Darkrooms as Metaphors; Darkrooms as Origins:
Michael S. Harper’s Dark Room Poems

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Abstract
The article explores the poet Michael S. Harper’s use of the darkroom as a metaphor for family history and African American identity. Acknowledging that the changes in photographic technology over the last decade have spelled the end of the darkroom as the actual workspace of the photographer and as valid, contemporary metaphor for the unconscious, the article describes Harper’s 1977 selected poems, Images of Kin, as one of the last great invocations of this metaphor, and it further examines how this metaphor and its counterpart (the metaphor of the photographic negative) develop for Harper as ekphrastic models of composition.

Keywords
photography, American poetry, African American Studies, text-image studies, ekphrasis
As photography evolves into an all-digital medium, the work of the darkroom is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. Indeed, as we move into an era of instantaneous digital images, the darkroom, its procedures and the photographic negatives that they produce have become the artifacts of an already antique technology. What before required hours of the professional photographer’s or expert developer’s time can now be accomplished quickly and conveniently on a personal computer. There is much to celebrate, but also more than a little to mourn about this technological advancement. The advent of digital photography has given us unparalleled control over the medium, but the absence from our lives of the darkroom and the photographic negatives that filled it may also be said to deny us a glimpse into photography’s mysteries. At times, these mysteries seem almost metaphysical, in that the negative-positive relationship that exists in photographic developing is dependent on opposites where black is the source of white, white of black. Indeed, the technology of pre-digital photography could even be viewed as the fulfillment of what Ralph Waldo Emerson terms the “inevitable dualism” that “bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay” (138).

In literary studies, the technological advancements of photography might seem of little importance. However, the advent of digital photography does affect one of the topoi of modern literature, for it ushers in the death of a series of powerful metaphors: namely, the metaphors of the darkroom and the photographic negative. Indeed, the progression of technology is such that, within a generation or two, students of literature may well read allusions to the photographic negative—as can be found in Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “The Island of the Fay” and throughout the literature of the twentieth century—as cryptic passages that require obliging footnotes. These passages might read something to this effect: Refers to an antique process of photographic development in which a master copy of the image was required in the form of its chromatic opposite. While such footnotes are at present unnecessary, their existence in the future, and indeed their necessity for understanding much of the twentieth century literature and thought, is not unthinkable. Unlike other pieces of technology that have provided the Western Literary Canon with new metaphors (one thinks of Whitman’s steam locomotive or Eliot’s “human taxi”), the darkroom and photographic negative appeal to many of the twentieth century’s greatest psychological and metaphysical preoccupations.

It is Sigmund Freud himself who, in “A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis” (1912), employs the photographic negative as a metaphor of the
unconscious:

Unconsciousness is a regular and inevitable phase in the processes constituting our mental activity; every mental act begins as an unconscious one, and it may either remain so or go on developing into consciousness, according as it meets with resistance or not. The distinction between preconscious and unconscious activity is not a primary one, but comes to be established after repulsion has sprung up. Only then the difference between preconscious ideas, which can appear in consciousness and reappear at any moment, and unconscious ideas which cannot do so gains a theoretical as well as a practical value. A rough but not inadequate analogy to this supposed relation of conscious to unconscious activity might be drawn from the field of ordinary photography. The first stage of the photograph is the “negative”; every photographic picture has to pass through the “negative process,” and some of these negatives which have held good in examination are admitted to the “positive process” ending in the picture. (38)

Freud’s metaphor is not merely convenient; it is compelling, for it allows us to conceive of our own “positive” consciousness as founded upon a primal world of shadows out of which consciousness is only one selected fragment. The mind is not only a conduit for these images; it is a darkroom where some of them are developed through the process of cognition—a process whose avatar is none other than the photographer.

