cameras, and point and shoot simplicity had seized average Americans by the 1970s, as the number of ads for instant cameras produced by Kodak and Polaroid on the pages of Newsweek and Time in 1976 indicate. The Guide’s nod to amateur practice accommodated the interests of corporate sponsor Ponder & Best/Vivitar to promote their products in a robust but highly competitive popular photography market. Technical advances of the 1970s promised longer-lasting color dyes and it finally seemed that color photographs were a worthwhile investment.

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49 Moore, 26.
50 “They Said: Book Reviews.” Art Direction (August 1976): 60. While it may seem far-fetched to suggest that MoMA was in synch with or had an influence upon Middle America, the possibility that the institution was
There is no denying that color – aesthetically, ethically, and socially – had a charge in political and popular culture at the time of Eggleston’s debut. The year 1976 (the country’s Bicentennial year) in the U.S. was a color-conscious context – “people learn early on that color is significant,” writes legal scholar Trina Jones. The practice of color-based discrimination was of sufficient magnitude and consistency that the word “color” was explicitly included, separately from the word “race,” both in the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution and in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Color was in the 1970s U.S. (and the 21st century U.S.) heavily value-laden – “Whites have generally held the position of privilege” writes Jones, while “blacks have generally been relegated to the bottom.”

Network television shows of the 1970s indicated a near-obsession with issues of color, race, and gender, as well as a desire to seek comic relief from these issues. Shows like The Jeffersons, Sanford & Son, and Good Times, openly addressed issues of identity and discrimination in contemporary life and were popular among mixed audiences. The not elitist and removed but responsive to the sentiments of the “educated” populace is suggested by American Studies scholar Maren Stange. Stange argues that, “Whatever else it has done, [MoMA] has not seceded from the public, “external” world. In fact, it might be said that the sensibility exhibited by the museum can claim hegemony over advanced American taste and that the museum’s discourse represents quite completely our educated vernacular in the arts.” Maren Stange, “Photography and the Institution: Szarkowski at the Modern,” The Massachusetts Review, vol. 19, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 706.

52 Jones, 155.
ABC series *Roots*, which aimed to tell the history of black America, debuted in 1977 and was predicted by *Newsweek* to be TV’s “most glittering Bicentennial event.” Based on an 885-page book by Alex Haley – *Roots* was the culmination of 10 years of research into his family’s history through seven generations.⁵³ According to historian Alex Haley, *Roots*, which was published in 1976 and released as a twelve-hour television adaptation in 1977, had a “catalytic effect on popular attitudes about slavery, especially among African Americans,” according to historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage. Haley’s “depiction of his slave ancestor’s struggle to retain their dignity and to attain freedom removed the stigma from slavery for many African Americans, transforming their past into a saga of perseverance and quiet heroism. Informed of their slave ancestors’ courage and resilience,” Brundage observes, “blacks displayed unprecedented interest in genealogy.” African Americans traced their family lines and visited historic sites to learn about the slave experience. Black museum owners increasingly realized that the inclusion of black history was “essential to expanding their clientele.”⁵⁴

The CBS sitcom *All in the Family* featured the archetypal white patriarch Archie Bunker and his comic tribulations at the hands of black neighbors Lionel and George

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⁵³ Harry F. Waters with Verne E. Smith. “Television: One Man’s Family.” *Newsweek*, June 21, 1976. The article states that ABC and Doubleday are synchronizing their “Jaws”-size publicity campaigns to introduce “Roots.” The publishing house is ordering up a record 200,000 first printing and the network plans to unveil the three-hour premiere episode before a VIP audience, possibly at Washington’s Kennedy Center.

Jefferson (stars of *The Jeffersons*) and Polish-American liberal son-in-law, Michael in a working class Queens neighborhood. Some viewers bemoaned while others glorified in what seemed to be the diminishing status of the white, straight, working class male’s dominion within his home and community. *All in the Family* was the most watched show in 1975, according to the AC Nielson report.55

*All in the Family* cut close to the quick, portraying screaming matches and seemingly irreconcilable differences between Archie Bunker and George Jefferson while real violence broke out over court-ordered school busing programs designed to achieve racial integration. The nationwide chaos demonstrated that color controversies had never been limited to southern states. A September 1976 issue of *Time*, for example, opined that, in the South, the civil rights-related confrontations of the 1950s and 1960s – bombings, Klan revivals, and school riots “seem as remote as the Dred Scott decision.” Races were clashing “up North, in staid Boston,” while Little Rock, Ark., “scene of Governor Orval Faubus’s strident segregationist harangues,” had thoroughly integrated its schools.56 *Time* further reported that although Mississippi had long been considered the most racially reactionary state, it had, after a “brief” flare of violence, “integrated

55 *Commercial Dispatch*, Columbus, Mississippi, January 9, 1975. *All in the Family* as followed in the rankings by NBC’s *Sanford and Son*. CBS broadcasted a warning before the first episode in January, 1971, stating that the show: “seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show, in a mature fashion, just how absurd they are.” Dominick Sandbrook, *Mad As Hell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 48/
with a speed that astonished even its neighbors.”57 “Throughout the South,” another 1976 Time article stated, “news of Northern and Border-state unrest over busing has been greeted with understanding and something more than a little regional hubris.” The article suggested that the South could now teach other regions a few civil rights lessons.58

Throughout the 1974-5 school year, the Associated Press brought to bastions of segregation like Mississippi and Alabama reports of stabbings and riots over school busing in Boston and New York. AP newsmen reported on the armies of police required for South Boston High School to remain in session after students from the black neighborhood of Roxbury were bused into the largely white, Irish Catholic neighborhood of South Boston. The attempt at integration had resulted in the stabbing of both black and white students. According to a January 1975 AP report published in, among other papers, the Columbus, Mississippi Commercial Dispatch: “the schools have been plagued by sporadic outbreaks of violence since they opened for the fall term under a partial desegregation order that requires the busing of about 18,000 of the city’s 87,000 students.”59 President Ford put the 82nd airborne on alert, while Boston “teetered on the brink of anarchy” according to political scholar Jeremy D. Mayer. “The

57 “The Spirit of the South,” Time (September 27, 1976).
opposition to busing in Boston was bitter and explicitly racist,” writes Mayer.

“Demonstrators waved bananas and screamed at the black children to go back to Africa.”  

Indeed, viewers and readers across the country witnessed white Boston students and parents making matter-of-fact, racist statements on television and in print. One student claimed that “most black boys were out to molest and rape white girls, that black girls would attack white girls in the ladies room, and that blacks of both sexes carried knives, razors, scissors, stick pins, and other weapons.” A brief report on cities in the June 28, 1976 issue of Newsweek described fearful predictions of violent resistance among Boston community leaders after the Supreme Court ruled that it would not to modify the court order for school busing. “The most serious troubles were in Chicago,” the report stated, “where a recent round of black protests and white backlash has already set off a spasm of beatings, stonings, and stabbings.” Blacks from the Englewood neighborhood marched through neighboring white Marquette Park over inadequate police protection and a lack of open housing, the report stated. Whites, encouraged by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Party of America, responded with anti-black rallies, swastika stickers and “niggers beware” slogans. And, “when a Sunday night tornado

Sandbrook, 53.
forced traffic off the flooded Dan Ryan expressway and into Englewood last week, one stranded white motorist was killed – and nineteen injured – in six separate attacks by blacks wielding guns, bricks, and clubs.” Reverend Jesse Jackson declared that Chicago was on the verge of a race war.62

As they had during the Civil Rights era, photographers continued to document race-related injustices and abuses. In April, 1976, just one month before Eggleston’s MoMA debut, the world laid eyes on The Soiling of Old Glory a Pulitzer Prize-winning black-and-white photograph depicting white antibusing protesters attacking black lawyer Ted Landsmark in front of Boston City Hall (figure 17). In the photograph, a wrathful teenager is poised to stab Landsmark with the tip of a flagpole (brandishing an American flag).

Despite color-based racial discrimination’s obvious role in sparking violence and prompting discrimination, an increasingly socially conservative U.S. Supreme Court, in the name of color blindness, used the Constitution during the 1970s to protect the racial status quo, condoning discrimination against minorities while condemning efforts to

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“Cities: Summer of ‘76.” *Newsweek*, June 28, 1976. All of this was taking place in the midst of the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations, including those in Philadelphia, where “left-wing activists” threatened to steal the show. Mayor Frank Rizzo, warning against the thousands of “radicals” threatening to converge on the city in the thousands, asked for 15,000 armed Federal troops to keep the peace. One group planned a “People’s Parade” through the “black ghetto” in North Philadelphia to demand jobs and equality
achieve greater racial equality. As law professor Ian Haney Lopez has written, the color blind posture invokes the formal antiracism of the early civil rights movement, calling for a refusal to recognize race in public life. Color blindness “advances an abstracted conception of race” and “allows the Court to be aggressive in preserving the racial status quo.” The color blind U.S. Supreme Court, Lopez continues, “refuses to stop discrimination against racial minorities, while it relentlessly condemns efforts to directly remedy racial inequality.” As an ideology that protects racial inequality, color blindness has at its heart “not a theory of racial inferiority” but of “race as an abstract, meaningless category.” Under colorblindness, Lopez explains, there is no difference between racism and affirmative action, since the Court abstracts race from social context and group conflict. Supreme Court cases that illustrate this include Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke (1978), which ruled as unconstitutional the admissions process at the UC Davis Medical School, which set aside 16 of 100 seats for African American students.

As historians such as Matthew Lassiter and Jacqueline Dowd Hall have observed, the New Right in the 1970s positioned itself as the true inheritor of Martin

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64 Lopez, 9-10.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid, 11-12.
Luther King’s philosophy as laid out in his “I have a Dream speech.” Hall has argued that the new “color-blind conservatives” insisted that color blindness, defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law, was the movement’s singular objective.”

In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that busing to achieve desegregation in Pasadena, CA, need not produce racially balanced schools in perpetuity, stating that if “the quite normal pattern of human migration resulted re-segregation, so be it.” In 1977 the Court appeared to turn an earlier decision requiring busing in Denver “on its head” when it hinted that even if the Dayton, Ohio, School Board had engaged in isolated instances of illegal segregation or “minor indiscretions,’ it need not fear city-wide busing. Furthermore, whites, not minorities, sought redress for having been discriminated against on the basis of race and color in affirmative action cases.

The phrase “affirmative action” first appeared when Kennedy issued an executive order in 1961 and directed that federal contractors “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated, during their employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act barred discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin.

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70 Kalman, 182.
origin in educational institutions and other programs that received federal funds, grants, and contracts. Title VII, which was extended to educational institutions in 1972, prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex.\textsuperscript{71} Despite their repeated assistances that the legislation promoted color blindness, civil rights activists, and white liberals who worked for it understood that color blindness would not ensure equal opportunity. The limitations of color blindness became clearer in the years following the passage of the civil rights legislation. Inner cities in the United States erupted during the mid-late 1960s, so the federal agencies that administered the Civil Rights Act replaced the ideal of color blindness with an ideal of color consciousness. Because enforcement problems were rampant, Congress began giving teeth to the Civil Rights Act in the 1970s. As affirmative action programs multiplied amid reminders that federal funding might be at stake, white males (like Archie Bunker) now began to see themselves as victims of discrimination.\textsuperscript{72}

Racial issues were also abstracted in the 1976 Jimmy Carter/Gerald Ford presidential campaign. Jimmy Carter managed to find support among both blacks and blue collar whites, but not by discussing busing and affirmative action in a forthright way. Rather, Carter formed this coalition by being vague on racial issues. Like Ford,

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.\textsuperscript{72} Kalman, 183.
Carter opposed busing when there was an alternative way to achieve racial balance.

Carter also made sure that the democratic platform avoided busing altogether. While Ford did not grasp the importance of the black vote, Carter was victorious because he could “parse the politics of race.” Racial politics, according to Mayer, were crucial in Carter’s race to the democratic nomination, even though he deemphasized the issue. Furthermore, as Kalman writes, it was harder to tell what liberals thought about racial equality in the 1970s than it had been in the 1960s.

In a similar way, Szarkowski deemphasized the social import of color film and the creeping undertones of racial violence in Eggleston’s imagery, which depicted places like Memphis, the Mississippi Delta, and Louisiana. Szarkowski reinforced, even encouraged critics to perceive Eggleston’s perspective on the South as bland, offhand, and apathetic, since the curator explicitly downplayed the social context of the imagery. In his essay for the Guide, Szarkowski referred to Eggleston’s claim that his images were “based compositionally on the Confederate flag.” Eggleston’s photograph “Memphis, Tennesse, 1975” suggests that this preposterous statement might hold some truth. In this photograph, a woman lies on the ground with her eyes closed, holding an Instamatic camera. Her torso, head, and two splayed arms extend almost to the edges of the frame,

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73 Kalman, Right Star Rising, 172.
74 Mayer, Running on Race, 123-125.
75 Mayer, Running on Race, 127-8.
76 Kalman, 180.
like the X on the Confederate flag (figure 21).

The flag is an oblong red banner with a blue cross of St. Andrew and 13 white five-pointed stars. It was actually a modification of the Confederate battle-flag, according to historian Allan Cabaniss, which was never adopted by the Confederate Congress and never officially flew over government offices of the Confederate States. The modern imitation called the “rebel flag” reached its greatest popularity in the 1950s, “possibly owing to widespread southern white dissatisfaction with the federal government during that period.” Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan have made use of the modified flag. “It has more or less been confined in conventional use to sporting events in the South, especially football games….emotions associated with the flag run deep among both white and black southerners.”

Szarkowski explained away Eggleston’s cavalier statement about the Confederate or Rebel flag, claiming it to be illustrative “only of the lengths to which artists sometimes go to frustrate rational analysis of their work, as though they fear it might prove an antidote to their magic” (figure 19).

By mentioning Eggleston’s Confederate flag statement in his essay yet downplaying its significance, Szarkowski models a method for navigating the more...

discomfiting aspects of Eggleston’s work. The viewer should acknowledge the obvious associations and between Eggleston’s work and the South, but disregard the relevance of these associations to its aesthetic import. In the 1970s, the South was still regarded as a culturally backward region and its mythology had heady, exotic associations grounded in a rich literary and popular culture tradition of the gothic. As literary scholars have observed, the South as a mythical construct has been regarded in literature as a repository for national traits that were antithetical to national ideals. Literary scholar Teresa Goddu writes:

> The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot.\(^{79}\)

The gothic’s basic impulses contradict America’s self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony, Goddu continues. In Leslie Fiedler’s words, the American Gothic is “a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation.”\(^{80}\)

But while popular culture Gothicized the South, journalists reported on the region’s burgeoning economic growth, connecting this growth to increased respect for artistic production in the Southern periphery. A 1976 *New York Times* story referred to the South of the 1970s as “increasingly urbanized and sophisticated.” Arts activity had


\(^{80}\) Ibid, 4.
“increased markedly” as the region “became more and more an economic and political power.” Indeed, the reporter noted that the Sunbelt in the mid-1970s was accruing economic, political, and cultural power faster than any other region.\textsuperscript{81}

A special September 1976 report described great social, economic, and cultural changes in the eleven states of the old Confederacy. “In what has long been the nation’s poorest, most backward-looking region,” the report stated, “business booms and economic, social and political opportunities abound.” Racial integration proceeded with smoothness and the Georgia-born Jimmy Carter had won the Democratic presidential nomination – the first major-party candidate for the presidency from the Deep South in 128 years.\textsuperscript{82} The South is a mix, the report stated, of modern and ancient, traditional and futuristic – multiethnic, multicolored, and multicultural. “Twenty percent of its population are black.” “The other 80% are an amalgam of mint-julep aristocrats out of Faulkner’s Sartoris clan, Mexican Americans from Texas, Roman Catholic Cajuns in Louisiana, Cubans and Jews in Miami, Vietnamese recently settled on the Gulf Coast and Anglo-Saxon Baptists everywhere.”\textsuperscript{83} While cities above the Mason-Dixon Line struggled with decay and impoverishment, \textit{Time} opined, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta were “large-scale success stories.”

\textsuperscript{82} “The South Today,” Special Section, \textit{Time} (September 27, 1976).
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
People were no longer fleeing the South for Northern industrial cities, according to *Time*. Instead, “white-collar workers, middle management, and an intellectual elite from the North” were flocking to the Sunbelt for jobs in the defense industry and the dozens of Fortune 500 corporations that had relocated there. Southern states made an effort to lure businessmen “fed up with high taxes, physical decay and demanding unions in the old urban centers of the North.” Yet despite all this praise for progress, another article from the same issue of *Time* described the South as a culturally exotic place being invaded and diluted by the influence of technology – namely the television set and the air conditioner. Indeed, bizarre forms of flora and fauna – kudzu, walking catfish, fire ants, water hyacinths, manatees, and alligators – were thought to be in abundance there.

Thus the lingering strangeness, blood, and death of the South mingled with the infiltration of “Northern” or outside influences may have been part of what held

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84 “The South/Economy & Business,” *Time* (September 27, 1976): 72-73. A University of Georgia economist said that between 1950 and 1975, the rate of economic expansion in the South averaged 4.4 percent annually versus 3.4 percent for the U.S. as a whole. The main thrust came at first from an increase in manufacturing. But service industries like banking, real estate, and retail trade were the fastest growing after 1970. By 1976 they provided the region with 54 percent of its gross product, a ten percent increase since 1950. From 1970 to 1975, every industry except mining showed a faster growth rate in the South than nationally. The rise of the Sunbelt South was driven in part by federal tax and spending policies that had “drained wealth from the Northeast and Midwest and diverted it to the Southern states.” In fiscal 1975, for example, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania received $10 billion less from government spending programs than they paid in taxes. The eleven states of the old Confederacy received $8.7 more than they paid out.

such great fascination for viewers of Eggleston’s work. As many critics pointed out, Eggleston stood out in New York as the only Southern member of a predominantly Jewish group of Northern photographers – Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Stephen Shore, and Joel Meyerowitz, for example. He made of his identity what he could, “exploiting it to fit the stereotype,” in the knowledge that “his photography has its being not in Southern culture but in direct, metaphysical experience,” according to art historians Mike Weaver and Anne Hammond. Living in the South for the last thirty years,” they wrote, “cannot have been easy, in any sense, for a member of the decayed cotton farming class.” Yet even as Weaver and Hammond attempt to separate the meaning of Eggleston’s work from his southern origins, they describe Eggleston like a character in a Faulkner novel.

For one year, in 1957, Eggleston attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, where he bought a camera and developer. For the summer semester of 1958, he attended Delta State University in Cleveland, MS. In the fall of 1958, he began attending the University of Mississippi in Oxford. There he learned about Henri Cartier-Bresson’s The Decisive Moment (1952) and Walker Evans’s American Photographs (1938). He also met

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86 The Time feature reported that the South had long known instinctively that death was a part of life, even while “elsewhere in the nation people are writing books and teaching university courses about how to face death with dignity.”

Tom Young, a visiting professor and painter from New York, who introduced Eggleston to Abstract Expressionism. Young encouraged Eggleston to photograph what was around him, even if he didn’t like it. Eggleston finished his studies at the University of Mississippi in 1960, but he did not graduate. “I never got a degree because I couldn’t see any sense in taking tests...Because I refused to take tests I had to talk the dean into letting me back into school every year, and that was hard because they didn’t think I was particularly talented.”

Eggleston’s wife Rosa, whom he married in 1964, said it “really sticks in her craw” when people call Eggleston a “Southern artist.” Eggleston himself has written that geographical locations are unimportant to the problems he addresses in his work, which are no different when he is in Africa, West Berlin, or Memphis. Yet “southernisms,” like the remark about the Confederate flag, have repeatedly cropped up in discussions about the photographer over the past several decades. Eggleston’s good friend Walter Hopps was reported to have said that although Eggleston’s mother was very much a lady, “she looks as if she could have led a regiment of the Confederate army.” The

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89 Ibid.
90 Phone conversation with Rosa Eggleston.
92 Ibid.
music journalist Stanley Booth let slip that for a couple of years he and Eggleston
“shared a chauffeur, a young black man whose name was Bob or something, but who
was called Molasses…Molasses, who was in on the joke, took special pleasure in telling
unsuspecting people of all races, ‘I like bein’ Mr. Bill and Mr. Stanley’s nigger.”93
Writing for the British publication The Observer in 2004, Sean O’Hagan described
Eggleston as “every inch a southern dandy,” standing out in a “pastel-blue summer
jacket, boldly striped tie, white trousers and matching shoes….He looks out of place and
out of time.”94 British journalist Charles Darwent characterized Eggleston as “Rhett
Butler with a camera,” perhaps having learned of the man’s alleged fondness for driving
around Memphis listening to the Gone with the Wind soundtrack.95 Eggleston is very
southern, said novelist and historian Shelby Foote, “from good people and conscious of
all the amenities. But he’s an artist and, in the South, that introduces complications.”96
Vanity Fair writer Richard B. Woodward observed in 1991 that Eggleston understood
how much he was marked by birth with the values of a white, high-born Southerner.
“Like Faulkner, he refuses to apologize for the life of his ancestors, even though he

93 Weaver and Hammond, “Existentially.”
the Deep South, with a taste for bourbon and antique guns and a reputation as a ‘hellraiser.’ He’s also the
photographer whose extraordinary ability to find beauty in the banal has transformed the way we look at
the world.”
95 Charles Darwent, “King Crimson,” The Independent on Sunday, 10.
knows that it’s doomed and, in many ways, justly so.”

Due to his ancestry and the persistence of southernisms in his manner and persona, the ominousness and creeping terror that imbue some of Eggleston’s photographs seems tied to the literary and pictorial trope of “southern gothic,” even if this was not the photographer’s intention. The divisiveness of his imagery, especially in 1976, and its ability to stir passions and incite anger derived from the manner in which it mingled indifference with explosions of wet, sticky, smelly, decaying, color in the context of the Deep South, the site of recent race-based horrors. The hyper-realism of the color seemed to leap over the abstractions of black and white and confront viewers with the parchment colored skin of Eggleston’s Uncle Adyn and the mahogany tones of his longtime servant Jasper (figure 8).

Both figures are bathed in the blank, indifferent light of a gray Mississippi day. The photograph of the two men – the white man slightly in front of the black man, both with the same sagging posture – suggests a family resemblance, made all the more pronounced when sandwiched between the leatherette covers of *William Eggleston’s Guide*, the high art catalogue that looks like a family photo album. They had known each other for so long, Eggleston once said, they’d started standing the same way. In the post-Jim Crow era, a decade after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, they both stand

\[^{\text{97}}\text{Ibid.}\]
there seemingly aimless and adrift, as if asking the question, “Now What?”

Many of the images in the *Guide* suggest temporal displacement, almost supernatural moments of limbo suspended in the aftermath of horror or the restless anticipation of an uncertain future. Cemeteries occupy several. One image shows an old truck parked in a driveway behind a fence full of blooming purple flowers, contrasted with dying brown grass covering the ground beneath them. Another depicts the lifeless trappings of a decaying Southern aristocracy: a portrait of a young child in a carved, gold-embossed frame hangs on the wall above a delicate china tea set atop a gleaming silver tray. On the left side of the frame, an open cabinet of china bowls and plates sits in darkness (figure 20). To the right of this scene, an open door leads through a sitting room in orangey light to a space that might be a kitchen, bathed in the daylight streaming through a glass paneled door, revealing wisps of cloud in a pale blue sky. The daylight cuts through the mausoleum-like environment of the darker room, creating an orange line along its doorframe that violently circumscribes the precious and decadent objects in its shadowy corner.

Eggleston often turned his attention to southern topics, including the political rise of another white man from the Deep South, Jimmy Carter. Carter was still running for

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98 Wedgwood Blue is also the name of one of Eggleston’s limited edition Artist Books. It was published by Caldecott Chubb in 1979. There are twenty editions.
office when Eggleston made the photographs that would become the “Election Eve” series in 1976. His images of Carter’s home place in Sumter County, Georgia, seemed like a statement “of perfect calm” and were very different from what the media portrayed of Carter’s home.\textsuperscript{99} In the media’s images, Carter was often pictured at work on his peanut farm, looking wholesome and homespun in jeans and rolled-up shirtsleeves. Photographed for a special September 1976 section of \textit{Time} magazine titled “The South Today,” Carter was pictured up to his waist in water, “performing the chore of draining the fish pond in Plains.” The magazine claimed, on the one hand, that Carter did not fit many Southern stereotypes: “He is not a hard drinker, poker player, or profane and garrulous see-gar-chomping raconteur.” On the other hand, he was still a Southern farm boy at heart, who knew how to “turn sweet potato vines, chop cotton and pull peanuts, and who looks homeward to a hamlet so archetypically Southern that it is almost parody.”\textsuperscript{100} Carter’s father, who had not allowed “Negroes beyond his back door” and was gunned down in an argument over ownership of a desk, represented the Old South. Carter’s mother represented the new – “urging fair and open treatment for blacks, less stress on tradition and more attention to the times that are a-changing.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Time} suggested that Carter’s success as a Southern politician was based on his

\textsuperscript{99} Fonvielle, “Election Eve,” 5.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} “How Southern is He?” \textit{Time} (September 27, 1976): 46.
ability to comprehend and accommodate the push and pull of what each of his parents represented – the push and pull of the contemporary South – “a continued reverence for the past with a growing desire to ‘get shut’ of it.”\textsuperscript{102} Carter’s populism and his ability to channel in his persona the “push and pull of the contemporary South” were also important tropes in the Eggleston/Szarkowski project in 1976. \textit{William Eggleston’s Guide} and the MoMA exhibition blended elitism with populism. Szarkowski called Eggleston a “country gentleman,” and his privileged upbringing in a sprawling Mississippi Delta mansion was well-known.\textsuperscript{103} Eggleston’s inherited wealth and privilege enabled him to venture into photography as a hobby and approach the practice with an experimental spirit. His use of the dye transfer process also spoke of wealth and privilege. At an estimated $100 per print in 1975-6, few photographers could afford the process. The May 24, 1976 opening of the Eggleston exhibition was funded by Vivitar and included “beautiful people” and “beautiful clothes.”\textsuperscript{104} Indeed, Szarkowski requested an hour and 45 minute cocktail reception for 350-500 people in the Garden Restaurant and

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\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY. CUR 1133, June 6, 1975 letter from John Szarkowski to William Eggleston. In the letter, Szarkowski describes the painstaking work of writing the essay for \textit{William Eggleston’s Guide}, which Szarkowski refers to as “your book.” “In the small hours of the norming (sic), as I stare at my yellow pad, covered with pompous idiocies, I think of you leading the civilized and cultured life of a country gentleman, and am instantly filled with jealousy and rage.”
\end{flushleft}
In seeming contradiction, however, the work itself in form and content appeared to be similar to the kind of thing any amateur could produce with a pocket camera made by Kodak or Vivitar. Some critics observed that the photographs were almost more mundane than the average snapshot. For example, Max Kozloff, in his review of the 1976 exhibition for Artforum, stated that the images had “the snapshotter’s typical focus on a center of interest, an object, or a person,” but exhibited more range in the trivialities they permitted. Eggleston appears to know that his subjects are “the sort of thing most likely to bore the family.”

Apparently frustrated by the Eggleston show, Kozloff observed that Szarkowski was “mystifying” Eggleston and color photography “practically out of existence.” MoMA had waited years to fund its first book devoted to a color photographer, he noted, but the public is out of luck if it wants to know anything about the artist’s class origins, intellectual outlook, creative development, professional contacts, and the

105 The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY. March 10, 1976, to Jeanne Thayer, special events. “Dear Jeanne, We would like to have a cocktail reception (6:15-8) for about 350-500 people at the time of our Eggleston opening on Monday evening May 24. Eggleston is an important color photographer (one of the best in the field) and this is the first large exhibition of his work. We are also publishing a book of his color work which appear at the time of the show. The National Endowment for the Arts and Vivitar Corporation have made generous contributions to help subsidize the project. The latter is a large optical company which is contributing to our company for the first time. We feel that it is important to plan a party for this reason as well as to honor the artist. The show is on the first floor so the Garden Restaurant & garden would be appropriate. Would you let me know if this date is all right and when we should discuss budget, invitation design, guest list, etc.? Folder ex. 1133, Letter from Graphics International LTD Washington DC, 202-338-5792.

identity of subjects that have personal meaning – “things that actually matter.” Kozloff wrote:

An old man sitting on his bed for his portrait holds a large shiny revolver, but God forbid we should be encouraged to draw any specious conclusions, say, about Mississippi violence. Well, such images, fragments as are all photos, are not obliged to spell out meanings if the photographer doesn’t want them to. And Eggleston’s dwell with such conventional uninsistence on this fact that they’re maddening, in a low-level, modish way.”

Yet the bland audaciousness of these repressed references to the exoticism and violence of the South drew the kind of attention the MoMA photography department needed during a time of financial crisis and cultural “malaise.” After all, why did Szarkowski waste precious print space in his essay to tell us about Eggleston’s reference to the Confederate flag if not to shock and perhaps even titillate? In his essay for the Guide and exhibition wall label, Szarkowski downplayed the issues raised by the location and nominal subjects of Eggleston’s photographs. For example, Szarkowski turned a cool and seemingly callous eye toward the troubling coincidence, which he must have been aware of, that Eggleston’s grandfather was a judge in Sumner, the town in which Eggleston was raised and the place where Emmett Till’s murderers were acquitted in 1955. “At the time of the murder, Eggleston [was] sixteen, just two years

\[107\] Max Kozloff, “How to Mystify Color Photography” Artforum (November 1976): 50. The man’s flaccid hold on the gun in his hand and the pail on the floor under the bed gives an impression of emasculation, as well as loss of power and control.
older than Till, though he has few recollections of the event.”

Perhaps Eggleston had the luxury of being unconcerned with such matters, in Szarkowski’s view, and we, the viewers, were encouraged to follow suit. In his introductory essay to William Eggleston’s Guide, Szarkowski declared:

> For many excellent reasons, most of which involve the financial problems of book publication, it would be convenient if one could claim, or suggest, that this book of photographs answers, or contributes to the answer of some large social or cultural question, such as, Whither the South? or Whither America? depending on one’s viewing distance. The fact is that Eggleston’s pictures do not seem concerned with large questions of this sort. They seem concerned, simply with describing life.

That Eggleston’s pictures did not answer the questions “Whither the South?” or “Whither America?” was not fact, of course, but a matter of opinion. And many viewers of Eggleston’s work had opinions that differed. Bruce Brown, reviewing a show of roughly forty of the MoMA exhibition prints at the Seattle Art Museum’s Modern Art Pavilion, suggested that some of Eggleston’s images offered poignant and personal answers to these very questions. Brown writes:

> Again and again, Eggleston uses images like this (a wisteria-draped hot rod parked in front of an aging mansion, the King Cotton Beverage Co.) to illustrate quite clearly his own personal

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Brown observed, further, that it was not surprising Szarkowski had chosen to emphasize Eggleston’s greatest weakness (his sense of composition, according to Brown), since, as a “pundit of modernism,” Szarkowski helped erect a structure of theory founded on the faulty premise that the point of communication is grammar, not information.”

This dismissal of information in favor of form was, I would add, in keeping with political strategies that remained vague on explosive issues related to color as a social phenomenon, such as school busing and desegregation.

Color was an explosive aesthetic element in popular culture as well, and for this reason it was necessary for Szarkowski to model for his audience the appropriate way of reacting to it in Eggleston’s work. Some people regarded Eggleston’s color as strained and muted, while others called it visceral and gaudy. To others still, it veered between both of those extremes. “At one end of the spectrum,” observed writer Jane Livingston, “were images lushly alluring as abstract color compositions; at the other, images whose bleakness of tonality and opacity of subject made them unevocative to the point of being altogether indecipherable.”

The writer Sean Callahan observed that Eggleston “emphasizes hues that soak the scene or resonate in a critical way, virtually creating

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110 Bruce Brown, “You Can’t Judge a Photographer By His Backers.” *Argus* (October 8, 1976).
111 Brown, “You Can’t Judge a Photographer.”
effects of sound, silence, smell, temperature, pressure – sensations that black and white photography has yet to evoke.” And Richard Harrington observed in 1983 that Eggleston’s earlier work had “often seemed a conspiracy of attachments between natural and artificial color.”

It is interesting to note that Jane Livingston, about six years after writing about Eggleston, almost singlehandedly brought black self-taught artists from the South into critical acclaim. Along with her colleague John Beardsley, Livingston planned the traveling exhibition, “Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980,” in 1982. The exhibition, first mounted at the Corcoran Gallery of Art where Livingston was assistant director, was, according to journalist John Russell, “groundbreaking” and “monumental” and “on every count a most remarkable affair.” Russell expressed awe at the degree to which exhibition organizers were required to start from scratch to assemble the twenty-artist show: “While most major exhibitions draw upon an already voluminous bibliography, this one had to be put together piece by piece on the rumor, hearsay, and the hot tip.” There was something fresh, grassroots, cutting edge, and scrappy about not only the work itself but the way in which it was brought together, in Russell’s view.

116 Ibid.
There are similarities between the manner in which Eggleston’s work was appreciated by curators and critics and the appreciation for self-taught art as described by Russell. Folk, or self-taught, art, writes Russell, “cuts the fat off traditional art.” Because it is “untaught,” folk art is somehow uncorrupted. And while Eggleston received art education from, among other people, Tom Young at the University of Mississippi, he exploded onto the scene relatively unknown in the mid-1970s, seemingly from a deep southern backwater. As Sean Callahan quipped, just as everyone “finally got around to accepting New York street photography, [Szekowski] went and unveiled an obscure Southerner named William Eggleston whose artless color prints set up the hue and cry all over again.”  

Eggleston combines visceral or, alternatively, bland color with offhand references to controversial southern themes and race. Sometimes those references are so offhand that observers have read them as inconclusive or nonexistent. Take, for example, art historians Anne Hammond and Mike Weaver’s reading of an Eggleston photograph which did not appear in the exhibition and shows a black person driving a car in (the title states) Jackson, Tennessee, near a church (figure 23). “ACLU” is printed on a utility pole. “We do not doubt,” Weaver and Hammond write, “that the ACLU sign is what caught Eggleston’s eye…but it would be a rash critic who suggested that he was

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either for or against freedom riders, the busing of children, or blacks driving shiny cars – in short, either for segregation or against it.”\textsuperscript{118} But, I would interject, even if we can’t draw conclusions about Eggleston’s position on these subjects, we can postulate based on his attention to them that he considered these subjects relevant. At the very least, he sensed that his audiences would be interested in and attracted by these visual cues.

Weaver and Hammond also report an anecdote from 1991, when they were giving a lecture about Eggleston’s work in Memphis and attempting to discuss a picture of a barbecue with a blood-red axe lying next to it. One of Eggleston’s friends in the audience piped up: “there were ten people watching him take that picture and none one could figure out why!” According to Weaver and Hammond, Eggleston knew that the picture “would not mean a thing to most people.”\textsuperscript{119} But I am arguing quite the opposite about Eggleston and the other photographers in this study. Indeed, another interviewer quoted Eggleston saying something different from what Hammond and Weaver report: “You and I both know the picture of the hatchet is ominous, but the task was making a good picture of it.”\textsuperscript{120} In my view, Eggleston photographs such objects – a bloody axe, supersaturated blood reds, monochromatic whites, mahogany and parchment colored flesh, ACLU signs, and “good ol’ boys” with guns – because of a canny color

\textsuperscript{118} Weaver and Hammond.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
consciousness, though he told a British journalist he just thought the axe was funny, and that, “there’s no underlying sense of murder or mayhem to that red paint.”

This color consciousness – an awareness of the emotional shock of color due to its visceral quality, surrealism, and social dimensions in the hands of an artist from the Deep South – was present in Eggleston’s aesthetic choices, even if it was sometimes obscured by formalist justifications. Eggleston had a sharp sense of smell for blood, so to speak, as indicated by his choice to photograph the hatchet (and his companions’ utter lack of comprehension). As A.D. Coleman observed, Eggleston was working with received ideas. In doing so, I would argue, he must have been aware of the myth that “violence is not far from the surface” in the South, as Time reported in 1976. He must also have been aware that this perception of incipient and festering Southern violence had fresh immediacy for Northern audiences. While Montgomery, AL, Lubbock, TX, and Savannah, GA had the highest murder rates in the nation, Time reported, “up North,

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123 In his essay “Southern Fictions” in the exhibition catalogue for “Southern Fictions” produced by the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston for an August 4 – September 2 exhibition in 1983, curator William Fagaly noted a lack of control over one’s passions as a stereotype of southern life. “Uncontrolled emotional release resulting in violence and tragedy,” he wrote, “has a particular place in the Southern ethos. Sadistic torture, hangings and ‘mad houses’ are but a few examples. The curious phenomenon of violence for pleasure takes the form of cock fights, dog fights, ‘coon on a log’ or hunting and trapping for sport.” He connected these passions to an interest among Southerners in the bizarre, peculiar, and seedy: “Interest in the sensational and fantastic, be it carney and freak shows or roadside reptile farms, is indicative of a people who respond with zeal to external stimuli.” William A. Fagaly and Dr. Monroe K. Spears, Southern Fictions. Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas, August 2 – September 4, 1983 (Contemporary Art Museum: Houston, TX, 1983).
the combined rate of violent crimes (murder, rape, aggravated assault and robbery) is still greater than that of the South.”

Why and how did Eggleston make mundane objects and scenes seem so sinister, to the point that David Lynch, director of surrealist films and TV shows tinged with terror, cites him as an influence? As a writer for the British Journal of Photography pointed out in 1992, critics have been inclined to see this sinister quality in Eggleston’s work: “A close-up of the plumbing in a German shower recess is seen as a metaphor for a Nazi torture chamber…the sculptural shape of a mini jukebox summons up a primeval or alien presence, and the wide-angle peek into a kitchen oven might be a suicide’s last glimpse of the world.” An Australian Center for Photography newsletter observed in 1976 that Eggleston’s pictures are shocking and disturbing, but it is an “effect of negative shock” – “there is a kind of awful stillness in this work that demands intellectual participation by the viewer.”

Eggleston’s use of the dye transfer process boosted the rich, sticky, scary-saturated quality of the work and its content. Eggleston used the process – which had not, until 1976, been known outside of the advertising world, to amp up his color – the

125 “Tennessee William,” The British Journal of Photography (March 19, 1992), 18. Eggleston told the journalist that “everybody seizes on those aspects but nobody seems to catch the humour…the bloody axe’ is, to my mind, very funny.”
dramatic red in the “Red Ceiling” photo, for example. Dye transfer prints are dye-soaked and can be manipulated for maximum control of color balance and contrast.

Eggleston told a *British Journal of Photography* reporter in 1992 that, “I thought I needed the added saturation of the inks if I wanted a color or a group of colors to function in a more forceful way. I don’t think anything has the seductivity of these dyes.”127 As a color process, dye transfer emphasized the medium’s more basic, primal connection to knee-jerk emotions that some 1970s critics and photographers believed color photography to possess. Photographer Mitch Epstein claimed that “photography dumbed color down to emotional button-pushing – blue for cool, red for warmth. Faced with this, I felt, as Winogrand put it, ‘at war with the obvious.’”128

Eggleston’s 1983 series on Graceland – Elvis Presley’s mansion in Memphis – is an apt demonstration of the way Eggleston exploits the sticky saturation of the dye transfer printing process. The color takes on a heavy, lacquered feeling in the depiction of Graceland – a space that is kitschy and morbid at the same time. A friend supposedly asked Eggleston to make the images in 1983 because the Presley estate needed new pictures for its Graceland tour book. Eggleston took the public tour of the mansion. He

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127 The 75 prints in the 1976 exhibition were all dye transfers, according to Eggleston, as were prints made for projects Eggleston worked on in the 1980s.

was not sure why he had been asked to take the photographs, though he had shown some of his earlier portfolios to Priscilla Presley, including “Southern Suite” and “Troubled Waters.” Eggleston speculated that he was perhaps given the assignment because it was thought that he might be able to “see” Graceland better. “I could still see it as an oddity, but not as a complete oddity.” He spent two-and-a-half months shooting, using both a 35mm camera and a larger format camera.

The news of Presley’s death in 1977 was only a couple of years old when Eggleston embarked on the project. Eggleston made the Graceland images at night, and most of the shots were long exposures that employed artificial light. “I had the run of the place at night for many months but did not consider it necessary to take a lot of pictures, as I usually do,” Eggleston told the British Journal of Photography writer in 1992. “Once the public left, I was a ghoul,” Eggleston told Washington Post reviewer Richard Harrington. “After the sun went down I would come out of the coffin until 9 o’clock the next morning.” Eggleston “soaked in the atmosphere of the rooms,” Harrington reported. Eggleston’s response to the environment suggested his sensitivity to the decadence and melancholy of Elvis’s mythology. “There was something oppressive

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130 Ibid.
131 Ibid. Harrington describes this as a “painterly technique that gives the photographs great warmth and depth.”
132 Ibid.
about the environment,” Eggleston told Harrington. “I got that feeling of ‘heavy.’ You can tell it when you’re walking into some historical site. I knew it was a big theme, but I didn’t know how much.” The windows were heavily draped – “most of the time very little sunlight ever got inside that house,” Eggleston said. “At the Graceland mansion, wrote Harrington, “it seems that all color, all light, all life is artificial, whether it be Elvis’s army uniform and militia flag, a pinball machine, an old Gibson guitar leaning against a gaudy motorcycle…it’s easy to feel that nobody’s been home for a long time.” It was, Harrington observed, the perfect photographic subject for Eggleston (figure 24).