Such metaphors may well explain the importance that the darkroom has played in modern literature, for they allow us to conceive of the darkroom as something of a literary chronotope. According to M. M. Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope, “it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (84-85). For Bakhtin, literary genres are unequivocally connected to the sites in which they depict time. The genre of the medieval quest (one of Bakhtin’s primary examples) is distinguished by the chronotope of the road, which depicts time protracted over the length of a journey, while the domestic drama of the nineteenth century novel is dependent upon the chronotope of the threshold—
the entrance into the bourgeois dwelling (Bakhtin 243-44). If we give credence to Bakhtin’s statement that “the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic,” we might declare that the image of man’s mind is equally so, and that the form of this chronotope—in late modernity, at least—is the darkroom: the site in which a literary character confronts the awful transformation from the negative or the other or the uncanny into the positive, the familiar, even the canny.

These sorts of confrontations occur again and again throughout the narratives of the twentieth century. Let us not forget that it is in the darkroom that the photographer-protagonist of Julio Cortazar’s short story “Las Babas del Diablo” (1958) (later in 1966 adapted by Michelangelo Antonioni into his film Blow-Up) discovers the murder lurking in the background of his own fashion photographs. Both Cortazar’s short story and Antonioni’s film portray the darkroom as a site of understanding, recognition and even obsession. They are not alone in this depiction. In the fiction of such writers as Don DeLillo, R. K. Narayan and Günter Grass, the darkroom is a place of realization and transformation—a place where characters search for truth among the shadows. In so doing, they present the darkroom as a synonym of primal discovery, a kind of modern-day underworld.

To my mind, no writer in American literature has explored this chronotope more thoroughly than the poet Michael S. Harper. Throughout Harper’s career, photography has figured as both a subject and as one of the mimetic sources for this poet’s style. Beginning his poetic career at the time of the Black Arts Movement, Harper may be said to have embraced, along with the other African American poets and artists of his day, photography as a seminal medium for a black aesthetic. This attitude persists in the poet’s work. In his recent collection, Use Trouble (2009), Harper includes a number of ekphrastic poems of photographs, and it is obvious that such photographers as Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava have influenced his imagism. However, it is Harper’s Images of Kin (1977) in which Harper produces a series of poems that meditate on the mythical and psychological significances of the darkroom and its negatives. Indeed, the collection (it is in fact selected poems) includes a series of poems, which I would term Harper’s “darkroom poems,” in that their narratives involve the developing of photographs and thus they concentrate on the technical activities of the darkroom.

As these poems make clear, Harper’s interest in the darkroom stems in part from his racial identity. As an African-American poet with a knowledge of photography, Harper is keenly aware of the relationships that exist between the darkness of the darkroom and the darkness of the black body. However, while the issues of racial identity are central to Harper’s work, few of the darkroom poems
directly address racial politics. Rather, these politics may be said to pressurize the poems in ways that figure the darkroom as a meditative space, outside of which the din of American racial politics can be intuited. In this space, Harper’s speakers find a haven for meditations that stray between the realms of the personal, the mythical and the philosophical.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these poems is the manner in which they implicitly explore and subvert what we might term “the photocentricity” that has grown up around descriptions of photography itself. While Harper’s poems do not set out to document this photocentricity in any direct sense, their themes call attention to how—from some of the earliest descriptions of photography—commentators have hailed it as a medium of light, and light alone. In short (with the exception of William Henry Fox Talbot’s acknowledgments of the shadow) the roles that darkness and the photographic negative play in the medium have been suppressed in favor of the work performed by light. The result of this suppression is that photography, as a metaphor, has generally been restricted to an age-old set of binaries that place light in opposition with darkness. Good/evil, knowledge/ignorance, action/inertia, inclusion/castigation, truth/falsehood and redemption/sin—these oppositions have become synonymous with that of light/darkness. And as Harper’s poems imply, this photocentricity is such that it figures photography in another one of the age-old binaries that has haunted Western thought: one that places the white European body in opposition to—the black African one.

One hardly needs to rehearse how this binary has found its way into the historical realities of race in the United States and elsewhere in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Harper, whose poetry first began to appear in the 1960s and who experienced the rise of African-American political activism and Black Nationalism in the United States first-hand, engages these realities in his poems by subverting this binary—that is, by celebrating the darkroom and its negatives as sources of personal identity and mythical creation. Indeed, to use Talbot’s phrase: for Harper, photography is first and foremost “the art of fixing a shadow” (qtd. in Schaaf xviii).

This fixing of shadows strongly links Harper’s poems to the Black Arts Movement, which hailed both photography and poetry as central media for the advancement of an African American aesthetic. One of the most powerful tropes of the Black Arts Movement was the ideal of “black light.” Margot Natalie Crawford summarizes the significance of the black-light metaphor. Citing from Larry Neal’s afterword to the 1968 anthology of African American literature, Black Fire,
Crawford quotes Neal as stating: “We know who we are, and we are not invisible, at least, not to each other. We are not Kafkaesque creatures stumbling through a white light of confusion and absurdity. The light is black (now, get that!) as are most of the meaningful tendencies in the world” (qtd. in Crawford 30). Crawford goes on to describe how Neal “denaturalizes white light as he reveals that optic itself has been tainted by the racist privileging of whiteness,” and she states: “This discussion of white versus black is omnipresent in Black Fire” (Crawford 30).

Indeed, a similar statement might be made of Harper’s darkroom poems, for certainly the photocentric aspects of photography are what these poems challenge. However, what I hasten to add to this statement is that, while Harper’s poems call our attention to the skiagraphic aspects of photography, they are less engaged in creating a full-scale series of oppositions between white and black, as they are in crossing the color lines, if you will, that such an opposition institutes. Indeed, as a photographer and a poet, Harper is well aware that white and black are not mutually exclusive. They are necessary components of a photographic image, and thus, setting them in mere opposition only prioritizes a binary that has little or nothing to do with realities of photographic creation—and possibly nothing to do with the realities of American life.

What runs throughout Harper’s darkroom poems is rather a doubleness or double exposure that transposes white on black and black on white. Harper introduces this doubleness into the collection in his poem “The Negatives,” which focuses on the world of the darkroom:

She agitates
the quart developing tank
in total darkness,
our window bath;
the cylinder sliders
inside against the film
for ten minutes
at 70 degrees.
I can see the developer
acid in the luminous
dial of my watch:
she adds the stop-bath.
The hypo fix
fastens the images
hardening against light
on her film and papers.
I imagine her movement
at night as her teeth grind:
I know she dreams the negatives. (131)

Harper is a poet of fusions—a practitioner of what William Empson famously describes as “the second kind of ambiguity,” which “occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one” (48). In Images of Kin, a great number of Harper’s fusions involve creating double-exposures or composite images in words. However, it is important to recognize how Harper’s double exposures have another and far greater aspect than merely the fusion of multiple themes. Indeed, the darkroom and its negatives provide Harper with a means for substantiating in his poetry what W. E. B. Du Bois famously terms “the double consciousness” of the African American artist. This is a double consciousness that Harper both delineates as it was originally presented by Du Bois, and it is a consciousness that he extends, including within it a portrait of African American woman as an artist and imbuing her artistic role with the additional aspect of childbirth as an element of creation.

It is to be remembered that in “The Souls of Black Folk” (1903), Du Bois formulates what he terms “the two-ness” of the African American “savant” (103): a two-ness which Du Bois describes as being divided between being “an American” and being “a Negro.” “Two souls,” writes Du Bois, “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (102). What Du Bois seeks to define in such a litany is the “paradox” that confronts the African American artist, for as he states, “the knowledge [this artist’s] people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge that would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood” (103). For Du Bois, this double consciousness is the cause of “havoc” for all aspiring African American artists and educated persons, for it means, in effect, that the artist may be educated into white artistic world, whose conventions effectively alienate this artist from African American culture. What, then, is needed is a medium or art form that can exhibit the exceptionalism of African American culture: an art form that expresses “no truer exponents of the human spirit.” For Du Bois, this art form is the Spiritual. Du Bois writes: “there is no truer American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave . . .” (106). In this statement, Du Bois identifies African American music as a medium that can unite this double consciousness, for this art form bridges the gap between white and
black cultures.