The rich, gaudy tones of Eggleston’s lush dye transfers evoked excess and tackiness and, in the manner of David Lynch’s 1986 film, Blue Velvet, exploited overwhelming chromatic saturation to seduce and terrify. As Harrington observed, color is “supra-real” in these images. “The dye transfer prints in particular exude a sharpness, a sense of detail suffused with warmth.” Thick, clinging color is what makes Eggleston’s photographs of Graceland so visceral and strangely disturbing, highlighting that Graceland, after 1977, had become a “temple, a museum, a mausoleum.” The photographs feature “thickly hung drapes so sea blue that to touch

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135 Ibid.
them is to come away wet” and gold leaf encasing every inch of a 9-foot grand piano.\footnote{Harrington, “Graceland: Images of a Fallen King” \\The Washington Post (December 10, 1983): D1.}

But if the Graceland series was thick with bright color, some of the photographs in the “Election Eve” series were subdued (figure 26).\footnote{Two different printing techniques – dye transfer versus C-print – signal two different chromatic moods and modes of the photographer. In direct contrast to the use of dye transfer in the Graceland series, Eggleston though the C-print was more appropriate for his 1976 “Election Eve” project. Rolling Stone commissioned this assignment, which was to photograph in and around Jimmy Carter’s hometown of Plains, in Sumter County, Georgia. Eggleston made the pictures in October, 1976, just weeks before Carter was elected president. “As a Southerner,” journalist Richard B. Woodward wrote, Eggleston “seemed ideal to photograph Jimmy Carter in his hometown. But Eggleston didn’t take a single picture of the Carter family and managed precious few of Plains.” Eggleston instead photographed trees, bushes, ditches, fences, and roads, apparently making no effort to give Rolling Stone editor Jann Wenner what he wanted, according to Walter Hopps. The Corcoran Gallery of Art also published a catalogue in 1977 to accompany their exhibition of the images. C-Prints are a lot less trouble to make, Eggleston told a writer for the British Journal of Photography. They also “give more accurate, across-the-board representation of all the values and colors in a particular image.”}

Eggleston was not the only artist of the 1970s and 1980s to use color to convey violence, sickness, and perversity. The 1970s was the era of the multiplex, or “Grindhouse” – the trashy movie houses with double features trafficking in “cheesy, disreputable pleasures,” as New York Times film critic A.O Scott put it. These were, in Scott’s words:

cheap, nasty slasher films, sleazy exploitation pictures
gimcrack sci-fi epics starring people you never heard of.
Just about anything, in short with the right combination of gory, pointless violence and inspired amateurism. Also car chases.\footnote{A.O. Scott, “Back to the (Double) Feature” The New York Times (April 6, 2007).}
The seediness of the grindhouse extended beyond the B-movie frame into blockbuster Hollywood fare. The reception of the Martin Scorsese film, *Taxi Driver*, released in February 1976, four months before Eggleston’s exhibition, suggests a symbolic and conceptual link in popular culture between violence, obscenity, and hyper-saturated color film in the mid-late 1970s. *Taxi Driver* depicts mid-1970s NYC as a dangerous, Gotham City-like hellhole. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, media coverage of urban spaces, especially New York City, in the 1970s showcased rioting, burning buildings, and the threat of violent crime. Violent crime was, furthermore, relentlessly linked to race. The sentiments that emerged in the media coverage of the school busing crisis made this clear. According to the notorious anti-busing activist Louise Day Hicks, “There are at least 100 black people walking around in the black community who have killed white people in the last two years.”\(^{140}\) In Brooklyn’s white, working class Canarsie neighborhood, residents relayed mythical accounts of black people mugging white people and cornering them on elevators.\(^{141}\) Television spots for the Nixon election campaign preyed upon the Silent Majority’s fever dreams of widespread urban blight and a promise of return to law and order. A New York City Police Department report released in 1978 showed that homicides in the city reached a

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\(^{140}\) Quoted from Lukas, *Common Ground*, 53.

\(^{141}\) Sandbrook, 53.
peak figure of 1,691 in 1972.\textsuperscript{142}

Echoing these pop culture persuasions and political ploys, \textit{Taxi Driver} depicted the city as a sleazy, seedy, sodden environment, laced with a creeping sense of horror. Film critic J. Hoberman’s look back at \textit{Taxi Driver} in 2011 evokes a lingering whiff of the morally aimless, sensationalist, violent feel of 1970s New York City:

“…the Checker cabs are gone as are the taxi garages at the end of 57\textsuperscript{th} street and the all-night Belmore cafeteria. Times Square has been sanitized, the pestilent combat zone at Third Avenue and 13\textsuperscript{th} Street where Iris peddles her underage charms have long since been gentrified. New York is no longer the planet’s designated Hell on Earth…No nostalgia, though: In other aspects, the world of \textit{Taxi Driver} is recognizably ours. Libidinal politics, celebrity worship, sexual exploitation, the fetishization of guns and violence, racial stereotyping, the fear of foreigners – not to mention the promise of apocalyptic religion – all remain.”\textsuperscript{143}

\textit{Taxi Driver}, writes Hoberman, is “brilliant and yet repellent, at times even hateful” (a description that sounds remarkably familiar to some of the criticisms of Eggleston’s exhibition at MoMA in May of 1976 – \textit{New York Times} critic Gene Thornton called it the “most hated show of the year”). \textit{Taxi Driver} was the 12\textsuperscript{th} top-grossing movie of 1976, yet, like Eggleston’s show, it inspired an “understandable ambivalence,”

\textsuperscript{142} Leonard Buder, “Killings in Families are Reported Rising: New York Police Study Also Finds Murders Committed by Strangers Increased After Decline in 1976,” \textit{New York Times}, June 25, 1978. The report also found that during the first four months of 1978, the number of recorded murders was only slightly ahead of the comparable 1977, figure but that there was an increase in the number of homicides in which the slayer was a family member of the victim, or had an otherwise “close personal relationship” with the victim.

\textsuperscript{143} Hoberman.
according to Hoberman. It was “not just a hit, but, like Psycho or Bonnie and Clyde, an event in American popular culture – perhaps even an intervention.”

In Taxi Driver, former Vietnam serviceman Travis Bickle suffered from insomnia and took a job driving a taxi in the wee hours of the morning. The film depicts his morally ambivalent, obsessively private, personal, alienated encounter with his environment. Reviewing the film for the Times of London in 1976 David Robinson suggested that the film’s focus on Bickle’s solitary routines – “the diary which is his only confidant, the endless driving through the coloured streamers of the city lights, the monotonous clicking of the meter, the succession of fares….the ritual nibbling of bits of bread soaked in cherry brandy, the mad method of the preparation of his mechanical armoury – gives him the private character of a Bresson hero.” Such a description echoes Szarkowski’s assessment of Eggleston’s incessantly private, idiosyncratic, and morally ambivalent character in both his work and his public persona.

One of the photographs featured in Eggleston’s exhibition and published in William Eggleston’s Guide, titled “Greenwood, Mississippi, c. 1972” looks very similar to the wretched flophouse where Bickle (Robert DeNiro) carries out his warped vigilante

146 David Robinson writes that Bickle “gazes in expressionless distaste on the human detritus, the prostitutes, pimps, pushers, pleasure seekers and pleasure vendors. Every night when he has brought in his cab and cleaned out the filthy leavings of his customers, he listens to his fellow drivers’ own horror stories of the city.”
justice in defense of an underage prostitute named Iris (Jodi Foster) (figure 27). In Eggleston’s photograph, a red-tinged haze of sex and sleaze overlays a nude man standing and scratching his head near a rumpled, unmade bed, surrounded by primitive black graffiti (the word “God” is most prominent in the scrawl). The photo (and Eggleston’s “Red Ceiling” photograph as well) also calls to mind the red of the porno theater Bickle frequents between night drives in his cab.

As it does in Eggleston’s red room photographs, the intensity of the color in Taxi Driver – the neon of the streetlights, the dirty red velvet porn theater seating – immerse the viewer in degeneracy and the grotesque. The revoltingly pornographic saturation of the blood splattered on Bickle’s bizarrely mohawked head and the dead bodies of pimps and Johns in the final massacre sequence of Taxi Driver sparked so much controversy that the Motion Picture Association of America threatened an X rating for the film. Scorsese was forced to tone down the color in the final sequence in an effort to insulate the audience from the scene and obtain an R rating. The film negative was edited to “radically shift the scene’s color values” and to render it in “a less representational light,” according to a 2011 Wall Street Journal report by Bruce Bennett on the digital

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Bickle massacres the pimps and johns he believes are preying upon the 12-year-old Iris (Jody Foster) in a hallucinatory bloodbath.
restoration of the film by Sony Pictures.\textsuperscript{148}

Szarkowski’s attempt to control the viewer’s perception of color in Eggleston’s work was an important critical maneuver, given color’s power to shock and awe in the 1970s. Color had a foul reputation (if sometimes overstated in the arts media) among “serious” art photographers. “Color,” Walker Evans had written in 1969, “tends to corrupt photography and absolute color corrupts it absolutely.”

Consider the way color film usually renders blue sky, green foliage, lipstick red, and the kiddie’s playsuit. There are four simple words for the matter, which must be whispered: color photography is vulgar. When the point of a picture subject is precisely its vulgarity or its color-accident through man’s hand, not God’s, then only can color film be used validly.\textsuperscript{149}

Many fine arts photographers had avoided color photography due to the compositional challenges it presented and its lack of archival stability. Serious practitioners of the medium regarded color as “distracting” and superfluous.\textsuperscript{150} There were technical limitations to color. “In color photography,” A.D. Coleman wrote in 1982,

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\textsuperscript{150} “They Said, book reviews,” \textit{Art Direction} (August 1976): 60. “The additional problem of color has constituted a distracting and irresolvable superfluity for many photographers and viewers alike. At best, we have felt that color intrudes upon and confuses the delicate element of form.”
\end{flushright}
“image decay seems to be inherent in the materials.”151 The first prints made from Kodachrome (the first chromogenic film introduced to the public, in 1935) were unstable and some of the dyes faded quickly. Over time, usually between 35 to 50 years, chromogenic prints suffered a loss of highlight and low-density detail, and a color balance change.152 By the late 1960s, the longevity of chromogenic prints had begun to improve and the Swiss company, Ciba-Geigny Corporation, had introduced the Cibachrome printing process to the market. Yet even the dye transfer printing process used in advertising had a relatively short lifespan. “All dyes, in time, will fade,” wrote Sean Callahan, in his review of Eggleston’s exhibit for New York magazine. “A negative sales point, for sure. No collector or dealer wants to lose out on an investment.153

Color also had an aesthetic stigma. Robert Frank, author of The Americans (1959) had declared that “black and white are the colors of photography.” Roland Barthes proclaimed that he always felt color was “a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, colour is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses).”154 A 1981 photography catalogue published by the New York-

152 Sarah Ernisse, “Chromogenic Information,” The Ryerson Photographic Preservation and Collections Management Program, http://www.imagearts.ryerson.ca/topographica/About%20Us.html. According to Ernisse, Kodak’s box of film read “Since color dyes may change over time, this product will not be replaced for, or otherwise warranted against, any change in color.”
based LIGHT gallery referred to color photography – “the landscape of exotic beauty and luxuriant color” — as “one of the few areas often considered outside the domain of the serious creative photographer.” Yet color work was included for nine out of 31 photographers published in the LIGHT catalogue, indicating that artists were meeting the challenge of color head-on.

In his essay for William Eggleston’s Guide, Szarkowski asked viewers to imagine the chaos that ensued when the photographer who had spent “a century learning how to use his medium in monochrome” was suddenly given “cheap and virtually foolproof color film.” The “technical geniuses who developed this wonderful advance assumed, naturally, that more was better,” Szarkowski wrote, “and that the old pictures plus color could only be more natural.” But photographers knew that the old pictures were not natural to begin with, and for the photographer who demanded “formal rigor” from his pictures, “color was an enormous complication of a problem already cruelly difficult.” Most professionals, Szarkowski explained, used color only when paid to, “doing their very best, without quite knowing what they meant by that.”

Most color photography, for this reason, has been “puerile,” Szarkowski claimed. It’s been “either formless or pretty. “While editing directly from life, photographers have found it too difficult to see

155 LIGHT (New York, 1981), 24. This statement was made in reference to the work of Mitch Epstein, a photographer who worked with color film.
156 Szarkowski, Guide, 8.
157 Ibid.
simultaneously both the blue and the sky.”

It took several years for Szarkowski to raise the money for the Eggleston exhibition and William Eggleston’s Guide. Eggleston had appeared “out of the blue” at MoMA one day in the late 1960s, and Szarkowski claimed not to have known he existed before then. The well-dressed, aristocratic southerner was carrying a set of black and white prints and a suitcase full of “drugstore” color prints. Szarkowski went before his Photography Committee to recommend the purchase of two Eggleston black-and-whites a month later. The committee bought one of them. Eggleston returned to MoMA in 1971 with a new series of color slides. Szarkowski told his committee that the photographs showed a “wholly successful use of color photography.” But, according to Richard B. Woodward, the photography committee remained unconvinced.

Szarkowski was the most important figure in art photography during the 1960s and 1970s. New York Times critic Hilton Kramer called him “not only one of our leading authorities in the history of photography but also one of our best writers in this field.” Another New York Times critic, Gene Thornton, wrote that “no one has been more

158 Ibid, 8-9.
160 Ibid.
successful than he [Szarkowski] in bringing the work of previously unknown photographers to public attention. It is he...who necessarily dominates any serious discussion of American photography today." In 1976, Callahan complained that everyone “takes Szarkowski too seriously these days” and continued:

because of his position as head of the most ambitious photography program of any museum in the world, and because of his unusual intelligence and discernment, a Szarkowski show endows the photographer with a weighty, if not oppressive, imprimatur.

Young photographers who wanted their work to be known on an international level took their work to Szarkowski. Anyone who wanted to wade into the waters of photographic criticism in the 1970s had to read the catalogues published and exhibitions mounted by the curator and his venerable home institution, The Museum of Modern Art.

Through its exhibitions and publications, the department had been setting viewers’ expectations with respect to photography since Beaumont Newhall’s appointment as the first curator of photography in 1940. Newhall had called for a study of photography based on the connoisseur’s cultivated, discriminating taste and the canonization of “masters of photography”—an art history of photography, according to

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163 Sean Callahan, “MOMA Lowers the Color Bar: Szarkowski’s Show of Eggleston’s Work is Sure to Spur Buyers to Consider Color Photographs as Items of Collectible Merit” *New York* (June 28, 1976): 75.
art historian Christopher Phillips.\textsuperscript{164} The concepts of rarity, authenticity, and personal expression were privileged in the texts accompanying the first MoMA exhibition staged by Newhall and photographer Ansel Adams, called “60 Photographs: A Survey of Camera Esthetics.”\textsuperscript{165} The curator and photographer claimed together that each print in the exhibition was an individual personal expression. This was “the ultimate guarantee against the charge that the photographic process was merely mechanical.”\textsuperscript{166}

Newhall and Adams’s curatorial strategy for photography, consisting of a “formalist reading, the presupposition of creative intent, and the announced preciousness of the photographic print” – was abruptly trashed in the summer of 1947, when MoMA’s trustees hired Edward Steichen as director of photography and accepted Newhall’s resignation.\textsuperscript{167} MoMA president Nelson Rockefeller announced the appointment of Steichen, who, according to a press release issued at the time, had been in conversation with MoMA officials about enlarging the scope of the department. According to the release, the first large exhibition planned by the department would be “Great News Photographs” in the winter of 1948. This would include the history of news photography. Also in the works was a “major thematic exhibition” involving the use of photomurals and dramatic installations. Organized and directed by Mr. Steichen,

\textsuperscript{164} Phillips, 29-30.  
\textsuperscript{165} Phillips, 36.  
\textsuperscript{166} Phillips, 36-40.  
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
the exhibition’s theme was “Photography in the Service of Science in War and Peace.”

Steichen was preferred, according to Phillips, because of his ability to raise more money from photographic equipment companies – including Kodak – to subsidize his salary. He was hired because Newhall had failed to redeem photography from its marginal status among the fine arts and because MoMA had come to be regarded as “snobbish” by amateur photographers. The institution sought expansion funds in the mid-1940s, and thus was actively seeking the “support of the photographic industry and photography’s vast and devoted following.”

Steichen served as Director of Photography from 1947-1962, and helped establish MoMA as the country’s leading mediator between the public and photographic practice – journalistic, documentary, and artistic. MoMA was able to assume this unique role because, at the time, most American art museums still considered photography “well beyond the pale of the fine arts.” When Szarkowski took over in 1962, the installation of photographic exhibitions changed dramatically – photography underwent, in Phillips’s words, a “cultural repackaging.” Mrs. John D. Rockefeller the 3rd announced Szarkowski’s appointment in a press release dated March 4, 1962. Szarkowski was, at

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170 Phillips, 40.
171 Phillips, 50-53.
the time, a 36-year-old photography instructor at the University of Buffalo with two publications under his belt – *The Idea of Louis Sullivan* (1956) and *The Face of Minnesota* (1958). At the time of his appointment he was in the midst of a Guggenheim Fellowship, photographing the Quetico Superior wilderness of Wisconsin. By this point, the total number of photographs in the museum’s collection had risen to 6,000 prints made by more than 1,000 photographers internationally. The press release stated that “a major project” for Szarkowski would be to implement plans for the Edward Steichen Photography Center, part of the new wing of the museum at the conclusion of the 30th Anniversary Fund Raising Drive that was ongoing at the time. From the get-go, Szarkowski announced his intention to honor artist-based initiatives, not museum-based projects. The museum’s role during his tenure would be to “try to remain alertly responsive” to the searches and experiments of serious photographers and to “seek out and publish that work which makes a relevant human statement with the intensity that identifies a work of art.” Szarkowski officially took over the director’s post on July 1, 1962.

A new era at MoMA thus began. Phillips writes:

Steichen’s hyperactive, chock-a-block displays metamorphose before one’s eyes into the cool white spaces of sparsely hung galleries.

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Mural-sized enlargements shrink to conventional proportions, and the eccentric clustering of photographs of wildly assorted dimensions gives way to an orderly march of prints of utterly uniform size. The fine-art acoutrements of the Newhall years – standard white mattes, wooden frames, and covering glass – quickly reappear. With no knowledge of the particulars of John Szarkowski’s program as director of MoMA’s Department of Photography, one could easily surmise that the museum’s claims for photography’s “cult value” had been dusted off and urgently revived.173

Szarkowski saw himself as a risk-taker who helped highlight photography’s independent identity without resorting to “philosophical or moral positions.”174 “I think I was able to take a less hortatory position than Mr. Steichen took – to put it pretty bluntly,” Szarkowski said.175 He explained that, when he took over the department, he wanted to put greater emphasis on one-man exhibitions, where individual photographers were represented as individual practitioners rather than being shown as partaking of a spiritual or philosophical principle. The role of a curator, he said, is “not that dissimilar from that of the function of a taxonomist or natural scientist.” The role of the curator is also to “make clear what the next available open positions might be – or at least to define the series of open positions as they now are.”176

One of the first shows Szarkowski was deeply involved with was “Five

173 Phillips, 53.
175 Ibid.
176 Gruen, 68.
Unrelated Photographers” in 1963, which comprised a group of five one-man shows of 25 photographs for each photographer – Ken Heyman, George Krause, Jerome Liebling, Minor White, and Garry Winogrand. The purpose was to emphasize the individuality of each photographer’s work – not to link them by a central theme or idea, according to a MoMA press release. More than ten years later, in his interview with Liebling, Szarkowski said it was not an accident that he was intimately involved with this exhibition, nor was the title accidental. “I suppose,” he told Liebling, “consciously or unconsciously, I wanted to make it clear that that show had no philosophical moral, it had no political moral, it had no stylistic moral, but everybody in it was doing work that I considered to be of intensity and quality…” Szarkowski’s insistence upon the purity of the medium of photography and the precedence of its formal characteristics over narrative content was in evidence long before the Eggleston show and the rightward political turn of the 1970s. Nonetheless, I would argue that a position emphasizing the formal purity of photography as a medium was amenable to a climate of increasing social conservatism in the 1970s.

Many aspects of Newhalls’s method, such as the emphasis on the unique traits of

178 Stange, 699, quoting Liebling.
photography as a medium, reappeared under Szarkowski’s tenure.\(^{179}\) In his 1966 book, *The Photographer’s Eye* (based on a 1964 MoMA exhibition), Szarkowski insisted upon the uniqueness of photography as an artistic form. He argued that the history of the photograph could be conceived in terms of the photographer’s “progressive awareness of characteristics and problems that seem inherent to the medium.”\(^{180}\) He identified five such characteristics, all of which he said “should be regarded as interdependent aspects of a single problem: “The Thing Itself,” “The Detail,” “The Frame,” “Time Exposure,” and “Vantage Point.”\(^{181}\) The “Photographer’s Eye” exhibition consisted of 200 photographs “selected to define the unique characteristics of this art form.”\(^{182}\)

Although this delineation of characteristics suggests clarity and specificity, Szarkowski’s framework for understanding photographs is vague and mystical. It emphasizes the “ineffability” of photographs, wresting them from the contexts in which they were created. In insisting upon the “narrative poverty” of the photograph, Szarkowski claims that an individual photograph can at best give only a “sense of the scene” – never conveying a larger narrative meaning. The viewer should not, for this reason, seek a supplement beyond the frame to help explain the image – this would undermine the aesthetic autonomy and self-sufficiency of the photograph. Photographs

\(^{179}\) Phillips, 37.


\(^{181}\) Ibid, 8-11.

are not stories but symbols. They are “short visual poems” describing a “simple perception out of context.” In a seemingly contradictory and mystical way, photographs are “as images...shockingly direct, and at the same time mysterious, elliptical, and fragmentary, reproducing the texture of experience without explaining its meaning.”183 These qualities are produced by the photographic medium itself, Szarkowski contends, a claim that allows him to insist upon the medium’s own modernist “pictorial vocabulary, based on the specific, the fragmentary, the elliptical, the ephemeral, and the provisional.”184

In order for photography to be integrated into high art culture, art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau has observed, it “had to be defined in ways that permitted its assimilation within the museological/art historical model of aesthetic autonomy.”185 But Solomon-Godeau points out that pictures can never be “isolated, free-floating entities offering windowlike views on the reality outside.” On the contrary, they participate in the construction of social reality. Photographs are, furthermore, always encountered in specific viewing situations – in magazines and newspapers, for example, or hung on gallery and museum walls. Therefore, the experience of reception and viewership – inflected by class, race, gender, and nationality – must be considered when discussing

183 Quoted in Phillips from From the Picture Press.
the reception of photographs.  

Szarkowski’s power and unshakable formalism had come under attack by some in the arts media by the time of the Eggleston exhibition. The curator remained calm under pressure, however, as historian Maren Strange has noted. Szarkowski acknowledged the “large body of opinion or feeling” that the MoMA photography department was unconcerned with social issues or reportage, but dismissed it as being “generally outside of the schools,” implying that those who held this view were uneducated or ignorant. But he stridently refused to accept that “something should be shown because it’s happening.” Furthermore, he said, “we’ve never done an exhibition designed to show that women were a good idea, that youth was a good idea, or that everybody was all the same all over. I can’t think of one exhibition that we’ve ever done that could be thought of as having been designed to demonstrate any such thing.” He went on to say that he believed exhibition policy should be either a formal issue or a matter of content, but not a mix of the two.

Szarkowski’s account of the history of photography and the vocabulary he created for discussing it were the products of an idiosyncratic mind subject to external constraints including but not limited to the art market, financial pressures on MoMA,

\[\text{^186}\text{ Solomon-Godeau, xxix.}\]
and the ascendance of right wing politics. Solomon-Godeau has pointed out that Szarkowski’s privileging of certain photographers over others was sometimes an effort to maintain continuity with previous curatorial decisions. For example, she contends, Szarkowski invented a 1980s version of the nineteenth-century French photographer Eugène Atget in order to justify his own curatorial preferences (Lee Friedlander rather than Cindy Sherman; Robert Adams rather than Sherry Levine; Garry Winogrand rather than Barbara Kruger). Szarkowski’s Atget served to justify and account for the decanonization of figures once central to art photography – Henry Peach Robinson, F. Holland Day, Clarence White, Minor White, Eliot Porter, Jerry Uelsman, and even Ansel Adams, according to Solomon-Godeau. 188 The canonization of Atget, furthermore, accommodated the historical moment of 1968, when MoMA had purchased Berenice Abbott’s Atget collection. This moment was marked by structural changes in museum financing and the increasing importance of corporate funding in lieu of individual private support. These factors contributed to a “heightened need to create an artistic star system.” 189 In 1960, for example, the CBS Foundation Inc. pledged $150,000 to the museum’s 30th Anniversary Fund Drive. The grant was used to continue and strengthen the museum’s circulating exhibitions program, which prepared traveling shows for

188 Solomon-Godeau, 35-37.
189 Solomon-Godeau, 35-37.
educational institutions throughout the U.S. and Canada.\textsuperscript{190}

The Museum of Modern Art was one of the “power blocs” A.D. Coleman named in 1975 as responsible for shaping our understanding of the photographic medium. The list also included the George Eastman House, the Center for Creative Photography, Princeton University, and the University of New Mexico. Coleman writes:

Photography is a unique medium in many ways, one of which is that it is enormously widespread and highly diversified in its utilitarian, communicative, and creative functions, yet young enough to have developed only a few centralized power blocs. These loci therefore exercise an ability to shape our definitions – and thus our culture’s understanding of photography – which is quite disproportionate to their age and size.\textsuperscript{191}

In a tight job market, Coleman noted, “any association whose imprimatur is convertible to heightened employability and/or job security is in a position of power. With such power comes politics.”\textsuperscript{192}

Szarkowski’s diminishment of social context to protect the autonomous “art” of photography certainly had political ramifications. This formalist effort leant itself, if unintentionally, to conservative readings of photographs that undermined issues of class, race, and gender. For example, Szarkowski voided the historical and social context

\textsuperscript{190} Museum of Modern Art press release, June 24, 1960.
\textsuperscript{191} Coleman, Light Readings, from Creative Camera International Yearbook, 1975, p. 196.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid. 200.
of a Garry Winogrand photograph that featured an interracial couple, calling Winogrand the “most outrageously thoroughgoing formalist” who is trying to figure out what the “machine will do by putting it to the most extreme tests under the greatest possible pressure” (figure 28).193 But taking into account the context of history, reception, and viewership, the artist and writer Victor Burgin notes that the position of the white male subject is secured in the viewing of that same 1967 Winogrand photo. The image appeared in the MoMA exhibition catalogue, New Photography USA, and shows a pretty young white woman next to a handsome young black man, each toting a live chimpanzee dressed in children’s clothing. Far from being a self-contained visual poem, the image plays off of a social context rife with, in Burgin’s words, “expressions of irrational fear of the ‘mixed marriage’” such as the “cliqué insults of the committed racist, according to whose rhetoric the union of white and black can give [rise] to monkeys.”194

Szarkowski’s branding of Winogrand as a rigid formalist indicates an inability to comprehend how politically radical audiences concerned about race and representation would regard the work of his favored photographers. This position was compatible with the increasing conservatism of mid-late 1970s politics and this compatibility may help

193 Burgin.
194 Burgin, 207.
contribute an answer to the question, “Why Eggleston now?” As Solomon-Godeau has observed, the historical moment in which photography became fully integrated into high art culture “occurred under the sign of an ascendant right wing politics and an exploding, volatile, and insatiable art market.” The institutional formation of a photographic aesthetic and the histories it engenders, she points out, mask an instrumental politics. Making note of which practices and practitioners are “made visible” versus the ones that were banished and ignored at MoMA in the late 1970s and early 1980s may tell us something about the politics that brought pressure to bear on MoMA at the time. As New York Times photography critic Gene Thornton pointed out, Eggleston’s MoMA show emblematized a movement toward formalistic photography that contrasted sharply with the renewed attention to “human interest photography” on display, for example, at the Knoedler gallery’s opening exhibit devoted to the works of veteran Life photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt. “For several years now,” wrote Thornton, “the Modern has assiduously courted the kind of photographic formalism that is the antithesis of human interest photography.” This courtship was consummated with MoMA’s Harry Callahan exhibition of 1976-1977 and the Eggleston exhibit, Thornton

196 Ibid.
said. The latter exemplified a “newer kind of formalism” with snapshot-like work that looks as if it were made by “someone with no artistic pretensions whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{199} And Sean Callahan wrote in his June 1976 review of the Eggleston show that the photographer’s apparently mundane snapshots “may characterize our times more accurately than the momentous news shots or the carefully composed pictures of traditional photography.”\textsuperscript{200}

MoMA and Szarkowski, according to Solomon-Godeau, represented at this time the single most influential source of photographic legitimization in America, and this legitimization was rooted in profoundly conservative values.\textsuperscript{201} Images have the power to render ideology innocent, naturalize domination, and displace history and memory, and the aesthetic discourse of photography – its institutions, canons, histories, values, investments, and exclusions are grounded in existing sexual and social relations, she points out.\textsuperscript{202} By arguing for the compatibility between Szarkowski’s curatorial stance (and Eggleston’s apparently indifferent aesthetic posture) and an increasingly conservative political climate I do not mean to suggest that Szarkowski’s position was the consensus among other critics or that it was accepted without controversy. What I am suggesting is that Szarkowski’s position and Eggleston’s photographs were

\textsuperscript{199} Thornton, 29.
\textsuperscript{201} Solomon-Godeau, \textit{Photography at the Dock}, xxv.
\textsuperscript{202} Solomon-Godeau, \textit{Photography at the Dock}, xxxiv.
seemingly conservative and apolitical enough to obtain corporate sponsorship and
defederal funding at a time of cost cutting, “color blind” conservatism, and the political
evasion of racial issues in the 1976 presidential election. The social conservatism of the
work, furthermore, generated an abundance of press, which is precisely what
Szarkowski wanted for the show. Such attention would help justify the Eggleston project
to its corporate donor, Ponder & Best/Vivitar, Inc., which would launch its new pocket
camera, the Vivitar 600 just three months after the Eggleston opening.

But it is important not to cede too much authority to MoMA and Szarkowski.
While the curator and museum may have wielded incredible power in reframing
Eggleston’s photographs as formalist projects, other critics simultaneously attacked and
questioned this reading, or provided new ones of their own. In addition, other artists
were making photographs of everyday life and mundane subjects that dealt with race,
class, gender, and sexuality. Photographers like Nan Goldin and Larry Clark
demonstrated how images of banal activities – smoking, kissing, shaving, and sleeping –
could be tied to social realities. Their photographs were people-centered and sometimes
offered an uncomfortably intimate view into warm and seedy worlds of close friends
and associates. If Eggleston’s uses of red could be coy or tongue-in-cheek, Goldin’s was
earnest. In a self-portrait of her bruised face after an episode of domestic violence,
Goldin’s injured eye matches her red lipstick (figure 29). Maybe Goldin applied the
makeup after she was assaulted – a stoic and proud attempt to pull herself together for a photo. Or maybe she was wearing it during the attack – having gotten primped up and excited for a night on the town. Color, writes curator Juliana Engberg, “becomes a defining, arresting quality” in Goldin’s work. Saturated reds, greens, blues and yellows pull her subjects from commonality to uniqueness. Furthermore, Engberg observes, the use of color distances Goldin from the documentary realism of photojournalism.

Just as Szarkowski’s was by no means the only critical approach to interpreting photographs, MoMA was hardly the only exhibition venue for photography. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of many new photo-exhibition venues, especially commercial photo galleries. Student demand for photography programs and workshops had been growing steadily in the sixties and seventies, as Nancy M. Stuart points out in her 2005 dissertation, “The History of Photographic Education in Rochester, New York 1960-1980.” By 1980, she writes, there were photography and history of photography programs at universities in every state. Many students of photography in the 1960s and 1970s experienced making pictures for the first time through a Kodak Instamatic

204 Engberg, 200.
205 Ibid.
206 Stuart, 3.
camera when they were younger. Between 1963 and 1970 over 50 million Instamatic cameras were produced. “Photography,” writes Stewart “came to be seen as both a common visual language and a revolutionary art.”\textsuperscript{207} Keith Davis has shown that the number of fine art photography (as opposed to journalistic photography) courses doubled between ’64 and ’68, and doubled again between ’68 and ’71. By contrast, the number of photography courses taught in journalism programs declined. There was a “shift from vocational training to self-expression” taking place.\textsuperscript{208} Student enrollment at the Rochester Institute of Technology increased dramatically in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{209} There was an immense popularity and interest in the discipline of photography in the 1960s and 1970s though the discipline had not been defined yet.\textsuperscript{210}

Stuart also explains that an expanding art market for photographic prints was in part a function of the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. Guggenheim Fellowships in photography were awarded at an increased pace of 181 fellowships during the nineteen years between 1966 and 1985, up from 39 fellowships awarded the prior 19 years.\textsuperscript{211} During the 1970s, major magazines including \textit{Newsweek}, \textit{Esquire}, and \textit{Rolling Stone} did cover stories devoted to photography.

\textsuperscript{207} Stuart, 3.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} Stuart, 30.
\textsuperscript{211} Stuart, 30.
According to Stuart, photography was “modern, artistic, and hip.” In New York City in 1968, twenty-four photographic exhibits were on view during a one-month period. Photography was entering the art world just as academia was showing an interdisciplinary interest in it, Stuart points out. In 1975, Wellesley College sponsored a series of lectures around the theme “Photography Within the Humanities.” The series featured lectures by Susan Sontag, Szarkowski, Robert Frank, W. Eugene Smith, and Irving Penn. Academic disciplines, such as art history, American Studies, English, anthropology, and philosophy, were taking an interest in the photographic image.\textsuperscript{212} Stuart writes: “The confluence of the amplified demographics of college-aged individuals, the critical and cultural acceptance of photography as an art form and the increased expectation for the attainment of higher education combined to escalate the enrollment in photography departments across the country, including Rochester.”\textsuperscript{213}

Commercial galleries were cropping up, including LIGHT Gallery, Lee Witkin’s Gallery, and Castelli Graphics in New York. Joshua Mann Pailet opened A Gallery for Fine Photography in New Orleans in 1973. LIGHT gallery, which opened in 1971, was based in New York and Los Angeles. The gallery was showing color work at least as early as 1972, when it mounted a Stephen Shore exhibition from September 23–October

\textsuperscript{212} Stuart, 31.
\textsuperscript{213} Stuart, 32.
28. Shore’s work was exhibited at LIGHT gallery in 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, and 1978.\textsuperscript{214}

The Metropolitan Museum of Art collected photographs in the 1940s and 1950s under curators William M. Ivins and A. Hyatt Mayor and its most popular exhibition series was “Photography in the Fine Arts,” presented in six exhibitions between 1959 and 1967. These shows attempted to encourage photography’s acceptance by the art world through juried exhibitions and results published in the \textit{Saturday Review}. The shows were criticized for depriving the photographs of their context.

\textit{The New York Times} reported an unprecedented boom in the photography market in 1975. “…prices are rising sharply; several museums, universities and large private collectors are buying up just about everything worthwhile in sight in the almost frenzied belief that this will be their last chance to acquire a substantial amount of first-rate vintage material; and some dealers are shifting their attention from paintings to photographs as the one sure way to make money in an art market that is otherwise soft.”\textsuperscript{215} The article goes on to state that the photography market had been “red hot”

\textsuperscript{214} \textit{Light} (New York, 1981): pp. 4-6. According to this 1981 catalogue, the gallery was primarily concerned with 20th century photography and the “contemporary working photographer.” The catalogue included only one woman (Linda Connor). All of the photographers were white Americans with the exception of Eikoh Hosoe, born in Japan, Andre Kertesz, born in Hungary, Grant Mudford, born in Australia, Frederick Sommer, born in Italy. Eleven were born in New York City or New Jersey.

since 1973.\textsuperscript{216} Yet in spite of all this recent activity, the market was, according to Blodgett, still a very narrow field controlled by no more than a dozen dealers in New York and L.A. and “even fewer private collectors.”\textsuperscript{217}

The George Eastman House had opened almost twenty years prior to the Eggleston show – in 1948 – with Beaumont Newhall as curator. As Nancy Stuart has pointed out in her study of the Eastman House and Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester has been a center of manufacturing for cameras and related products since the founding of the Eastman Kodak Company in 1878. The emergence of the Visual Studies Workshop and Rochester Institute of Technology and organizations such as the George Eastman House, Kodak, the Society for Photographic Education, and Light Impressions Corporation helped to characterize the city as the “imaging capital of the world.”\textsuperscript{218}

The George Eastman House began publishing the journal \textit{Image} in 1952, and one year later, Newhall hired Minor White to edit the journal. In 1960, the Rochester Institute of Technology began offering a bachelor of fine arts degree in photography and started producing graduates. The Rhode Island School of Design had professors such as

\textsuperscript{216} Besides work of the Photo-Seccessionists,” Blodgett states, “other major areas of current buying interest include: 1) anything very early, especially works created during the decade following the invention of the daguerrotype print in 1839; 2) works by the well-known 19\textsuperscript{th}-century masters, including Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll and John Thomson; 3) photographs of the American West, particularly those dating from the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century through the 1930s; and 4) works by the few living, elderly master photographers, including Ansel Adams and Paul Strand.

\textsuperscript{217} Blodgett, “Blow-Up.”

\textsuperscript{218} Stuart, 32.
Harry Callahan (hired in 1961) and Aaron Siskind (hired in 1971). Most of this was entrenched before 1962, when John Szarkowski became curator of photography at MoMA.

The Visual Studies Workshop was founded in Rochester in 1969 (the same year as Woodstock), and photographer Nathan Lyons began teaching there. Lyons had been appointed associate director and curator of photography at the George Eastman House in 1965, the year the National Endowment for the Arts was founded. The Visual Studies Workshop began publishing the journal *Afterimage* in 1972. The following year (and the year of the Vietnam ceasefire), another publication, called *Exposure*, began being published by the Society for Photographic Education. The society was founded after an Invitational Teaching Conference at the George Eastman House in November 1962 attended by Beaumont Newhall, Minor White, John Szarkowski, Aaron Siskind, Clarence H. White, Jr., Henry Holmes Smith, and Jerry Uelsmann. The purpose of the organization was to collect and disseminate teaching practices and principles of photography, act as an advisory group for school administrators interested in establishing photography courses, assist all organizations attempting to collect examples in photography, and serve as a clearinghouse for teaching positions, among other things.

By 1980 there were photography and history of photography programs at universities in every state, and a member of the board at the George Eastman House said
students were “wearing cameras like jewelry.” The interest in photography was fueled by the confluence of an expanding art market and the formation of a national photography association in 1963. The 1963 introduction of the Kodak Instamatic at $15.95 a pop “democratized the mechanics of photography,” Stuart points out. More than 50 million of them were produced between 1963 and 1970. Many photography students, notes Stuart, made pictures for the first time through a Kodak Instamatic when they were growing up. The number of fine art photography courses doubled between 1964 and 1968 and doubled again between 1968 and 1971 according to Keith Davis.

The U.S. was in great financial distress in the mid-1970s. In 1975, a spokesman for the National Association of Home Builders described the economic slump as “by far and away the worst since the Depression.” The economy affected photographers – in the 1960s, colleges, universities, and art institutes across North America expanded preexisting photography departments and added new ones, creating a “booming market for teachers of photography,” A.D. Coleman wrote in a 1975 essay for Creative Camera International Yearbook. But the economic bubble burst at the beginning of the 1970s,

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219 Stuart, 2.
220 Stuart, 3.
222 Sandbrook, 42.
making many of these photographers redundant, according to Coleman. Newspapers predicted declines in industrial production, auto sales, and a rise in unemployment to 9 or 10 percent.224 A letter writer to the Columbus, Mississippi Commercial Dispatch groused in January 6, 1975: “Can any rational being look at society, from the lowliest street cleaner to the White House and its occupants – and not be horrified? Our society is falling apart, torn by inflation, ripped by political dissension, haunted by the specter of Watergate, shackled by impotent leadership. We live in a town, a state, a nation, in which we are slowly smothering ourselves with our intense desire to have government take over the running of our lives.”225

The words of this frustrated citizen, in particular his references to the smothering presence of the government, seem to auger the era of market deregulation and shrinking government to be ushered in five years later, with the dawn of the Reagan era in 1980. During the years in which Eggleston’s show gestated and was mounted at the Museum of Modern Art, the effects of oil shock – rampant inflation, recession, unemployment, and a general sense of depression and decline – were felt all around the industrialized

224 Commercial Dispatch, Columbus, Mississippi, January 6, 1975, reporting on data compiled in the Phillips-Sindlinger Poll, January 6, 1975. Watergate was the top story in 1973-4, according to readers polled by the Dispatch. Besides Watergate, the top ten stories included the economy, the energy crisis, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, Ford’s pardon of Nixon on September 8, and the democratic sweep in the off-year November election.
225Letter by IK Newton, Rt. 7, Columbus, Mississippi, Commercial Dispatch, January 6, 1975.
world, according to historian Dominick Sandbrook.\textsuperscript{226} In the first quarter of 1974, gross national product fell by the biggest margin in sixteen years and inflation reached an annual rate of almost 15 percent. “Americans were redrawing their expectations,” writes Sandbrook. “Students dropped out of college, young couples abandoned their dreams of owning their first home, pensioners, having watched the value of their savings disappear, were reported to be scavenging in the dumps of Miami and Milwaukee.”\textsuperscript{227}

Financial strains on MoMA were also profound in the 1970s. Indeed, the exhibition and publication of Eggleston’s work had been “considerably delayed because of the lack of adequate subsidy” according to a grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts written by Szarkowski.\textsuperscript{228} MoMA’s 1974-76 Biennial Report discussed the rapid increases in utility costs and “reduced income in a climate of recession” that had pushed the Museum deficit to the “alarming level of $1,477,000” in 1973-4 ($7,422,037.59 in 2014 U.S. dollars).\textsuperscript{229} Despite continuing inflation and a depressed economy, however, the deficit was reduced to $798,007 (This was the lowest deficit since 1970-71. This is $3,292,739.57 in 2014 U.S. dollars).\textsuperscript{230} This reduction was

\textsuperscript{226} Sandbrook, 37.
\textsuperscript{227} Sandbrook, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{228} National Endowment for the Arts, Grant Application for the period of July 1 – June 30, 1976. Museum of Modern Art Archives, Folder: PI-Z C/E ’63, ’64, ’65, NEA Grant Application & Backup Details. The project was estimated to cost $54,250, including the publication of the \textit{Guide}.
\textsuperscript{229} Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator located at: http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl
\textsuperscript{230} Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator located at: http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl
achieved through “painful” measures, such as a 1975-76 wage freeze and continuing restraints on hiring new personnel. Both measures required “unpleasant sacrifices and the assumption of additional responsibilities by many staff members.” In addition, the report notes, “no departmental budget escaped the paring of expenses,” and the museum regretfully decided in 1975 to close to the public one day a week (Wednesday).\textsuperscript{231}

The addition of several new members to MoMA’s Board of Trustees between 1974 and 1976 indicates an alliance between the Museum and the corporate world in the midst of a “difficult economic climate that has been affecting all of New York’s cultural institutions,” as put by MoMA president Mrs. John D. Rockefeller.\textsuperscript{232} Among the eight new trustees was Thomas S. Carroll, president of Lever Brothers Company, who had been an active member of the Museum’s Business Committee for the Arts since 1967, when David Rockefeller formed the committee. Carroll and his corporation had “helped the Museum to understand its revenue and membership needs and have suggested new ways to meet those needs.”\textsuperscript{233} In addition, Paul Gottlieb was appointed to the Board of Trustees as new Chairman of the Publications Committee. Gottlieb had served as president of the American Heritage Publishing Company and was at the time of his

\textsuperscript{231} Museum of Modern Art Biennial Report, 1974-76, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{232} Museum of Modern Art Biennial Report, 1974-76, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
appointment to the Board heading his own firm of publishing consultants. Donald B. Marron, Director of the New York Stock Exchange and member of the Museum’s Investment and Finance Committee was also appointed to the Board during the 1974-1976 period.234

Did the taste patterns and political views of MoMA trustees affect Szarkowski and the curatorial decisions of the MoMA Department of Photography? On the one hand, it seems as if the department was left alone to make its own curatorial decisions. People like Edward Steichen and John Szarkowski were highly respected. It could be argued, then, that Szarkowski was given free reign to exercise his own curatorial predilections without kowtowing to anyone else’s interests. It could also be argued, as A.D Coleman has suggested that MoMA’s trustees “knew little and cared less about photography per se,” since “the still-small world of photography mimicked and venerated whatever MoMA’s department did. What more could they have asked?”235 I concede that the respect and near-infallibility accorded to Szarkowski by many critics and curators in the New York art world would have given him room to make his own decisions. However the important role played by museum trustees should not be overlooked. As artist Pablo Helguera has explained in his satirical account of art world

234 Ibid.
235 A.D. Coleman, April 2012 email.
machinations, The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style, the collector, trustee, or ministry of culture is the “most powerful piece in the game.” That is, if the art world is a game of chess, the collector or trustee is the queen. Helguera writes:

The queen has the greatest mobility on the board and can capture any other piece, making her the key piece in the game. The player’s inability to maneuver her guarantees the loss of the game. It is usually the worst mistake in the game to antagonize the queen, since she is able to undo the careers of everyone else in the game, including the king [the museum director].\textsuperscript{236}

The “rooks” are the curators, according to Helguera, and they have unilateral powers, but those powers are dependent upon support given by the queen and other pieces.\textsuperscript{237} The pawns in this game, Helguera contends, are the artists, “the least and most important piece of the game.”\textsuperscript{238}

The increasing representation of the business community on MoMA’s board of trustees comes as no surprise, since so many organizations and corporations in the mid-late 1970s, such as the National Endowment of the Arts and Ponder & Best were seeking guidance as to where to provide financial support.\textsuperscript{239} In his harsh evaluation of the Eggleston show for Camera 35, critic Michael Edelson concluded that the NEA and Vivitar had been unashamedly suckered into funding the Eggleston exhibition. Viewers

\begin{footnotes}
\item[237] Ibid.
\item[238] Ibid, 5.
\item[239] Michael Edelson, MoMA Shows Her Colors, Camera 35, October 1976, 11.
\end{footnotes}
could no longer look to MoMA for photographic direction, since the photo department “has become a vehicle of ego consciousness instead of a barometer of all that is going on in photography.”

Corporate funding was seen as crucial in the 1970s, given the condition of the economy. An Allied Chemical ad from the June 7, 1976 edition of Newsweek titled “The Road to Culture is Paved with Profits” reminded readers of the all-important role business played in nurturing cultural institutions. When you visit a museum or library, or enjoy a touring art exhibition and public service TV program, applaud a symphony orchestra and dance group, or admire the talents of a gifted performer at a concert, the ad states, “chances are that contributions from business helped make it possible.” Companies like IBM, Exxon, Alcoa, and Texaco were making such contributions an integral part of their corporate philosophy. Despite the recession, the business community contributed $150 million to cultural programs in 1975, the ad claims, more than in any previous year. Companies contribute to culture because people express themselves through cultural endeavors. Corporations, moreover, are made up of people “seeking better communities in which to live, work, and raise their children.” But, the ad warns, if companies are to be so generous, they must be able to make money. And while Americans seem to think that the average manufacturing corporation makes more than

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30 cents profit on every sales dollar, the average corporation actually made less than 5 cents on the dollar in 1975. The moral of the ad is that business can help the artist if and only if the American public helps business: “The artist in America has always traveled a rocky road. It’s going to take more profits, not just good intentions, to take some of the bumps out of that trip.”

As the business community sought to convince the public that spending meant protecting America’s cultural heritage, MoMA in turn sought relief from financial distress from the federal government and corporate America. Collaboration between the California camera company Ponder & Best/Vivitar, Inc., and MoMA made financial sense – the museum needed money, and Vivitar wanted to become more competitive with industry leaders Kodak and Polaroid. Vivitar lenses, flashes, and pocket cameras appeared in roughly 115 ads in *The New York Times* in 1976, versus 68 in 1975 and 57 in 1977, indicating that the company’s public relations campaign was in turbo drive in 1976, and the sponsorship of Eggleston’s exhibition was part of the push. The collaboration indicated that, like his predecessor Edward Steichen, Szarkowski was courting the photographic industry and photography’s “vast and devoted following.”

In addition to liquor and cigarettes, cameras and camera-related products were

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242 Phillips, 40-41.
some of the most advertised items in 1976 editions of *Time* and *Newsweek* – the easier to use, more portable, and faster to develop, the better, the ads indicate. The perception among critics and MoMA audiences that “Eggleston points and shoots, it seems, with color film in his camera,” indicates that his work was seen in some ways as contiguous with the simple snapshots made by the average reader of *Newsweek* or *Time* magazine.\(^{243}\)

An ad for the Kodak Trimlite Instamatic camera in a May, 1976 edition of *Newsweek* emphasized the Trimlite’s portability and ease of use.\(^{244}\) An ad for the Polaroid SX-70 Land camera touted the device’s ability to take the picture and hand it to you: “there is nothing to time, nothing to peel, nothing to throw away. You just watch the color and detail develop,” it promised. The most “revolutionary” camera Polaroid has ever made, it was designed for one purpose – “to free you to think about the picture in your mind instead of the camera in your hand.”\(^{245}\) However, by March 1977, the *New York Times* was reporting that Kodak’s stock was declining and the company was facing challenges from Polaroid on the grounds of a patent infringement. Investors were also worrying about foreign competition – “Meanwhile, the Japanese have zeroed in on the photography business and particularly the film market. They already have a top reputation in the high-priced camera business. Historically, wherever the Japanese have


attacked they have obtained a significant market share,” the New York Times reported in 1977. Furthermore, Kodak was facing “strong threats” in the “important pocket camera area” from Vivitar and Keystone.

All of these ads and stories appeared in the months surrounding the Eggleston exhibition at MoMA. Indeed, that same month Newsweek published a story in the business section about “the camera boom.” Americans “can’t go anywhere, do anything special, or visit anything memorable without snapping a picture to record the event,” the article claimed. The arrival of the instant camera with pictures developed on the spot “made the snapshot even harder to resist.” Instant photography had, by 1976, become one of the fastest growing segments of the camera market. And in 1975, Americans took more than seven billion photographs, spending a record $6.6 billion on film, equipment and processing. Average, everyday camera users dominated the market, according to the story, while professional photographers and dedicated amateurs comprised less than 5 percent.

Kodak and Polaroid competed fiercely to dominate instant cameras. While this technology had until recently been the domain of Edwin Land’s Polaroid Corporation, Kodak (a “giant firm” with revenues of $5 billion in 1975) jumped into the game in 1976.

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releasing two new cameras to the market – the EK5 and the EK6. Like the Polaroid SX-70, which had come to the market in 1972, these Kodak cameras would use an instant film that would develop pictures outside the camera in eight minutes. Kodak would likely have developed the instant technology sooner, the Newsweek article stated, but had committed most of its resources of the previous two decades to developing “what turned out to be the most spectacularly successful line of cameras ever produced” – the cartridge-loading Instamatic series, released in 1963.248 Despite Kodak’s considerable accomplishments in the market, Polaroid’s success convinced Kodak executives to turn their full attention to instant photography.

Photography is no longer just fun, the Newsweek article stated. In America, it’s almost a necessity. “Even when the recession was really bad, people were still buying cameras,” an assistant manager of the Mass. Camera Center in Boston said. With the recession apparently coming to an end, business was “increasing in leaps and bounds,” according to the owner of a chain of camera stores in Florida. “Everybody is shooting pictures, buying lenses, flashes, even color darkrooms,” he said. “Little old ladies own single-reflex cameras.” The camera, ubiquitous as it is, has “changed a nation’s behavior, strewn its wilderness with yellow film boxes and instant peel-offs, and probably altered its image of itself, somehow.” Nothing seems real, the article mused, 248 Ibid, 69.
until fixed on film.

In 1961, Eastman Kodak still dominated the production of color film, with some trade officials estimating that Kodak produced about 90 percent of the 8 and 35 mm color film business. The Ansco division of General Aniline and Film Corporation was the other established color film producer at the time, but smaller companies, like Dynacolor Corporation were starting to market their color film through places like Walgreens, Sears, at a lower cost. A Dynacolor company representative said that the big attraction in making color film “is that the profit margins are excellent and the business is considerably less competitive than other segments of the photography field.”

Art historian Sally Eauclaire observed in her 1984 monograph *New Color/New Work* that some of the photographers working with color at that time exploited “conspicuously photographic effects.” “Working in the vernacular,” she writes, “they incorporate many of the unwanted qualities typically found in amateur work.” These qualities included seemingly careless cropping and improper exposures, and films that seemed to be wrong for given lighting conditions. These apparent flaws could be “intelligently exploited to serve potent pictorial ends.” She offers Roger Mertin as one

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249 Bart, 13. Bart reports that, to stay competitive, Eastman Kodak recently started selling “mailers” along with their color film. When customers buy them, they pay the cost of processing and acquire a convenient packet to mail the film back in. They also introduced a new film, Kodachrome II, promising “sharper, higher quality films.” The company also reduced its price on Kodacolor film (Kodachrome produced transparencies while Kodacolor produces color prints).
example of a photographer who “persistently cultivates such effects. Mertin, she says, appreciates "'Kodak'-blue skies and the blue-tinted overreaction of indoor film to outdoor light.”

MoMA’s photography department had struggled in the past over what its relationship to amateur photography should be. Beaumont Newhall’s declaration that photography was a fine art drew the hostility of the amateur photographic press. According to Christopher Phillips, the MoMA photography department was called “snobbish,” “pontifical,” and accused of being shrouded in “esoteric fogs.” In the mid-1940s, the museum wanted funds for expansion intended to actively seek the “support of the photographic industry and photography’s vast and devoted following.”

Szarkowski, champion of photography as art, in a 1976 New York Times magazine feature story said that painting “is a very difficult craft, while photography is quite easy,” and “almost anyone can make competent photographs.” What distinguishes photos that embody “surprise, distinctive grace, wit, or original intelligence” is an ineffable quality –

252 Phillips, 40. Newhall later reflected on the incident: “Suddenly I was told by the director that the Trustees had decided to appoint Edward Steichen as the Director of Photography. I’d felt that I could not work with Steichen. I respected the man, I knew the man pretty well by this time. I just didn’t see that we could be colleagues. It was as simple as that. My interests were increasingly in the art of photography; his were increasingly in the illustrative use of photography, particularly in the swaying of great masses of people.” (Newhall interviewed by WXXI-TV, Rochester, 1979, transcript pages 27-28).
what Szarkowski calls “exceptional talent.” Szarkowski was also adamant about the singularity of each print and its unpredictability (less predictable than a print from an engraving or an etching plate).

Vivitar, the audio electronics and camera arm of Ponder & Best, came out with a new pocket camera – the Vivitar 600 – in November, 1976, just four months after the closing of the Eggleston exhibition at MoMA that it sponsored with a contribution of $20,000. Ponder & Best was founded by two German immigrants, Max Ponder and John Best who, in 1938, began distributing photographic equipment from the trunk of their Oldsmobile in Los Angeles. The company began producing lenses and accessories in the early 1970s and marketed lenses and flash units under the name Vivitar, which it adopted as the official company name in 1978.

A Ponder & Best press release that was probably issued for the Eggleston show (although it is undated) explains that the Santa Monica, California-based company had grown from its early years as a regional distributor of photo equipment in the Western states to an international marketing organization for a broad range of photo-related products. The company had more than 700 employees, according to the press release, and marketed its products to more than 8,000 U.S. dealers, its international subsidiaries, and

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253 John Szarkowski, “A Different Kind of Art: To its new public, photography seems to present not only dumb facts but also personal visions,” New York Times, April 13, 1975.
255 “About Vivitar” company profile sent in an email from Vivitar.
and some 85 overseas distributor companies. Under the Vivitar name, it marketed its own line of lenses, optical accessories, electronic flash units, pocket 110-type cameras, 35mm single lens reflex and compact cameras, darkroom equipment, filters, and other camera accessories. The company marketed Mamiya/Sekor Olympus 35mm single lens reflex and rangefinder cameras and accessories. Ponder & Best had been marketing audio electronics products since 1970 under the Vivitar name. These included a three-piece home cassette recorder, model RC-730, with AM-FM/FM radio, a three-piece home stereo cassette recorder, model RC-720, a portable cassette player with a digital counter, model C-2, and a three-piece AM-FM/FM stereo receiver, model RTA-727.

The most spectacular growth, the release states, occurred for P&B since 1963, when it ended an agreement with Rolleiflex to distribute their products. At that point, P&B “decided to take a more aggressive role in developing its own line of products to meet new consumer demands.” The company developed and marketed new camera products under the Vivitar label. It opened an office in Atlanta in April 1974 and a Dallas facility one month later, enhancing its ability to “effectively sell and properly

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257 Billboard, “Ponder & Best in M.O. Thrust,” October 24, 1970. The article discusses Ponder & Best’s efforts to sell its camera and electronic products through the incentive/premium/mail order market. As part of its efforts, company representatives made presentations to oil companies, stamp houses (Blue Chip, S&H), credit card outlets, and catalog sales in order to get the products on the pages of catalogs.
service dealers around the country.”

The company established Vivitar Japan Ltd. in 1973 and Vivitar Ltd. in London in 1975.

Thus by 1976, the company had offices throughout the United States – in Los Angeles, Lyndhurst, N.J., Chicago Atlanta and Dallas, in addition to subsidiary companies in Tokyo, London, and Frankfurt. Indeed, the company had in 1975 bought 24,000 square feet at 305 Chubb Avenue in Lyndhurst, New Jersey. Chubb Avenue was named for the insurance underwriter company Chubb & Son, owned by Percy Chubb II, whose son Caldecot Chubb (heir to the Chubb insurance fortune), a photographer and film producer, had published Eggleston’s first limited edition portfolio, 14 Pictures, in 1974. Indeed, according to Richard B. Woodward, Eggleston worked with Chubb between 1976 and 1980 to produce four books and two portfolios, including the 100-image photo essay “Election Eve” made in and around Jimmy Carter’s hometown of Plains, Georgia on assignment for Rolling Stone. “I haven’t figured out what we were doing in Plains,” Eggleston told a group at Yale about the project in November 1976, stating that he tried to be objective and approach Plains “as if it were

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259 P&B Press Release, p. 3.
anywhere.” Although Rolling Stone did not publish the images, Caldecott Chubb published 100 of them in October 1977. Chubb designed the book on the scale of the enormous two-volume Gardiner’s Sketchbook of the Civil War and thought they would get rich from the portfolios, which were priced at $15,000. They printed five of the portfolios and sold two. “I spent tons of money,” Chubb told Woodward, “which Bill liked, and made lots of prints, which Bill also liked. But the books never sold.” According to Woodward, Chubb dissolved their partnership after his drinking got out of control while photographing in East Africa.

Correspondence between John Szarkowski, and Ponder & Best/Vivitar President J.S. Katz reveals an attempt to cultivate a partnership between the museum and the company, which was contributing to the MoMA photography program for the first time. A March 4, 1976 letter from Szarkowski to Katz suggests that the two men might “pursue further [Katz’s] ideas about ways in which Vivitar Corporation could continue to broaden its services to the photographic community. This is an enormously fertile idea, which I am convinced could be most rewarding to photography and to Vivitar.” Szarkowski goes on to say that he is “just pleased as punch” that Vivitar has agreed to support the Eggleston exhibition and book. “As you know, I consider Eggleston to be

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262 Southern Folklife Collection, FT – 10204 LC, Southern Folklife Collection William R. Ferris Collection , 11-10-1976
264 Ibid.

158
one of the very brightest and most talented photographers working today, and I feel that it is important that his work be seen and appreciated.” There would be no way that work of this kind could be made public without subsidy, Szarkowski wrote, no doubt referencing the prohibitive cost of making expensive dye transfer prints and high-quality color reproductions for the catalogue. “Eggleston told a group of viewers at Yale University that he was trying to find a way to do “cheap mass color printing with negative film…I’m interested in a large number of images and working color is just very expensive.”

And with the serious economic problems that burden this Museum, our ability to fund the projects that we most want to do has become very limited. Thus your support and that of the National Endowment for the Arts, is serving an essential need of our program.”

A May 10, 1976 letter from Katz accompanied two checks from Vivitar, Inc. for $15,000 ($62,000 in 2012 U.S. dollars) to support the exhibition and $500 ($2,098.52 in 2012 U.S. dollars) as a contribution “to the cocktail reception which will kick off the Eggleston exhibition.” The letter stated that while Katz would not be able to attend the opening, Vivitar would be represented by Gottlieb and Vice President of Sales Bruce

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265 Southern Folklife Collection, FT – 10204 LC, Southern Folklife Collection, William R. Ferris Collection
11-10-1976


267 Price conversions from Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/
MacFarlane. “It is a real pleasure to support MOMA’s photographic program and I am sure that the Eggleston exhibition will be both an artistic and attendance success.”

A May 18, 1976 letter from Szarkowski to Katz accompanied an advance copy of William Eggleston’s Guide, and touted the production quality of the catalogue. “Allow me to tell you again how very grateful the Museum is for the contribution that Vivitar, Inc. has made to this project. My guess is that the show and the book are going to receive considerable attention,” Szarkowski wrote. Acknowledging the checks totaling $20,000 ($47,144.78 in 2014 U.S. dollars) from Ponder & Best, Szarkowski continued in his show of gratitude, “At a time in which this Museum is confronted with severe financial problems, this kind of support is of inestimable importance to the continued vitality and diversity of our program. We are extremely grateful.”

A July 14, 1976 letter from Szarkowski to Harold Dreyfus of the publicity group “The Dreyfus Agency,” describes the curator’s desire to remain in touch with the publicity executive and “drop him a note from time to time to inform” him of “aspects of our program that might interest you.” Szarkowski also discussed the possibility of Ponder & Best buying 1,000 copies of the Eggleston book for free distribution to photo stores. Further, Szarkowski mentioned that he was sending to Gottlieb, who was in

270 Letter from John Szarkowski to Katz, Ponder & Best, Inc., 1630 Stewart Street, Santa Monica, California, 90406, May 18, 1976.
charge of publicity for Ponder & Best, a file of the reviews on the Eggleston show and
book. “There will continue of course to be new pieces appearing for a long time,”
Szarkowski wrote, suggesting that the exhibition and book were intended to garner
considerable critical attention.\(^{271}\)

Szarkowski began working with MoMA’s special events department in March to
coordinate a cocktail reception for 350-500 people the night of the Eggleston opening. In
a memo to Jeanne Thayer from the department, Szarkowski indicated the urgency of
having a party for this particular opening. Vivitar, he wrote, “is a large optical company
which is contributing to our program for the first time. We feel that it is important to
plan a party for this reason as well as to honor the artist.”\(^ {272}\)

The MoMA show resulted in an art market boom for Eggleston. A limited edition
folio of eleven 20 x 24 dye transfer prints from the “William Eggleston’s Graceland”
show in Washington D.C., for example, sold for $20,000 in 1983 ($45,175.78 in 2012 U.S.
dollars).\(^ {273}\) However, journalist Richard B. Woodward reported that although Eggleston
had the MoMA stamp of approval, he had more difficulty finding widespread
acceptance in the gallery system. “At first, the radical nature of his vision and, later, a
careless attitude toward the sale of his prints prevented more exposure.” Although he

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\(^{271}\) Letter from John Szarkowski to Harold Dreyfus, The Dreyfus Agency, 10100 Santa Monica Boulevard,
\(^{272}\) March 10, 1976, to Jeanne Thayer from John Szarkowski, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, N.Y.
has had shows at prestigious galleries like Castelli Graphics, Robert Miller, Pace/MacGill, and Laurence Miller, the frustration of working with him has often interfered with his career. “Getting him to release a set of prints in time for a show has always been a nightmare,” Woodward wrote. “Worse, only his most reproduced pictures from the era of the Guide command high prices.” Woodward wrote in 1992 that a conservative estimate of Eggleston’s output would have been 50,000 photographs, including work prints and what he calls “usable” prints. All of these were scattered in various homes, among friends, vaults, museums and dealers.274

Szarkowski’s efforts to attract attention to the show by planning an elaborate reception and contacting dozens of press representatives paid off. A spirited critical debate over the aesthetic merit or, by contrast, bankruptcy, of Eggleston’s work, followed the opening. Hilton Kramer’s May 28, 1976 review of the show is often considered emblematic of the hostile response to Eggleston’s work. “Historic breakthroughs are not, alas, what they used to be,” Kramer noted, “at least in the world of art.” The Eggleston exhibition hardly merited the significance Szarkowski attributed to it with the publication of the “poshy, hardcover book of 112 pages,”(William Eggleston’s Guide) a “fairly unusual procedure for the first solo exhibition by an artist few

people have ever heard of.” Furthermore in the text for the book, Szarkowski threw all caution to the winds by speaking of Eggleston’s pictures as perfect. “Perfect? Perfectly banal, perhaps. Perfectly boring, certainly,” Kramer famously retorted. He warned, furthermore, that Szarkowski’s view on the work achieves a “rare degree of excellence and originality,” is something about which opinions will differ, “to put the matter mildly.” The exhibition is historic in the sense that it is the first “major” exhibit of color photography and the very first publication on color photography, with 48 plates – “more than half of the exhibition” – printed in color. And since color is one of the hot problems in a medium long dominated by black and white images, “it would be news indeed if Eggleston’s pictures were the masterpieces they are claimed to be. In my opinion they are not.” Kramer continued:

The bathroom shower is an index to the kind of subject Mr. Eggleston favors. He likes trucks, cars, tricycles unremarkable suburban houses and dreary landscapes to, and he especially likes his family and friends, who may, for all I know, be wonderful people, but who appear in these pictures as dismal figures inhabiting a commonplace world of little visual interest.277

Kramer observed that the color in the work is similarly commonplace, ranging between “obviously pretty” and “obviously austere.” It is “postcard bright” or

276 Kramer, 62.
277 Ibid.
ponderously atmospheric." Kramer insisted that there was no aesthetic feat in placing subjects plunk down in the center of pictorial space, or just off center. The images belong to the category of snapshot chic, Kramer contended, “to the post-Diane Arbus, antiformalist esthetic that is now all the rage among many younger photographers and has all but derailed Mr. Szarkowski's taste so far as contemporary photography is concerned.”

Eggleston’s contribution to this look has been the effects of photorealist painting, “a case, if not of the blind leading the blind, at least of the banal leading the banal.”

Writing for *New York* in June, 1976, Sean Callahan mused that financial success would no doubt come to Eggleston, due in no small part to his show at MoMA. The monetary repercussions of the show would reach far beyond Eggleston, furthermore, he wrote. “The very fact that Szarkowski is exhibiting color photographs will spur dealers, collectors, curators, and photographers to reconsider color photography as a medium of salable and collectible merit.”

Callahan concedes to Szarkowski that Eggleston is an important young artist, but the event of his exhibition, “financed largely by Vivitar, Inc.,” is apt to overshadow his achievement. “Inevitably it raises questions as to why him and why now.” The answer, for Callahan, lies in the fact that, while there are other

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278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
280 Sean Callahan, “MOMA Lowers the Color Bar: Szarkowski’s Show of Eggleston’s Work is Sure to Spur Buyers to Consider Color Photographs as Items of Collectible Merit,” *New York* (June 28, 1976).
young photographers better known for their serious efforts in color such as Stephen
Shore, Neal Slavin, and Syl Labrot, Eggleston “belongs to the personal documentary
school, a style Szarkowski particularly favors.” Eggleston isn’t doing anything dramatic
with color in Callahan’s view. “His talent is in not overdoing it. In bringing the snapshot
aesthetic into the world of color, he has enriched that fragile genre with a subtle
interweave of content and hue. It is a masterful achievement that lifts his art well
beyond the works that have been summarily dismissed as ‘snapshot chic,’” Callahan
writes.281

A June 1976 review in the SoHo Weekly News by Shelley Rice described a “gala
opening” for the Eggleston exhibit, complete with “a lot of beautiful people” and “a lot
of beautiful clothes.”282 But Rice’s “cultural suspension of disbelief” would not extend
far enough to accept Szarkowski’s assessment of Eggleston’s photographs as “perfect.”
Although MoMA was throwing its weight behind Eggleston with an “extensive
downstairs exhibition space,” “classy opening,” and “publication of the Museum’s first
monograph on color photography” Rice couldn’t understand why.283 Like reviewers
Michael Edelson and Hilton Kramer, Rice suggested that the curator’s privileging of
Eggleston was tied to his preference for certain kinds of photographs – “picture postcard

281 Callahan, “MOMA,” 75.
views of the American landscape” – low horizons, roadside stands, automobiles, and suburban houses. That Eggleston photographed these things in color made him “different enough from Lee Friedlander to warrant a big party,” Rice noted, but “similar enough to allow Mr. Szarkowski to ride the same trendy wave into a new field.”

When it was bad, Rice argued, the bland realism of the work was annoying and a waste of color film. But when it was good, it reflected a “deeply personal interpretation of the South” that combined both romance and pessimism. In one photograph, a youth from Mississippi “rigidly seated in the dark back seat of an automobile, hardly represents the American dream of mobility and freedom.” Indeed, this image was emblematic of a common trope in Eggleston’s photographs of people – the sense of a lack of control and feeling of entrapment. The youth was “incarcerated rather than liberated,” Rice observed. While almost always centered within the image, she wrote, “Eggleston’s people….seem to have no control over themselves or their surroundings. Their roles seem superimposed, dictated by the demands of the society which is the dominant motif in all of Eggleston’s prints.” The people became puppets of themselves in the superstructure within which they exist.


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284 Rice, 29.
285 Ibid.
286 Rice, 29.
*Direction* described the “violently mixed reaction” produced by the exhibition. The exhibition “marked the official coming of age of color photography and the first major commitment to the medium by a major American museum.”  

Furthermore, Eggleston’s work raised some interesting issues, if not novel ones. “There is the matter of the so-called ‘snapshot school,’ while “more obvious is the renascent controversy over the nature and function of color in relation to principles developed only decades ago on the basis of black and white.”  

The reviewer called the color in Eggleston’s work “muted” and “strained.” While in a vacuum it possessed an “otherworldly eeriness amplified by exceptionally sharp focus,” it could not be looked at in a vacuum and separated from the context. Eggleston’s color was indigenous to the world he depicted, the reviewer wrote. It featured “gaudy, orange interiors of southern homes, a black sharecropper in a yellow dress against a slate-grey sky, grease-caked metal racks inside an oven, empty white plastic bottles scattered across a baked dirt lot.” This was an exotic, foreign world that did not exist for most of us, the reviewer claimed.  

Reviewing the MoMA show, the critic Michael Edelson argued in an October 1976 article for *Camera 35* that Eggleston’s images were questionable as serious examples of photography and, furthermore, were “just plain dull.” Edelson also called into

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288 Ibid.
289 “They said, book reviews,” *Art Direction*, 60
question Szakorwski’s comments about the work in his catalogue essay and wall label for the show. Szarkowski saw Eggleston’s photographs as an artistic achievement for linking color and form, for making these two elements inseparable, “as though the blue and the sky were one thing.” Edelson was outraged by Szarkowski’s claim that most of the work in the medium of color photography has been puerile:

   Puerile! Why then was Haas exhibited at the MoMA some years back? What about the work of Samaras, Hiro, Sennett, Turner, Glinn, Krims, Hidalgo, Kaleya and all the others? The childishness lies not in the work of contemporary photography but in both Szarkowski’s seemingly uninformed mind and Eggleston’s passé imagery.

   Edelson says he does not want to argue with Eggleston about the validity of America being a wasteland landscape. “However,” he writes, “this method of informing me of this through his photographs is, at best, old hat. I, personally, am very irritated of seeing white plastic bottles on rich soil, repetitive houses, repetitive houses with autos and closeups of showers, ovens, and the like.” Edelson didn’t necessarily believe that this vision of America was used up, but he thought Eggleston was used up “before he even took up the camera.”

   Furthermore, Szarkowski must have considered long and hard before deciding on Eggleston as the big color show. But “despite the glamour and bon vivant

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292 Edelson, 10.
atmosphere of the opening that night at the MOMA, the Eggleston exhibit is unimportant in the scheme of things except when considered in terms of its failure."295

And in light of what the curator has been selecting to hang at the Modern, “it appears that Szarkowski is either hooked onto a certain kind of photography or is determined to make his mark in photographic history.”294 The boredom in the images lies in the lack of insight and repetitiveness of the images. Furthermore, since so few people shoot “black and white snaps these days,” Edelson writes, the color there only accentuates the absolute ordinariness of conceptualism behind the images. “These are truly ‘nominal subjects’ as Szarkowski describes them, but treated in a hopelessly nominal manner.”295

Rounding up the year in photography shows as seen from New York City, New York Times photography critic Gene Thornton called the Eggleston show “the most hated show of the year,” noting that “Eggleston’s photographs strongly resemble the color slides made by the man next door.”296

The debate extended to other exhibitions of Eggleston’s work. Writing for the Village Voice in December 1977, following an Eggleston show at Castelli Graphics, Owen Edwards argued that Eggleston’s success was the vestige of “an elitism based on

293 Ibid.
294 Ibid.
295 Ibid, 10-11.
ignorance.” Eggleston’s 85 photographs on view are, to Edwards, “relentlessly ordinary” and the May 1976 show at MoMA had featured nothing by “glossy pretension.” Edwards argues that Eggleston’s color seems inconsistent and unsure, shifting from “evocative composition to garish, strobe-lit surrealism to the kind of washed-out weariness usually seen in demo prints left too long in shop windows.” At least ten other photographers were superior to Eggleston, according to Edwards. Eggleston was like Peter Frampton – “a created star, brought onstage to satisfy the specific needs of others, both aesthetic and financial.” Eggleston’s first show was brought together and edited by skilled entrepreneurs. But without such skilled vetting, Eggleston’s Castelli show was “a hodgepodge without a sensibility strong enough to glue it all together.”

Despite the whiff of wealth and privilege in Eggleston’s demeanor, it is notable that he often used the word “democratic” to describe his picture-making process. The words “democratic” and “democracy” had a contested meaning and powerful currency in the Cold War and post-Civil Rights movement era. To illustrate his so-called democratic process of picture-making, Eggleston describes a story in which he wandered into the woods one day. It seemed like “there was no picture there. It seemed

298 Edwards, “New Clothes.”
like nothing, but of course there was something for someone out there.” He began taking pictures of the earth, where it had been eroded thirty or forty feet from the road, realizing that it was working, that he was taking good pictures. Later, while having dinner with some writer friends from Oxford, he told them he had been photographing democratically, telling them that he had been “outdoors, nowhere, in nothing,” photographing the woods and dirt, “a little asphalt here and there.” “I was treating things democratically,” he wrote, “which of course didn’t mean a thing to the people I was talking to.”

The “Democratic Forest” project comprises 12,000 constituent images, allegedly completely unedited. It’s a refusal to take a stand, to choose one image against the other, to search for criteria. “I had an idea after photographing dead leaves on a Mississippi backroad,” Eggleston told a British Journal of Photography reporter in 1992, “that one could photograph, say, the Lincoln Memorial and an anonymous street corner with the same amount of care, and that the resulting pictures would be equal.” But critic and artist Henry Bond disputes Eggleston’s claims to democracy, declaring that “there is no democracy in photography” and “no objectivity in image making.” The photograph

299 Eggleston, The Democratic Forest, 171.
300 Henry Bond in conversation with museum director Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen in the catalogue The Cult of the Street, Emily Tsingou Gallery, 1999. Bond writes that Eggleston’s process seemed to be about rejecting or problematizing “the idea of choosing…I am fascinated by that position as a formal strategy.” Later, Bond says: “Certainly, for me an image is always coloured, charged and altered by affecting its context.”
always reflects a choice, and Eggleston’s obsessive practice reflects a choice to be deeply engaged with his environment. Furthermore, as Bond argues, context affects content.

Eggleston and Szarkowski sometimes gave the impression that Eggleston was beyond or outside of the relationship shared by photographers and environment – as Bond observes, “It seems that he is part of a history which is strictly photographic, that is the problem. He has managed to be confined or confined himself.”

Eggleston’s democratic approach reflects obsessive interest in context. He is so interested in photography, on the one hand, and so fascinated by his surroundings, on the other, that he describes spending afternoons photographing everything in sight. He is apparently indiscriminate – twigs, leaves, and asphalt are fair game. Though Eggleston avoids describing himself as a southern artist, and claims that place names are not relevant to photography, his work is deeply connected to place, and ultimately to the South. He has helped define a New South aesthetic, and his practice can’t help but address the issue of race and southern history. As curator Tina Kukielski points out, “a close examination of early and consistent strains of themes endemic to the South in Eggleston’s work unearths a subtle reflection on an oftentimes tumultuous history.”

Indeed, Eggleston’s Democratic Forest photograph of a white uniform hanging in

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302 Henry Bond, conversation with Schmidt-Wulffen.
a tree demonstrates a “subtle reflection” on the confluence of the social and aesthetic meaning of color and form (figure 30). There is an abstract quality to the crisp, immaculate uniform, which seems to float among the leaves, like the ghost of a domestic worker. This image is solemn and elegiac, a reminder of Jim Crow and Civil Rights era lynchings. Another Democratic Forest image depicts a black man walking through the parking area of a decrepit gas station and garage. His figure is balanced by decorative streamers stretched across the parking lot – red, orange, yellow, green, red, and blue – almost like a broken-up rainbow (figure 31). I hope to have shown that photographs like these were not random point-and-shoot exercises for Eggleston, but rather reflect a synergy between formal decisions and his incisive, if subtle, commentary on contemporary life in the South.

Inspired by Eggleston, I am interested in what it meant to photograph in color in the South in the decades following the classical phase of the civil rights movement. The next chapter will address the work of another photographer who uses color in this spatial and chronological territory – Birney Imes of Columbus, MS. How does Imes use color for “emotional button pushing,” in the words of Mitch Epstein? Both Imes and Eggleston have experimented with overexposing their photographs to achieve the deepest and best color for their purposes. As a result, Imes achieves some of the same deep reds that Eggleston was known for. Like Eggleston, Imes is focused on the local.
What drove Imes to make photographs? How does color affect our perception of his work’s realism?
3. Birney Imes

*If color is more realistic, then can’t it be used to make fantasy and illusion more believable?*

Open the book and a man with a pool cue, shrouded by a red curtain, peers from the page (figure 32). Turn the page and a hand-painted sign beckons: “open time…party time!” Turn the next page and stumble on a world where the details are sharper, the light brighter, and the color hallucinatory. Page after page reveals a bizarre and fantastic world of shimmering glitter and garland, ghostly apparitions, and vivid wall paintings – love letters to sex, death, and desire. Welcome to a Mississippi Delta juke joint, through the lens of photographer Birney Imes.

Birney Imes (b. 1951), a photographer from Columbus, Mississippi, made these photographs in and around the state’s delta region throughout the 1980s. One result of his photographic encounters is the 1990 book, *Juke Joint*, a book of color photographs published by the University Press of Mississippi.

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2. “The decoration of those cafes and roadhouses and juke joints is fantastic,” writes art historian Estill Curtis Pennington. “Fantastic in the sense of aspiring to otherworldliness, the way it looks down at the club where a few beers are knocked back on a hot Saturday night while listening to records on the jukebox, Fats Domino and the boys singing about finding thrills on blueberry hill while the sun sets over a cotton crop in a flat field and pickup trucks and sports cars sit parked out front in regal splendor.” Estill Curtis Pennington, “Birney Imes III,” Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, September 27- October 31, 1984.

3. Birney Imes is the son of Birney Imes Jr. and Birney Imes Sr. Therefore his full name is Vinton Birney Imes III. In this dissertation, I will refer to him simply as Birney Imes, except in the context of his father, Vinton Birney Imes, Jr., and his grandfather, Vinton Birney Imes, Sr. In the sections in which I discuss Imes Jr. and Imes Sr., I will refer to Imes as Imes III to distinguish him from his father and grandfather.
While *Juke Joint* is a very different sort of album from *William Eggleston’s Guide*, both are photobooks that “create and make public political narratives that run counter to” dominant narratives, using color photography to do so. In this chapter I think through Imes’s process for making this album as a native of the once deeply racially divided culture of Columbus, MS, where he grew up during the civil rights movement and school desegregation.

Chapters one and three of this dissertation situate the work of two photographers in the context of political and cultural change in the southern U.S. This chapter examines one photographer in the context of his small Mississippi town and its sea changes during the civil rights and post-civil rights movement era, both of which paralleled his coming of age. Through photography, Imes explores Mississippi counties, including Lowndes and Noxubee, as well as the Mississippi Delta region, a roughly two hour drive west of his hometown. In this chapter I will examine Imes in the context of the protracted battle over school integration in his hometown of Columbus that he witnessed as a high school student, son of a town media mogul, and an artist in the 1970s-early 1990s.

I argue that in Imes’s photographs of southern roadhouse spaces, exaggeration of

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hue, bizarre juxtapositions, and choice of subject gesture toward the grotesque, the surreal, and the marvelous real as modes of being that are consequent of, and alternative to the highly constricted culture of Mississippi. These images – published in Juke Joint and the 1994 book Whispering Pines – stage the impossible coexistence of two seemingly irreconcilable worlds within this segregated society.

My claim about marvelous realism and the grotesque is inspired in part by the literary theory of Lois Zamora, Wendy Faris, and Patricia Yaeger. Faris and Zamora suggest that magical realism can facilitate the “fusion or coexistence of possible worlds, spaces, and systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction.” As manifestations of visual (rather than literary) art about physical spaces that are themselves works of art (the juke joints), Imes’s roadhouse photographs explore boundary-crossings between the interconnected worlds of black and white in post-civil rights movement Mississippi. I argue that photography for Imes is a means of effecting these boundary crossings – he has said that the medium afforded him a reason to enter the very different African American world that remained taboo for him as a child.6 His

6 Birney Imes, Partial to Home (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), interview with Vince Aletti, p. 10. Imes said: “Growing up in Mississippi in the ’50s and ’60s how could one not be obsessed or at least intensely curious about the relationships between blacks and whites here? Photography has been a way for me to look at those relationships, a way to seek understanding – to do something that was taboo for me as a child.”
photographs of roadhouses and juke joints – often containing figures that appear as ghostlike blurs due to a slow exposure – reveal the elusive interiors of what were once highly regulated and protected spaces.

The interior design of the spaces Imes photographed appears in keeping with the “marvelous real” as defined by Alejo Carpentier who argued in a 1949 essay that “lo real maravilloso Americano” differed from European Surrealism in profound ways. In Carpentier’s formulation, the fantastic is not to be discovered by subverting reality with abstract forms and contrived juxtapositions as Surrealism might have it. Rather, Carpentier contends, “the fantastic inheres in the natural and human realities of time and place, where improbable juxtapositions and marvelous mixtures exist by virtue of Latin America’s varied history, geography, demography, and politics…” In a similar way, the roadhouses Imes photographed in the post-colonial environment of the U.S. South presented in readymade form unexpected and bizarre juxtapositions – a windowless pair of curtains, a fake tree growing through a table, ghostly shadows, men dancing with empty coats, and wearing 3D-glasses (figures 54, 56, 67, 71). The “reality” of these places, in other words, met Carpentier’s definition of marvelous.

Thus, on one level, with their odd and inventive interior design and strict

demarcation between outside world and transformed inside reality, the roadhouses, to
Imes as an observer, are marvelous real spaces. On another level, Imes makes
photographs that, through framing, the use of hot/quartz lights, and film that increases
the saturation of colors, emphasize and exaggerate this marvelous reality, transforming
it into a magical realist or Surrealist vision in the sense that it is “premeditated and
calculated to produce a sense of strangeness” as Carpentier puts it.8 Cut out from the
context of the juke joint, scenes of bizarre, unexpected, surreal juxtapositions are
exaggerated by means of Imes’s art. Color film is an important means of effecting this
exaggeration.