Harper’s darkroom poems, with their portrait of the mysterious photographer-mother, celebrate photography as another artistic medium through which the African American artist may unify this double consciousness. In creating images of art from African American life, the black photographer generates a body of work that does not fall prey to the limitations of being a “twice-told tale” of white viewers, nor is it “Greek” to the people that these images record. Instead, it transforms the realities of the African American community into a universal series of images. The matter returns us the Black Arts Movement, its conception of “black light,” and this light’s relationship to the “black aesthetic.” In her discussion of the black aesthetic and photography, titled “Transcending the Fixity of Race: The Kamoinge Workshop and the Question of a ‘Black Aesthetic’ in Photography,” Erina Duganne identifies how photography assumed this artistic role from the late 1960s onward, especially in the work of such photographers as Roy DeCarava. She cites DeCarava as saying: “You should be able to look at me and see my work. You should be able to look at my work and see me” (qtd. in Duganne 187). Duganne couples this statement with another one of DeCarava’s from 1972 in which he stated: “I don’t see art as an individual function as much as a social function” (qtd. in Duganne 187). As Duganne argues, DeCarava’s statements call attention to black aesthetic that is both personal and communal, and thus they call attention to how photographers such as DeCarava are engaged in efforts to solve the problems Du Bois observes in his description of the double consciousness; at least, theoretically, photographer, photographs and the African American community are one.

In Harper’s poems, this unity is particularly represented in “The Negatives” where the photographer is assigned three aspects: the aspect of the technician, the aspect of the lover, and the aspect of the dream-maker. The majority of the poem concentrates on the first aspect. In its opening two lines, the photographer “agitates / the quart developing tank” (131). As well as setting the poem in motion, this aspect establishes the photographer as an expert of her craft: a user of photographer’s terminology and a canny practitioner of its procedures. However, after this is established, the focus of the poem shifts to the process of developing the film itself. The photographer becomes secondary, and the speaker enters as an observer.

Only in the last three lines of the poem do we return to the photographer, at which point her other two aspects emerge and may be said to layer or “double-expose” over her role as the technician:
I imagine her movement
at night as her teeth grind:
I know she dreams the negatives. (Harper 131)

These lines entail a dynamic evacuation of the darkroom: a movement out of its confining darkness into the greater darkness of the “night.” In this greater space, the photographer ceases to be a technician; her expertise is usurped by the idea of her movement in the darkness.

The allusion, though tenuous, is to Byron’s ode, “She Walks in Beauty, like the Night,” in which “all that’s best of dark and bright / meets in [the beloved’s] aspect and her eye” (46). Byron’s description of the perfect balance of darkness and light which meets in the eye of the beloved might very well be used to describe the composite ingredients sought by the eye of the expert photographer. By making this allusion, Harper implicitly describes the photographer’s activities outside of the darkroom while also allowing his poem to segue into an ode-like celebration of her as a lover. Here, the love theme is circumstantial but apparent. Prompted first by the allusion to Byron, it is bolstered by the proximity and knowledge of the speaker: He “knows” that she dreams, presumably because he is present to witness her do so—present to witness her grind her teeth at night, as only a lover would be. While circumstantial here, the love theme is overt in other poems in Images of Kin, where it cements the relationships between speaker/lover, father/mother and poet/photographer.

In “The Negatives,” however, the third aspect of the photographer complicates this theme: her role as a dream-maker. The tension in “The Negatives” exists between the technical procedures of photographic developing and the way that these procedures correspond to a story of creation (a creation myth, if you will). In this story, the photographic negative is the source of all things, and, as the black body shares with the negative the umbral spectrum of darkness, this body becomes the emphatic presence of creation: a substantiation—not of the darkness of John 1:5—but rather of the darkness that serves as the foundation of all light. Placed into a narrative that follows the steps of photographic development, this creation story entails a movement from the technical aspects of photographic developing to dream-thought, suggesting in the process that the enigmatic photographer is something of a divine personage. As she works, she is not merely following the technical procedures of the darkroom; she is “dreaming”—and therefore creating by the power of thought alone, as only a god could—the images that she develops.

Conceived this way, she bears comparison with the God of Genesis or with
the Biblical Jeremiah, who declares: “I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed.” (23:25, King James Bible). Harper’s photographer might claim: “I have photographed, I have photographed.” And yet, even these comparisons do not fully encompass the mythical dimensions of the poem. In her darkroom, Harper’s photographer seems to share more in common with the Ashanti goddess, Asase Ya, than the God of the Old Testament and His prophets. As Patricia Turner and Charles Russell Coulter relate, “Asase Ya, ‘Old Woman Earth,’ is the great goddess who created humanity and at death returns them to her fold” (72). This association with the goddess comes to mind not only because the photographer is a woman-maker, but because her making is intimately associated with the darkness of the darkroom. Cave-like and thus earth-like, the darkroom assumes the role of a womb out of which human images emerge.

What this means is that, in these poems, photographs and their negatives are anthropomorphized as children. As later poems in the collection relate, photographs are not merely static, lifeless records; they are described as the children of the photographer. Very little of this is suggested in “The Negatives” but for the inclusion of the odd detail about the photographer grinding her teeth. In itself, this detail is strange and apparently arbitrary, but whatever we might make of it, it counters the technical work of the darkroom with a suggestion of pain—possibly even the pain of childbirth. While this interpretation of the line may appear to stretch credulity, it seems justified when we consider that this detail is delivered in the poem’s penultimate line, which introduces the idea of the photographer dreaming her negatives with a colon and therefore suggests that the speaker “knows” (seemingly because he is watching her sleep) that this grinding is a sign of her dreaming the negatives into being. In short, the speaker watches her give birth.

The relationship between the act of giving birth and the act of developing photographs is made more explicit in later poems in the collection, the most significant being “Utility Room,” in which the developing tray is twice compared with the photographer’s uterus. Here is the poem’s second-verse paragraph:

She shakes the developing tank
as a uterus
mixing developer
to the negatives
where no light appears;
I hold her hips
as saline and acid
pock up image.
I see my children
of these negatives
in a windowless room. (Harper 134)

As in “The Negatives,” Harper once again doubles or layers the role of the darkroom with another activity: in this case, obviously, birth. The gesture establishes the connection between the darkness of the speaker’s children and the darkness of photographic creation. In this poem, the photographer is not just a maker; her body has become part of the darkroom itself—become part of it, or she has been double-exposed in a way that overlaps her image on top of it.

In “Utility Room,” this double exposure is not limited to the photographer alone, however. Indeed, the photographer, the darkroom and the photographic negatives are all described as having the power to give birth, and it is this layering that allows Harper’s speaker to ascribe life to the photographic negatives. In one of the poem’s strangest lines, the speaker declares how these negatives are the mothers of his children: “I see my children / of these negatives / in a windowless room.” As odd as the syntax of the sentence is, it does not provide us with a great deal of ambiguity. Though embroiled in a certain degree of anthropomorphism, the meaning is quite clear: The photographic negatives have given birth to their positives. What makes these “children” the speaker’s is less clear, unless he is now the photographer. In any event, what is significant is the life that is ascribed and how it originates in the darkroom process.

In Camera Lucida (1980), Roland Barthes famously describes what he calls the “justesse” of a photograph. For Barthes, the justesse relates, of course, to a particular image; to the power that it has to express “the impossible science of the unique being” (70) and its ability to return the dead to life. Such ideas clearly figure photography for Barthes as a ghostly phenomenon. For Barthes, photographs are the dead returned. Harper’s speaker, on the other hand, suggests that his photographs are born from a union between the darkness of their negatives and the agency of the photographer. What is so much more compelling about Harper’s notion of “the life of photographs,” then, is that this life is not a ghostly affair. The photographic negatives do not give birth to images of the dead; they give birth to children. In this way, a poem such as “Utility Room” not only inverts the customary notions of darkness as a specter of death; it also hails its physical manifestation as a producer of life. We might take this a little further, if we return to Neal’s notions of black
light and how this light’s blackness is related to what Neal terms the “most of the meaningful tendencies in the world” (652). What these tendencies are is not exactly clear, but Neal’s insistence on their positive qualities would seem to be augmented in the life that Harper’s poems ascribe to the negatives. Indeed, like that Ashanti earth goddess, the negatives are those agents that bare life out of the darkness.