Color, as literary theorists Stanley Cavell and Fredric Jameson have suggested,
has a constitutive function in the depiction in art of a reality that is already itself magical
or fantastic. Cavell suggests that it is a mistake to imagine the world of our ordinary life
as a world of colors. It would be more correct to presume that the real world, in which
we move, act, and look, is “in” black-and-white. A 1962 study at Michigan State
University supports these observations. In the study, college students were shown short

8 Carpentier, in Zamora and Faris, eds. Magical Realism, 103. After working as a staff photographer at the
Commercial Dispatch, he established a commercial photography studio. Through studio portraiture and
advertising work, he funded his documentation of the rural communities. He began to incorporate the color
film he used in his commercial work into his field work. Using a 4x5 view camera on a tripod, he began to
focus less on the characters populating his region and more on the places they congregated. Using small lens
aperture to assure adequate depth of field, long exposures would blur moving figures (Pennington, “Birney
Imes III”).
film scenes in black-and-white and color and asked whether the scene was filmed or staged. For the most part, “the black and white version elicited a higher percentage of responses indicating belief that the scenes were shot from actuality.” Imes’s photographic technique of decreasing the grain and increasing the saturation of hue in his photographs results in exaggerated color and contrast, distancing the images from the tradition of black-and-white documentary realism.

In the wake of William Eggleston’s infamous color photography show at MoMA (discussed in chapter one), color photography was thought to have lost its shock value. But had it? Why did Imes make photographs of Delta juke joints and prairie roadhouses throughout the 1980s and early ‘90s so supersaturated with detail and color, far beyond what the naked eye can see? And what effect did this choice have on the meaning of the work and its reception? It is my contention that supersaturated hyper-detailed color was essential to Imes’s art. If no longer shocking, such color still resonated with emotion for Imes and for viewers. Color – particularly its associations with unreality and fantasy – enabled Imes to create images that dramatized his own boundary crossings through the idiom of magical realism and its counterpart, the grotesque.

This dissertation addresses the ways in which three color photographers

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working in the Deep South – Eggleston, Imes, and William Greiner (of Baton Rouge, LA) – sought to control and exploit color’s ability to “push buttons.”\(^\text{11}\) Greiner has used Photoshop to pump up the color in his prints, while Imes, as mentioned above, almost overexposed color negative and black-and-white film to decrease the grain and achieve a high degree of saturation.\(^\text{12}\) Eggleston’s use of the dye transfer process suggested his desire for saturation, sometimes to the point of garishness.\(^\text{13}\) But all three photographers stayed in control even as they laid the color on thick.\(^\text{14}\) Their processes allowed for careful adjustments to make the color just right. Imes either made his own Type C prints or worked with a printer. Eggleston, working with a printer, could control the individual colors in his prints separately, since the dyes in dye transfer are rolled on a receiving paper one at a time. In this process, the red in a photograph can be deepened

\(^{11}\) I am referring to Mitch Epstein’s remark that photography dumbed color down to “emotional button-pushing” and the difficulties this proposed for him as a photographer. Quoting Winogrand, he said, he felt “at war with the obvious.” Mitch Epstein, *Mitch Epstein: Work* (Gottingen: Steidl, 2006), 14.

\(^{12}\) Interview with William Greiner, June 24 2011; email from William Greiner, June 25 2011.

\(^{13}\) Kevin Moore, 26. “This subtractive color process, based on the principle that gelatin can soak up, release, and transfer dyes to another surface, was first explored in the 1880s and first used to make color motion-picture film (Technicolor) in the 1920s. In 1935, Kodak introduced a dye imbibitions print process (Eastman Wash-Off Relief) which was improved and released in 1945 as Dye Transfer, the most successful of the dye imbibitions processes. Its rich colors and translucency are the result of using dyes, rather than pigments, in a gelatin binder. Although few artists worked in this process before the 1970s, the advertising and fashion industries of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as journalists in the late 1950s and 1960s, embraced it, despite the substantial cost and the time and skill required to produce high-quality prints.” Sarah Kennel. *In the Darkroom: An Illustrated Guide to Photographic Processes Before the Digital Age,* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010).
while deemphasizing the blue, for example. As this dissertation moves forward I will consider how, through their use of color and choice of subject, these photographers create photographs that evince a canny form of color-consciousness and a high degree of control over the once seemingly difficult to control medium of color.

Imes said in a 1994 interview with Grover Lewis for the *Los Angeles Times* that he “thinks everyone who photographs in color owes something to William Eggleston.” Indeed, Imes’s photograph, *The Skin Man Place* (figure 33), Belzoni, Mississippi, 1986 (printed in *Juke Joint*) bears similarity to two photographs in Eggleston’s 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. All three photographs show relentlessly red, windowless, cramped, claustrophobic spaces. Eggleston’s “red ceiling” (Greenwood, MS, n.d.) and Imes’s *The Skin Man Place* both feature a naked light bulb as a central part of the composition. The vertical orientation of the frame, the seediness of the dirty toilet next to a cardboard Budweiser box in *Skin Man Place*, and even the name of the image itself – call to mind Eggleston’s photograph of a naked man standing aimlessly (scratching his head) in a red room with ominous looking graffiti on the walls (figure 6).

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15 If a printer wanted to load up the red but keep the yellow subtle, dye transfer makes that control possible. In contrast to the Autochrome and carbro print processes, dye transfer offers a fair amount of control to the photographer. The hues and contrast of the image can be adjusted by varying the formulation of the dye baths and re-soaking the matrices to produce a new print, and by applying other darkroom techniques such as masking. Kennel, 41.

In the previous chapter I discussed William Eggleston’s 1976 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. I demonstrated the way in which criticism of his photographs often noted his southern or aristocratic modes of dress, patterns of speech, hobbies, and habits. I showed that covert and overt associations between Eggleston’s work and the South, made by critics, the public, and the photographer himself, contributed to a palpable sense of horror in the imagery, their sickly saturation seemingly connected to the decadence, fetidness, and decay of southern gothic literary tropes. I also examined the paradoxical way in which the curator of Eggleston’s 1976 MoMA exhibition, John Szarkowski, downplayed the nominal subject of Eggleston’s photographs – life in the southern U.S., Memphis and Mississippi in particular – in favor of a formalist reading of Eggleston’s images that emphasized color, form, composition, and the private and idiosyncratic (rather than sociopolitical) nature of the photographer’s vision. I challenged Szarkowski’s reading of the work, and proposed that this reading was in keeping with MoMA’s apolitical approach to photography under his tenure. This was an institutional pattern that predated Szarkowski, as other scholars, such as Patricia Leighten and A.D. Coleman, have shown.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} In her assessment of the 1989 opening of the exhibition “Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism” at the Museum of Modern Art, and a symposium of Picasso and Braque scholars, Patricia Leighten notes the procedure of “business as usual” at the museum. While the papers at the symposium engaged complex historical considerations, the discussions accompanying the papers were different, says Leighten. They “disclose more succinctly than one would have thought possible the restricted terms of discourse at MoMA,
Taking as its starting point the importance of place in the work of the photographers I discuss, this chapter will examine the emotional impact of color photography in the Delta and prairie regions of Mississippi in 1975-1995. Imes’s hometown of Columbus is near Mississippi’s “Black Prairie” region of fertile black soil, conducive to many types of agriculture and once the site of large cotton plantations.\textsuperscript{18} The Mississippi Delta is in the roughly northwestern quadrant of the state, between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers.\textsuperscript{19} Here, during Jim Crow, “racial proscription and violence were the order of every day….Simply surviving this oppressive environment was all that most Negroes could hope for.”\textsuperscript{20} In the 1870s, after Reconstruction, a network of small Delta towns developed, often derived from former plantation railroad stops.

“These rural towns were literally built on the principles of racial segregation,” according to historian Jennifer Nardone, “and therefore offer a highly complex system of sorting...
out the community spatially.” The cultural landscape of the Delta comprised both the “official” landscape – one closely monitored by the dominant white culture – and a “more covert landscape, developed out of the defiance of the African American community” toward the official landscape.21

Imes used the camera and color film to cross racial boundaries into this once “covert landscape.” His use of color transmits to the viewer a sometimes exotic world apart from the intractable black-and-white reality of segregation that had been part of Columbus’s history. Berkley Hudson, now a journalist, attended Columbus’s Stephen D. Lee High School with Imes and photographed with him as a young man. Hudson described the Columbus of their youth:

As a Columbus resident during my first two decades, I experienced, in my own privileged white male way, the violent pain of being a witness to racial segregation and its murder of the spirit of black and white people alike. I grew up learning to shut out even hearing the word ‘nigger’ when people I loved and knew and those I did not love or did not know used the word in all shades of meaning. To survive, Frantz Fanon has said, black people must wear a mask when they are around white people. I, too, learned to wear a mask, though surely a different one from the mask of Fanon.22

Hudson, Imes, and three other friends started a corporation known as Possum Town

Photographs, Inc. and in 1987 purchased a collection of images made by another Columbus photographer – O.N. Pruitt.²³ Pruitt’s photography practice had been an opportunity for interaction between blacks and whites within this rigidly segregated community.²⁴ Through his photography studio in the 1920s and 1930s, Pruitt “supplied vital images for the black community’s use.”²⁵ One might say that, like Pruitt in his day, Imes was part of the white, male power structure in Columbus.²⁶ But Imes’s photographs are sites of his own resistance. One might look at Imes’s photographic explorations as an effort to wrestle with and reject the highly segregated culture of his hometown. As such, his photographs represent moments of boundary crossing and rebellion. Aided by color, they take on the qualities of the marvelous or magical real, a

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²³ In his dissertation, Hudson explained his own and Imes’ interest in the Pruitt collection as follows: “In the early 1970s, as a photographer and a writer on college publications at the University of Michigan and then at Columbia University, I became interested in the Pruitt photographs,” Hudson writes. “I was taking lots of pictures then, sometimes with photographer friends Birney Imes and Mark Gooch…Without the Possum Town Boys of James P. Carnes, David Gooch, Mark Gooch, and Birney Imes this dissertation likely never would have been undertaken. Formally they constitute, along with me, a corporation known as Possum Town Photographs Inc. Our collective vision led us to purchase the Pruitt Collection in 1987. Our commitment is to preserve, archive, research, exhibit, and publish materials from the collection. We grew up together in Columbus, some of us friends since babyhood. In their own distinctive ways, these four men have given to me incredible insights into Pruitt and his photographs.” (Hudson, xi)

²⁴ Hudson noted that while some of Pruitt’s photographs demonstrated the inequities between blacks and whites in Columbus, “when Pruitt photographed African Americans in their churches and homes, the subjects often seemed to co-create the image with the photographer.” Such “co-creation” also occurred when Pruitt photographed African Americans in his studio, which Hudson says must have been unusual at the time. “This was happening in a town where until the 1970s, ‘colored only’ or ‘whites only’ signs were posted in virtually every public place.” Pruitt invited African Americans to his studio to photograph them, and went to their houses to take their pictures. (Hudson, 29-30)

²⁵ Hudson, Possum Town Photo-Biography, 29.

²⁶ Hudson referred to O.N. Pruitt as eventually becoming part of the “white, male Columbus power structure.” (Hudson, Possum Town, 30). Hudson did not refer to Imes in this way.
worldview that many critics have argued allows for deviation from an oppressive mainstream.

In chapter one, I built upon many of the incisive observations made by curator Kevin Moore about color photography in the 1970s. Moore discusses the “democratic” feel of exhibitions like Stephen Shore’s show at Light Gallery in fall 1972, in which 312 3x5-inch drugstore color prints were glued to the walls in a grid, in no particular order. The effect was so underwhelming, Moore writes, that no one seems to have reported on the show. Shore was ahead of his time, Moore insists, lacking in artistry or an interest in politics, instead offering “a casually unengaged, ambiguous view of American culture,” which would be increasingly identified with William Eggleston and the color photography of the 1970s.²⁷ Such an affect of disengagement (and I argued in chapter one that Eggleston’s work could be interpreted as not really having this affect) is in sharp contrast with Imes’s approach to his small range of subjects. In his photographs of juke joints and roadhouses, delight, mystification, and obsession palpitate.

Imes ran a commercial photography business in Columbus from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, photographing ball games, architecture, consumer products, and making portraits. In his “artistic” or personal work, he gestated a smaller range of deeply engaged, ongoing projects – including the juke joints and the series of

photographs (made from 1975-1993) that resulted in Whispering Pines, a book about a formerly segregated roadhouse and eatery roughly twenty miles south of Columbus.28

One theme that seems to compel Imes is the imaginary barriers between people. Another is the bizarre, surreal, and marvelous real subjects he encounters when he crosses such barriers and ventures into the juke joint environment.29 Building on the work of novelists and scholars who have explored marvelous and magical realism in the context of literature and postcolonial theory, I argue that Imes’s themes of boundary crossing and the marvelous are intertwined, and that color is integral to their expression in his work.

Color, for Imes, serves conceptual and atmospheric needs more than representational ones. He was working with at least two factors – chroma and a subject matter that would be considered “abject” (although he would not use this word to refer to his subjects). This theme of the abject or grotesque is indebted to Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and other Southern Gothicists. Columbus was in the thick of such literary mythology – Tennessee Williams’s birthplace was a few minutes’ walk to Imes’s photography studio above the Princess movie theater in the

28 Imes made initial visits to Whispering Pines when he first worked as a photographer at the Commercial Dispatch from 1975-76. He and Sammie McDavid, then a staff reporter at the Dispatch, did a story/photograph feature package. “It was probably the place to go for a time,” Imes said. “You could order steaks, fried shrimp, and hamburgers there. And you could dance on the concrete dance floor under the pines. Smith, Tammy M., “Whispering Pines: Time, Place Captured in Imes’s Photographs.” Commercial Dispatch (August 21, 1994).
center of town.

Born Thomas Lanier Williams, Tennessee Williams spent the first eight years of his life in Columbus.30 His plays and short stories deal with marginal people, freaks, and liminal spaces. He hated his own homosexuality, and in a 1951 short story, “The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin,” described the young male protagonist’s urges for other men as something monstrous: “How on earth did I explain to myself, at that time, confessing to myself, that I was a little monster?” Williams wrote.31 Upon moving to New Orleans at age 28, Williams discovered “new netherworlds,” and many of his plays – “The Glass Menagerie,” “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Baby Doll,” and “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” deal with such netherworlds, featuring outcasts, vagrants, the grotesque, and family dysfunction.32 Sidney Lumet directed the film version of Williams’s 1957 play, “Orpheus Descending” – the 1959 film The Fugitive Kind. In the story, a drifter with a guitar autographed by musicians like Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, and Leadbelly wanders into a Mississippi town from a place called Witches Bayou. Back home the drifter had learned to skin “wild things” – his nickname is Snakeskin for the snakeskin jacket he wears. An older Italian woman – Lady Torrance

30 Tennessee Williams, Memoirs (New Directions Publishing, 1975), 12. Williams’s family moved to St. Louis when he was 8 years old.
32 Mel Gussow, “Tennessee Williams is Dead Here at 71: Tennessee Williams, 71, Dies in His Hotel Suite,” New York Times (February 26, 1983),
— hires Snakeskin to work as a clerk in the town store and they have an affair. The story is filled with magical and gothic elements linked to the possibilities of miscegenation and racial cross-dressing. A “Negro Conjure Man” comes into the store wearing garments “fantastically bedizened with many talismans and good-luck charms of shell and bone and feather. His blue-black skin is daubed with cryptic signs in white paint.”

Snakeskin is seduced in a cemetery by a young, “corrupt,” bohemian white woman who asks him to go “jooking” with her. Toward the end of the story, Lady Torrance announces she is pregnant with Snakeskin’s child and he decides to remain in town against a vicious warning from the local sheriff.

The story ends with past tragedies repeating themselves as Torrance and Snakeskin are killed in a fire set by Torrance’s jealous husband (Lady’s father was killed in a fire several decades prior, also set by Lady’s husband).

Writer Michael Pearson, who traveled to some jukes with Imes in the late ’80s or early ’90s, noted that the activities in a particular juke – “a blend of rap and soul music shaking the windows and a pig roast flaming outside the bar” – reminded him of Joanne Woodward’s definition of juoking in *The Fugitive Kind*: “you drink a little and drive a little, then stop at a place and drink some more, and eventually you wind up in a bone

orchard and make love on a grave.” By 1am, Pearson quipped about what he observed, “I’m convinced the cemeteries will have their visitors tonight.”

Tennessee Williams, along with McCullers, Faulkner, O’Connor, and Eggleston, explore the queerness of the mundane and the horrific that erupts out of that. The literary modes of magical realism and the southern grotesque are overtly intertwined in the relationship between Faulkner and Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who claimed the former as an influence. In Garcia Marquez’s *100 Years of Solitude*, there is a “persistent, mordant view of the American South which runs as a leitmotif parallel” to the “vision of decay and underdevelopment” in Garcia Marquez’s fictional region of Macondo, literary scholar Harley D. Oberhelman has observed. “Macondo and Yoknapatawpha County do have much in common, and Garcia Marquez does admit the influence of Faulkner on his writings,” Oberhelman noted. In *100 Years of Solitude*, published after Marquez visited the U.S. South in 1961, there is more evidence of “the synthesis of his interest in Faulkner and the American South,” than in any of Garcia Marquez’s other works so far. Imes’s work brings the viewer into a territory of southern strangeness and the grotesque. As is true of Eggleston, color is essential to this artistic maneuver. Imes’s color photographs are populated by figures who challenge

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35 Pearson, 75.
37 Ibid.
lines of demarcation. They are liminal, metaphoric, intermediary figures existing “in/between/on modernity’s boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical and real.”38

In addition to exploring the themes of boundary crossing, the grotesque, and the marvelous or magic real, Imes’s work opens up onto a set of issues relevant to African American life in the Deep South and beyond during the late 1970s—early 1990s. This period was characterized by cultural pluralism and material excess juxtaposed with extreme poverty. Social ennui was reflected in punk and gangster rap, while the AIDS crisis and the crack epidemic fanned the flames of social paranoia and racism towards blacks and the poor. Imes’s photographs, which juxtapose hardcore poverty with chromatic splendor, present a kind of tinsel-and-detritus vision that, by invoking the specter of bravura and death, gesture toward the extremes – or perceived extremes – of African American life during this period.

Most of the images published in Juke Joint were made throughout the 1980s, a time when the South was on the rise economically, as discussed in the first chapter. The 1980s also began a period of uncertainty for black people and the rest of the nation, as historians Kenneth Clark and John Hope Franklin have observed. The death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, as well as several other important civil rights leaders, and the

FBI’s attempt to suppress others, had weakened the civil rights movement. Furthermore, school desegregation had faced massive resistance, with whites deserting public schools in large numbers. When institutions began to set aside places for blacks, some whites objected, seeing no difference between the use of quotas to exclude and quotas to include those who had previously been shut out entirely, according to Clark and Franklin. The Supreme Court ruled in 1978 that when race alone was used to devise a program of admission it was unconstitutional, even if there was no evidence of prior racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{39} By the late 1970s, Clark and Franklin write, black voter registration was declining. The general economic condition among blacks was steadily worsening, and it was difficult to maintain a lively interest in politics.\textsuperscript{40} In 1978, 28 percent of all black families lived below the poverty line compared to seven percent of white families. Two black children of every five were growing up in poor families, and millions of black teenagers and young adults had never worked and had little or no prospect of ever working.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Juke Joint} and \textit{Whispering Pines} deal explicitly with the figuration of the black subject during this tenuous period in American history. The images in both books are specific to the lives of southern rural blacks, but they also address the issues Franklin

\textsuperscript{40} Clark and Franklin, 17.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
and Clark raise with respect to African American life in urban and rural areas nationwide. An image in *Juke Joint* shows a boy wearing an open pink coat leaning against a darkened entrance to a dilapidated building called the Pink Pony Café (figure 34). The word “pink” is the clearest part of the sign, echoing the boy’s clothing. The exterior of this juke is a patchwork of materials with a rusted tin and wood awning. Two metal drums overflow with beer bottles and paper bags. Ethereal late-afternoon sunshine casts the shadows of four people whose silhouettes read as children. They seem focused on the boy in pink, who returns their gaze intently. There is something insistent about the presence of these distinct, heavy shadows and their confrontation with the boy in the doorway.

The shadow figures evoke artist Kara Walker’s paper cutout silhouettes depicting a terrifying, uncanny U.S. South. In Walker’s tableaux, the grotesque sometimes takes the form of black children – sometimes mutated or joined together as Siamese twins – Southern Belles with phallic protrusions who tiptoe toward cavalier gentlemen otherwise occupied with their hands under the skirts of African American women (figure 35). Just as Walker’s silhouettes conjure unspeakable histories, so do the child shadows in *The Pink Pony Cafe* insist upon a steady, strong, and unrelenting presence in the world.

In his 2008 monograph, *Cutting a Figure*, art historian Richard J. Powell identifies
“subject-dominated portraits” and black American-informed strategies of modern style, “fundamental to the formulation of many examples of black portraiture and its capacity to convey data via a discursive figure.”42 The nuanced sense of “sharpness” Powell explores by means of selected examples throughout the history of black portraiture is at play in some of Imes’s photographs of Delta juke joint inhabitants. Black male subjects evince “sharpness,” and take “visceral and psychic pleasure” in doing so. 43 In *Freedom Village Juke*, three boys pose in a windowless corner of the Freedom Village Juke in 1985 (figure 37). Messages are scrawled on the red, patched-up walls behind them while the water-stained ceiling above their heads buckles and sags. One of the chalk-drawn messages reads “Is God the answer?” while another is an ode to “true love,” and people “2-kool 2-be 4-gotten.” The three boys form a tight trio, two of them stone-faced, flanking a third boy, who smiles invitingly, playfully, tossing white pool ball. The ball hovers just above his hand mid-toss, as though he can suspend it in midair. This boy and the boy to his right grasp pool cues and lean into each other.

Discussing a photograph of his father and uncle in 1930, during the Great Migration, Powell writes, “The adjective that invariably comes to mind when I see this photograph is *sharp.*” He continues, “many fashionable people have a precise and

42 Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7.
43 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 7, 16. Quoting Robin D. G. Kelley on page 15.
exacting edge, a sense of how to look, of how, figuratively speaking, to ‘stand out’ and be ‘a cut above’ the dull and commonplace.”44 A portrait is a two-way street and a reciprocal relationship. What we see in Freedom Village Juke are black figures constructing themselves, socially and historically. Powell argues:

Photographs of southern black migrants recently arrived ‘up North,’ like the one of my father and uncle, not only illustrate the state of being sharp; they epitomize something fundamentally artistic in the way the people depicted present themselves to the world at large. This art of self-representation is far more intangible and multivalenced than mere style for style’s sake.45

There is something fundamentally artistic in the way the boys in Freedom Village Juke represent themselves. As Powell argues, “the sense of pride and exhibitionism” implicit in “cutting a figure” “are often qualified by race, class, and historical circumstances.”46 The boys cut a figure as a group, the vertical stripes of their leather jackets are mimicked by the pool cues, and the dynamism of red, white and black energizes the frame. As in other images Powell identifies as demonstrative of corporeal excess, Freedom Village Juke displays “anatomical distortion, emblematic posturing, and a

44 Richard J. Powell, Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 4.
45 Powell, Cutting, 4.
46 Powell, Cutting a Figure, 10.
contrastive design scheme." 47

The dress, posing, and posturing of the three boys connects them to the broader American culture outside of the Deep South during the 1980s. Michael Jackson’s Thriller was the best-selling album in the world in 1983. In the music video for the single of the same name, Jackson wore a shiny red jacket with diagonal black stripes that became the “hottest outerwear fad of the mid-1980s.” 48 Millions of people copied the style (figures 38 and 39). By 1984, Jackson was such an important cultural figure Ronald Reagan presented him with a Presidential Public Policy Communication Award for allowing the song “Beat It” to be used in a public service campaign against teen drinking and driving. 49 The jackets worn by the boys in Freedom Village Juke are a very similar style as Jackson’s, connecting them to the wider world of popular culture.

Imes’s juke joint series came on the heels of the “black arts movement” in the United States (1967-1979) and the explosion of African American popular culture in the U.S., particularly the Blaxploitation boom of the 1970s. Imes was born just six years after painter Barkley Hendricks, whose supersaturated portraits of African Americans

47 Powell, 10.
48 David Mansour, From Abba to Zoom: A Pop Culture Encyclopedia of the Late Twentieth Century (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005), 487.
49 Jackson’s 1980s videos incorporated elements of horror and magic: in Thriller, Jackson turns into a monster and dances with a crowd of zombies and other monsters. In the video for his 1982 single, “Billie Jean,” Jackson dances through a dark urban wasteland. The ground glows with every step he takes. When he throws a coin into a homeless man’s cup, the cup lights up and the man is transformed from rags into a white suit.
emerged during the black arts movement. Hendricks’s paintings were rooted in the academic Western portraiture that had elevated white subjects to monumentality, according to Powell. Instead of white subjects, Hendricks’s paintings featured “young, urbane blacks whose claims to pictorial posterity resided neither in deeds nor dictates but in their clothes, carriage, and color,” Powell writes. “In that era of political conspicuousness and public performances of blackness these portrayals of persons who historically had been disparaged became the new aesthetic barometer.”

Hendricks’s subjects, Powell observes, seem to be conscious of being the object of thousands of spectators, and I would argue that the men in Imes’s photographs pose with a similar awareness.

In another photograph of the Pink Pony Café in Darling, 1983, a man’s body takes on the rich, obsessive, detail afforded by Imes’s small aperture and large format camera (figure 40). The man’s arms are ideally formed and his skin glows as one arm folds up to draw a cigarette from his mouth. His shirt is bright white, while his pants are dark black, contrasting with his burnished brown skin. The crease in his pants is startlingly straight, cutting through the picture plane. The incisiveness and pristine sharpness of this cut provides a dramatic contrast with the green and red polka-dotted walls of the Pink Pony Cafe. He communicates a crispness in his affect that makes him

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50 Powell, 128.
“‘a cut above’ the dull and commonplace.” He isn’t just posing. His clothes, like the magical remove of the juke, form “a protective wall against racism and its uncanny ability to render peoples of color unseen.”

The photograph is similar in composition to Hendricks’s 1973 painting, Arriving Soon, which shows a black woman – Hendricks’s friend Angie Johnson of Alabama – as she sits next to a Coke machine holding a phallic balloon that communicates her “aggressive propensity” (figure 41). Powell points to the “bodily and sartorial defenses” employed by Johnson in her reclusive body language and apparent jadedness. Such reclusiveness and sartorial self-assertion is present in the Pink Pony Cafe portrait as well, with Imes’s subject slightly tilted from the viewer as he sits on the blood red table, but with one slitted eye on the viewer – he’s no object – he’s a participant in this act of self-representation. Arriving Soon and Pink Pony Cafe are strikingly similar in their compositions as well – in both portraits, the subject sits left of center, a solid and magnetic lure despite the colors and visual seduction of an eye-popping background.

Another photograph, Imes’s Magic City (1989), shows a decrepit-looking juke exterior. Patches of black paint are peeled from the lower structure and a stained white cinderblock upper-story façade sits above a buckling black wood overhang (figure 42).

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51 Powell, 4.
52 Powell, 131.
53 Powell, 150.
Litter is lightly sprinkled around the patchy concrete, dirt, and grass foreground. “Magic City” is stenciled in red on two sides of the lower facade in perfect symmetry. Flanking the front door are two young men leaning against makeshift wooden pillars. These “pillars” – impossibly thin and wispy looking, as if they could never support the building – are bright yellow. They place the men within a glowing frame. Their clothes are plain, but sharp and pressed. One man holds his hand to his chin, modeling his features beneath a bright red baseball cap. A blue building tucked into the far-right frame mimics the bright blue of his sweatshirt. His friend recedes slightly into the shadow, his hair in a hi-top fade, a cigarette jutting coolly from his lips. Both men hold themselves tightly, limbs folded in. In this sense, they are unlike the boys in Freedom Village, whose limbs and gestures mimic the dynamic lines of their clothing. The Magic City men are self-contained. They seem to stand guard over the teeming excitement, heat, and noise beyond the orange doorway to the juke’s inner sanctum.

This photograph appears at the very end of Juke Joint – it is the second-to-last image – and crystallizes one of the messages transmitted by the entire series – that a transformative, transcendent experience lies in wait behind the sometimes shoddy-looking façade. The tidy young men on either side of the orange, star-emblazoned door are sentinels, powerful guardians of this fantastic world. One might be granted entry, but only if one knows the password and has the passport.
The University Press of Mississippi published another photobook by a Mississippian in 1989, a year prior to Juke Joint. This was Eudora Welty’s largest book of photographs, titled Eudora Welty Photographs. Published the same year as Eggleston’s The Democratic Forest [for which Welty wrote the foreword], Welty’s monograph included a foreword by fellow southern writer Reynolds Price. From the vantage point of 1989, Welty’s images of Depression-era Mississippi are a throwback – and not just because they depict older clothes, cars, agricultural practices, and people who have since grown older or died. They demonstrate an openness, according to Welty, to being photographed that had become all but extinct in the 1970s and ‘80s. The people of 1930s Mississippi, Welty maintained, were more welcoming to a stranger with a camera than the people of subsequent decades. “Had I no shame as a white person for what message might lie in my pictures of black persons? No, I was too busy imagining myself into their lives to be open to any generalities. I wished no more to indict anybody, to prove or disprove anything by my pictures, than I would have wished to do harm to the people in them, or have expected any harm from them to come to me.”

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54 Juke Joint is one of the University Press of Mississippi’s three top-selling photography books of all time. Signed special editions of the 1990 monograph sell for $750 at A Gallery for Fine Photography in New Orleans. The book has sold 8,035 hardcover and 8,156 paperback editions since its original publication in 1990, according to Assistant Director of Marketing Steven B. Yates. Prints from the Juke Joint series were estimated at up to $5,000 at auction in 2005.


56 Welty, One Time, 10.
Welty, like Williams, Eggleston, Imes, and Faulkner welcomed the abject, the grotesque, freaks into their imaginations and, subsequently, their art. The grotesque is more than a trope – it’s a “technique for positioning texts at the edge of southern disorder,” according to literary scholar Patricia Yaeger.\textsuperscript{57} The imminence of disorder is impelled by the presence of invisible but nonetheless present bodies, “foundation-bearing black folks who lie beneath the earth (the subjects of lynching, shooting, drowning, murder, beating, suicide, being ignored, or worked to death).”\textsuperscript{58} Welty’s “freak-obsessed” photographs and stories acknowledge this disorder, according to Yaeger.\textsuperscript{59} Far from being anodyne tales of place, they tell of near-drownings and murders, of suffocating mansion interiors and sinister hitchhikers.

Printed just one year after Welty’s photobook, Imes’s \textit{Juke Joint} established his reputation in Mississippi and among fine art and documentary photographers everywhere. Museums and galleries across the country and internationally have exhibited his photographs and other prints of life in rural Mississippi – both in color and black-and-white. He has received several National Endowment for the Arts grants, the first in 1984. He has had solo shows at the Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris (1988), the Art Institute of Chicago (1987), and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (2011), among

\textsuperscript{58} Patricia Yaeger, \textit{Dirt and Desire}, 13-20.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
other venues. His work is housed in collections at the Art Institute of Chicago, Arkansas Art Center, the Museum of Modern Art, Mississippi Museum of Art, Lauren Rogers Museum of Art, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He is a recipient of the National Endowment of the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship (1984). He won the photography award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters in 1987, in 1991 for *Juke Joint*, and in 1995 for *Whispering Pines*. He won the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts in Mississippi the first year it was established – 1988 – for “artist’s achievement.”

Although distanced from certain trends in art photography of the 1980s, Imes’s work is in keeping with others. A new generation of artists was less interested in a Purist view of photography as autonomous art than in using the medium to critique images from television, film, and advertising, writer and curator James Crump has observed. “Armed with postmodern theory,” these artists “sought to tear down the boundaries once prescribed for the medium.” The 1976 Eggleston exhibition had unleashed “a torrent of ‘new’ methods in which color was the dominant mode” exploited by the “apparent heirs to the legacy of color photography of the 1970s.” These heirs included Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, and Louise Lawler. “Photography was no longer seen as a narrowly defined, self-referential technical process, but rather more broadly as

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60 Patti Carr Black, *Art in Mississippi*, 268.
simply another means to image making.”62 Jeff Wall’s experimental, staged photographs challenged viewers to find meaning in ordinary situations. “Redolent of literary and art historical references, Wall’s photographs are often compared by critics with nineteenth-century tableaux.”63

The urge to construct and stage photographic images took off in this period.64 First shown in the second installment of the Museum of Modern Art’s New Photography series in 1986, Philip Lorca diCorcia’s “subtly theatrical tableaux,” as MoMA described them, address psychological themes and make use of fictional “actors” (diCorcia’s family and friends), whom the artist directs with his camera. Crump observed that the male prostitute series was similar to “recent noirish films that exploit color in a similar fashion – visceral, raw, supersaturated color consonant with the motion pictures of say David Lynch or Peter Greenaway.” These photographs are the result of staged productions on a scale that might rival a motion picture set.65 Imes’s work also veered into the realm of tableaux, depicting un-peopled juke joints that sometimes took on the look of still lifes, as Ogden Museum of Southern Art curator Richard McCabe has observed.66 In contrast with the “catch-as-catch can” purism of

63 Crump, 44.
64 Crump. 45.
65 Ibid.
“straight” and “street” photography, or the so-called “clicking machine” approach once attributed to Eggleston, Imes frequently posed people and objects in his photographs. He frequently applied lighting techniques from his commercial practice to his “personal” work. He was not a “Purist” in the tradition of Edward Weston, nor a documentarian like Walker Evans and is, in this sense, very much of the new generation of 1980s photographers who acknowledged that all photographs are constructions. Like Imes, they embraced the use of stage lighting, posing, and manipulated color to achieve dramatic effects.

By the end of the 1970s, color was no longer an aesthetic novelty, Crump insists. Its newness was worn out, and the controversies over its use in fine art photography were waning. Color was equated with the medium of photography itself. Consenting to Crump’s assertions does not mean, in my view, that saturated color no longer had a visceral effect on the viewer. It still retained its power to evoke vulgarity, create an alternate world, and enrapture viewers with its beauty.

While Imes appeared comfortable with postmodernism’s embrace of overt manipulation, his orientation toward his subject was relatively relaxed with respect to postmodernist theories of representation and identity politics. In interviews, he does not

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appear deeply concerned with his identity as a white photographer making pictures of black subjects. He betrays little discomfort with the power dynamics of his relationship to them. But these very dynamics have made his work vulnerable to criticism. While some observers have testified to Imes’s skill, professionalism, and good intentions, his portrayal of black life has been publically called into question on at least one occasion.

Reviewing *Juke Joint* for the *Clarion-Ledger* Afi-Odelia E. Scruggs argued that Imes’s photographs of juke joints failed in their attempt to illuminate the legacy of segregation and deprivation in the Mississippi Delta – they instead became part of it. Imes, Scruggs wrote, “offers page after page of interiors: tiny, sometimes squalid rooms; empty

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68 In an interview with writer Vince Aletti, Imes commented that, “When I show these pictures or try to talk about them, someone invariably wants me to explain myself in terms of race – my being white and the subjects being black. I have never really understood the point they were trying to make with the question. Maybe the answer they are looking for is in the pictures. Growing up in Mississippi in the ’50s and ’60s how could one not be obsessed or at least intensely curious about the relationships between blacks and whites here?” Birney Imes, *Partial to Home* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 10.

69 In defending Imes’s *Juke Joint* book against the criticism of Afi-Odelia Scruggs’s review in the *Clarion-Ledger*, Richard Ford insisted that the book was “gentle and humane and forthcoming; because at heart it is affectionate and patient and attentive to the details of lived life.” The photograph of the card table in *Juke Joint*, he said, “is at least as eloquent as Evans’ photograph of the Gudgers’ cookstove in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and equally lacking in condescension or sociological presumptions…For allowing such a callous dismissal of a person’s hard work, not to mention the efforts of the publisher and printer, the book page editor should resign in disgrace.” (Richard Ford, Letter to the Editor, Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, September 6, 1990). Another letter writer, Sallie Anderson of Meridian, took Imes at his word – that he felt nothing short of a “need” to overcome his ignorance about black life in the Delta. The writer observes, “the implied moral imperative is attractive, laudable; and I want to know through the images selected by him what he is about and what versions of reality he has seen so far.” And Dan Hise of Jackson wrote another letter, stating: “…Imes has chosen a dispassionate point of view calculated to let his subjects speak for themselves” (Letters to the Editor, Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, September 6, 1990). Vince Aletti, while interviewing Imes for *Partial to Home*, remarked that there was “something very intimate” about the connection between Imes and his subjects. “Yours isn’t an intrusive eye,” said Aletti, “and there also seems to be a welcoming or embracing on the subject’s part. Does it help that you’re southern and that, in a sense, this is the other side of your life and culture?”
whiskey bottles left on tattered tablecloths; liquor advertisements tacked on peeling walls.” In many of the photographs the people are absent, and without them, she argued, the spaces are just “empty, forlorn places known colloquially as juke joints.”

Thus, Scruggs insisted that Imes, in making these photographs, was following white cultural tradition by keeping blacks in their place. He did this, she argued, through “exclusion and omission:”

No stories are told. There are no comments from owners or patrons. They are photographed, but never identified. Blacks have no voice in Imes’s examination of their environs.

Imes insists that his work is not an attempt to atone for anything that happened in Mississippi in the past, but he does hope the photographs have helped “others appreciate and empathize with a culture different from their own” and that in some small way they have “brought about some understanding, some reconciliation.” “I would like to think that the exchange had value,” he said, the white guy from a privileged world standing and talking with members of another race and class living right next door. He says his work is an effort to move forward and learn about this world that has been denied in some small sense. He is trying to build a relationship

71 Ibid.
72 Birney Imes, Partial to Home, 10.
through the act of going out and making pictures.

Scruggs’s attack raises important questions deriving from the lessons of 1970s and ‘80s postmodernist critiques of disciplines that attempt to describe or explain “others,” such as documentary photography, ethnography, and anthropology.

According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, two key assumptions characterize postmodernism:

…first, the assumption that there is no common denominator – in ‘nature or ‘truth’ or ‘God’ or ‘time’— that guarantees either the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral, objective thought; second, the assumption that all human systems operate like language as self-reflexive rather than referential systems, in other words systems of differential function that are powerful but finite, and that construct and maintain meaning and value.73

Postmodern theorists sought to expose as false the notion that documentary photography was an objective or pure form of representation. Furthermore, they questioned the terms of the relationships between documentarians, spectators, and subjects.

Seminal postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment subject and its visual

representations of “others” – African Americans, women, “Orientals” – were published between 1975 and 1995, influenced by feminist and postcolonial theory. These included “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” by Laura Mulvey (1975), Orientalism by Edward Said (1978) “In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography),” by Martha Rosler (1981), Allan Sekula’s “The Body and the Archive,” (1986), The Burden of Representation by John Tagg (1988), Colonizing Egypt by Timothy Mitchell (1991), and Photography at the Dock by Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1991). These critiques suggested that the documentary subject was constructed for a more powerful (usually male, Western European) spectator. “We must ask...whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes in her 1991 book of essays, Photography at the Dock, “first in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents.”

Solomon-Godeau observed that if one considers the act of looking at photographs with respect to gender or the operations of the psyche – the “complex acts of projection, voyeurism, investiture, fantasy, and desire that inform our looking” – one inevitably has to discard “the innocent belief that the documentary camera presents visual facts” that were “simply ‘out there’ and which we now, simply and

74 Solomon-Godeau, Photography at the Dock, 176.
disinterestedly, observe and register.”

Furthermore, Solomon-Godeau argues that the technology of the camera confers a position of visual mastery upon the spectator, “whose ideal, all-seeing eye becomes the commanding locus of the pictorial field.” The perspective of the camera is very different from the orientation of natural vision, which has no vanishing point, is binocular, “unbounded, in constant motion, and marked by loss of clarity in the periphery.” By contrast, the camera “limits the world by framing, lines it up at the proper distance, so that it offers itself as an object endowed with meaning.” It is for this reason, Solomon-Godeau points out, that “the camera has historically engendered a vocabulary of mastery, possession, appropriation, and aggression; to shoot a picture, to take a picture, to aim the camera, and so forth.”

Perhaps responding to such pressures, in the late 1960s John Szarkowski expanded the definition of documentary, referring to Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander the “new documentarians” whose work reflected their own personal visions rather than universal truths about humanity. In 1980 the New York Times Magazine exposed the flaws of what had been considered one of the greatest achievements of Southern documentary photography – Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1936) by Walker Evans and James Agee. In the critique, Alabama native Howell Raines

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75 Solomon-Godeau, 182.
76 Solomon-Godeau, 181.
addressed the anger felt by surviving members of the Gudger (Burroughs) and Woods (Fields) families, all photographed by Evans during the Depression. Ruby Fields Darley told Raines that the pictures Evans made “are a scandal on the family… How they got Daddy’s picture without a shirt on and barefooted, I’ll never know.”

In addition to aesthetic and postmodern critiques, cultural and political changes in the United States also altered the meaning of documentary in the late 1970s. The liberal New Deal state had been dismantled, the War on Poverty and utopia abandoned, artist Martha Rosler wrote in 1981. Documentary had lost its mandate, its sense of “exposé, compassion, or outrage.” It had devolved instead into exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting – and careerism.”

The “radical chic” of the 1960s had given way to the “pugnacious self-interest” of the 1980s. Documentary was now a testament to the photographer’s (not the subject’s) character – his bravery, even “manipulativeness and savvy.” The documentarian saved us the trouble of entering situations “of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay.”