The poem in his collection that explores this theme of birth in the greatest depth is “Trays: A Portfolio.” A poem of five sections, “Trays” connects the act of photographic creation directly with parenthood. The female photographer of “Negatives” returns again and is identified as the mother of the speaker’s actual children. Here is the poem’s first section:

At the tray
she looks into the heart
of these negatives,
her borning room
fireplace oven full of pitch,
roasting brick sidings,
her heart warmed
from the inside cradle
of the windowless bath. (Harper 138)

As with the poem “Utility Room,” in “Trays” the allusion to the motherhood of the photographer is overt. Harper calls the photographer’s darkroom the “borning room” and describes it as being full of two distinctly different sets of objects. In this room, one encounters not only objects of photographic developing such as “trays” and “negatives,” but also objects found in a rural house or shack: an “oven,” “fireplace” and “brick sidings.” This connection is reinforced in the poem’s third section, where one of the speaker’s sons is described “walk[ing] / under [the photographer’s] apron / as film develops / in her black and white eyes.” By the poem’s fourth section, the sons of the speaker and the photographer have become “developed” as photographic negatives:

We grade the paper from one to six
as our number of children;
little contrast to extreme contrast,
two to four the perfect negative
in our perfect family
enlarged as a light bulb
with a shade; we fight
the dirt on the negatives,
touch up the spotted liquid
absorbed by numbered print:
contact: print:
blacken our negatives with light. (Harper 140)

It’s not clear from this passage whether the negatives are (in the normative sense) numbered according to the number of the speaker’s children (as in Matthew One, Mark Two, etc.) or if the speaker is figuratively referring (as he does in “Utility Room”) to the negatives as his numbered children. Here, the distinction between the negatives and the children has been eradicated. The words “like” and “as” do not appear. There are no clarifying rhetorical elements to distinguish the metaphorical from the real. Rather, reality is double-exposed in the ambiguity of the trays. Such an uncertainty further allows the speaker to superimpose upon the processes of the darkroom the work of domestic life, or vice-versa. Notice how the family is “enlarged”; how the mother and father “fight”—not, as the line break makes clear, with each other, but rather with “the dirt on the negatives.” Such figurations invert the myths of photographic making; for them, light does not come down—as the hand of the Old Testament God does—to draw life into human body. Instead, darkness is obstetric.

The poem in which these themes are ultimately realized is entitled “Photographs” and follows “The Negatives,” “Utility Room” and “Trays”:

Felt negatives work the pores
coal black in darkness
double negatives;
now in the light
the emulsive side down
on top of brown-gray paper
human images rise.

From the bath to workbench
in our tarpaper shack;
stacks of grade paper appear,
fixed images on archival prints;
tempered, the control chemicals  
edge ‘round the contact sheet  
edged in a family grave.

Print and stir dektol  
on agfa brovira bromide paper,  
apply stop action, keep moving  
saline amniotic fluid,  
dilute with hot water.

The iron water cools;  
paper shown to light  
turns black  
as skin on my arm. (Harper 132)

Here, we are not only confronted with the tension between domestic life and photographic creation, we are also given a jazz ballad of the darkroom. In using such words as “agfa brovira bromide paper” and “dektol,” Harper weaves a tapestry of alliteration that incorporates music into his passion for technical accuracy. The alliterations of the poem’s third-verse paragraph alone are enough to call our attention to the fact that the technical language of the darkroom is not anti-poetic. In Harper’s hands, it is arranged in such a way that its rhythm and cadences remind us of the jazz music that is a major influence on this poet’s work.