Thus by the time Eggleston’s work first appeared at MoMA in 1976, social documentary occupied a fallen status in the eyes of critics and the public. This was the moment Imes

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80 Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 308.
entered as a young photographer and he must have been aware of such critiques. Perhaps it was in part because of them that Imes did not claim to be a documentary photographer nor did he claim that his projects atoned for the history of his home state.

In addition to critiquing the documentary tradition, postmodern art criticism took aim at modernism’s institutions and its art. Collectors, dealers, artists and curators came to regard so-called “self-taught,” “folk,” or “outsider” artists as equal or superior to their academically-trained counterparts. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, artists, curators, and critics, such as Jane Livingston, William Arnett, and William Christenberry exhibited, wrote about, and mined the work of outsider artists for potential subjects. Imes shared in this admiration for self-taught art – part of what dazzled him about the juke joints was their creative and ingenuous interior design, achieved through the use of minimal resources. The result of this ingenuity with scarce resources in the jukes and at the “Pines” – bright red curtains and black polka dots on the walls, trees growing from tables, a neon moon over a concrete dance floor in the woods – is sometimes fantastic and even “surreal.” As Imes said in an interview with the Nola Defender, each visit to

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82 Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002): 99. Powell writes, “It would not be until the late 1970s, with a diversified, highly profitable U.S. art market, that these popular works and their artists would stand as equals beside the works and practitioners of the so-called professional art world.”
Whispering Pines “was like a one-act play…some surreal stuff went on there.”\textsuperscript{83} His use of a pumped up, saturated color in his photographs emphasized the glittering and uncanny decorative achievements of these self-taught interior designers.

Intense color is an important component of the work of many self-taught artists, such as Howard Finster, and the artists featured in collector William Arnett’s colossal, two-volume monograph, \textit{Souls Grown Deep}. These include painters Minnie Evans (1892-1987), Clementine Hunter (1887-1988), and Mose Tolliver (1920-2006), all of whom used bright chroma to communicate mystical idiosyncratic visions. Tolliver in particular was known for his somewhat horrific images “rendered in a highly keyed palette.”\textsuperscript{84} In \textit{The Fugitive Kind}, a “visionary” artist named Vee paints in response to trauma. “Before you started to paint, it didn’t make sense,” Snakeskin said to her. “You saw awful things take place…beatings, lynchings, etc.” Vee agrees: “They call me a visionary…That’s what the New Orleans and Memphis newspaper people admire so much in my work. They call it a primitive style, the work of a visionary.”\textsuperscript{85} Such spiritual and emotionally cathartic works of the subconscious made by self-taught artists are not apolitical, according to Powell. He points out that paintings by Minnie Evans spoke to the effects of racism and


\textsuperscript{85} Williams, “Orpheus Descending,” 57.
segregation on black aspirations and dreams in Jim-Crow-era North Carolina. The same can be said of the juke joint environment and the self-taught art of its interiors.

The juke joint is a circumvention of an oppressive mainstream, a response to repression in the postcolonial U.S. South. “Juke joint,” according to the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, is a term that usually refers to roadhouses patronized by African Americans. After the Civil War, formerly integrated Southern roadhouses became segregated and newly freed blacks formed their own recreation sites. Some rural blacks then opened their homes to the public, selling homemade liquor to friends and strangers. For entertainment, the owners of these houses employed local musicians, who played blues and “jump-ups” as a soundtrack for gambling and dancing. “Offering entertainment as well as refreshments, these black-owned houses were invariably known as jukes or juke joints.”

The word “juke” comes from the pronunciation of the word “joog” among Gullah-Geechee blacks of coastal South Carolina and Georgia and may derive from the word dzugu, a word from the Bamana people of West Africa, meaning wicked. “In the Southwest, it was not uncommon for whites to attend black jukes and for blacks to visit white honky-tonks. But in the southeast the racial barrier was more rigid. Although

86 Powell, Black Art, 99.
intermingling was not unknown there, black jukes and white honkytonks remained segregated by custom. Even today some southeastern jukes and honky-tonks remain segregated.”

Juke joints were thus developed in large part as refuges from the violence endemic to the life of African Americans in the South, as historian Jennifer Nardone has observed. African Americans developed “a system of communicating and moving within the built environment with little or no detection by the ever-present white authority,” she writes. Juke joints are not permanent structures, but often “inhabit buildings originally intended for other purposes, and as a result, no real physical or aesthetic commonality ties these buildings together.” Since public or communal gathering of African Americans during the Jim Crow era was dangerous, “deflecting attention from that space was a method of protection,” and the spaces often lacked signage. There is a strict demarcation between interior and exterior space, and a careful filtering process takes place at this boundary. This is a protection strategy to prevent hostile parties from entering. Once inside, the nondescript or even decrepit exterior falls away, revealing a transformed world of audacious glitter and color. Furthermore, once

90 Nardone, 168.
inside there is a total lack of anonymity in most juke joints, as patrons tend to know each other.\textsuperscript{91}

Mississippi’s status as a post-plantation, post-colonial culture substantiates my reading of Imes’s juke joints and roadhouses as marvelous real and magical realist spaces. Scholars Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn point out that, according to a hemispherical definition of America, the experiences of defeat, occupation, and reconstruction – particularly the experience of defeat under slavery – are shared between the southern United States and every other part of the Americas.\textsuperscript{92} Indeed there are many reasons for connecting the U.S. South to post-plantation cultures throughout the New World, Smith argues.\textsuperscript{93} All of these post-plantation cultures, he writes:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item share a history of colonial plantations, race slavery, race mixing, a vibrant African cultural survival, disappeared bodies, a predilection for the baroque (as Alejo Carpentier defines it), poverty, state-sponsored right wing terrorism, insular communities, creole nativism and what C. Vann Woodward famously called ‘the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction.’\textsuperscript{94}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{91} Nardone, 169.
\textsuperscript{92} Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds. \textit{Look Away: The U.S. South in New World Studies} (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
The U.S. South is simultaneously center and margin, colonizer and colonized, global north and global south, essentialist and hybrid, according to Smith, and thus “represents a crucial locus” for the development of Ella Shohat’s theory that postcolonial studies is better understood as “First/Third Worlds” theory.

Since the sixteenth century, Smith observes, three kinds of colonialism have taken place in the U.S. South and, as such, postcolonial conditions in the region persist until the present day. First, settlers killed and displaced Native Americans. Second, the Jim Crow laws were instituted as internal colonialism, and African American activists saw their struggles for Civil Rights as part of a global decolonization movement for people of color. Third, most white Southerners (from the 1880s on) saw the Civil War and Reconstruction as imperial conquest.⁹⁵ While cities like Atlanta and Charlotte may be part of the industrial backbone of the nation, “many rural and small-town parts of the South, saddled with poorly-educated workforces whose industrial bases are moving offshore, seem to be moving in an ever-more peripheral direction.”⁹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that “the spatial divisions of the three Worlds (First, Second, and Third) have been scrambled so we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all…” But according to Smith, this

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⁹⁵ Jon Smith, “The U.S. South and the Future of the Postcolonial,” *The Global South* 1 (Winter 2007): 154-155. As Smith points out, this vision of supposedly colonized whiteness is a result of the region’s colonial economy and its reliance on slavery.

⁹⁶ Smith, “Future,” 156.
development does not render postcolonial theory obsolete. Rather, it makes the U.S. South of “crucial interest to postcolonial theory.”

Having experienced defeat and regarded at times as culturally, morally, and economically marginal, the South is, an “ex-centric” space. “It is precisely the notion of the ex-centric,” writes literary scholar Theo D’Haen, “in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place ‘other’ than ‘the’ or ‘a’ center – that seems to me an essential feature of that strain of postmodernism we call magic realism.” Magic realism, argues D’Haen, appropriates the techniques of the center and uses them to create an alternative world correcting existing reality to right the wrongs the “reality” of the existing world depends upon. Faulkner, writes D’Haen, is “undoubtedly one of the most ex-centric, in the sense that we have here given to that word, of American authors.”

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier identified “lo real maravilloso” in 1950 as a kind of literature that posited an exceptional perspective distinct from mainstream texts. He used the term the ‘marvelous real’ to describe elements of the fantastic in everyday life and unexpected changes to reality. Because magic realist insights have historical dimensions for Carpentier, his definition of

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100 D’Haen, “Magical Realism,” 201.
the concept is “attractive to the study of postcolonial cinema,” francophone studies
scholar Carina Yervasi has observed. It functions as a revitalizing force that comes from
a peripheral region.101

Yaeger has observed that black and white U.S. Southern women’s writing is a
kind of marvelous realism and insists that U.S. Southern women writers “take the
everyday – the real, dirt – and render it marvelous, wondrous, astonishing.”102 The
women Yaeger observes need to “invent new forms for thinking about the un-thought
known and to circumvent the rigid systems of race and gender, the ‘normal’ deformities
of southern culture.”103 In arguing for the “hallucinatory plot twists” and “strange
hybrid images” in Carson McCullers’s novella, The Member of the Wedding, Yeager notes
that the work achieves a lucidity best summarized by the surrealists. Quoting from
Sergei Eisenstein, Yaeger argues that McCullers “tries to ‘shake what is called reality by
means of non-adapted hallucinations so as to alter the value hierarchies of the real.”104 In
Surrealist art, furthermore, hallucination has the effect of breaking with the smooth

101 Yervasi, 47.
102 Jon Smith, 153.
103 Smith, 154
104 Patricia Yaeger, Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990. Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, 2000: 171-179. Yaeger writes that from the very beginning of The Member of the Wedding,
“every habit seems uncanny, every story, custom, ritual, or verbal act begins to sound peculiar, inexplicable,
nonhabitual…In addition, McCullers’s novella is caught up in the question of ‘the Law,’ as the local police
are described with a surrealists’ eye.” Yaeger continues by noting that, in terms of the novella, the only
community available to one of the female protagonists is straight, white, and segregated. The book achieves
a lucidity best summarized by the surrealists. (179)
machinations of culture and introducing “blocks of ‘a-causality’” – alternatively speeding up and slowing down our access to realities that have been ‘absurdity given as such.’ This art “introduces oscillations at the surface of things; the pattern of the real is torn.”105 Furthermore, a hallucinatory condition may result when one is confronted with overly constrictive social conditions of a southern town, Yaeger states:

I’m not arguing that the rigidities and proprieties of this small southern town are hallucinatory, but that these practices create so many boundaries that almost anyone can step out of their ‘right mind’ into the condition of hallucination. In addition, these rigidities promulgate an inability to see how deeply people’s lives are interconnected.106

Like Schuyler’s prose, McCullers’s novella renders the familiar strange, so that events that had “seemed obvious or matter-of-fact are suddenly causeless and incomprehensible.” The condition of hallucination provides a chance to explore the “heterogeneity of the systems that seem so homogenous.” This opportunity, I would argue, is what erupts in the unreality or surreality of color photography (as opposed to black-and-white) that Imes deploys.107

Art historian Franz Roh first introduced the term in his 1925 book, Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus (1925) to describe a style deriving from Neue

105 Yaeger, 180.
106 Yaeger, 180.
107 Yaeger, 182.
Sachlichkeit, but rooted in late 19th-century German Romantic fantasy. In later criticism, the term has been used to describe painting in which objects are “depicted with photographic naturalism but which because of paradoxical elements or strange juxtapositions convey a feeling of unreality, infusing the ordinary with a sense of mystery.”108 Art historian Estill Curtis Pennington has observed tendencies toward magic realism in the paintings of several contemporary painters from the Deep South – David Bates, Douglas Bourgeois, and Don Cooper. Bates works in Texas, and his paintings often depict the wilderness landscape of the rural South in the swamps, creeks, and bayous of East Texas and Louisiana. “Like works by other artists in this collection, notably Don Cooper and Douglas Bourgeois,” Pennington writes, Bates’s works “tread the line of magic realism, with images so commanding and so

108Theo L. D’Haen, “Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” in Lois P. Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community Magic Realism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 191. According to Oxford Art Online, magic realism is a “style of painting popular in Europe and the USA mainly from the 1920s to 1940s, with some followers in the 1950s. It occupies a position between Surrealism and Photorealism, whereby the subject is rendered with a photographic naturalism, but where the use of flat tones, ambiguous perspectives and strange juxtapositions suggest an imagined or dreamed reality. The term was introduced by art historian Franz Roh in his book Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus (1925) to describe a style deriving from Neue Sachlichkeit, but rooted in late 19th-century German Romantic fantasy. It had strong connections with the Italian Pittura Metafisica of which the work of Giorgio de Chirico was exemplary in its quest to express the mysterious. The work of Giuseppe Capogrossi and the Scuola Romana of the 1930s is also closely related to the visionary elements of Magic Realism. In Belgium its surreal strand was exemplified by René Magritte, with his ‘fantasies of the commonplace,’ and in the USA by Peter Blume, as in South of Scranton and The Eternal City. Later artists associated with Magic Realism include the American George Tooker, whose best-known work Subway (1950) captures the alienation of strangers gathered in public, and the German Christian Schad, who also used the style in the 1950s. The later use of the term for types of non-Western, particularly Latin American fiction was not connected with its artistic application. Oxford Art Online, Grove Art Online, “Magic Realism,” http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T053125?q=roh&search=quick&pos=4&_start=1 #firsthit. Date accessed: January 4, 2013.
recognizable, yet captured in so fantastic a manner as to unsettle even as they send out a familiar greeting.”

New Orleans critics Roger Green and Eric Bookhardt see the art of Douglas Bourgeois as part of a Louisiana movement Bookhardt termed the “visionary imagists.” These artists, according to Green, work in a “tight, polished figurative style, usually with a palette of jewel-bright colors. All express mystical sensibilities…” In the Atlanta-based Don Cooper’s paintings, “there is the suggestion of nature under violent assault, a violence rendered more threatening by the use of intense color,” according to Pennington.

Douglas Bourgeois’s highly detailed, supersaturated, religious, and supernaturalist paintings tread on similar aesthetic ground to Imes’s color work.

Bourgeois was raised on a small farm in the rural southern Louisiana community of St. Amant, a thirty-minute drive from Baton Rouge. Religion was a very important part of Bourgeois’s life, and he was enrolled in Catholic school for grades three through eight. He served as an altar boy and entered St. Joseph Cathedral Preparatory Seminary in Baton Rouge at age 14 in order to become a priest. In 1968, he transferred out of the seminary and into public high school, then studied painting at Louisiana State University. Roman Catholic mysticism inflected his work with magic realist elements.

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109 Pennington, A Southern Collection, 224
110 Pennington, A Southern Collection, 226.
111 Rubin, 2.
He created apparition paintings, for example, *Blessed Virgin Appears to a Woman* (1978), in which “holy figures are shown in dreamlike visions before common laypeople in everyday settings.”

Like Imes, Bourgeois was fascinated by African American popular culture and race, and some of his paintings explore boundary-crossing and race mixing, depicting white actors and pop stars with darker skin tones. For example, his 1981 painting of Elvis, titled *Blue Christmas*, shows the singer with a brown skin tone and a dark, ashen five o’clock shadow under his chin. Bourgeois’s 1982 painting *Inger and the Hitchhikers* features two cameo portraits of Burt Reynolds in which he appears phenotypically black (figure 43). Inger Stevens actually married a black man, although this was kept secret until her death, which may have influenced Bourgeois’s choices in this work. Another painting, *Twenty-Five Gary Coopers* (1981), shows a mass of heads and torsos of Cooper, each with skin colors ranging from ice blue to ashen to parchment to dark brown.

In addition to playing with viewer expectations about skin tone, *Inger and the Hitchhikers* demonstrates Bourgeois’s penchant for the fantastic and the mystical. The painting is based in part on a *Twilight Zone* episode in which Stevens saw the same hitchhiker over and over while driving through the desert. The painting shows Stevens at the wheel of a majestic, gleaming vintage car driving around the bend of a seemingly

\[\text{\textsuperscript{112}}\text{Rubin, 5.}\]
endless desert road at night, billions of bright stars twinkling in the sky. The moon beams light Stevens’s way, and purplish mountains recede in the distance. Red and orange desert flowers and prickly cacti pulsate like jewels from the side of the road among luminescent gray and silver stones.

John McCrady was a Mississippi painter who, like Bourgeois, used bold color to portray magic-inflected scenes and was fascinated with African American culture and spirituality. During the 1930s, McCrady, who was born in Canton, Mississippi but lived in Hammond, Louisiana, was recognized as one of the most important Regionalist painters working in the South. According to curator Keith Marshall, McCrady’s paintings “find a complementary parallel in the stories and novels of contemporary southern writers, particularly William Faulkner.” McCrady’s paintings of New Orleans’s French quarter could “provide visual settings for Tennessee Williams’s early plays.”

Like Bourgeois, McCrady was deeply influenced by religion. “Man and God are two themes in his painting, whether it be the activities of the former or the influence of the latter, indirectly manifested in the landscape or more prominently revealed through Negro Spirituals.” McCrady interpreted religious visions and “breathed life into them on his canvases.” He did not distinguish between reality and fantasy. “For him, there

114 Ibid.
was a greater reality than that seen by the naked eye.” In his 1937 painting *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, a dying person attended by three black men is visible through the open door of a farmhouse. A golden chariot led by white horses rides toward the house through the clouds, while a group of five angels hover above the roof, one carrying a burning torch, another playing a trumpet. To the left, the devil, identified by his horns, trident, and bright red skin, seems to compete for entry into the house where the dying person lays. Controlled use of the color red triangulates the three figures—the angel carrying a burning torch, the devil, and the dying person, who is covered in a red blanket (figure 44).

In a discussion of three films with qualities of “magic realism,” literary critic Fredric Jameson identifies the “peculiar and constitutive function” of color in the depiction of a reality that is “already in itself magical or fantastic.” Color in films, such as *Fever*, a Polish film by Agnusza Holland, does not function as a homogenous medium, but is capable of “registering the pulsation” of “discontinuous intensities.” Jameson points to philosopher Stanley Cavell’s observations about color film and the viewer’s perception of realism. Cavell argues that, “when dramatic explanations cease to be our natural mode of understanding one another’s behavior...black and white ceases

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to be the mode in which our lives are convincingly portrayed.” Figures in color are familiar to us and resemble us, but are no longer psychically present to us, Cavell observes. “We read them as de-psychologized, which, for us, means un-theatricalized. And from there it is only logical to project them as inhabiting a future, a mutation away from the past we know (as we know it).”

Cavell suggests that color can create an autonomous world.

According to curator Katherine Bussard, “without a doubt…no film better dramatized the arrival of color than The Wizard of Oz.” Produced in Technicolor, the films Robin Hood and The Wizard of Oz demonstrated Cavell’s claim that: “color can serve to unify the projected world in another way than by direct reliance upon, or implication toward, the spatial-temporal consistency of the real world. The world so unified is obviously not the real past world of photography, but a consistent region of make-believe, so it is essential to their rightness that these films are children’s tales.” Black-and-white, Cavell observes, was the natural medium of visual drama, while color appeared less realistic. Film colors were not accurate transcriptions of natural colors, for one thing, and many of the early stories shot in color were explicitly unrealistic, such as

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119 Cavell, 81.
Robin Hood, The Wizard of Oz, and Gone with the Wind. As Jameson notes, color in film has become the norm rather than the exception since Cavell’s book was published. Even so, he argues, Cavell’s hypothesis “retains an ever-scandalous power, suggesting that it is a mistake to imagine the world of our ordinary daily life as a world of colors, and that in that sense it would be more correct to presume that the real world, in which we move act, and look, is more properly characterized as being ‘in’ black-and-white.”

Imes’s use of color is beholden not only to Eggleston, but to a kind of mid-twentieth-century hyper-realism in the media, as expressed in Look magazine, Hollywood films, and contemporary, photo-realist painting. “Just as black and white had transformed the visible world into a monochromatic field of darks and lights, signaling an image of documentary and/or artistic intent,” writes Kevin Moore, “exaggerated colors had produced a similar transformation, distilling a ‘colorized,’ make-believe version of reality much like the one Hollywood, TV, and ad agencies had been disseminating for some time.” When Walker Evans referred to color photography as vulgar, Moore insists, he was referring to both commercial and amateur applications of color – in advertising, fashion, National Geographic-style travel pictures, postcards, and family snapshots. These images had certain aesthetic characteristics –

120 Cavell, 91.
121 Jameson, 315.
122 Moore, Starburst, 19.
colors were altered and intensified in these vernacular images. “This was due in part to technical imperfections, both in the color processes and in their translation to print, but the effect was often intentional; colors were punched up in order to generate a hyperreal vision of products, clothes, and faraway places that appealed to conditioned consumers. Such images could be flagrantly sentimental, garish, and kitsch. Critic Bruce Downes praised fashion photographers John Rawlings, Irving Penn, and Cecil Beaton for ‘deliberately exploiting the defects of the color process.’”

Technical problems could no longer be seen as blocking the potential of color media for artistic expression. Indeed, that accuracy, which increasingly lent photographs a greater sense of naturalism and transparency, became a new issue altogether. Photographs no longer seemed to mediate the world in a pronounced way. Nonetheless, my contention here is that color maintained the capacity for visceral impact in southern photography, and that color film was a medium ideally suited to the emotional resonance of Imes’s endeavor in Mississippi. Photographer Joel Meyerowitz has suggested that slow-speed color film invites a broader range of interpretations of reality than black-and-white film, which conditions viewer expectations for seriousness and factuality. Meyerowitz’s 1978, “Cape Light” Museum of Fine Arts exhibition of

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123 Kevin Moore, 19.
124 Moore, 19.
sublime color photographs of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and the accompanying monograph, in which Meyerowitz details his process, were highly influential for those exploring color in photography. Durham, North Carolina-based photographer Alex Harris said that Meyerowitz’s show gave him permission to see in color. Imes acknowledged that he read Meyerowitz’s instructions and tried them out himself.125

“Color plays itself out along a richer band of feelings – more wavelengths, more radiance, more sensation,” Meyerowitz said in a 1977 interview. “I wanted to see more and experience more feelings from a photograph, and I wanted bigger images that would describe things more fully, more cohesively. Slow-speed color film provided that.”126 The wider band of feelings that played out in color, and the ability of color to construct a world apart from black-and-white reality are two notions, from Meyerowitz and Cavell respectively, that are important to understanding the use of color as an expressive, personal response in Imes’s photographs.

Imes’s remarks about juke joints and black life in Mississippi indicate that these subjects sparked strong emotions in him. Photographer Milly Moorhead West (b. 1949), a contemporary of Imes, has photographed most extensively in the Mississippi Delta,

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125 Interviews with Alex Harris and Birney Imes, August 2012. Imes said he did not continue to use Meyerowitz’s method after trying it.
where she grew up, and in Cuba, which she visited for the first time in 1996. West says she began working in color in the early 1980s. “In some instances, the black and white seemed like a waste of film, especially in the late afternoon or the quiet morning sun, which enhanced the density of the colors and made me realize why I took the picture in the first place.”127 Seeing cultural and social changes taking place at that time prompted her to use color, since “some things just could not be fully expressed in black-and-white.”128

West’s first trip to Cuba in 1996 was planned by the Center for Cuban Studies out of New York. “That first trip changed my life. I went from being a satisfied-with-life person to a person aware of what real joy could be. The energy I felt can’t be explained, and the work can hardly be called that…it was all magical.”129 West was energized by what she saw in Cuba from the moment she arrived. “I felt a connection in the strongest way,” she told a writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, who reviewed her exhibition, “Milly West: Cuba for Keeps,” Krowswork Gallery in Oakland, California in 2013. The exhibition was accompanied by a book titled Cuba for Keeps, designed by West’s daughter, Jasmine Moorhead, founder of Krowswork. In addition to the exhibition at

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127 Milly West Guggenheim application, 1995 or 1996.
129 Notes from interview of West by for San Francisco Chronicle from Nirmala Nataraj. Notes provided by West in March 2014.
Krow's work, West exhibited the Cuba photographs at the Fielding Wright Art Gallery at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi, 2014.

The appreciation West has for her photographic subjects in Cuba and the Mississippi Delta was in part inspired by the use of color she encountered in these communities. In a 1995-1996 application for a Guggenheim fellowship, she related poverty in the Delta to color, observing that, “sometimes the poorest people in the world are the most colorful in temperament as well as dress.” She continued: “In fact, it is often the color that attracts me to them in the first place – bright clothes on a line, hot green pants, pink or purple walls. It’s a sign that there’s more there. It’s almost never a false sign.”¹³⁰

West’s comments reflect a belief in the almost talismanic power of color – its ability to draw the photographer mystically to her subject. West has thought carefully about the differences between the uses of color in Cuba and in the Delta. “In Cuba, the use of that Caribbean blue is traditional, but in the Delta, a house painted brightly or clothes that stand out due to color or design is to announce something, I think, like I am here.”¹³¹

As she was coming into her own as a photographer, long before she went to

¹³⁰ Milly West Guggenheim application, 1995 or 1996.
¹³¹ Notes for article by Nirmala Nataraj, “Milly West’s Photographs of Cuba at S.F. Gallery,” in the San Francisco Chronicle. Notes provided by Milly West in March 2014.
Cuba, she was drawn to exploring Mississippi Delta communities that were unknown to her. Being able to cross borders into unknown territory was part of her skillset as a photographer. “There is something to be said for trusting your surroundings,” West told interviewer Catherine Kirk from Delta State University. “If I was ever afraid of going into any place, then my work would suffer.” As a photographer, West has always been fueled by curiosity, asking questions like: “What lies beyond the door of the homes, the tenement houses, and in the juke joints?”  

West’s energy is inspired not just by the process of photography but the “love and wonderment of the people who graciously let me in. For example, every time I went to Clarksdale, nothing was forced or planned, but the resulting images were the best I ever took.”

West wrestled with overcoming the racial convictions of her mother and grandparents in her own life. She spent her childhood and teenage years moving around to Memphis and different towns in Mississippi with her mother and brother – leaving Sunflower for Rosedale, the home of her maternal grandparents, and from there to Memphis, the home of her maternal grandmother, then to Oxford, Greenwood, and Corinth, Mississippi.

132 Interview with Milly West for Delta State University by Catherine Kirk. Interview transcript provided by West in March 2014.
133 2011 email from West to author.
West’s given name was Mildred Polk Lewis. She was born in Memphis while her family was living in Sunflower, where her mother became a widow at age 29. West’s father, whose family came from Rosedale, Mississippi, died of a heart attack when she was two years old. West’s grandfather on her mother’s side was a cotton broker and her paternal grandmother and uncle owned a drugstore in Rosedale called Lewis Drug Store. She learned a lot about Southern culture there. “The children who came in for ice cream – black and white – were from different worlds,” West told Catherine Kirk.134

West, her mother, and brother (born five months after the death of their father) lived for several years in Memphis where her mother worked in a downtown cotton office. The family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, in the fall of 1962 so that West’s mother could attend pharmacy school at the University of Mississippi. West was an adolescent – an eighth grader – and the place was exploding into strife. William Faulkner had just died, and James Meredith had enrolled at the University of Mississippi as the first black student.

Forty-thousand National Guardsmen who arrived in town to calm the rioting were West’s “welcoming committee,” writer Gary Bridgman recounted in a 2000 interview with West for *Memphis Magazine* – troops stopped the family on their way into

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town and searched the car. Just one month later, the Cuban missile crisis unfolded and “the world found itself on the brink of nuclear Armageddon as the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. each waited for each other to blink over the Soviet’s placement of medium-range ballistic missiles on Cuban soil.” The magazine was featuring her work on Cuba, and Bridgman liked the connection of history to her personal story.

Growing up, none of the high schools West attended were integrated. As a teenager in Greenwood, Mississippi, she volunteered at a Head Start program, the first year it was instituted in the state. Working for the program made her realize she wasn’t as comfortable with the African American community in the Delta as she may have thought. She distinctly remembers being the only white person in a room filled with dozens of black five-year-olds, several older black girls who were also volunteers, and three or four nuns. She recounts a story of taking a ride from the program with four black girls one day: “I thought it was going to be o.k., but it wasn’t. I was out of my mind with wondering what would happen if someone saw me. My teeth began to chatter, my knees were literally shaking, and I could hardly speak to them to tell them where to go. Surely, they felt my fear and that made it worse.” The experience of driving home with the girls and being afraid someone would recognize her and be angry with

her “gave her permission or strength not to be afraid so many years later as I walked down the streets and alleys of Clarksdale as a photographer.”\textsuperscript{136}

West graduated from the University of Mississippi with a BA in English and Speech and Theater. “I started photography in college while I was taking courses in journalism. My mother had a little Brownie and often took photos of us. I always felt comfortable with the camera and had great fun in the darkroom.”\textsuperscript{137}

After traveling to Colorado, she and her husband settled in Oxford. In 1984, West began a job recruiting blood donors for Mississippi Blood Services. This involved many hours of traveling across 13 counties, providing West with a great opportunity to make photographs. She was the 1996 recipient of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters photography award for her Southern Heritage Collection. In 2014, she won the Institute’s photography award for her Cuban images and book \textit{Cuba for Keeps}.

Four of West’s photographs are owned by the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans. One is the photograph titled \textit{Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman}, which West made at Aaron Henry’s drugstore in 1983 (figure 48). Henry was for many years the leader of the NAACP in Mississippi, served in the state legislature – in the House of Representatives – from 1979-1996.

\textsuperscript{136} Artist statement by Milly West.
\textsuperscript{137} 2014 email from Milly West.
The pictures of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were hanging up behind a soda fountain when West walked into the drugstore. These were the photographs the FBI put out when the men went missing. “Aaron Henry got blow-ups of the photographs and put them up there for everyone to see, to remember,” West surmised.

West’s photograph contrasts the FBI images with the mundane consumer products of everyday life – batteries, Saltines, Lectric Shave, Afro Sheen, and other drug store items. West recalls her experience making the photograph: “Here it was, 1983. I was walking around Clarksdale, thinking of myself as a pied piper…there were three little kids with me who had just started walking with me to take photos. We all sat down at the fountain. What I told Aaron Henry that day was that I admired him for keeping those photos there so people would remember what happened. Those kids I was with had no idea who those three men were, but at least they saw their faces and something might have registered, even if it came years later.” West points out that she was a young woman comfortable with being in the all African American section of Clarksdale, going into homes, walking around with the children, talking to Aaron Henry and anyone else on the streets. “Times had changed and I had changed more…My taking that photo is a memory that stays with me.”

In another one of her photographs, “Paulette at Her Mirror,” a woman named

138 2014 email from Milly West to author.
Paulette stands in front of a mirror (figure 45). Paulette was a bartender in Clarksdale. The viewer is positioned at Paulette’s back, which is partly cast in shadows. Paulette is clothed in an off-the-shoulder dress with red long-stemmed flowers on it. Her arms are held up gracefully to her face and her head is cocked slightly to the side as she fastens an earring. Paulette’s mirror is part of a vanity covered with fabrics and bottles and other items bathed in dusky light. The mirror, embellished with scalloping and rounded edges, and seems to mimic Paulette’s figure. Paulette is looking at her reflection in the mirror as she puts the finishing touches on her outfit. Thus the viewer has the sensation of being a voyeur, as the Orientalist paintings of Odalisques. West won ‘Best in Show,’ when she entered this photograph in the 1984 Arts in the Park in Memphis.

Lynne, a character in Alice Walker’s 1976 novel Meridian shares Imes and Milly West’s fascination with black working class subjects. Lynne is a Jewish civil rights worker from the suburbs of the North who marries a black civil rights worker and enjoys photographing black working class southerners. “To Lynne, the black people of the South were Art,” the narrator of Meridian observes. “This she begged forgiveness for and tried to hide, but it was no use.”139

While Imes and West were both Mississippi natives, their relationships with black nannies, friends, and neighbors were restricted. Imes and West both attended

segregated elementary and high schools, or schools that were segregated or began
desegregating while they were in attendance. They wanted contact with black
Mississippians and the seemingly separate world they occupied. Imes and West
discovered that the camera was a way to enter this world. West says her mother was a
“product of their time,” who used words like “colored” and “Negra.” She had to
shake off many of these beliefs and preconceptions as she transitioned to adulthood:
“We make so many mistakes when we are young based it seems on the unjust prejudices
of our elders, our parents, and the culture that taught them to be careful and socially
superior. I hope I have not taught my children these lessons.”

Imes grew up in an influential family in Columbus with African American
people working in his household. “There was a woman that cooked and her daughter
who helped my mother with the house and later her son, whom we children idolized,”
Imes said. He suggests that there is an interconnected relationship between blacks and
whites in the rural South. While the basis for the relationship may be economic, there are
instances of black families and white families whose lives have been connected for

140 In a 2011 email, West said: “Mama was a product of her time. The words went from Colored, to Negra, to
finally, Black. Sometimes she let on that she knew things were unjust, but she still played the role of the
white upperclass, even though we were not rich and not society people.” She recalled a time when she was
sitting with a Mexican friend, a boy, outside her house in Greenwood: “We sat on the porch and were still
there when Mama came home. After he left, she put a stop to that.”
141 2011 email interview with Milly West.
142 Birney Imes, Partial to Home, 9.
generations. Because of this connection, Imes said, the line between the two races has faded. For example, Imes conceded to Vince Aletti that the portrait Imes made of a little white child on a porch with a black woman’s hand, arm, breast – essentially half of her body – reaching down could have been him (figure 49). That the two figures are standing on a porch is important – the porch is a liminal zone between the private, domestic sphere and the world at large. It is “neither here nor there.” Positioning this interracial exchange – a special kind of relationship between white children and adult caregivers – on a porch is fitting since these relationships are neither here nor there – they are difficult to define and almost impossible to explain to those who have not experienced them.

In an essay published in the New York Times in June 2012, Alexandra Styron describes growing up with the Caribbean nanny and the South Carolinian black man who worked in her Connecticut home. The daughter of author William Styron and now an author herself, Alexandra describes the paradox in simultaneously feeling kinship for her caretakers and white guilt. Even so, she “never thought there was anything politically incorrect about my love for Terry, or Ettie, or Mavis. Nor was I deluded in my belief that the feelings were mutual.”

143 William Eggleston’s cousin, Maude Schuyler

Clay, has a photograph – *Emma and Schuyler, 1992* – that epitomizes this mystique, as it transforms Clay’s house maid, Emma, into an angel hovering above a tantruming child (Clay’s son, Schuyler) (figure 50).

Imes’s family history in Columbus is much more in keeping with triumphalist narratives of the new, business-oriented Sunbelt South than the old South of plantation mythology. There is little doubt Imes (full name Vinton Birney Imes III) was born into an important family. Imes III’s grandfather, Vinton Birney Imes, Sr. (1889-1947) was born in Gloster, Mississippi, in Amite County, the son of Lemuel Jackson and Millineum Whittington Imes. In 1922, Birney Imes, Sr., along with two partners, bought *The Columbus Dispatch* and merged it with another local paper, *The Columbus Commercial*, creating *The Commercial Dispatch* in 1922. The city’s paper of record, the *Dispatch* now covers the neighboring cities of Starkville and West Point, and became a daily in 1926.

When Birney Imes Sr. died in 1947, his son, Birney Imes Jr. (the photographer’s father), took over running the paper and contributed his thoughts to its editorial page. He bought several TV stations, including WMUR in Manchester, New Hampshire, WCBI-TV in Columbus, WBOY-TV in Clarksburg, W. Virginia. An astute businessman, Imes, Jr. also bought and sold timberland. “He inherited some money, but he made so

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144 http://www.cdispatch.com/about/
146 Higginbotham, 1.
much more,” said his friend Jake Propst. “He just sort of blossomed money out. He was a brilliant businessman. I guess he got it from his parents.”

Imes Jr. also became involved in politics, and was a delegate to the Democratic Convention in 1956. He was, moreover, a loyal southerner. He loved animals, especially dogs. During his leisure time, he enjoyed hunting duck, pheasant and quail. He was king of the Columbus’s annual pilgrimage and pageant ball in 1958.

A 1957 column for the Dispatch stated that the hoopskirts and antebellum houses of the Pilgrimage “represent a side of the South now being pushed to the background for distorted views...those gracious ladies and gentlemen are the ones who compiled the wealth of the nation and formed traditions which have made the United States the leading power of the world...There is no apology here for being Southern.”

Of Eisenhower’s decision to send federal troops into Little Rock, AK, to enforce school desegregation in 1957, a Dispatch editorial opined, “This is one time federal will cannot

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147 Higginbotham, 9-10.
148 The civil rights platform of the convention called for voting rights, equal employment, and the desegregation of public schools. In reporting on the convention, Imes, Sr. said: “The Mississippi delegation had a caucus in the afternoon and all we did was discuss the platform plank on civil rights. Nobody liked it but we didn’t vote on it,” August 16, 1956, “Convention Capers” by Birney Imes, Jr. reprinted in Higginbotham, 52. In another column, he writes, “I believe our folks today are not much different, fundamentally, from their kinfolks of another day who felt so strongly they were right that they died for their beliefs...I believe our people are again willing to pay the price for their ideals and principles,” “Birney Imes, Jr., “Convention Capers,” quoted in Higginbotham, 52.
149 Higginbotham, 28.
150 The pilgrimage is a week of events in Columbus including tours of antebellum homes and a ball to which the women wear hoop skirts.
151 Quoted in Higginbotham, 55.
be crammed down the throats of Southerners. Every bayonet in the armed forces will not be enough to make this law stick. The President should know this by now.”152 In 1950 (the year before his first son, Imes III – the photographer – was born), an editorial cautioned against taking Federal money in order to build new schools. After the government gets a foot in the door by supplying aid, the editorial noted, it would insist on a “loud voice in the operations. This means a real danger in the South. We can’t afford to take government money to build our schools. When we do, it will be the beginning of the end of running the institutions the way we want to.”153

Imes Jr. was an acquaintance of Senator John C. Stennis and Senator James O. Eastland, the latter known for his support of “state’s rights” and opposition to the civil rights movement.154 He was a close childhood friend of Jake Propst, whose father served as mayor of Columbus.155 Another friend, Bill Whitfield, reported that Imes Jr. “loved good clothes” and was always “neat, trim, and well-groomed…” As he became more

152 Higginbotham, 58. Higginbotham writes: “The editor was right about the law’s not sticking, for even though the law has been enforced and integration of the schools has occurred, there are still separate school districts in the South because of the proliferation of private schools.”
153 Higginbotham, 19.
154 In a June 6, 1957 column, Birney Imes, Jr. wrote about visiting senators James O. Eastland and John C. Stennis. Eastland was busy “shaping the fight against civil rights proposals.” He also said that in Senator Stennis’s “private office is a highly polished mahogany chair from the old Supreme Court Building marked, ‘Reserved’...It was explained that the chair was for Mississippians who never get to Washington...It serves as a constant reminder for the Senator.” quoted in Higginbotham, 54.
155 Higginbotham, 4.
successful, “he had his clothes tailored in London, when possible.” Imes Jr. spent his entire life in Columbus, except for the time he was at the Gulf Coast Military Academy and “the handful of years he spent at the University of Alabama and Ole Miss,” according to a 2003 column by Imes III that was published after his father’s death. Imes III’s father never graduated from either institution. “Refused to get out of bed for a Spanish exam, story has it,” Imes III wrote in his column.

Roger Larsen, who worked at one of the Imes, Jr.’s stations, wrote that Imes Jr. “probably had a greater impact on Columbus than any other individual in the last half of the twentieth century….Actually it can be argued that he and his father together had a greater impact on the town than anyone else in the entire century…” Sylvia Higginbotham, who in 2003 (the year of Imes Jr.’s death at age 89) published a book documenting Imes Jr.’s life, said she was surprised when, upon moving to Columbus in 1981, she found “what I called a ‘media mogul’ walking the streets of a small Southern town, passing the time of day with people he met.” She described him as a “well-dressed, articulate, gray-haired gentleman who apparently paid no mind to the position

156 Higginbotham, 4. Like his father, Imes III seemed to have enjoyed wearing good clothes in high school. He was voted “best groomed” in the 1968 yearbook. He played football, ran track, was a member of the Key Club, and served as class president his sophomore year.
158 Higginbotham, Time Passages, ii. Higginbotham. Higginbotham admitted that her definition of media mogul at that time was “anyone who owned more than one television station and also had print and radio interests.”
that he could have claimed as the publisher of the only daily newspaper in town.”¹⁵⁹

A 1971 exchange between an anonymous letter writer and the Dispatch editorial staff indicates Imes Jr.’s views on segregation. The letter writer, calling himself “Publius,” asked if his name could be withheld because he didn’t want to involve his parents, who disagreed with his point of view. He worried that southern publics were not getting truthful journalism: “The great danger in the South has come precisely from the fact that the public is not informed. Newspapers have notoriously shirked their editorial responsibilities and have printed what they thought their readers wanted….In addition, most have adhered to the long standing conspiracy of silence about anything remotely favorable to the Negro.”¹⁶⁰

The letter writer urged the Dispatch to oppose the Mississippi legislature’s attempt to “re-legalize segregation with the passage of a bill in flagrant violation of recent supreme court rulings,” which he characterized as “a blatant extension of racism.”¹⁶¹ Imes’s editorial response was derisive: “Yours is a classic case of wet behind the ear legions which infest this country and think you are smarter than your parents and everyone else…” With regard to the legislature’s bill that would re-legalize segregation, the editorial stated, “…we are on the opposite side from you. We favor it.

¹⁵⁹ Higginbotham, ii.
¹⁶⁰ Higginbotham, 103.
¹⁶¹ Higginbotham, 103.
That is as plain as we can make it.”

It seems clear from this editorial that Imes Jr. had a very different attitude toward racial relations than might be attributed to his son, Vinton Birney Imes III, who took over the Commercial Dispatch in 1996, after his father’s retirement. A July 18, 1950 column referred to the coverage by a British “picture magazine” (The Post) of a “Negro Tombigbee River baptizing” as the “surprise of the month.” It would “take ‘a lot of getting used to’ for Americans to get accustomed to British journalism”, the column quipped. The tone of amusement and (perhaps slightly affected) perplexity over British journalism is ironic, considering the subjects Birney Imes III would choose to photograph in the following decades (figure 51). The Tombigbee River baptizing photograph described in “Bits of Columbiana” was possibly very similar to the black-and-white photographs Imes made of baptisms when he returned to Columbus after college, worked for the Dispatch, and opened his own commercial photography studio in town.

Until the end of Imes’s high school years, Mississippi schools were extremely segregated, and his “exposure to and knowledge of this other world around me was very limited.”

162 Higginbotham, 104.
163 Higginbotham, Time Passages, 23.
164 Birney Imes, Partial to Home, 9.
change for me,” Imes told interviewer Vince Aletti. “One of the small group of black students who first came to the high school I attended played those sports too [football and track], and we became friends. Through that friendship I was introduced to this other world, and I began to see and question things in a way that I hadn’t before.”

One of the students Imes came to know was Jackie Ball, a star running back who later served on the Columbus city council. He was among the small group of black students who integrated Imes’s Lee High School in the fall of 1967. “Through his force of personality and quick wit, he gained immediate acceptance among his teammates and, in large part to his assimilation, there was little disruption during those formative years of school integration here,” stated a 2002 obituary for Ball, who died at age 51.

According to the obituary, Ball, in addition to being a city councilman, was an aspiring songwriter, civil rights pioneer, and political activist. “Relying on an ability with words he developed as a songwriter, Ball could twist the language into new and unexpected shapes. At a council meeting during his final term in office, Ball expressed his displeasure by announcing that he was at the ‘highest level of pissity.’”

Photographs in the 1967--1969 Lee High yearbooks show a small number of black students—two black women in the Library Club and several black men on the

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165 Imes, Partial to Home, 9.
166 Birney Imes and Conswella Bennett, “Political Wizard Jackie Ball Dies,” Commercial Dispatch (May 24, 2002).
track and football teams. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage has observed, when schools were desegregated, black students “found themselves transferred from schools named after Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and other black heroes to buildings adorned with rebel mascots and named after such illustrious Confederates as Nathan Bedford Forrest, P.G.T. Beauregard, and Robert E. Lee. A black student who entered a previously all-white high school in Americus, Georgia, in the early 1970s observed, according to Brundage: “It wasn’t really our school. Like we had lost our own school, you know, and all we had was the whites’ school.”

Before integration, two separate schools operated within the municipal school district in Columbus – Hunt High School served the black population and Lee High the white, according to a 1996 article in the Commercial Dispatch. The Justice Department filed suit against the city school district in 1968, mandating integration of the high schools. The district fought the ruling of the courts for two years. After losing in the 5th district court of appeals in New Orleans, the district was given one year to get school facilities ready for black students. In 1971, Lee High and Caldwell High were made the city’s high schools, and Hunt High became a middle school. Lee and Caldwell high schools were combined to form Columbus High School in 1993, though the high school

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167 Brundage, The Southern Past, 279.
was still divided into two separate locations. Ground was broken for construction on a brand new high school in 1995. The new building opened in 1996, a moment that marked, according to the Dispatch, “a milestone in a long, ongoing journey – a journey that began almost two centuries ago in a small one story building in a river outpost; a journey that saw a divided community unite for what it believed was for the common good of its children.”\textsuperscript{169} This was the first time in the school district’s 176 year history that all Columbus public high school students attended one school. According to an article in the Columbus Dispatch, the opening of the school was an “arduous journey through segregation, parental opposition, and the obstacle of money.”\textsuperscript{170}

The integration issue was a central part of Imes’s life growing up – a source of stress, obsession, and fascination that remained with him into adulthood. The schools were one crucible where the matter of integration was writ large. But professional photography – photojournalism and art photography – was another problematic site with regard to the topic of integration. In 1970, the photo critic A.D. Coleman pointed to the “de facto segregation” within photojournalism in the U.S. He wrote in Popular Photography that while photographers prided themselves on being part of a “hip, pace-setting profession,” there was as much de facto segregation in that field as in any other.

\textsuperscript{169} The Commercial Dispatch, “New Columbus High School Opens.”
\textsuperscript{170} The Commercial Dispatch, “New Columbus High School Opens.”
Coleman referred to Gordon Parks as “the industry’s carefully selected token Negro and the only one yet permitted to reach the top,” noting that only a handful of black photographers have been able to earn a living as photojournalists.\textsuperscript{171} Despite the dramatic increase in coverage of “black-oriented material and news events over the past decade,” Coleman observed, the situation hadn’t really improved, and the assignments for such stories had simply gone to white photographers. “Intent as we are on preserving our distorted vision of black reality,” Coleman observed, “we have insured that it reaches us only after filtration through white eyes.”\textsuperscript{172}

The same bias existed in the world of art photography, Coleman said. Established galleries did not exhibit many prints made by non-whites and art museums for the most part ignored them completely. “Thus the black artist is cut off from his potential public” Coleman argued, “and from his peers, forced to work in a vacuum and go unnoticed.”\textsuperscript{173} Bruce Davidson’s 1970 “East 100th Street” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art forced critics to confront these issues. The exhibit comprised more than forty photographs of a block in East Harlem. Much like Birney Imes would for his subjects later on, Bruce Davidson gave prints from the exhibition (and accompanying book) to residents of the East Harlem neighborhood, and made sure they received copies

\textsuperscript{173} Coleman, 21.
of the book when it was published. Money from the sale of the book was used for neighborhood assistance. However, despite all of these efforts, Coleman wrote in his review of the show, Davidson – an Illinois native and member of the Magnum Photo Agency – was not only an outsider but an alien to this neighborhood.\textsuperscript{174} “He is neither black nor Puerto Rican, but white,” Coleman wrote. While he may, “like the block’s residents, ‘love and hate’ this ghetto,” unlike them, “he has the option of leaving which is implicit in his impulse to ‘keep going back.’”\textsuperscript{175}

Davidson’s foreigner status within the community does not make his work invalid, Coleman wrote. But any white photographer’s documentation of non-whites is limited because, no matter how insightful a white photographer may be, and despite all precautions he might take, he is still white and still alien. “Thus, even where there is mutual admiration and respect between photographer and subject, there is automatically a barrier, for they stand on different sides of the socio-cultural fence.”\textsuperscript{176}

Furthermore, Coleman wrote, there is a problem with making brutal living conditions beautiful in photographs. They should instead be ugly and difficult to look at. Anything less “permits us the delusion that this brutalization of the human spirit serves some

\textsuperscript{174} Coleman, “East 100\textsuperscript{th} Street,” \textit{Light Readings} 46.
\textsuperscript{175} Coleman, “East 100\textsuperscript{th} Street,” 46.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
purpose, if only to provide photographers with ripe subject matter.”177 “It is a little short of scandalous,” Coleman wrote, “that [as of 1970] the Museum of Modern Art has never given a one-man show to a non-white photographer.”178 And if the museum waited until it can find such an exhibition that does not have political overtones (as it is wont to do), it risked becoming “entrapped in what I hope is an inadvertent but nonetheless racist policy.”179 Indeed, the “closed circuit” of images of non-white subcultures taken exclusively by whites must be broken, Coleman argued. He continued:

To do so at this tormented moment, not furtively but by conscious and announced decision, would be an act of courage…out of the resulting contrasts might come a fuller and deeper understanding of what it means to be black (and white) in America today.180

This was a fascinating admission in 1970 and clearly the prelude to The Black Photographers Annual, a photography serial that began in 1973 and continued to 1976.

The introduction to the first issue by Clayton Riley confronted the “correlation between image and destiny,” and the lies that America has prepared “for the general and specific population.” It reads, “Ours has been the myth of our ugliness. All wrong were our skin tones, ranging as they do from mahogany to cream, mis-shapen have our features been

177 Ibid, 47.
179 Ibid, 48.
180 Ibid, 48.
in spreading the broad nose and large lips across the map of our faces…” The inaugural volume featured black-and-white portraits by black photographers, including Lloyd E. Saunders, Ray Gibson, Theron Taylor, Shawn Walker, and James Van DerZee.

As a white Mississippian, Imes might be considered an outsider – an alien – who did not belong in the subculture of the jukes. The virtuosity with which he used color to photograph these spaces makes them appear, as critics have noted, magical and fantastic – spaces separate from black-and-white reality. The magic realist idiom (effected by Imes’s super-saturated color and emphasis on unexpected juxtapositions) is well-suited to boundary-crossings, whether those boundaries “are ontological, political, geographical, or generic.” Magic realism, indeed, facilitates “the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction.” Saturated color emphasizes the exoticism of Imes’s roadhouses and the transcendent qualities of these “peripheral” postcolonial spaces, placing the Juke Joint work within the tradition of magic realism.

In a 1992 report for The Houston Chronicle on a Houston Art Dealers Association, Patricia Johnson called Imes’s color “gorgeous” and “saturated,” “sparkling,” “stunning,” and “bathed in surreal light.” His photographs display “intense coloration”

and “crisp sumptuousness of color.”183 The color, she suggests, is super-real, far more intense than real life. Other reviewers commented on the lavishness of Juke Joint. An Associated Press review of the series emphasized its vividness and boldness: “The Pink Pony Café in Darling boasts an irregular design of red, green, and black spots of paint on its unpainted wooden walls, and white ceilings with red polka dots.”184 In a review of Juke Joint for Mississippi Magazine, John R. Kemp claimed that the real Delta – “the hot, sweaty, flat, rich, poor Delta” leered out from Imes’s photographs. He continued, commenting in particular on the lewdness of the color, saying that:

…rhythm and blues echoes from walls
splashed with reds and hot pinks like some
abstract expressionist canvas…185

“Very little in them makes me think: yes, life’s just like that,” novelist Richard Ford wrote in his introduction to Juke Joint. “Life’s usually not this pretty; its colors are hardly ever this substantial, this bright and chosen.” If Ford himself traveled to these places and viewed them with his own eyes, he predicted, life would be infinitely more quotidian: “pale, hesitant, less noticeable, the light more diffuse, human activity less

fixed, more open to speculation.” Writer Michael Pearson writes that “Imes’s photographs lay seductive claim to people’s attention. The ubiquitous Budweiser cans, the Colt 45 ads, the blurred faces, the ghostly bodies, the primitive murals on the walls…”

Clearly Imes’s color serves conceptual, atmospheric needs as much as, or more than, conventional representational needs. His photographs make the jukes look mystical and, as I have been arguing, there is evidence that this effect is a function of how Imes perceived the spaces.

In an interview with the Nola Defender, Imes said there is a “magical sense to the décor and energy” of the juke joints, “a raw energy that evoked the timeless quality where the blues was spawned.” In the wall text for Imes’s 2011 exhibition at the Ogden Museum of Southern art, Imes called the jukes “products of a process that took the elemental and transformed it into something rare and wondrous.” The juke joints in Imes’s photographs seem like fantastical spaces to outsiders of any race unfamiliar with them. What comes across to these outsiders is what Imes felt about the spaces – they were part of a world that had been forbidden to him in childhood and early adulthood. “Growing up in Mississippi in the ’50s and ’60s how could one not be obsessed or at

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187 Pearson, 74.
least intensely curious about the relationships between whites and blacks here? Photography has been a way for me to look at those relationships, a way to seek understanding – to do something that was taboo for me as a child.”

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Alejo Carpentier made a sharp distinction between European Surrealism and the “marvelous real.” I would argue that Imes’s decisions about framing align him with the artistic registers of both magic realism and Surrealism. Imes’s art – which channels the fantastic, otherworldly realm of the juke joint – suggests his sensitivity to English literature scholar Patricia Yaeger’s suggestion that a hallucinatory condition can result from a confrontation with overly constrictive social conditions. Imes’s work also corroborates curator Sue Spaid’s claim that “Delta references frequently intimate some enchanting world where the unbelievable routinely happens.”

The repurposing of objects in ingenious and unexpected ways in the juke joints Imes photographed resulted in Surrealist juxtapositions that are, I would argue, in keeping with the definition of the movement put forth in 1917 by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Apollinaire understood Surrealism to be a form of expression that involved a strong element of surprise. This element of surprise was to be achieved through unexpected juxtapositions, the best of which were not the result of conscious

188 Birney Imes, Partial to Home, 10, Interview with Vince Aletti.
189 Sue Spaid, “Going Places: Jackson to Natchez and Back Again,” Mississippi Invitational (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2006).
deliberation. “A chance encounter of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,” held beauty for the French poet Comte de Lautreamont, who influenced the Surrealists.\textsuperscript{190} In Dada as well, respect for the laws of chance indicates a respect for forces outside of rationalism.\textsuperscript{191} By means of framing, Imes emphasizes the unexpected juxtapositions he encounters in the jukes. In A.D.’s Place, Glendora, 1986, curtains so blood red they seem to glow hang on a windowless white wall. All around them are painted black polka dots (figures 52-56).

These \textit{Juke Joint} photographs are aesthetically linked to photographer John Divola’s late-1970s color images of an abandoned house at Zuma Beach in California. Before photographing it, Divola sprayed-painted patterns on the walls of the fire-wrecked beach house, “sometimes tossing objects such as magazines into the air, photographing them.”\textsuperscript{192} As in Imes’s photographs, the color is neon and electric, stretching the boundaries of credible reality (figure 57). Divola’s images are likewise breathtaking and strange, with interior and exterior spaces overlapping visually onto each other. This fluid relationship between inner and outer spaces is in marked contrast to Imes’s juke joint photographs. In most of these photographs, the interiors seem to be hermetically sealed, available to viewing only by means of Imes’s photograph.


\textsuperscript{191} Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale. “Dada.” \textit{Grove Art Online}.

\textsuperscript{192} Kevin Moore, 30.
A.D.’s Place calls to mind other Surrealist windows that subvert the function of allowing light in or enabling inhabitants to see outside. In René Magritte’s 1963 painting, The Telescope, a window opens onto a black void. The peaceful blue sky and fluffy white clouds are somehow affixed to the glass of the window itself which, when opened, reveals darkness (figure 58).

Clarence John Laughlin (1905-1985) was a self-declared Surrealist photographer from New Orleans who engineered gothic tales and tableaux in his photographs by inserting actors and props. He used the techniques of double exposure and combination printing to symbolize haunting, spirits and insidious underlying realities. In a 1973 Aperture monograph, critic Jonathan Williams praised Laughlin, saying that no one in the history of photography had equaled his “feeling for the animate life of architecture.”

Williams inserted Laughlin firmly within the deepest, darkest recesses of the Southern Gothic: “Clarence is all phantasmagoria and gumbo – Archimboldo, ‘The Invasion of the Body Snatchers,’ Grandville, Belle Grove Plantation, The Wizard of Oz, and skillet corn bread…” According to Williams, Laughlin was a “visionary talent,” fed by something “in those bayous so far from the outside world.”

In Laughlin’s 1948 Elegy for a Moss Land, the photographer uses the camera and

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193 Ibid, 5.
195 Williams, 8.
black-and-white film to conjure a ghostly apparition (figure 59). By means of multiple exposures, he staged a scene in which a zombie-like woman is placed within a plantation scene. The Big House and Spanish Moss – two potent symbols of the antebellum Deep South – form a gauzy vision of the southern gothic.

Ghosts also have a presence in Imes’s *Juke Joint* photographs. Because he used a small aperture and long exposure to create highly detailed images, anything that moved, such as a person, could be recorded as a shadow (figure 60). Viewers such as Richard Ford and Ofi-Adelia Scruggs reported strong reactions to the shadowy forms that appeared in the photographs. On the occasion of a 1994 exhibition mounted by the Houston Art Dealer’s Association, Patricia C. Johnson observed that the figures in Imes’s juke joints were “intuited rather than seen, in the dead heat of day and the darkest, neon-lit midnight.” Imes explains the technical reason for this in his afterword to *Juke Joint*:

Generally I prefer a small lens aperture to achieve adequate depth of field. This requires exposure times that can range from several seconds to several minutes. With exposures of this length any movement within the frame – a figure walking in front of the camera, a beer can lifted to a mouth, or a billiard ball rolling across a table – usually appears on the film as a ghostlike blur. Rather than try to control this motion I usually allow these movements to take their natural course during the exposure, and it is not until I view

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Durham, North Carolina-based photographer Alex Harris has also noted the frustrations of holding still for a lengthy, detail-recording color exposure. Writing about the first color portrait he made – of a New Mexico rancher and his wife – Harris remembered, “It was difficult to make this kind of a portrait with a view camera. The machine seemed to get in the way; and for anyone trying to hold still, the color exposures were painfully slow.”

The ghostly forms wrought by the detail-rendering long exposures in *Juke Joint* contributed to the otherworldly quality of these photographs. Furthermore, they connect the imagery to a tradition of magic real and southern gothic literature in which, as Flannery O’Connor put it, “ghosts can be very fierce and instructive.” Some literary ghosts, writes scholar Lois Parkinson Zamora, “serve their creators as carriers of transcendental truths, as visible or audible signs of spirit.” Other ghosts, she writes, “carry the burden of tradition and collective memory.” Ghosts from the past “often act

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as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion. Still other ghosts are agents of aesthetic effect…the fantastical release/relief from the constraints of reason.” Like the silhouettes in Imes’s *Pink Pony Café* (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), ghosts are bearers of cultural and historical burdens, representing the dangers, anxieties, and forces of passion that civilization banishes. Because they make absence present, ghosts foreground the main concern of magical realism – the nature and limits of the knowable, Zamora says. They represent an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of western modernity – that reality is knowable, predictable, and controllable, and unsettle modernity’s basis in progressive, linear history – “they float free in time, not just here and now but then and there, eternal and everywhere. Ghosts embody the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove…Magical realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable, and ghosts are often our guides.”

Ghosts in *Juke Joint* signal the eruption of histories and horrors (like the ghost daughter in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*). It is telling that Imes, a seasoned and skilled

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200 Zamora, 497.
201 Zamora, “Magical Romance/Magical Realism,” 498.
photographer, allowed these technical imperfections to remain in the photographs. Doing so indicates his belief that the ghostly forms were part and parcel of these fantastic spaces. As Surrealist art, these photographs “introduce oscillations at the surface of things,” whereby “the pattern of the real is torn.”202 And just as he does in *Juke Joint*, Imes addresses southern history and black and white relationships in *Whispering Pines*. A formerly segregated roadhouse, the boundaries between black and white had totally disintegrated by the time Imes began photographing there around 1975. Imes employed the dual artistic idioms of the magic real and the grotesque to depict the Pines, which opened in 1949, with a white side and a black side. Like the juke joints, the reality of the Pines is itself “marvelous” by Carpentier’s definition. In its glory days, the roadhouse had a concrete dance floor poured out under the pines, a neon moon suspended above.203 “The mirage of an oasis comes to mind,” mused curator Trudy Wilner Stack, “when I imagine the searching photographer’s first glimpse of a declining roadhouse off in the distance.”204

During the roughly 15 years Imes spent photographing Whispering Pines, he switched between black-and-white and color film, printing both types of photograph in the 1994 monograph. The switch-off between media – black-and-white versus color,

documentary reality versus fantasy – is a formal indicator of the photographic content of the Pines work – the crossing and outright destruction of racial boundaries. Triplett’s appearance in the photographs as a grotesque figure also signals the presence of southern history and the marvelousness of this world of boundary crossings. Triplett is, in the words of journalist Grover Lewis, a “cracker,” a “feral old duff not even near the fringes of respectable society.” Imes’s saw in “Triplett an odd human instrument whose slow and painful demise suggests the close of one chapter of our national history and the opening of another.”

Indeed, Imes pulls no punches in his depiction of Triplett, who became his close friend over the course of many visits to the Pines. Imes puts forth a raw depiction of Triplett – a man with several missing teeth, a lumpy body, and sagging flesh beneath stained “wife-beaters” and plaid shirts. In some of the photographs, a safety pin is clasped to his breast holding rings that belonged to his late wife (figure 61). In others, he wears the gaudy diamond-like ring on his finger (figure 62). His skin is so white it’s almost translucent, spotted with brown and lined with blue veins. Brown, mole-like lumps dot his chest (figure 64). He dines on chitterlings coated in pepper, from a plate resting on the seat of a chair (figure 63). We as viewers see all of this because Imes

photographed it and, of the 15 years worth of photographs made at the Pines, Imes chose to include these images in his book.

Several close-ups of Triplett in color emphasize the imperfections of his white skin (figure 64). One image shows only his arm, pushing open a torn screen door (figure 65). The white flesh under his bicep wrinkles and sags, while his forearm is mottled with age spots. On the soft inner flesh of his elbow, there is a brown mole with a white dot in the center. The photograph does not invite extended viewing. Indeed, it places the Whispering Pines photographs firmly within the realm of the grotesque.

While the grotesque is fantastic — “glittering with the aura of the astonishing, the out-of-the-ordinary,” it appears in the quotidian detail as well – in Blume’s chitterlings and pig’s feet, his cigars and stained shirts. Imes, like the southern writer Patricia Yaeger describes, uses “descriptions of extraordinary bodies to show the ordinary effects of southern racial history.” Yaeger writes that the “deformation of the southern body is a surprisingly constant theme in stories and anecdotes about the South….the body is not portrayed in isolation from the segregated world but as a hybrid form – already mixed with or imprinted by its environment.” The constrictions of southern race relations deform both black and white figures. The grotesque represents an “image of society”

206 Yaeger, 237.
207 Ibid.
being “carved into the flesh.” The grotesque, as Yaeger writes, “draws attention to the body as a stain or spot, to the tacky, sticky, somatic self that will not go away.” Its excess of meaning “opens a space of permeable, ongoing disturbance and offers another way of engaging with the reader’s soma: a kind of contact zone where the reader runs smack into ideology – but ideology as body and blood.”

Other bizarre subjects in Imes’s Whispering Pines photographs communicate complex implications for race in the post-Civil Rights Act, post-Voting Rights Act South through the idiom of the grotesque. A black-and-white photograph from *Whispering Pines* shows Triplett (the proprietor) and Rosie Stevenson (the woman who worked the black side of the roadhouse since 1959) standing together (figure 66). The photograph seems to depict a domestic scene. Indeed, since Triplett lived at *Whispering Pines* and was sometimes depicted in his bed or underclothes, the place seemed in limbo between public, private, domestic and recreational. Rosie, with her curlers and American flag bandana, like a beleaguered and long-suffering wife, seems to help Triplett keep his balance. With white-knuckled, his left hand grasps hers, while his right brandishes a gun directly against her head, his hand buttressed against her. He gazes into a corner of the room, a cigar clamped in his mouth. The position seems precarious for Rosie, with

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208 Quoted in Yaeger, 237.
209 Yaeger, 238.
210 Yager, 248.
Triplett’s gun so close. Curator Trudy Wilner As Stack wrote in her introduction to *Whispering Pines*, as Triplett fell into old age and ill health, he became dependent on Rosie for everything. Imes writes in the book’s postscript: 

In the mid-eighties, Blume’s health began to decline, and he moved over to the Black Side so Rosie could better take care of him. The White Side, clogged with debris he had collected over the years, became known as the “archives”...a ruptured appendix put him in the hospital in 1989.

This bizarre place – where Jim Crow boundaries unravel and the lines between public and private, domestic and recreational blur so completely – is tucked off in the woods about 15 miles from Imes’s Columbus home, “5 miles north of Brooksville on Highway 45 in Crawford, MS.” Grover Lewis, who visited the Pines with Imes described his journey: 

Imes drove west across the Tombigbee River and and turned south on U.S. 45 into the Prairie. The highway, almost empty of traffic, wound through low, rolling hills and lush farmland cultivated in patches of cotton and immense tracks of soybeans... Fifteen miles from town, Imes pulled off into a tangle of undergrowth that I didn’t immediately recognize as

212 *Whispering Pines*, 76.
a parking lot and rolled to a stop at the end of a cinder-block building resembling a stock shed.\textsuperscript{214}

Like the juke joints, Whispering Pines is a backwoods oasis that appears suddenly out of a tangle of brush. It is a similarly marvelous space and Imes’s camera becomes the medium to convey its magic, wonder, and otherworldliness. After Triplett’s funeral in July 1991, Imes stopped by the Pines on his way home. He described a supernatural presence there:

I had a key to the front door and something drew me in. Whether it was the day, the heat, all the stuff, smells, or just being back after a long time away I don’t know, but there was a palpable presence. The camera was in the car, and I wondered if it might be possible to convey this presence with photographs.\textsuperscript{215}

In his description of the drive to Whispering Pines, writer Grover Lewis described being immersed into a humming, raw place – “towering thickets of trees” that “gave off a dense, primeval hum that enfolded you after a while.”\textsuperscript{216} The mirage of an oasis comes to mind, writes Stack, “when I imagine the searching photographer’s first glimpse of a declining roadhouse off in the distance: ‘Whispering Pines’ (a dreamy sort of name)

\textsuperscript{215} Imes, \textit{Pines}, 77.
\textsuperscript{216} Lewis, “Juke Joints.”
growing quickly larger and more real in his dusty windshield.”217 Evidently Imes was not the only one dazzled by the Pines.

Imes’s work at Whispering Pines and in the juke joints hangs in the balance between documentary realism and fantasy. Color sometimes serves as a hinge between these realms, as Whispering Pines teeters back and forth between black-and-white and color film. Several black-and-white photographs in the book address themes of transcendence and the surreal in black-and-white. One such image shows a black man (Rosie’s brother) and a white man wearing 3-D glasses (figure 67). The black man is seated on a bench, protectively cuddling a large dog. The dog is positioned so that he is concealing the man’s leg, and, bizarrely substituting for the hidden appendage. A white man wearing an unbuttoned flannel shirt stands behind him, leaning on the table with both hands. His mouth is parted and he is smiling, looking awestruck. The 3-D glasses make the viewer wonder what kinds of visions these men are having through the paper frames and plastic lenses. Our vision of this scene is in black-and-white, but we are invited to consider that the two subjects of this photograph, one black and one white, are seeing something hyper-color and hyper-real.

The black-and-white images in Whispering Pines are dispersed throughout the

217 Birney Imes, Whispering Pines (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), introduction by Trudy Wilner Stack, 11
book but fewer in number than the color images. Two of the black-and-white photographs show the same black man who was wearing the 3-D glasses looking as though he is dancing or in a trance. In one close-up shot that shows his face and upper torso, we see one of his eyes rolled back into his head, revealing only the white part of what looks like a glass eye. The same white man from the 3-D glasses photograph stands behind him, gazing at him with an amazed expression on his face. It looks as though they are communicating telepathically – each knows the other is looking at him, even if he can’t see him (figures 70 and 71). Or is this glaucoma? The photograph almost implies a blindness on the part of this man. Furthermore, these square format photographs call to mind Diane Arbus’s photographs of “freaks” – transvestites, dwarfs, twins, giants – before her death in 1971 (figure 68).

Eudora Welty and O.N. Pruitt (the Columbus-based photographer discussed earlier in this chapter) photographed freak shows – Patricia Yaeger referred to Welty as “disturbing” and “freak-obsessed.” Rising early to photograph carnival workers setting up, Welty became interested in the posters advertising so-called “freak” shows. These posters were “a whole school of naïve folk art,” she said, depicting, for example, a group of bystanders in fancy clothes being horrified by an alleged snake-man. Imes’s

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Patricia Yaeger, Dirt and Desire, 62. “Let’s begin with the problem of domestication. Why is it that a writer as freak-obsessed and fiercely disturbing as Eudora Welty can consistently be described as ‘one of our purest, finest, gentlest voices?’”
black-and-white square format photographs in Whispering Pines gesture toward Arbus’s and Welty’s photographs of freak show posters (figure 69).

Despite being in the mystical, primordial backwoods of Mississippi, Whispering Pines is within the reaches of “globalization. In some of the images, imperialism juxtaposes objects from far-flung corners of the globe to the remotest corners of Mississippi. Imes’s images depict a place teeming with the detritus accrued in postcolonial, postmodern Mississippi. One photograph is a still-life pastiche – a black-and-white photograph of Triplett, a King Edward Imperial cigar box, and several tape cassettes. One of the cassettes reads “Blues” and lists various dates (presumably of recordings). Another tape reads “Made in Hong Kong.” The Blues, a multicultural product combining musical traditions from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, is recorded on a tape manufactured in Hong Kong, an outpost of the British Empire until 1997. Triplett, a cultural product of the Mississippi backwoods, is assembled along with these disparate yet tortuously related artifacts (figure 72).219

219 Imes was a still photographer for the 1991 Mira Nair film, Mississippi Masala, which illustrates the complicated cultural juxtapositions erupting along the Delta in the 1980s. The film stars Denzel Washington and chronicles the romance between his character, a black Mississippian, and an Indian woman played by Sarita Choudhury, whose family was displaced to Mississippi from Uganda when Idi Amin took power in 1971. “During the British rule in India, many Indians were sent to Uganda to assist in the building of a railroad. When the railroad was complete, most of the Indians decided to make Uganda their new home. Soon they became rich property owners and enjoyed a far better standard of living than native Ugandans. Some conservative parents of second generation Ugandan-Indians refused to permit their children to marry native Ugandans….In November of 1972 General Idi Amin made it mandatory for all Asians to leave Uganda, as he wanted Africa to be a ‘black Africa.’” Mississippi Masala tells the story of one of the displaced
Mississippi writer Cynthia Shearer’s 2005 novel Celestial Jukebox addresses the theme of globalization and hybridity in Mississippi. Sometimes the cultural juxtapositions are bizarre and jarring enough to seem surreal. In her novel, a Mauritanian teenager named Boubacar immigrates to the fictitious Delta town of Madagascar, Mississippi. The first person he meets is the Chinese man, Angus Chien, who runs Celestial Grocery, the town grocery store and “the unacknowledged heart of the little dying town.” When in one scene of the novel he is asked by a visitor if he has any good barbecue, Chien replies with words that “rolled out of his mouth like sleepy fat birds, a southern drawl that did not match his Chinese face.” The Celestial was, “the last of a constellation of Chinese-run country stores that used to exist in almost every river town between Memphis and New Orleans and sold plaid flannel shirts from Taiwan, sardines from Finland next to pantyhose from North Carolina. “Cheap families that moved from Kampala to Greenwood, Mississippi…Since the daughter, Meena, had a dark complexion, she was often mistaken for Mexican. Her father holds a grudge against the black Africans who displaced him and took over his property. Meena begins having an affair with a black man who runs a business cleaning carpets in motel rooms. “Watch how tensions rise when salt is rubbed on old wounds, and racism, called ‘tradition’ by some folks in the U.S., raises its ugly head, perhaps to claim more victims.”

Internet Movie Database summary, written by Ed Sutton, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102456/plotsummary Color photographer Mitch Epstein was the co-producer and production designer of the film.

220 Shearer, Celestial, 32.
222 Shearer, Celestial, 31.
cotton-candy textured baby dresses from the Philippines hung on a dusty rack alongside camouflage t-shirts from Alabama meant for deer hunters. Shotgun shells and tractor sparkplugs, Elvis and Ole Miss t-shirts, baby formula and diapers, herbicides and hemorrhoid ointments, horse liniment, bridles...Costs were always tallied on a red lacquer abacus that had come all the way from China in 1938." There is an element of the marvelous real in the sheer plentitude and strangeness of these juxtapositions of consumer products. Yet they illustrate the pragmatist reality of the post-industrial South and the way that consumption unifies and levels difference between cultural products.

Shearer’s description of the group of houses where Mauritanian immigrant Boubacar makes his home is similarly fantastical. Like a mirage in a desert of Mississippi woods there is a glimmering apparition:

Next door, a rickety boathouse stood on its piers over the water, and stark, strange animals made from bright stovepipe stood above it. A sign arched over an oyster shell path from the road to the boathouse, ANARCHY GARDEN OF THE MEZZALUNA MILLENNIUM. Tiny dolls dangled like little white corpses from it. The small trees around the boathouse were cobwebbed with gold lights strung in a disorderly way. Silver disks made from pie pans reflected the sun, and shards of colored glass dangled from strings, and clinked dully together. On the bare branches of a dead tree, bottles of many colors were upended.

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Shearer, Celestial 33.

Shearer, Jukebox, 28. Boubacar identifies the colored bottles as having the ability to detain whatever spirits meant harm to the household and theorized that the neighbors could be from Senegal.
What Shearer describes is very similar to the apparition or mirage that Birney Imes’s *Juke Joint* conjures. The monograph recreates the artist’s process of confronting and entering the spaces, rendered in spectacular color. In doing so, he crossed over from a white Mississippi boyhood policed by racial division into another world.
4. William Greiner

Catastrophe has a way of making the ordinary extraordinary, journalist Robin Miller wrote in a review of Baton Rouge-based photographer William Kross Greiner’s 2008 exhibit *Fallen Paradise: Photographs of New Orleans, 1995-2005.*\(^1\) Mostly made prior to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, the *Fallen Paradise* photographs depict supposedly overlooked elements of the metropolitan New Orleans landscape – parking lots, drainage pipes, trailers, movie theaters, and pool halls – in expressive color. In these images, urban/suburban detritus takes on heightened significance, as it does in some horror and suspense films. In such films, an apparently mundane detail is unveiled as hugely significant in the denouement. One of Greiner’s greatest influences is photographer William Eggleston, whom critics have observed often invests the seemingly quotidian and mundane with monumentality and who has influenced filmmakers such as David Lynch that traffic in suspense and rely heavily on color to create a mood.\(^2\)

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the underlying edginess of Greiner’s images seemed acutely palpable and foreboding to some onlookers, who noted that such

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\(^1\) The exhibit was on display at the Louisiana Museum of Art and Science in Baton Rouge in 2008.

attentive, color-laden portraits of urban, exurban, and suburban commonplaces seemed to mysteriously foreshadow the horrors of Katrina. A 1998 image depicts the infamous 17th Street Canal (which released floodwaters into New Orleans after Katrina) abstracted and distanced from its function (figure 73). When Greiner made this picture, he “had no idea disaster would strike seven years later, that the canal would flood the city. No one did.” Yet an unspoken, ill-defined dread seems to nip at the edges of these sometimes harshly colored, mostly un-peopled landscapes. Intuition, Robin Miller observed – a mysterious, almost supernatural form of privileged prescience – played an important role in Greiner’s picture-making process: “He didn’t plan this composition or any of the rest in the gallery,” the reviewer reported about the Fallen Paradise images. “They just happened. Ask him, and that’s what he’ll tell you. He depends on intuition in his photography, and it’s pretty much on target.”

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3 Robin Miller, “Photos Capture Everyday New Orleans Before Katrina,” Baton Rouge Advocate magazine section, 5E, August 3, 2008. “The scenes were something the passersby saw every day, roads, waterways, parking lots, old buildings – none of it too special.” Miller observed. The photographs depict sites in the New Orleans area forever changed by hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

4 Miller, “Photos Capture.” The 17th Street Canal flows into Lake Pontchartrain. It sits on the boundary between New Orleans and the suburb of Metairie. It forms a large portion of the boundary. During Hurricane Katrina, part of the canal wall split open and released floodwaters into the city.

5 Anne Price of the Baton Rouge Advocate called Fallen Paradise a “remarkable photographic record of the decline of parts of a great city.” August 24, 2008.

6 Miller, “Photographs Capture Everyday New Orleans Before Katrina.” Greiner has said of his photographic intuition: “I work intuitively. I work on issues and themes that seem to be relevant in my life at a certain moment, and try to translate that into the subjective process of going out to the world and choosing what is included and what is excluded in the picture.” Photography has a history of being likened to or used in the service of the occult and attempts to understand the supernatural. See Clement Cheroux, The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and
In this chapter, I discuss selected images – most of them from three of Greiner’s pre-Katrina photographic series – *Gone But Not Forgotten* (1991-1996), *The Reposed* (1989-1998), and *Homefront* (1992-2002). Each of these series, like *Fallen Paradise*, seems to express in visceral color an unsettled attitude toward the Greater New Orleans and Baton Rouge Metropolitan Areas. Admittedly, this unsettled quality in the photographs is especially palpable from a post-Katrina vantage point. “I grew up in New Orleans, which sits at an elevation above sea level,” Greiner commented in a 2010 interview. “As a child, I often wondered if the Gulf of Mexico would one day swallow us. I would look out over the levees, half expecting to see a wall of water rushing towards me. As we all know, that day did indeed come.” Like many other New Orleanians (those who were fortunate enough), Greiner relocated to Baton Rouge after Katrina. He did it begrudgingly, adjusting uneasily and mournfully to the new landscape. Like Eggleston, Greiner claims to stay away from broad social issues in his work for the most part, but

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8 “The concrete and trees of Baton Rouge are a far cry from her native Mandeville, a popular destination for yachting along Lake Pontchartrain that suffered severe hurricane damage.” “Overnight, Baton Rouge has replaced New Orleans as the most populous city in the state. And with that title come all the challenges of a booming metropolis.” Ian Urbina and Jeremy Alford, “As One City is Emptying, Another Finds Itself Full,” *The New York Times* (September 2, 2005).
admits that Katrina made him “think about the world and how fragile it is...”

It may seem anachronistic and un-rigorous to read Greiner’s pre-2005 work in light of the Katrina disaster. However, as art historian Gennifer Weisenfeld has noted, photographs carry within them vestiges of the past, present, and future. “By underscoring the present temporal position of the viewer, who embodies the potential to act in the future,” Weisenfeld writes, “photographs communicate a sense of imminence while reinforcing a sense of distance.” I argue that Greiner’s pre-Katrina photographs in the Gone But Not Forgotten, Reposed and Homefront series communicate an imminent unsettledness, even doom, through expressive and sometimes supersaturated color. Their ability to communicate unsettledness is due in part to several cultural, political, and environmental factors that predated but are socially and politically related to how Katrina’s aftermath was understood by the media, the public, and government officials. These factors are the 1990s and early 2000s climate of race relations in the United States and the creeping sense of imminent environmental and urban disaster in the ever-precarious setting of Greater New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and nearby parishes. The photographs communicate uneasiness by means of visceral color and the choice of subject. In highlighting an apparently mundane detail, they create suspense in the

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9 June 25, 2011 email from Greiner to author.
tradition of filmmakers like Wes Craven, Alfred Hitchcock, Stephen King, and David Lynch – storytellers whose work literature and film studies scholar Bernice Murphy has defined being as part of the “suburban gothic” genre.\textsuperscript{11}

In 1957, William Kross Greiner was born in New Orleans, where his grandfather owned a lumber business called Kross Lumber and Wrecking Company (figure 74). Greiner says he started making photographs at 12 or 13 years old, energized and inspired by the example of Sports Illustrated photographer Neil Leifer (figure 75). “I would spend hours out in front of my house photographing cars, as they flew down the street,” said Greiner. “There was something magical about the whole process, freezing objects, stopping time.”\textsuperscript{12} Greiner took photography seriously, photographing for the school newspaper and for the National Football League after he graduated high school.\textsuperscript{13}

Greiner enrolled at Bradford College in 1979 after he left the National Football League. At this small liberal arts college near Boston, Greiner met two students from Memphis, TN, who told him about Eggleston’s 1976 monograph, William Eggleston’s Guide. “I looked at this book and although I could not completely grasp its complexity and originality, I realized photography had the potential to be very personal and it did

\textsuperscript{13} Michael Werner, “William Greiner.”
not have to function as journalism or ‘news.’” He traveled with his friends to Memphis and was able to meet Eggleston. “This encounter was a like a fork in the road and I pretty much abandoned photography as journalism.”

After earning his Associate of Arts degree from Bradford, Greiner enrolled at Tufts University in Medford, MA, where he obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1982. While at Tufts, he studied with photographer James Dow at the nearby School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) in Boston. Dow had earned a BFA and MFA in photography from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1965 and 1968 respectively after Harry Callahan established the program in 1961. According to Dow, RISD and the SMFA had different approaches to photography in the late 1960s – at RISD, making photographs as a form of personal expression seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. But at the SMFA some art professors regarded photographers – whether working in black-and-white or color – as technicians. Dow recalls that when he started teaching at the SMFA in the early 1970s, however, color photographers like William Eggleston, William Christenberry, and Stephen Shore were increasingly recognized as artists. The

15 Dow’s recent projects include American Studies (2011). He has traveled, photographed, exhibited and published extensively, and his subjects include folk art, roadside architecture, signs, county courthouses, baseball parks, soccer stadiums, private clubs, barbeque joints, and taco trucks. “He is fascinated by the way people leave their mark on both the rural and urban landscape and seeks to preserve this through photography.” Dow lives in Boston and teaches at Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. (information from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, http://www.cdsporch.org/archives/6227).
16 2011 phone conversation between author and Jim Dow.
number of photography outlets really began to increase in the 1980's. Galleries showing photography actually existed whereas before they did not, with a couple of notable exceptions. The number of photography outlets really began to increase in the 1980s.

Printing in color was economically impractical for students, so many of them shot slides “and that was their art work.” 17

By the early 1980s, when Greiner got to the SMFA, more and more students were interested in making color photographs as a form of personal expression. Indeed, Greiner wanted to study with Dow because this is what the older photographer was doing – “I gravitated towards Jim b/c he also worked exclusively in color,” Greiner said. 18 Greiner never made black-and-white images – “working in color was always my interest. Even earlier when it was sports journalism.” 19 By the end of the 1980s, it would have been standard for any photography program with majors and graduate students to be able to make medium-large color prints in a darkroom onsite, and Greiner would have come in with the expectation that this would be possible. 20

Greiner was making color prints on his own before arriving at the SMFA, using a

\[17\text{Ibid.}\]
\[18\text{Dow was greatly influenced by Walker Evans' 1938 book }\textit{American Photographs} \text{ and was hired to print Evans' photographs for the 1972 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, during which time Dow worked with curator John Szarkowski. Dow has documented baseball stadiums and courthouses, as well as North Dakota folk art, such as road signs, handpainted billboards, and gravestones, much like Eggleston and William Christenberry}\]
\[19\text{2011 email from William K. Greiner to author.}\]
\[20\text{Conversation between the author and Jim Dow, 2011.}\]
positive to positive printing method for making prints from slides. The technique is known as Cibachrome or Ilfochrome printing, a process of making color prints from a transparency enlarged directly onto the paper. Cibachrome is an “integral tripack process” that uses three separate negatives to which red, green, and blue filters have been applied. The final print or transparency is built up by superimposition from the three separate negatives. Instead of producing a colored image by building up dyes, in the Cibachrome process the final print is produced by bleaching out dyes not required. The silver dye-bleach process results in a stable color print suitable for exhibition work.21

Greiner said he took a printing class or two at the SMFA, but did not like being in the darkroom. When he got out of school, he used commercial labs for printing, which meant he had to trust the skills and preferences of the printer. “I trusted the skills of my printer but it was a process of trial and error to communicate what I wanted the print to look like. Also, because every printing session was different, each print varied from one to the next, which I did not like. Fast forward to now, scanning negatives and saving files eliminates this occurring, because each print is exactly the same whether printed at the same time or on different occasions.”22

22 March 2014 email from Greiner to the author.
Greiner now uses Photoshop to communicate his wishes to printers. Many of his prints are Lambda LightJet prints, which are exposed by means of a Lambda printer rather than a negative with an enlarger. “The end result is exactly the same,” Greiner said. The Lambda printer produces digital prints on light sensitive color and monochrome papers and transparency display materials from digital or scanned film originals. The images are produced by exposing light sensitive material with laser light.

While living in New England, Greiner was never particularly inspired by the landscape. “I sort of knew I had to go home,” he said. “Jim Dow always traveled to make pictures, I decided I wanted to do the opposite, i.e., photograph in my own back yard.” After graduating from Tufts, Greiner earned a Master’s in Business Administration from Suffolk University (also in Boston) in 1985. He moved back to New Orleans around 1986, and worked for a real estate company and in finance. “I did not like that work, so after I did that a few years, then did consulting, I started working in an art gallery.” He continued making photographs. Like Eggleston and Birney Imes (discussed in chapters one and two of this dissertation), Greiner brought his work to

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23 2013 email from William K. Greiner to author.
24 2011 email from William K. Greiner to the author.
26 William K. Greiner, 2011 email to author.
27 Email from William K. Greiner to author, June 25, 2011.
MoMA curator John Szarkowski. Szarkowski purchased three of Greiner’s images for the permanent collection (figure 76). “The work was included in a recent acquisitions show not long after that, so this was a great boost,” said Greiner. He continued to make a point of visiting museum curators everywhere he went in an effort to promote his work.

Greiner used the image Szarkowski bought – *White Wall, New Orleans, 1989* — for a November 2006 blog entry on the death of his mother, Shirley Kross Greiner (shortly after the one-year anniversary of Katrina). A serene, eulogizing image, *White Wall* also gestures toward the racial divide in New Orleans. With its provocative title, the photograph alludes to phenotypical whiteness, segregation, and the psychological suffocation that ensues from walling people off from one another. Walls feature in a number of Greiner photographs, including *White Power*, which shows a square wall of unclear purpose diagonally divided into a red and a green triangle (figure 77). The call for “white power” is scribbled sloppily and without conviction in the upper half of the wall. Set against the vibrantly colored wall and brilliant blue sky, the meaning of the half-heartedly scrawled “White Power” is totally undermined, if not rendered a complete non sequitur.

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Greiner uses various cameras, including a 35 mm camera and a medium format camera, depending on the project to be undertaken. Different cameras for different purposes, “like shooting a rifle for large game, shotguns for birds and small arms, like hand guns for self-defense.”

Greiner’s use of this aggressive trope – the comparison of a camera and a gun – evokes a stereotypically masculine and swaggering image of the photographer, like the photographer-protagonist in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film, Blow-up. In the film, David Hemmings – playing an arrogant, rakish fashion photographer working in mod London – believes he may have witnessed and photographed a murder. The film does interesting things with color, as pointed out by critic Max Kozloff in a 1967 review. “Practically at the opening,” writes Kozloff, “we see Negro nuns dressed in white, one of the first of many reversals of expected hue.”

The city of London, he continues, “seems more than usually bled of intermediate varieties of color, which makes the few reds that punctuate the differing sequences, and, of course, the green park, exceptionally vivid.” In a megalomaniac gesture, Antonioni ordered sections of London to be touched up with color; grass was painted green, local roads were painted black; even the pigeons were dyed with ink.”

Greiner’s highly saturated photographs in the Homefront, Gone But Not Forgotten, and Reposed series share in the

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30 2011 email from William K. Greiner to author.
32 Kozloff, 29.
33 “Michelangelo Antonioni,” The Telegraph (July 30, 2007).
mystery and intrigue of *Blow-up*, in which film negatives carry powerful secrets.\(^{34}\)

“Blow-up just made me want to have a life like the main character,” Greiner said. “It was something I had seen while in school. Just an affirmation really.”\(^{35}\)

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Greiner’s *Reposed* and *Homefront* series can be read in the context of Hurricane Katrina, as if they actually foreshadowed it, though the hurricane occurred after the images were made. The photographs draw their meaning in part from an archive of southern disaster imagery that resonates in the twenty-first century.\(^{36}\) Photographs of lynching, civil war carnage, the violence of the civil rights movement, and environmental cataclysms – flood, disease, famine, and hurricanes – are elements of southern disaster for which vivid visual touchstones have accumulated.\(^{37}\)

I situate Greiner’s 1990s and early 2000s imagery in the context of not only the Katrina catastrophe, but also the 1990s “predilection for the macabre” identified by

\(^{34}\) *The Telegraph*.

\(^{35}\) 2011 email from William K. Greiner to author.


English literature scholar Mark Edmundson in his 1997 book, *Nightmare on Main Street*. In our fin de siècle,” writes Edmundson, “Gothic novels and films are proliferating. Stephen King and Anne Rice are the dual monarchs...of American Gothic fiction.” The influence of “major Gothic artist” Alfred Hitchcock “remains omnipresent in American film,” Edmundson notes, citing Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, the Coen brothers, and Brian de Palma as the iconic filmmaker’s descendants.

Edmundson argues that the gothic infuses not only fiction and movies but also the news media. “Gothic is alive not just in Stephen King’s and Quentin Tarantino’s films, but in media renderings of the OJ Simpson case, in our political discourse, in our modes of therapy, our TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah*, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment. American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots.” In the 1990s, Edmundson was among many others fixated on the Gothic, which took the form of stories about serial killers, shows like *The X Files*, and vampire novels by Anne Rice.

Like Weisenfeld and Edmundson, English and American Studies professor

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38 Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Weisenfeld used the phrase “predilection for the macabre” to describe “the increasing focus on gruesome stories of criminality in the news” in Edo period popular imagery. “There was no shortage of blood and gore in Edo popular imagery,” she writes, “a feature that was carried through to the subsequent Meiji period...Disaster imagery could not be separated from visual entertainment, even when it conveyed strong moralistic messages,” Weisenfeld concluded.

39 Edmundson, xii.

40 Edmundson, xii.
Teresa Goddu has also observed a connection between current events and gothic tales, this time in the U.S. of the 1940s. Goddu reflects on a story that novelist Richard Wright recounted about his obsession with the titillating horror stories on the pages of a white supremacist magazine. In his autobiography, *Black Boy*, Wright said he stopped reading the tales when he discovered the white supremacist connection, but the episode demonstrates, as Goddu notes, that gothic stories are not “gateways to other, distant worlds of fantasy,” but “intimately connected to the culture that produces them.” These horror tales of mad scientists and electric chairs were “actually folded within the pages of the newspaper.” Situated here, they “are enacted in the everyday terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan.” Accounts of the Klan’s terrors can provoke in the reader a response like the gothic tale, writes Goddu. Indeed, Wright gets goosebumps from reading the words of the white supremacists just as he does from the fictional gothic tales.41

Greiner’s 2001 photograph, *Wedding Dress* draws on gothic tropes both fantastical and historical – the Wicked Witch of the West on the one hand and the antebellum world of plantation slavery on the other (figure 78). Although a note on the image says it was made in Santa Fe, NM, the antiquated, lace-clad figure resembles the cliché of an antebellum New Orleans belle, demurring with a flutter of her fan. The

creepiness combined with her anonymity invite comparisons to washed-up Southern belle Blanche DuBois from Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Indeed, there is more resemblance to one of artist Kara Walker’s antebellum grotesqueries than to an idealized Scarlett O’Hara debutante (figure 79). This figure’s monstrous hands, with their long, thin fingers and talon-like nails resemble Freddy Krueger’s primitive metal-clawed brown leather glove and the fingers of the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*.\(^{42}\)

Greiner’s New Orleans/Louisiana-based project gestures toward the work of Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The connection to the Mexican photographer is also evident in Greiner’s cemetery photographs. Like Alvarez Bravo, Greiner seems to continually demolish clichés about his region, often showing us a New Orleans so anonymously suburban it could be southern California.\(^{43}\) In a similar way, “Alvarez Bravo’s search for *mexicanidad* led him to reconfigure national symbols, such as the maguey cactus” (figure

\(^{42}\) See Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007); and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Shaw describes piles of excrement, children being sexually assaulted, and babies being murdered” in Walker’s 1995 life-size museum installation, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*. “Were these elegant black silhouettes actually doing the horrible and ghastly things that I imagined, or was I projecting my own nasty thoughts onto them? ...I was both bewildered and elated by the exciting, yet largely incomprehensible narrative of graphic violence and sexual depravity that spread before me in a great gothic panorama” (Shaw, 4).

\(^{43}\) “Conscious both of Mexico’s otherness, and the way in which that has led almost naturally to stereotypical imagery, Alvarez Bravo has always swum counter to the stream of established clichés.””Bravo, Manuel Alvarez” in Lynne Warren, ed. *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography: A-E: Index, Volume 1* CRC Press, 2006.
There is also, of course, an African-Latin, Caribbean cultural influence on the culture of the Gulf Coast from Texas to Louisiana down to south Florida. Such influence comes from the Bahamas, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The Caribbean cultural zone also includes Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Belize, Guatemala, Panama, and Honduras, “all of which touch the Caribbean and are united to the islands by ethnic composition, language, religious institutions, political instabilities, broad historical experiences, and economic problems.” Indeed, “the Louisiana Gulf Coast was among the first areas of the South to experience Caribbean cultural influences,” according to scholar Charles Reagan Wilson. The Spanish Canary Islanders came to Louisiana from Cuba in 1777, introducing a long Spanish presence. “They still eat fish and trap in Saint Bernard Parish, eat their distinctive foods such as caldo, and sing Spanish ballads.” Thousands of French planters, enslaved peoples, and free people of color fled Santo Domingo during and after the revolution which led to the founding of Haiti in the early nineteenth century. “This migration introduced many of the central cultural customs and institutions of southern Louisiana. Voodoo, gumbo, jambalaya, zydeco music, street dancing to Afro-Latin rhythms, shotgun houses, Creole cottages,

44 Encyclopedia, 167.
46 Wilson, 405.
the prevalence of festivals, and a Creole language...have been traced back to these early
refugees.”

In portraying the latent monstrosity of the southern belle, the Greiner image also
conjures the personification of New Orleans as a mysterious woman, or the
personification of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina as a powerful witch who ravaged the city.
In a short article about Greiner, Doug Rickard equated New Orleans to a woman with
whom the post-Katrina Greiner was “obsessed” and “in love.” His love, observed
Rickard, had been injured, scarred, and left for dead. “Much of her left him, gone in the
sad shadows of a storm, gone in the twinkling of an eye, taken away in a massive act of
violence and rape...Memories of her, fragments of her...the scene, her colors...her
sounds...her things...some of these remain but much of William Greiner’s sweet New
Orleans has gone away.” This woman has been ravaged, Rickard writes, “by neglect,
abandoned by her lovers...left vulnerable due to cruelty, left alone to struggle.”

Rickard describes Pre-Katrina New Orleans as an already sick woman who was
“vulnerable, isolated and alone.” The attack “would come violently and then...no one
would come to her rescue, no one would come to her aid...the police would not believe
her story and they would not come, she would be left for dead, injured, cold,

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47 Wilson, 405.
violated...alone. Dead or still barely alive, she was left to fend on her own."\textsuperscript{49} In Rickard’s description, the fall of New Orleans was itself a gothic tale.

The opinion Rickard points to – that the effects of the storm could have been mitigated, that the signs of potential disaster were everywhere before the storm – ripped through the media in Katrina’s aftermath. Politicians, scientists, and journalists argued that the storm’s effects could have been lessened by better anticipation of the dangers posed by the inadequate levee system. Bob Sheets, a meteorologist who directed the National Hurricane Center before his 1995 retirement, said that even as a firmer understanding of the dangers became evident in the late 1970s, some local officials discounted the risks. At that time, Dr. Sheets and other federal forecasters ran the first computer simulations demonstrating how Lake Pontchartrain and surrounding waters might behave in big storms. “The simulations made clear that certain storms could swamp the platter-like city between a great river and a broad lake….The risk obviously in New Orleans was greater than in any other community,” a \textit{New York Times} article contended.\textsuperscript{50} Another \textit{Times} story noted that the debate over New Orleans’s vulnerability had been ongoing for a century. “Yet some scientists reflexively disregarded practical considerations pointed out by the Army [Corps of] Engineers; more often, the engineers

\textsuperscript{50} Andrew C. Revkin, “Gazing at the Breached Levees, Critics See Years of Missed Opportunities,” \textit{New York Times} (September 2, 2005).
scoffed at scientific studies indicating that the basic facts of geology and hydrology meant that significant design changes were needed.” In “true American fashion,” the inevitable problem was ignored until disaster focused everyone’s attention. “There is one thing we know for sure: hurricanes will howl through the Mississippi Delta again.”51

These comments indicate that those attuned to conditions in New Orleans maintained a continuous sense of fear and vulnerability both before and after Katrina.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, downright gothic tales of depravity and horror were reported by a seemingly astonished media in an unrelenting cycle of news coverage. The events precipitated by the hurricane, namely the August 29, 2005 breach of the levees and the flooding of the city by Lake Pontchartrain, were recounted in nightmarish description. More than 1,577 people died from storm-related causes. The Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and the Louisiana Superdome became sites of subhuman depravity and devastation. As reported by The New York Times, the Superdome was “understaffed, undersupplied and without air conditioning or even much lighting.” It very quickly devolved into “a sweltering and surreal vault, a place of overflowing toilets and no showers. ”The “stink was staggering.” Rotting garbage was piled in heaps, baking under a “blazing Louisiana sun.” Trash “spilled across corridors and aisles, slippery with smelly mud and scraps of food.” In such accounts, the fabled

vulgarity and fetidness of the South and New Orleans in particular was taken to a hyperbolic level. Another Times story described a “barely functional hospital,” with no power, in which medication had to be “rushed through sodden hallways by flashlight after dark,” and desperate physicians determined the seriousness of patients’ infections by smelling them. All the while medical experts were forecasting more peril in the form of “diseases spread by tainted water, spoiled food, breeding insects, and snakes.”

Another reporter lamented, “These are the scenes of a dying city: an elderly woman dead in a wheelchair outside the convention center, a note on her lap bearing her name. A horrified family telling tales of pirates commandeering rescue boats at gunpoint. Corpses left rotting in broad daylight. Angry crowds chanting for the television cameras, ‘We’re dying!’ or simply ‘Help!’

Accounts of post-Katrina tragedy in New Orleans, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida had an uncanny similarity to the gothic tales of racial violence all too familiar in the Deep South. One after the other, journalists and politicians took note of the skin color of most of the refugees trapped in the floodwaters of New Orleans, a seeming majority of them African Americans. “All morning, cable news networks showed scene

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after scene of victims, most of them black,” wrote New York Times television critic Alessandra Stanley. And Maryland Representative Elijah E. Cummings, former Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, warned that “we cannot allow it to be said that the difference between those who lived and those who died amounted to nothing more than poverty, age, or skin color.” Condoleezza Rice conceded that, “yes, the African-American community has obviously been very heavily affected.” Indeed, in a different context, art historian Gennifer Weisenfeld has observed that “You only have to look at the disasters around the world to see that the disenfranchised, the poor, regional areas – they just suffer more…What makes a disaster often is the socioeconomic and cultural context in which a natural phenomenon intersects with human existence. And so, if you are poor, if you live in bad conditions, if you live in regional places where you have nuclear or any kind of waste sites,…you’re more vulnerable to the collateral damages, the manmade components of what any natural phenomenon brings…We’re not all equal in the face of disaster.”

Greiner’s photographs, even those made in a pre-Katrina context, seem to communicate the gothic pathos conveyed in descriptions of the hurricane’s aftermath,

using color to do so. Weisenfeld has observed the differences between spectacular
images of disaster in black-and-white versus color, citing a postcard image of 1923 Great
Kanto earthquake refugees at the former Honjo Clothing Depot, the site of a giant post-
earthquake inferno. The use of color in one version of the image broadens the spectrum
of affective impact, in that the coloring of the victims’ belongings emphasizes the “tragic
symbolism” of the photograph – the fact that these “worldly possessions” provided fuel
for the flames. Furthermore, the color “eerily contrasts the overall cheery tenor with the
specter of imminent death.” The combination produces an uncanny effect in retrospect,
“with the aesthetics of fear revealing the anxiety aroused by exposing hidden threats
within the familiar,” Weisenfeld observes.57

The symbolic and visceral power of the color red as a signifier in the post-civil
rights movement Deep South has been a recurrent theme of this dissertation. And
indeed, Weisenfeld points out in her study of disaster imagery that “red was a central
hue in the earthquake palette, representing the color of the intense heat that tinted the
sky and of the smoldering embers that were all that remained of beloved buildings, but
it could not be expressed in black-and-white photography.”58 Furthermore, writes
Weisenfeld, there was a profitable market for earthquake postcards depicting graphic

57 Weisenfeld, 65.
58 Weisenfeld, 69.
scenes of death and destruction. Such postcard imagery, made from both aerial
perspectives and from the ground, “distinguished themselves through the widespread
addition of color.” Color, argues Weisenfeld, “was thought to enhance the verisimilitude
while aestheticizing the image.”

Color contributes to the affective impact of Greiner’s photographs, but I would
argue that it often does so by lessening the sense of verisimilitude in the scenes he
frames. In Greiner’ 1993 chromogenic print, Running Shoes in Driveway (from the series
Homefront), color infuses this rather ordinary suburban scene with a sense of
supernatural danger – exposing, as Weisenfeld puts it, “hidden threats within the
familiar” (figure 81). Icy blues and violets cast an ominous pall as night falls on this
suburban dystopia. Greiner seems to be especially intrigued with the effects of lighting –
his images deploy an interplay of hot spots and shadows, lending an air of theatricality
to the picture. In The Reposed series, by contrast, there is an anti-aesthetic quality, as if the
image is shorn of its artfulness. As a whole, Greiner’s oeuvre combines artfulness and
the vernacular.

Greiner’s own home was just a few blocks away from the house depicted in
Running Shoes and he simply pulled into the driveway to make the picture. A woman he

59 Weisenfeld, 74.
60 Weisenfeld, 65.
was dating lived directly across the street. The driveway in the image belonged to another woman, whom Greiner had known since childhood. Greiner lit the picture from several sources – natural light from the sky and artificial light from the neighboring house, the flood light on the driveway, and his car headlights. “I decided to leave my headlights on to add more and different light source,” Greiner said. “Everything was found as it was except my car headlights. I think I was trying to illuminate the reflective tape on the running shoes.”

This photograph, like many of Greiner’s other works, lends itself to a narrative, Greiner says. “The photograph is fraught with possibilities. The shoes are obviously key to the image. Who owns these shoes? Why are they left in the driveway? Maybe the paramedics left the shoes after a 911 call to rescue the runner who went into cardiac arrest after a run? There are 1,000 possibilities. And of course, the dramatic light makes the picture more interesting. The series HOMEFRONT was actually about the notion that people stamp their personalities on their environment by how they decorate, adorn or in this case, litter their property.”

From the title, we know that the photograph shows a driveway in New Orleans, but this is a New Orleans wiped clean of historical and cultural markers. There is no

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61 William Greiner in a February 25, 2013 email to author.
62 Greiner, email to author, February 25, 2013.
obvious trace of the French Quarter, Treme, Preservation Hall, Jim Crow or plantation slavery. There is little indication that, as journalist Tyler Bridges puts it, “Louisiana is our most exotic state. It is religious and roguish, a place populated by Cajuns, Creoles, Christian Conservatives, rednecks, African Americans, and the white working-class New Orleanians known as ‘Yats.’” What Greiner shows us is a New Orleans that looks just as suburban as any other metropolitan area.

Seen in the context of the rest of Greiner’s work, however – including other photographs of metropolitan New Orleans suburbia, cemeteries, Martin Luther King billboards, Civil Rights murals, racist graffiti, and other racial imagery in and around the city, *Running Shoes in Driveway* can be read as a suburban gothic image, in which the eeriness, creepiness, and foreboding of suburban dwelling in Louisiana is emphasized. In the 60 years since the mass suburbanization of the United States began, writers, film makers, and the public have engaged with narratives “in which the suspicion that something dark lurks below suburbia’s peaceful façade is dramatically vindicated,” literature and film scholar Bernice Murphy has argued.” Murphy defines this as the suburban gothic sub-genre, a “dramaturgical mode” preoccupied with “anxieties arising from the mass suburbanization of the United States” featuring “suburban settings,


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preoccupations and protagonists.” The genre exploits the suspicion that “even the most ordinary looking neighborhood or house has something to hide and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from the dramatic (and generally sinister) incident.” Murphy notes furthermore that the trope of the peaceful looking suburban house with a terrible secret is a familiar cliché. “It reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyle and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreplaceable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with old patterns of existence,” she writes.

The suburban gothic sub-genre furthermore exploits a closely interrelated set of contradictory values, according to Murphy, a set of binary oppositions: the homey suburban dream versus the haunted suburban nightmare, the chance to have a home of one’s own versus the chance to fall into debt and financial entanglement; a place to make a fresh start vs. a place haunted by the familial and communal past. Much like the photographs of suburban homes, Weber grills, and aimlessness featured in William Eggleston’s Guide, some of Greiner’s Homefront images gesture toward films that locate terror in the suburban lifestyle and an underlying hauntedness simmering below the

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Murphy, 3.
surface, such as *Poltergeist* (1982), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Twin Peaks* (TV series, 1990-1991) (figure 82). However, these works also proclaim a kind of nationalism: an underlying anxiety unique to the late twentieth century United States and a visual product of late twentieth century socio-economic decline.

*Running Shoes*, which monumentalizes an empty and used pair of sneakers, also invokes allegories of supernatural human disappearances, including the story of “The Rapture” in the Bible. According to this prophecy, at the end of times, God will take up to heaven those true believers who are still alive, leaving the non-believers behind for the end times and its associated tribulations. The word “Rapture” is derived from the Latin verb Rapere, meaning to “carry off” or “catch up.” According to the Bible, when the Rapture comes, believers will suddenly “without warning disappear from Earth in the twinkling of an eye.”

Greiner’s *Running Shoes* also gestures toward the 1954 novel *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (adapted to film in 1956 and 1978), in which an extraterrestrial life form invades a California town, replacing human beings with alien pods. The story illustrates the fear of conformity and standardization associated with suburban life – “the inevitable outcome of developments within American society and

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In films like *Invasion*, “the secure and the familiar are twisted into something subtly dangerous and slyly perverted,” film scholar Vivian Sobchack has noted.\(^{70}\)

Like *Running Shoes*, Greiner’s 1994 tricycle photograph *Baton Rouge, LA*, is in the photographer’s *Homefront* series, part of which was published in *A New Life: Stories and Photographs from the Suburban South*, a 1997 volume of photographs and short stories edited by Durham, North Carolina-based photographer Alex Harris (figure 83).

In this photograph depicting a suburban garage interior, a tricycle with a red seat, red handlebars, and red trim seems to be traveling up a red brick wall. The image was made in the carport of Greiner’s in-laws’ house in Baton Rouge, and the tricycle probably belonged to a family member, he says.\(^{72}\) Greiner recalls using available light to make the photograph.\(^{73}\) “The photograph is a reference and homage to William Eggleston’s famous image of a tricycle from the early 1970s.”\(^{74}\)

The choice to monumentalize an empty yet seemingly animate tricycle is worth examining, given that the toy is a key prop in several horror movies, including *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), in which five-year-old Danny Torrance rides not a tricycle but a similar Big Wheel through the hallway of the Overlook Hotel,


\(^{71}\) Murphy, 80.

\(^{72}\) 2013 email from William K. Greiner to the author.

\(^{73}\) 2013 email from William K. Greiner to author.

\(^{74}\) March 2014 email from William K. Greiner to the author.
encountering the ghosts of two girls slain by their deranged father before the Torrance family moved in. In the 1990 television series, *It* (like *The Shining* based on a Stephen King story), a young girl is pulled from a tricycle and murdered in a suburban neighborhood by a monster. The manner in which the tricycle hangs in Greiner’s photograph even calls to mind the iconic 1974 slasher film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, in which a woman is hung from a meathook. Such movies, according to film scholar Christopher Sharrett, “became tied in the 1960s and ‘70s to an ongoing process of debunking the myths of utopia underneath the American civilizing process.”

Like the running shoes, the tricycle is a prop of suburban life that when idle seems eerily indicative of unexplained disappearances with terrifying possibilities. Such props can create an atmosphere of terror by means of implication and insinuation. No specific tragedy or horror is spelled out; the viewer is left to recall or invent stories about missing children and joggers, body snatchers and nuclear holocausts. Greiner’s tricycle photograph therefore has much in common with Eggleston’s tricycle that appeared on the cover of *William Eggleston’s Guide* (figure 84).

Eggleston’s tricycle sits idly in the middle of the road in front of two ranch-style suburban homes in Memphis. The sky is dull gray. Both Greiner’s and Eggleston’s

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75 Barry Keith Grant, Christopher Sharrett, eds. *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 301.
tricycles look well-worn; on Eggleston’s, the tires are traced with mud and the handlebars are rusted. On Greiner’s the red paint is worn off and chipped in many places. A worn blue sticker of a cartoon car is stuck to the seat. Both the Greiner and Eggleston tricycle images illustrate a highly contained, claustrophobic environment. In the Greiner image, the tricycle seems to be climbing the walls of the room, as if combing the interior in search of an exit. The door is closed and the other hooks on the ceiling are empty, projecting an atmosphere of boredom and airlessness. Eggleston’s tricycle is in the open air and monumental, implying a certain dominion over the suburban environs, but the massiveness of the tricycle also serves to demonstrate the claustrophobic smallness of the space, hemmed in at almost every visible turn by suburban blandness; even the color of the sky is in collusion with the oppressive listlessness.

In the mid-twentieth century, historian Becky Nicolaides has argued, many scholars observing life in American cities decided that the environment that seemed most harmful to authentic community was not the city but the suburbs. The suburbs, a low-density form of development, scattered people away from each other, exacerbating the isolation of individualized households. “People were cut off from face-to-face contact, holed up in their homes and cars, detached, alone, housewives finding their only companion on the television screen.” Furthermore, suburbs produced racial and

† Becky Nicolaides, “How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing
economic inequality. The community ideal was transformed from a positive source of human fulfillment and acceptance into a destructive tool of exclusivity and inequality, writes Nicolaides. “Suburbia has thus corrupted a benevolent community ideal.”

Since the suburbs isolated a homogenous demographic of residents from diversity, the form of suburban space and civil rights struggles share an intertwined relationship of cause and effect. The tract housing developments of the 1950s and 1960s propelled the perception that suburbia was a breeding ground of uniformity and conformity. Some sought to dispel this myth of conformity, but according to urban scholars, “it was often assumed that all suburbs were middle class, white, and residential. In reality, America’s suburbs were peppered by issues of class and race.”

One might look at Eggleston and Greiner’s photographs as in some ways sites of resistance to the ostensibly homogenizing effects of suburbanization. Greiner has indeed stated that his Homefront project is a “celebration of the earnest attempts at individuality in the generic developments of suburban New Orleans, where he lives.”


Nicolaides, 97.


photographs highlight the quirky, but also, as I have suggested, creepy or unsettling elements of suburbia. As writer Luc Sante points out, familiar elements of the suburban landscape – tract housing, vinyl siding, patios, grills, two-car garages – can look “desolate, forbidding, strange,” outside of your own neighborhood, if you see it somewhere else, at night, in the fog. “Remember running dangerously low on gas on the highway at night, so low you take the next exit even though there is no indication of an open service station there? And you find yourself driving through block after block of nothing but houses, neighborhood giving way to neighborhood...Didn’t everything seem vaguely threatening then?”

Suburbs are thought to have no landmarks or distinguishing traits and for this reason to be unmappable places, difficult to navigate, lacking in distinctiveness and therefore foreboding like the horror film characters Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees who terrorize them. “With the possible exception of the suburb you live in, the suburbs are the tundra, and at night the effect is doubled. The suburbs at night are what you see from the window of the plane: chains of lights, some of them in patterns like a diagram, some of them too bright, some of them as diffuse as if underwater, all surrounded by nothingness.”

Greiner’s 1993 TV in Bayou makes disturbing reference to the dark side of

81 Sante, ibid.
suburban life and foreshadows the flooding of Hurricane Katrina (figure 85). It is also a not-too-subtle allusion to backwater violence – lynched bodies deposited in the rivers during the civil rights era, such as the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 and the slaying of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in 1964. This television floating through the dirty brown water of a bayou in the New Orleans metropolitan area parallels Hurricane Katrina imagery in which bodies floated through flooded streets alongside the detritus of consumer culture (figure 86).

Media theorist Douglas Kellner has written of the way in which Poltergeist (1982) – a film in which a television set figures prominently – preys on specifically suburban American fears. The film, in Kellner’s view, presents the “shadow side of suburban life in the form of an allegorical nightmare.”\footnote{Douglas Kellner, “Poltergeist: Suburban Ideology,” Jump Cut 28 (April 1983): 5-6.} Poltergeist, Kellner observes, is part of a wave of post-1960s horror films featuring “economic crisis, accelerating social and cultural change, a near epidemic of cancer, industrial diseases, and AIDS; political turmoil; and fear of nuclear annihilation.” Such films show contemporary institutions and ways of life to be sources of horror. Indeed, an explosion of Hollywood horror films of the 1970s and ‘80s similarly fretted over social disintegration and the deterioration of middle and
working class quality of life. Stephen King observes that the subtext of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) that “is one of economic unease...Little by little, it is ruining the Lutz family financially. The Film might as well have been titled ‘The Horror of the Shrinking Bank Account.’”

In *Poltergeist*, a middle class family called the Freelings lives in one of the first houses built in a housing project called Cuenta Vista. Mr. Freeling, like Greiner in the early stages of his career, worked in the real estate business. Freeling is quite successful, having sold more than $70 million in property. His success and prosperity (built on the backs of native peoples and taking an environmental toll) blows up in the family’s face when they discover their house is being haunted by spirits from the graveyard on which the house is built. As Kellner has argued, the film “plays on fears that land developers will destroy the environment and upset the delicate ecological balance,” a fear that Greiner’s comments about Katrina and the environmental fragility it brought into relief suggest he may share.

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84 Kellner, 226.
85 Kellner, 221.
Poltergeist depicts the trappings of middle class suburbia such as those photographed by Eggleston and Greiner – children’s toys, split-level architecture, and the “omnipresent multi-channeled television.” Indeed, the television becomes the organ by which the youngest child, Carol Anne Freeling, communicates with and is nearly sucked into the world of demons haunting her family. Thus, according to Kellner, the film also plays on the 1980s fear of television taking over the minds of young people and eclipsing other forms of leisure activity. The television is a prominent symbol in the film; its role as a conduit for demonic possession and, by extension, the loss or destruction of one’s home makes it a fearsome one. The film, like Greiner’s photographs – especially post-Katrina – deals with “anxieties about losing one’s home or watching it fall apart.”

Greiner made several images from television screens, including Halloween JFK on TV, New Orleans, 1993, part of the Gone But Not Forgotten series, comprising photographs of found JFK, Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X imagery Greiner encountered throughout New Orleans. The faces of these men function ignorance are combining to lay the groundwork for another catastrophe.” Michael Grunewald, “Why New Orleans Still Isn’t Safe,” Time (August 29, 2007).

Kellner, 222. Greiner has made several images of television screens, including photographs of the Atlanta Olympics published in Atlanta Summer 1996 (Alex Harris, Gudmund Vigtel: Atlanta: Alston & Bird, 1996).

Kellner, 222.

Ibid.
in a post-1960s context as symbols of premature death and intrigue. Each image in the series is a kind of *memento mori* referencing those who die young. Their faces invoke the aura of conspiracy surrounding their deaths. In *Halloween JFK*, the witch’s and skull’s heads and Kennedy’s flickering face cast a conspiratorial pall and undercurrent of fear, while also suggesting the ephemerality of life (figure 87).

Scholars of urban history have pointed to a “gothic” atmosphere that had overtaken many older suburbs in the U.S. in 2007. The “center of metropolitan gravity has shifted outward,” they write, and “the United States is now a metropolitan society dominated by the suburbs.”90 One result of this shift has been that older suburbs – built in the 1950s and 1960s – no longer attract new development or new residents and show the symptoms of decline that US cities experienced several decades ago. Outer suburbs, further from the core, are the primary sites of development.91 “This dichotomy has brought what we term a ‘gothic’ element to older, inner-ring suburbs. The term ‘gothic’ refers to the grotesque or desolate, adjectives not typically associated with the suburbs, they write. Yet, many older suburbs, particularly those built in the postwar period, are bleak places. Many older, postwar suburbs struggle to survive let alone thrive in today’s

91 Ibid, 642.
The biggest factor shaping the new suburban gothic is continued decentralization, they argue. Jobs and people have moved away from the central city core throughout the twentieth century. As decentralization has continued, some of the first areas to suburbanize are falling into ruin. “Decentralized, disparate, and uneven land use planning is characteristic of the new suburban gothic,” they note.”Furthermore, there are no checks or limits on sprawl.93

Greiner’s photographs of New Orleans suburbia in the early-to-mid 1990s may have touched a nerve with local residents given the already-ongoing debates about urban planning, race, and sprawl in the metropolitan area. Urban planners saw a direct connection between race and sprawl in New Orleans development; the New Orleans metropolitan region was in the 1990s considered one of the most segregated in the country. According to a report by urban planner David Rusk (published in the Times-Picayune in 1999), “on a scale of 0 to 100 (with 100 indicating total segregation), the regional housing market measured a 69 on a common diversity index in 1990.” This figure had improved only slightly from an index score of 73 in 1970 and was “less than one-third the average rate of improvement for major southern metro areas. It was also behind the rate of improvement for “major northern metro areas.” In 1990, black family

92 Short, Hanlon, Vicino, 644.
93 Ibid, 648.
income in greater New Orleans was only 44 percent of white family income, according to Rusk. “Among major metro areas New Orleans was second only to Milwaukee (at 39 percent) in having the largest income gap between blacks and whites. And that gap grew by six percentage points during the 1980s.”94 African Americans in greater New Orleans have achieved political power and access to new educational and occupational opportunities almost unimaginable fifty years ago, said Rusk. “But the reality is that for the great mass of the black population social and economic progress in greater New Orleans is occurring at glacial speed.”95

Greiner’s 1994 photograph, *White Bird Mobile*, gestures toward the socially inhibiting effects of suburban life and its associated racial segregation in New Orleans by again depicting wall-to-wall whiteness. The imagery of inescapable whiteness is also part of Greiner’s *White Wall* photograph discussed earlier in this chapter. In *White Bird Mobile*, the cut-out white birds are frozen in midair in a prison of white bars and wrought-iron embellishments. The darkened windows do not beckon and the birds seem to be trapped like ghosts in the limbo zone of the porch (figure 88).

In 1999 – the year Greiner’s monograph of New Orleans cemetery photographs, *The Reposed*, was published – New Orleans in particular was suffering from the effects of

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95 Ibid.
poor regional planning. A September 8, 1999 article in the *Times-Picayune* quoted local developer Pres Kabacoff, who stressed the need for parishes in the region to craft a joint plan outlining “how and where they want to grow.” The state should pass a new law requiring better regional planning, he insisted. Kabacoff made the comments on the occasion of the publication of the report by urban planning consultant Rusk on metropolitan growth in New Orleans. “The report will help educate our community on the fact that we are in reality a region and we either rise or fall together,” Kabacoff said.

The report used population, race, land-use and poverty data to buttress arguments that weak planning has damaged the metro area’s quality of life and weakened its business climate. A St. Tammany planning advocate was quoted in the *Times-Picayune* saying that “concerns about water pollution, crowded roads, and other byproducts of sprawl have led to strong public support for land use controls in the New Orleans metro area.”

Rusk’s report, titled “The New Regionalism: Planning Together to Reshape New Orleans’ Future,” was distributed as an insert in the same edition of the *Times-Picayune* along with an introduction by *Picayune* staff warning readers of the gloomy economic and social forecast wrought by years of sprawling low-density development. “Over the last 25 years,” the writers warned, “our metropolis has experienced neither population

growth nor an inflation adjusted increase in property values. Instead, our population
has simply migrated from Orleans [parish] and now Jefferson to St. Tammany, St.
Charles [parishes] and other exurban areas, including Mississippi.” The result, they
observed, has been a concentration of poor in Orleans and Jefferson parishes and an
“overburdening of exurban resources, with dire impact on the quality of life for all.”

Greiner’s 1998 photograph, Will Build to Suit points up the haphazard and
impromptu approach to suburban development the Rusk report took to task. “Will
Build to Suit” could be read as the developer’s promise to a prospective buyer: your
house does not have to be a cookie cutter tract home, it doesn’t have to fit a prescribed
footprint – you can put your own architectural stamp on it, suiting your family’s unique
requirements. But the sign also suggests the “dark side” of this have-it-your-way ethos –
the lurking presence of an uncontrolled, consumer-driven market, in which concerns
about the environment and long-term regional planning are of little concern. The “Will
Build to Suit” sign is affixed to a pine tree, as if demanding the tree’s acquiescence to the
demands for free space and lumber (figure 89).

Rusk’s report was commissioned by a collective of local institutions and
organizations known as “Metropolitan Neighbors” to analyze the “underlying patterns
that shape our region,” and with that information, the city hoped to, in the words of the

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Times Picayune, “influence a change in the game,” allowing the “Queen City of the Gulf South and its economic region,” “to flourish in the next millennium.”98 Rusk stressed the need for comprehensive planning in land use and economic development, decrying the income and spatial gap between blacks and whites, and the effects of urban sprawl. New Orleans had concentrated poverty so much that it was causing a social meltdown.

In the report, Rusk observed that the “characteristics that make a region different are often its positive attributes. The problems faced by most of our metropolitan regions are distressingly shared in common – race and sprawl.” Furthermore, he said, the two factors of race and sprawl are inextricably linked. This is most clear through the concentration of poverty, which is itself a racially skewed phenomenon, he said. “In this respect the New Orleans region is not unique at all. Race continues to shape and divide the region in many ways. About 35 percent of the region’s population is African American, the second highest percentage among major metro areas.”99 New Orleans had also exhibited weak economic growth, as it was lagging in job creation, average family income, and growth in property wealth. The 1990 census revealed that the New Orleans –Metairie-Bogalusa Combined Statistical Area had the lowest median family income and highest regional poverty rate among its peers. It was well below national

98 Ibid.
99 According to Rusk, New Orleans was second to Greater Memphis, which was 42 percent black.
averages. From 1950 to 1997, the rate of job creation in metropolitan New Orleans was lower than for all its peers – including Charlotte, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Houston, Memphis, and Nashville – with the exception of Birmingham.  

Greiner’s 1994 photograph *Oak Tree and Sprinkler* (from the series *Homefront*) depicts a mundane suburban lawn with requisite sprinkler but also gestures toward the iconography of race riots, particularly the Birmingham riots of 1963, when police attacked non-violent protesters, subjecting them to torrents of water blasted from high-pressure firehoses (figures 90 and 91). The incident was monumentalized and memorialized by photographers like Charles Moore. In addition to mimicking the iconography of race riots, Greiner’s photograph points to the ecological issue of water waste in the name of keeping lawns supersaturated with verdant hue, a point of pride for suburban homeowners.

In 2006, one year after Katrina and seven years after Rusk produced his report, the National Trust for Historic Preservation conducted an interview with Rusk, who referred to the New Orleans Metropolitan Area (covering about 3,400 square miles and made up of eight parishes – Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, St. Charles, and St. John the Baptist) as “highly segregated.” Furthermore, he noted, there had been no economic progress over the past 30 years. “During the decades after

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100 Ibid.
World War II, Jefferson Parish, right outside New Orleans, was the land of opportunity, especially for whites,” wrote Rusk. “But by the 1980s, it was clearly in decline. Its municipalities were poorer in 1990 than in 1980,” he continued. The trend carried through the 1990s, “when the land of opportunity moved 22 miles across a causeway, across Lake Pontchartrain, into St. Tammany Parish.”101

In the interview, Rusk said that very little had resulted from his study of New Orleans, conducted back in 1999.102 That not much had changed since the late 1990s is indicated by Times-Picayune reporter Coleman Warner’s summary of the New Orleans metro area as “a confounding mix of progress and despair.”103 According to scholar Robert Whelan, metropolitan “government” was nonexistent in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, and metropolitan governance was limited and highly problematic. In 2004, Whelan concluded that by and large, “political warfare pits the city (New Orleans) versus the suburban parishes.” The middle class continued its exodus from the city, and the region became increasingly separated along racial and economic lines. This lack of racial and economic cooperation prevented regional cooperation.104 Whelan called the

102 Ibid.
104 Whelan, 205.
New Orleans metropolitan region “highly fragmented” – “highly polarized between African-Americans and whites, and between the affluent and the poor.” Indeed, Greiner’s 1992 American Flag on Blue House depicts a section of New Orleans that contrasts sharply with the theatrically lit, middle class suburban neighborhood of Running Shoes in Driveway. Depicted in bald sunlight, a row of small, “shotgun” style houses are compressed together in the picture plane, suggesting a lack of personal space. The paint on the houses is chipped; windows and doors are boarded with wood. Yet a smooth and pristine American flag is pressed taut against the side of the house (figure 92).

According to Whelan, the racial composition of New Orleans’s urban core contrasts sharply with that of its surrounding suburban neighborhoods. In the 2000 Census, two-thirds of the city’s population was African-American, while almost 75 percent of the suburban population in the Metropolitan Statistical Area was white. Furthermore, racial polarization is compounded by class polarization. In the 2000 census, 28 percent of the city’s residents lived in poverty, with a high percentage of African-Americans in this category. But the suburbs are generally more middle income in character. Before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was 70 percent African

\[\text{\textsuperscript{105} Whelan, 206.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{106} Whelan, 212.}\]
American. The other parishes were at least 70 percent white.  

The decade preceding Katrina was a time when the effort to achieve civil rights for minority groups met with frustrating roadblocks. Artists, politicians, and activists sought to “dig up” the past and subject it to cathartic examination. Writing in 1997, journalist E.R. Shipp described the contrast between her peers’ efforts to revisit past racial injustices and the reaction of her parents’ generation to such efforts. “I don’t know what y’all hunting them old dry bones for,” they told her when she explained that she was visiting a cemetery. Shipp’s father had denied knowing her paternal grandfather, a former slave. “Even after ‘Roots’ – the book and the television mini-series that came out in the 70s,” wrote Shipp, “Miss Esther and my father stood as fortresses to protect their progeny from the painful, though rich, African-American heritage.”

John Singleton, director of the 1997 film *Rosewood*, has described American history as “morbid,” observing that “most of us try to avoid it…Black people don’t want to remember having been the victims of lynchings and rapes. We don’t want to linger on the separation of our families, living under Jim Crow, and all the horrors that kind of life entailed. And white folk don’t want to remember perpetrating that kind of

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107 Ibid.
persecution.” Survivors of the 1923 Rosewood massacre lived in fear that if they talked of what they saw, members of the mob would track them down. But by the early 1980s, Shipp noted, some of the survivors had begun talking to journalists.

Indeed, writer and scholar Gerald Early noted that while earlier generations didn’t want to “talk about slavery or deal with the kind of pogroms or whatever you want to call it that white people carried out in places like Rosewood,” by 1997, many blacks wanted to create “an epic narrative of what their experience means in the Western world.” Such narratives included Malcolm X (Spike Lee, 1992), Daughters of the Dust (1992), Posse (1993), Panther (1995), Tuskegee Airmen (1995), and Miss Evers’ Boys (1997). All of these stories, wrote Shipp, are shaped by a present largely depicted in the popular culture and by news media as marked by racism, violence, police brutality, welfare dependency, broken families, drug abuse, and alarming rates of incarceration. Director Melvin Van Peebles said while there is nothing new about black artists seeking to articulate the African American experience, the difference in 1997 was the increased

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110 Rosewood was a Florida town with a majority black population. It was the site of a deadly riot in 1923, after a white woman claimed to have been assaulted by a black man. A posse was summoned and tracking dogs ordered. The white mob attached the two, resulting in the murder of six black and two white people. (Rosewood Massacre, 1923, blackpast.org)
111 The Rosewood story was also told in a 1993 report prepared by researchers from three Florida universities, titled “A Documented History of the Incident Which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida in January 1923.” In it, the writers state that “from Chicago to Tulsa, to Omaha, East St. Louis, and many communities in between, and finally to Rosewood, white mobs pursued what can only be described as a reign of terror against African Americans during the period from 1917 to 1923.”
access to a mass market available to Singleton, Van Peebles, and Lee.\textsuperscript{112}

The public also sought recompense for the brutalities and injustices of the past in the form of slavery reparations. In 1989, Representative John Conyers introduced bill, H.R. 40, Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act.”\textsuperscript{113} A 2000 \textit{New York Times} article stated that the issue of American reparations for slavery was “beginning to look sane.” “For so long it was just ludicrous for black folk to even bring up the notion that they might be entitled to some just compensation,” African American Studies scholar Michael Eric Dyson was quoted in the article. “It was simply crazy.” Other reparations campaigns, the \textit{Times} suggested – on behalf of American Indian tribes for example – had added momentum to the “African-American case.” Harvard professors Charles Ogletree and Henry Louis Gates Jr. offered vocal support for reparations, while cultural studies scholar Elazar Barkan referred to slavery as “the most glaring example of an unaddressed social injustice in the United States.” Indeed, the \textit{Times} reported, at the urging of scholars and activists, the public came increasingly to view contemporary social problems among African Americans, such as out-of-wedlock birth rates, inner-city ghettos, poor education, and the stigma of racial

\textsuperscript{112} Early and Van Peebles quoted in Shipp.
inferiority as the ongoing consequences of chattel slavery in the U.S.\textsuperscript{114}

In addition to a spate of films dealing with the black past and serious talk about slavery reparations, the 1990s saw retrials for several civil rights killings, including the retrial of the killer of former president of the Forest County NAACP Vernon Dahmer. Dahmer was 58-year old sawmill operator in 1956 when Klansmen set his home and store on fire while the family slept. His family escaped but Dahmer later died.\textsuperscript{115} In 1994, white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith was retried for the murder of NAACP Mississippi Field Secretary Medgar Evers. Beckwith was charged with the murder but set free after two hung juries in 1964.\textsuperscript{116} The retrial was dramatized in the 1996 Hollywood film \textit{Ghosts of Mississippi}.

Greiner’s series \textit{Gone But Not Forgotten} and \textit{The Reposed} both deal with hauntings. \textit{Gone But Not Forgotten} deals explicitly with the lingering influence of unresolved social justice and racial issues from Louisiana’s past that could also be used to understand the notion of haunting in \textit{The Reposed}. In \textit{Gone But Not Forgotten}, Greiner photographed images of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and John F. Kennedy throughout New


Orleans (figures 93 and 94). Much like Greiner’s *Reposed* series, *Clock, King, and Kennedys* is a *memento mori* (in Latin, “remember that you will die”), a visual reminder of life’s fragility and finitude. Martin Luther King and the Kennedys are paired together in the portrait as brothers-in-arms on the front lines of the civil rights movement, a reassuring but not uncontroversial perspective. Together, they form part of a domestic shrine, taking their place on the mantle among primitive paintings. The clock hangs directly below the portraits, bottom-heavy like a teardrop. It is shaped like a banjo, with a round body and tuning pegs for three strings. The shape reinforces a sense of kinship between these three leaders as folk/vernacular heroes, while emphasizing the passage of time.

Greiner’s *King - Promised Land Billboard* shares some chromatic and compositional elements with a photograph from *William Eggleston’s Guide*, including the fantastic coloring of the purple night sky and a lone streetlamp lighting the building like a stage set (figure 95). But Greiner’s photograph makes the racial tensions in the subtext of Eggleston’s *Guide* photographs overt by foregrounding the King billboard featuring a quotation from his “mountaintop” speech, given April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination. The photograph forces contemplation of what kind of land the billboard exists in – a seemingly un-peopled, almost post-apocalyptic one – and how King’s legacy reverberates in the present day. Other Greiner photographs allude to aspects of the city’s racial history. *Civil War Mural and AC*, 2003, pairs the bayonet-wielding
Confederate soldiers of the Old South and air conditioning – one of the technologies that enabled the explosion of economic development in the Sunbelt South, and its associated cultural and economic changes (figure 96). 117

Like Civil War Mural and AC, Greiner’s 2007 photograph of the Robert E. Lee Theatre on Robert E. Lee Boulevard in New Orleans is evidence of the author’s taste for irony (figure 97). The theater has since been torn down, but not before Greiner and fellow artist Christian Patterson made an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the letters from demolition (doing so proved to be cost-prohibitive). In their “cowboy,” “wild west” style, the lettering has an old-timey feel that harks back to Louisiana’s frontier days, giving off a whiff of the “Rebel South.” But the brazen red letters appear pathetic as they sit atop a row of decrepit buildings, a reminder that this theater in its Lake Pontchartrain-side neighborhood (which flooded during Katrina) is an anachronism.

117 “Ask any southerner over thirty years of age to explain why the South has changed in recent decades, and he may begin with the civil rights movement or industrialization. But sooner or later he will come around to the subject of air conditioning. For better or worse, he will tell you, the air conditioner has changed the nature of southern life. Some southerners will praise air conditioning and wonder out loud how they ever lived without it....” Raymond Arsenault, “The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture,” The Journal of Southern History vol. 50, no. 4 (November 1984): 597-628. According to Arsenault, “by the mid-1970s air-conditioning had made its way into more than 90 percent of the South’s high-rise office buildings, banks, apartments, and railroad passenger coaches...”the air conditioner has greatly accelerated what John Egerton has called ‘the Americanization of Dixie.’ To begin with, the air conditioner has helped to reverse an almost century-long southern tradition of net outmigration...in the 1960s, for the first time since the Civil War, the South experienced more in-migration than out-migration...between 1970 and 1978, 7 million people migrated to the South, twice the number that left the region. By the end of that decade, the Sunbelt era was in full swing.” Air-conditioning has brought new factories and businesses to the South, improved working conditions, and increased productivity. Raymond Arsenault, “Air-Conditioning,” in Charles Reagan Wilson & William Ferris, Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989): 321-322.
The theater was closed in 1991 and demolished almost 20 years later to make way for new retail and office developments.118

Themes in Greiner’s pre-Katrina photographs offer evidence of the intertwined relationship between race and the gothic in American culture, always vulnerable to the haunting eruptions of past racial tragedy. Greiner’s Reposed series, published in a 1999 monograph, depicts New Orleans cemeteries and mausoleums alongside suburban developments, Winn Dixies, and dollar stores – a metaphor for the uneasy coexistence of the racialized gothic and the quotidian. Photographs in this series do not depict “grandiose, gated necropoli” in the French Quarter, as former New Orleans Museum of Art curator of photographs (now president of the Brevard Art Museum in Florida) Stephen Maklansky has said.119 Or as Roger Green from the Times Picayune puts it, “The cemeteries Greiner photographs are not the tended final resting places of wealthy or influential people but provide repose to ordinary Janes and Joes.” The modest cemeteries Greiner frequents include Holt cemetery on City Park Avenue, as well as graveyards in Raceland, Bouette, Violet, Houma, and Madisonville.120

In the *Reposed* series Greiner often used a flash to intensify the color and emphasized isolated objects against bright backgrounds. Of the series, Green writes, “Fully as striking as the photo’s content is their gemlike color, which seems less recorded on film than painted with a miniaturist’s expertise.” Green notes, furthermore, that Greiner “intensifies colors by shooting outdoors with a flashbulb (a technique that further emphasizes isolated colored images by flattening background and bleaching foregrounds).”

As in Hollywood films, many of the photographs in *The Reposed* conform to highly eye-pleasing conventions – they are well-lit, almost excessively so, and the “plainest décor seems to sparkle.” Saturated color creates a serene fantasy world – a lush and sometimes bizarre realm of suspended disbelief. In David Lynch’s 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*, saturated color works similarly to affect a sublime and untroubled place. By contrast, Lynch uses de-saturated color in the same film to affect a dreadful alternate world of despair. In *Mulholland Drive*, the detritus of a fallen character “inhabits a room desaturated of color.” The photographs in *The Reposed*, by contrast, create a fantasmatic world, a “coherent place of bright and vivid colors.”

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123 Martha P. Nochimson, “Mulholland Drive,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1 (Fall 2002), 39.
124 Nochimson, 43.
125 McGowan, “Mulholland Drive,” 68. McGowan argues that the fantasy world in Mulholland Drive is a “coherent place of bright and vivid colors” which contrasts with a “world of desire that is dark and fragmentary.”
Through expressive color, Greiner, like Lynch, “exposes the extreme situations that exist in the heart of everyday reality.”\textsuperscript{126}

John Szarkowski observed that, in Greiner’s cemetery photographs, the atmosphere “seems almost distilled, almost airless.” The curator took note of “a beautiful, crystal, transparent quality of light and super clarity to the quality of these places that has a very elegiac spirit.”\textsuperscript{127} Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s photographs also sometimes exude this smooth, airless quality. One example is Caballito de Quito, 1984 (figure 98). Like many of Greiner’s cemetery photographs, this image pays homage to what is perhaps a child’s toy or a bit of personal embellishment – the metal ornament on the hood of a car. The car is pushed up against the side of a white painted building, flush, so that the white spiral adornment protruding from the wall runs almost continuously into the smooth and shiny white hood. Despite being monochrome, there is a striking contrast between the liquid metallic luminescence of modernity and the imperfect and textured walls of a seemingly ancient whitewashed building.

Although the cemetery environments themselves – with their silences and whitewashed surfaces – possess this airless quality to some degree apart from Greiner’s photographs of them, this airless quality is not as distinct in Clarence John Laughlin’s

\textsuperscript{126} McGowan, 69.
photographs of Louisiana cemeteries. A heightened contrast between light and shadow in Laughlin’s black-and-white *Insect-headed Tombstone* imparts dynamism – the fringe around the heart-shaped wreath casts scraggly shadows onto the tombstone and seems electrified, as if pulsing with energy (figure 99). The deep shadows suggest weather and the passage of time – as if a hot, direct sun is baking into the stone. Most obviously, the crystalline clarity – what some have referred to as the jewel-like quality – of Greiner’s color is not present in Laughlin’s image. One reason for the seemingly “airless” quality in Greiner’s cemetery photographs is the illusion that the tombs and wreaths are perfectly lit – as if in a studio with artificial light. Trees, flowers, and blades of grass don’t blow around but remain anchored in place. Another reason for the affect of airlessness may be Greiner’s use of flash and the way in which it isolates objects and impresses them upon the surface behind them, as if caught in a police lineup or mug shot.

As art historian Patricia Leighten has noted, Laughlin’s work was largely ignored outside the dominant mainstream of American photography for much of his lifetime. In 1917, as Leighten observes, Alfred Stieglitz dedicated the last two issues of *Camera Work* to the work of Paul Strand, precipitating a purist attitude in American photography that made all other forms of photographic expression seem a travesty of
the medium’s fundamental potential.\textsuperscript{128} Laughlin was one of a small handful of photographers, writes Leighten, who continued exploring the expressive possibilities of overtly manipulated photography after the Second World War. His work is therefore important for an understanding of the history of photography and the history of Surrealism in America. \textsuperscript{129} As I have argued, in their use of color to render subjects fantastic and dreamlike, the photographers in this dissertation have at times and to varying degrees brought their work into Surrealist territory, despite also working within the American documentary, “straight” tradition championed by Szarkowski and exemplified in the work of Walker Evans. Furthermore, not one of the three photographers I discuss has taken a stand against so-called manipulation in his practice, and one could argue that their use of saturated color is suggestive of manipulations during both exposure and printing (for example, Photoshop and dye transfer can be used to emphasize one color over another; film can be overexposed to achieve a higher contrast).\textsuperscript{130}

Working in black-and-white, Laughlin used methods like double exposure and combination printing to layer ghostly figures into gothic milieu as symbolic

\textsuperscript{129} Leighten, 130.
\textsuperscript{130} For an incisive discussion of overt manipulation in photography and attitudes toward it, please see Patricia Leighten, “Critical Attitudes Toward Overtly Manipulated Photography in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century,” \textit{Art Journal}, vol. 37, no. 4 (Summer 1978): pp. 313-321.
manifestations of unconscious fears or dreams. “Conceived as symbolist visual poems,” writes Leighten, “such contrived and manipulated images have frequently been seen as evidence of Laughlin’s bad taste, rather than forays of photography into Surrealism and Surrealism into photography.”

Although the other photographers I have discussed in this dissertation did not make routine use of double exposures, combination printing, or other forms of overt photographic manipulation, they took pains to achieve the degree of color saturation they desired in their prints. Greiner, I would argue, was like Laughlin interested in the “fantastic use of the camera.” Laughlin in particular deployed it so that “these people, these images,” appeared in “a kind of hyperspace, where solid things become ghostly…I tried to take that magical quality he [Atget] got in those showcases and shop windows of Paris and push it further.”

Like Laughlin, Greiner sought out the bizarre, bright, and unusual in Louisiana cemeteries. They both photographed boxes with glass covers on graves in rural Louisiana cemeteries, as well as flowers, lace, and images of Christ. According to Laughlin, “the most important form of the Louisiana folk art found in many bayou cemeteries… is a wooden box, faced with glass. Inside these boxes are found many different kinds of objects. In some boxes there are stuffed birds, used, consciously, as the

131 Leighten, 132.
132 Leighten, 132.
symbol of the Holy Ghost; [but, inevitably, as in all the art of man, the subconscious mind introduces meanings of its own].”¹³³

Laughlin’s 1953 *Bird of the Death Dream* is a very different take on the theme of the glass-enclosed box, which Greiner also took up in his 1990 photograph, *White Box* (figures 100 and 101). “The bird seen here is decaying and surrounded by flowers made of ribbons. It has the quality of a sinister and macabre vision, since its roots are deep within the secret, and compulsive, mind.”¹³⁴ Greiner’s *White Box* is also disorienting, despite providing the viewer with more context; it is not quite as closely cropped and the surrounding cemetery is visible. But a large part of the intrigue in Greiner’s photograph derives from color – the deep satiny reds and pinks of the flowered cross against the pristine white of the cross; that bright white against the roiling heavens above. These elements make the landscape dreamlike and portentous. As Patricia Leighten observes, the funeral boxes photographed by Laughlin bear similarity to Joseph Cornell’s glass-front boxes. Cornell collected objects – paper birds, clay pipes, clock springs, balls, and rings – and arranged them meticulously and fussily in the boxes, conjuring ideas, memories, fantasies, and dreams.¹³⁵

In reflecting on Laughlin’s work, New Orleans author Albert Belisle Davis noted

¹³³ Leighten, 143.
¹³⁴ Leighten, Ibid.
¹³⁵ Leighten, Ibid.
that the truest impression of the New Orleans cemeteries “is just the opposite of a gray-toned photograph.” The “truest photograph of this place would have to be in color, glaring blaring greens and blues, a white that makes you squint.” This is the effect that Greiner seems to reach for in photographs that so emphasize the unexpected brightness of the whites, the depth and sharpness of the blues, greens, yellows, and pinks. A picture of the New Orleans cemetery should “reminds us that this city exists somewhere in the city of the living….it is the living city that somehow wins, with an effect so dazzling that mourners and painters and tourists have to wear sunglasses to walk among these walls.”

The saturation of color in the cemeteries of Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana recently came under attack by the city council. In 2012, the council passed an ordinance requiring all new tombs in three cemeteries of the parish to be painted white. “Among the mostly white and gray slabs of concrete at Southdown Cemetery are a handful that are painted in a variety of splashy colors – pink, red, green, blue and yellow,” a local newspaper noted. “A bright blue statue of the Virgin Mary stands atop one blue

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City Councilman Alvin Tillman argued that bright colors were not right for a cemetery. “Folks are painting things purple and blue, and I just don’t think that’s in order,” the councilman said. “It’s very unsightly…you are going to go out there someday and find the cemetery looking like Mardis Gras…We just want to stop this before it gets out of hand.”

Laughlin and Greiner are certainly not the only photographers who have made images of decorated tombstones. Walker Evans, Doris Ulmann, Tom Rankin, and many others have pursued this photographic subject (figures 102 and 103). Greiner’s efforts are in dialogue, furthermore, with the folklorists and photographers who documented southern burial and funerary practices, especially those considered to be part of vernacular or “folk” culture (figure 104). Eggleston also delved into the subject in William Eggleston’s Guide and in his 1972 photograph of Delta bluesman Mississippi Fred McDowell (figures 105 and 106). Funerals are important social events all across the South, and they have distinctive features in African American communities. “In black society, it would be very bad form for a funeral not to be a lavish, even extravagant event. The conclusion of one’s life is regarded as a highly charged occasion, and many

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blacks make careful plans throughout their lives for the moment of death.” Within the larger context of southern burial imagery, Greiner’s *White Box* may be considered a kind of postmodern still life and *memento mori*. Greiner’s *Reposed* imagery also gestures toward the history of inequality in the South that extended even to burial of the dead.

Even if many of the cemeteries Greiner depicted served lower-income communities, *Times-Picayune* writer Roger Green writes, “the artificial floral offerings embellishing the graves are exercises in baroque excess.” Greiner’s “sharply focused pictures record the molded perfection of plastic petals and the way that blossoms fit into the sockets of plastic stems.” One could argue that Greiner’s photographs deploy a willed artlessness that’s comparable to the graveyard decorations themselves. The will to adorn is not coming from a living decorator as much as it is from an intuitive decorator.

Perfection in *The Reposed* photographs coexists with the backside or “underbelly” of these sublime gravesites. Green notes that several pictures “show not the fronts but the backs of floral offerings – embarrassing views of foam cores with skinny, projecting wires and sometimes borders of crumpled foil.” A few of the images show flowers in

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142 Green, “Photographer Takes a Good Hard Look at Grave Issues.”
plastic bags. Closed up and stifled in this way, they produce the airless effect Szarkowski described. They exude the tackiness of manufactured things in colors too bright and vulgar to resemble the living things they try to imitate. The plastic-enshrouded flowers have a morbid, body bag connotation (figure 107).

Media scholar Sally Stein called attention to Roland Barthes’ reflection that color is an artificial cosmetic, “like the kind used to paint corpses. What matters to me is not the photograph’s life (a purely ideological notion) but the certainty that the photographed body touches me with its own rays and not with a superadded light.”

This “intensely macabre,” in Stein’s words, link between color photography, cosmetics, and corpses, “pointedly equates the artifice of color with death and loss, and it just as pointedly circumvents the common association of cosmetics with women, and in particular, the wearing of makeup by women when they leave the intimate child-centered domestic sphere.”

Plastic Flowers in Bag, Raceland, 1990 also features plastic-bagged flowers. Colored like white and red like blood cells, they are tied to a stone cross painted pure unblemished white (figure 108). They splay out like a bag of blood drawn from a donor’s arm. The bag is clouded by heavy condensation, indicating that the flowers

144 Stein, 13.
were once alive, as they struggle to continue respiration. The condensation makes all the more palpable the suffocation, gasping for breath, the rapid loss of oxygen that the flowers signify.

Such an airless quality is also present in some images from William Eggleston’s *Guide*. In *Sumner, Mississippi*, a cadaverous meal is laid out in front of the viewer, daring him or her to eat it (figure 109).145 The waxy magnolias and the soggy red vegetables contrast revoltingly with the thick slab of meat. Depicting the Eggleston/Schuyler family home in the small Mississippi Delta town, the image connotes the death and airlessness associated with this thought-to-be decaying culture in the late 1970s. This image is the antithesis of the Dutch still life, illustrating the dialectic between illusion and non-illusion. Appearing scentless and tasteless, this food goes against the idea of food as something that nourishes and gives life.

The affect of airlessness persists in Greiner’s *Blue Heart, Houma*, in which diagonal line of white roses cuts through the heart-shaped wreath, like the sash on a Miss America contestant (figure 110). Improbably blue flowers cover the heart in a thick, lush blanket. This is a scene of pure, dreamlike, almost bizarre perfection. Greiner has caught this wreath at its moment of ripeness – no brown petals; not soaked from rain;

145 Marta Figlerowicz described the cadaverous look of the food in the 1964 Alfred Hitchcock film *Marnie* in her article “Timing and Vulnerability in Three Hitchcock Films,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 49-58, 52.
not splattered with dirt or picked at by birds – and made it seem eternal. Its pristine quality contributes to the sense of airlessness Szarkowski noted – the space seems devoid of “the elements,” human error – the things that ravaged New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As Eggleston does in his famous tricycle image, Greiner here turns an object into a monument.

_Bluie Heart_ contrasts dramatically with photographs in _The Reposed_ that depict brittle, crushed Styrofoam hearts, brown and twisted flowers and grass, teddy bears dripping with rain and dirt, plastic dolls with missing limbs (figure 111). Like Greiner’s _Reposed_ and _Gone But Not Forgotten_ images, Robert Mapplethorpe’s works also make the viewer contemplate how one addresses the elegiac. Mapplethorpe died from AIDS-related illness in 1989, and much of his later work dealt with the theme of mortality (figure 112).

The past fragility of color film as a medium adds to the sense of mourning something lost in Greiner’s _Reposed_ and _Gone But Not Forgotten_ imagery. Film scholar Tom Gunning describes film color as “elusive and fragile.” Until a few decades ago, he wrote in 2013, “color film stock was vulnerable to decay and deterioration and less suitable as an archival preservation medium than more stable black-and-white stocks.” Color film remains transitory, Gunning noted, “subject to changes wrought by time, as well as “changes as it migrates through different film stocks and modes of
Thus, it might be said that the medium of color film itself invites the contemplation of mortality and decay. From the perspective of archiving and preservation, Gunning writes, film color is “uniquely vulnerable and its relative absence from earlier accounts of silent film history may derive less from suspicion or ideological suppression than from the nature of color itself, elusive and ungraspable, as eager to appear to us as to flee from us.”

Greiner’s *Red Clay and Wreath*, Kentwood, 1990, depicts a wreath in a very different manner than *Blue Heart* (figure 113). Instead of being put on a pedestal, the wreath in Red Clay is thrown upon the orange clay. It is white and lush, like a heavily-frosted cake, but slashed through with an inexplicable strip of red. A more formal cemetery is visible in the distance, but this particular wreath is outcast, as if marking a burial ground for someone too poor for a tomb or mausoleum. Kentwood is nearly 100 miles north of New Orleans, near the Mississippi border, which may account in part for its different appearance from Greiner’s other cemetery photographs. The photograph is a reminder of the cultural differences among Louisianans, reflected in burial practices – the French Catholics of South Louisiana tended to use more crosses and above-ground vaults than the Anglo-Saxons of North Louisiana. Furthermore, urban and rural people

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147 Gunning, 84.
take different approaches to burial, with burials in rural cemeteries arranged according to local values. As in this case, grave markers are often absent.  

The photograph also gestures symbolically toward the racial segregation evident in many Louisiana cemeteries. Black people, especially black Protestants, often had their own church or community cemeteries. Through the 1980s, the majority of Louisiana cemeteries (85 percent) consisted exclusively of one race. Racial mixture was, however, more common in South Louisiana, Catholic, white, and urban cemeteries. As of the mid-1980s, thirty-nine percent of Catholic cemeteries were racially mixed, while only 4 percent of Protestant cemeteries were racially mixed. “Racial mixture in Catholic cemeteries derives from the practice of giving black Catholics portions of predominantly white Catholic cemeteries, instead of establishing separate black Catholic cemeteries,” according to researcher Tadashi Nakagawa. Segregation of white and black plots is less evident in Catholic than in Protestant cemeteries. According to Nakagawa, racial segregation in some Catholic cemeteries results from economic differences: black purchased the remaining plots at the corners after wealthy white families bought burial plots close to the central cross or to the church buildings. A few Catholic cemeteries, however, still show racial segregation. In St. Thomas cemetery, for example, blacks

149 Nakagawa, “The Cemetery as a Cultural Manifestation,” 91.
occupy the west and whites share the east of the central passage. In St. Alphonosus cemetery, blacks have a separate section and a second central cross. The tendency of the segregation, nevertheless, was blurring in those cemeteries. The fence between the white and the black sections in St. Alphonsus Cemetery was removed in the late 1960s. Nakagawa notes that racial mixture is more frequent in urban than rural cemeteries.\(^{150}\)

In traditional black graveyards bodies are interred with objects that were used by the person in life, according to American Studies scholar John Michael Vlach. Personal items like razors, lamps, clocks, toys, medicine bottles, glasses, cups, and so forth are clustered on top of the grave mound, he writes. Greiner’s photographs depict gravesites adorned with teddy bears, motorcycles, bingo boards, bicycles, and flowered guitars (figures 114, 115, 116).

Such vernacular objects are placed there to provide the spirits with material comforts so they might rest easy and not roam outside the cemetery. Such practice keeps the spirit where it belongs and connects the mourners to what they have lost, diminishing to a degree their sorrow, writes Vlach.\(^{151}\) Innovativeness of decoration in southern rural cemeteries covers a broad spectrum of traits, according to geography scholar Greg Jeane.” In general, there is a well-established condition of ‘making do.’

\(^{150}\) Nakagawa, “The Cemetery as Cultural Manifestation,” 93-94.

\(^{151}\) Vlach, *Encyclopedia*, 162.
Grave mounds are covered with shells, dishes, personal artifacts (such as favorite mugs, eyeglasses, medicine bottles, and the like), or other paraphernalia.”152

Greiner’s Red Rocks, White Fence, Blue Sky depicts a striking and dreamlike series of plots covered in blood red rocks and what appear to be crushed shells (figure 117). Jeane also notes that coffee cans or fruit jars covered with foil are converted to flower containers. “A particularly eye-catching, homemade container is made by cutting an aqua, or white, gallon detergent bottle in half. A hole is cut at the bottom center, the neck of the top half is inserted, and the cap screwed on. The resulting container has a broad base to resist easy toppling and will hold an abundant array of flowers. Children’s graves display a phenomenal array of personal items “-- toys and stuffed animals, for example. Other practices include the use of white sand for grave plots or even for covering entire graveyards.153

In Greiner’s Reposed series, the suburban trappings of Homefront are mingled with the serenity and transcendence of stone and marble cemeteries (figure 118). The Reposed draws on suburban gothic films that theorize and fantasize suburbia’s ominous alter-ego – Poltergeist (1973), The Stepford Wives (1975), Halloween (1978), It (1990), and Twin Peaks, to name a few examples. The creepiness that I suggest is in many Greiner

images, including *Running Shoes in Driveway* and photographs in *The Reposed* series, is achieved in part by means of suspense and repression – instead of being explicitly frightening, these photographs hint at dangers “implied but unsaid in the margins of thrillers.” As literary scholar Vivian Sobchack has noted, repression is one of the dominant strategies of the traditional horror film and in Greiner’s photographs, there is the sense of repressed danger or sadness. “I could walk around a cemetery and just sense the grief and the loss, not necessarily from about what was there but maybe about what was not there,” Greiner said in a 2000 interview with National Public Radio. “And that’s kind of also about what photography is. It’s not only what you include in the photograph but it’s about what you exclude from the photograph.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is no correlation between the use of color film and the impression of “reality” in the viewer; indeed, color film may be used to heighten the distinction between “ordinary” perception and a hallucinatory condition. Hitchcock sought to ameliorate the realism and shock value of the shower murder scene in the 1960 film *Psycho* by shooting in black-and-white, but the inclusion of color in Gus Van Sant’s 1998 remake did not make the scene more realistic, cultural studies scholar

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Philipp Schmerheim observes. In the 2000 film *Memento*, Christopher Nolan embraced the disorienting potential of color to tell the story of a man with a memory disorder, using color for scenes in reverse-chronological order and black-and-white for chronological scenes. Fairy tales and color, observes film scholar Joseph Yumibe, have long been entwined, from vibrantly illustrated children’s books, to the magical stage colors of the féerie plays of the nineteenth century, to the spectacular hand-colored and stenciled féérie films of Georges Méliès and Segundo de Chomón during the first decade of the 1900s.

Communicating in their often jewel-bright idiom, Greiner’s photographs of Louisiana cemeteries, billboards, and suburban homes belong to an artistic tradition that exploits vibrant color to arouse, entrance, and frighten. Through the visual language of color, the photographer elucidates the charged undercurrent of Louisiana and New Orleans – places cracking with immanence – of the next storm, race riot, or environmental disaster.

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5. Conclusion

In this dissertation I considered artistic color photography in the context of social and regional factors. In my examination of Eggleston especially, I explored the ways that expectations about regional content may be placed on works of art from the U.S. South. I also examined the way in which relationship to region may be ignored or suppressed in discussions about works of art. This approach has interesting implications for scholarly narratives about artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Johns spent much of his childhood in South Carolina, while Rauschenberg grew up in Texas. How did critics respond to or ignore the influence of region on the works of these artists? A critical reexamination of their relationship to a sense of place may have fruitful implications for discussions about Art of the U.S. Writing about Johns, Barbara Rose has suggested that his “role in American art is analogous to that of William Faulkner in literature.” Both are southerners who were able to “breathe new life into traditional forms (easel painting, the novel), thought to be nearing exhaustion, by emphasizing detail, texture, and complex interrelationships over long durations, thus slowing down the passage of time until it could be palpably experienced.” Johns’s attitude toward time, Rose suggests, was very different from that of New York school artists, who were much more concerned with spontaneity. Johns, by contrast, reworked and ruminated for years. His attention
span and historical consciousness were thus “at odds with contemporary sensibility.”

My interest in a particular section of the Deep South – the general Mississippi Delta region (from Memphis to New Orleans) and Mississippi as a whole – prevented me from including photographers like Shore, Sternfeld, Soth, Joel Meyerowitz, and Mitch Epstein in this study. Even William Christenberry, an artist whose work in painting, photography, and sculpture I greatly admire, has been excluded in part because of his commitment to working in Alabama. I felt it was important to my exploration to focus on Mississippi and the Delta region. I did not want this project to be about southern photography broadly in the post-civil rights movement era. Rather, I wanted it to be about color photographic practices in one part of the Deep South during a time period that included and extended beyond Eggleston’s MoMA exhibition.

However, there are many southern photographers whose work I could have discussed, or could have discussed in greater detail. An entire monograph could be devoted to the work of Milly West, a tireless photographer, and former gallery owner in Oxford, Mississippi (figure 119). West started the thriving Southside Gallery in Oxford, MS, with her former husband, Rod Moorhead. I could have discussed photographer Jane Rule Burdine, who let me visit her Taylor, MS farmhouse one afternoon. Burdine has made sensitive and beautiful photographs of the Mississippi Delta and the residents

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of Sugar Ditch Alley, a neighborhood in Tunica, MS with difficult history. Burdine’s monograph, *Delta Deep Down* (2008), depicts the Mississippi Delta as a place of ethereal warmth and light (figure 120).

New Orleans photographer Joshua Mann Pailet, owner of A Gallery for Fine Photography, shared several hours of his time with me discussing his impressive career as a photographer and collector. He opened his gallery in New Orleans in 1973, at a time when photo galleries were just beginning to crop up in New York. His book of color photographs, *The World’s Fair, New Orleans* (1987), includes many wonderful images that are worthy of inclusion in future studies (figure 121).

Alex Harris, a Durham, North Carolina-based photographer provided me with crucial insights into the making of color photographs while discussing his early color work in New Mexico. His photographs of the New South in Louisiana and North Carolina influenced my thinking about William K. Greiner’s work, which I learned about while looking at Harris’s edited volume, *A New Life: Stories and Photographs from the Suburban South*. Greiner’s “Homefront” series was published in Harris’s book, which informed my discussion of southern suburbia throughout the dissertation. *A New Life* is an assembly of short stories and images portraying the South “not as we might imagine or remember it, but as it is lived – in condos and malls, on golf courses and interstates, in
family rooms and bedrooms, and in the hearts and minds of southern people.” In a letter to Mary Ward Brown, Harris described an essay by writer Walker Percy that hinted at what Harris himself was trying to accomplish in *A New Life*. Percy, according to Harris, had urged a new generation of southern writers to: “tell the truth, to show how life is lived, and therefore affirm life, not only the lives of poor white people or poor black people...but even life in a condo on a golf course.” This, wrote Harris, “at least in part, is what I hope *A New Life* will accomplish, through stories and photographs – as a body of work – to give a new sense of contemporary life in the South” (figure 122).

Tom Rankin’s black-and-white photography and his insights as teacher and writer have hugely influenced my thinking about Eggleston, whom, Rankin has pointed out, is a documentary photographer. Rankin was generous enough to share his personal history as a folklorist and photographer with me in his office at the Center for Documentary Studies.

If time and space allowed, I would also have discussed Thomas Tulis’s night-time color photographs of power lines and suburban construction in Tennessee (figure 123). Tulis was born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee and lives in Atlanta, but says his images are “not particularly southern fried although when included in an anthology

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2 1996 description of *A New Life: Stories and Photographs of the Suburban South*, in the Alex Harris Papers, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

3 February 27, 1996 letter from Alex Harris to Mary Ward Brown, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.
of southern art they may look it.”\textsuperscript{4} A reviewer described Tulis’s Cibachrome images as transforming nature in a “vibrant, sometimes violent display of hellish colors….We see a world as if through alien eyes, a world both wondrous and foreboding.”\textsuperscript{5} Another writer reported that Tulis likes to infuse his work with an “artificial quality,” though he does not manipulate his photographs much to achieve it. “Rather, he works with his subjects at the site (often by panning) to distort or blur the background which surrounds the focal point or center of interest of the photograph.” He describes his color photographs as “portraits of the land.” In them, the reporter writes, “drama and a surrealist tone are evident – particularly in his night photos of transmission towers which have been specially lit by Mr. Tulis.”\textsuperscript{6}

Sonja Rieger is another photographer whose use of color makes her work attractive for this project. However Rieger fell outside of the geographic area I had drawn for myself to work within. Her photographs, such as \textit{Alabama Hubcaps}, use color in an uncanny and surreal manner that dovetails with many of the concerns of this project (figure 124). Talking about an earlier series, Rieger remarked in an artist’s statement that her photographs may appear to be the result of the use of filters, strobos, strobos,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Letter from Thomas Tulis to Alex Harris, March 3, 1996. In the Alex Harris Papers, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.
\item \textsuperscript{5} James Nelson, “Tulis’s lens uses commonplace to snap icons of the ordinary,” \textit{The Birmingham News} (September 26, 1993).
\end{itemize}
or other manipulations, but they are not. “The garish colors and bizarre landscapes are found in the environment. The bright orange-reds are created by neon signs casting light in isolated areas at dusk.” She notes that Birmingham has been defined by its “lateral urban sprawl, lush vegetation, indigenous history, and resulting architecture.” She describes her images in this series as appearing serene but “smoldering” and portentous of “a more sinister meaning about the identity of a city.” Much like Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner, Rieger is using color to achieve an emotional fever pitch and to imply lurking danger in a New South that lacks the more obvious villains but where the wounds of the past are still raw, just not always visible.

My argument suggests that the intense color of images like William Eggleston’s *Red Ceiling*, Birney Imes’s *Purple Rain Lounge*, and William Greiner’s *Blue Heart* resonates within the contexts in which they were produced and circulate. Each of the three chapters—although attempting to grapple with the time periods of the 1970s, 1980s, and mid-90s/00’s respectively—pivot around many of the same recurrent themes. These themes include race relations, rural vs. urban relations, and representations of the U.S. South as a cultural entity. I argue that an awareness of suburbanization, sprawl, and the Sunbelt phenomenon of economic development (which brought southern artists into

7 Sonja Rieger, Artist’s Statement, University of Alabama Birmingham Faculty Page, http://www.uab.edu/art/faculty/rieger/sonja_riegerstatement.html.

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greater physical and cultural contact with the New York art world) also affect our perception of the color in this work.

The first chapter, on Eggleston, introduces these themes by way of the narrative about Eggleston’s 1976 Museum of Modern Art exhibition and the very particular time – 1976, the nation’s bicentennial year – in which the exhibition was received. This chapter deals with the apocryphal controversy over the dullness and mundane quality of Eggleston’s color and subjects, commented upon by Hilton Kramer, Gene Thornton, Ansel Adams, and other critics. It also addresses the perception of Eggleston’s color as a vulgar product of the Deep South. I was also interested in how the curator of the exhibition, John Szarkowski, dealt with Eggleston’s strong historical and cultural ties the Mississippi Delta at a time when many photographers whose work hung on MoMA’s walls were Jewish New Yorkers. I explored the ways in which Szarkowski’s formalist explanation of Eggleston’s work was insufficient to account for Eggleston’s “bleeding colors” and the connection of this color to the South, both new and old. As artist and critic Martha Rosler pointed out, Szarkowski’s choices at the Museum of Modern Art were typified by the career of Garry Winogrand, “who aggressively rejects any responsibility (culpability) for his images and denies any relation between them and

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\(^8\) Again, I am indebted to historian Grace Elizabeth Hale for the phrase “bleeding colors” in reference to Eggleston’s work. See Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Eggleston’s South: Always in Color,” *Southern Spaces* (June 27, 2013). http://southernspaces.org/2013/eggletons-south-always-color
shared or public human meaning.”

In chapters two and three, I chose two other photographers from the Deep South (Imes of Columbus, MS and Greiner of Baton Rouge, LA) and analyzed the ways in which the color in their work may have been understood, given the subjects they chose and the contexts in which their work was received. In the case of Birney Imes, I was most concerned with how color film may have signaled a boundary-crossing and a momentous encounter between Imes and a world forbidden to him as a white Mississippian. In the case of William Greiner, I was more concerned with Hurricane Katrina and the political issues the storm brought into relief. I argued that these issues – overdevelopment, suburban sprawl, the interconnection between racism and urban planning, and climate change – affect our perception of Greiner’s oeuvre, much of which revolves around the New Orleans metropolitan area. Hurricane Katrina imagery – artistic, mass media, and everything in between – is a form of color photography of the South at its most visceral and dystopic. As artist Kara Walker observed in her 2007 book on Katrina, titled *After the Deluge*, there are “subconscious narratives at work when we talk about” a disaster like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.” Spanning the Bible, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and

beyond, such underlying narratives infuse the works of Eggleston, Imes, and Greiner with portent. It has been my modest aim in this dissertation to explore how the use of color as an expressive medium reinforces the relationship between the latent narratives Walker refers to and the photographs under discussion here.

I would like to thank my committee members for their patience, encouragement, ideas, and careful editing throughout the dissertation research and writing process. I am especially grateful to the chair of my committee, Richard J. Powell, whose feedback precipitated many new ideas and avenues for further research I could never have conceived of.
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Biography

Anna Kivlan was born in South Weymouth, Massachusetts on July 9, 1979. She received a bachelor’s degree from the University of San Diego in 2003 and a master of science in architecture studies from MIT in 2007.
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