The jazz-like qualities in “Photographs” call our attention to the way Images of Kin alludes to African-American culture in general. As its title suggests, the collection was written with an intimate awareness of its speakers’ personal, racial and literary origins. Part of this awareness involves the poems’ ekphrastic nod toward the work of such African-American photographers as James Van Der Zee, Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava. In a panegyric essay he wrote on Harper’s poetry, John S. Wright describes the work of these photographers as “images unstuck from the sweet flypaper of black life” that “fuse” Harper’s “spirit with a lensmaster’s ocular acuity and where the unrecognized romance of obscured lives emerges from darkroom shadow” (819). Certainly, some of the images that appear in “Photographs” involve “the ocular acuity” that Wright describes. “The tarpaper shack,” the “family graves”—these images, while divorced from clear narrative contexts, are part of the subject matter recorded in the work of Van Der Zee, Parks and DeCarava.
The ekphrastic allusion to the work of African-American photographers is only part of the collection’s greater allusion to African American identity, however. The black skin of the black arm that appears at the end of “Photographs” invokes an image that has recurred in African-American art and literature since the 19th century: the figure of the negated or negative man. Born of racial castigation, this figure originates in American (European) white portrayals of Africans. From the colonial period onward, white European-American society counted the African as a spiritual, cultural and legal naught, and this attitude was fostered by the photocentricity of Western thought in general. Such rhetoric is not restricted to American history, of course. Indeed, the binary opposition of white/black and positive/negative figures prominently in the general history of Western colonial thinking. As Frantz Fanon famously observes, in the eyes of the Western colonizer, the African native

is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetic or morals, an agent of malevolent powers, and unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces. (6)

Fanon’s characterization of European colonial attitudes toward the native of color is easily transferable to the attitudes expressed through American history toward African-Americans—attitudes that portray the African-American as being on the other side of the binary: the non-photonic side, the side of the shadow.

From the 1880s onward, the figure of the negated man developed from a pejorative term applied by whites to African-Americans into a complex symbol used by African-American writers to portray or construct an alternative identity from that of the whites. The logic of this development hinges on what might be called “the pejorative inheritance” of African American rhetoric: having inherited the racial slurs and denigrations from white culture, oftentimes, its writers and artists succeeded in appropriating and transforming them into powerful subversive tropes that undermine the racial institutions, social structures and cultural attitudes that fabricated them. The figure of the negated or negative man is one of these tropes, and indeed, it gives rise to the sort of definitions of black light that we find in the writing of Neal and other manifesto-writers of the black aesthetic.
However, it would be shortsighted to claim that in developing this trope, Harper is merely propitiating the contemporary aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, for, as well as participating the black aesthetic of the 1970s, *Images of Kin* inherits, along with that aesthetic, the trope of the negated man from the work of earlier African-American writers such as Frederick Douglass and Ralph Ellison.

In his pamphlet *Why is the Negro Lynched?*, Douglass uses the negative as a means of challenging the notion of negro wantonness: the idea that the African-American man is more given to the crime of rape than his white counterpart. Recognizing that debunking this notion by characterizing African-Americans in a positive light would only lead to further essentialisms, Douglass employs the logical negative to prove that the African-American man is no less and no more wanton than any other man (see mainly *Why 7-8*). Thus, the word “not” appears almost two hundred times in the essay, in so doing it becomes an agent of positive identity—dare we say a ray of black light? While it would be inaccurate to state that Harper’s poems make direct reference to Douglass’s pamphlet or that the darkroom metaphor his poems explore equates to Douglass’s use of the negative, they are a manifestation of the most concrete aspects of the kind of negation that Douglass describes. The dark photographer moving in darkness, the dark children moving under her apron, the dark speaker watching his lover sleep—these are the human negatives that Douglass uses his logic to describe.

The writer whose work most informs Harper’s darkroom poems, however, is Ralph Ellison, whose *The Invisible Man* (1952) develops the figure of the negative man from the argumentative logic of Douglass to a figural logic in which the narrator describes himself as invisible. The invisibility of Ellison’s narrator is famously ambiguous. It both acknowledges the view that American society holds of him—a view illustrated throughout the novel by the commentary of other characters—while also illustrating how this negation permits the narrator a degree of freedom, in that his invisibility places him outside the scrutiny of white eyes. While photography does not play a major role in the novel, Ellison’s own work as a photographer may be felt in the overall conceit of invisibility. As Arnold Rampersad relates, one of the anxieties that plagued Ellison while writing the novel was a fear “that blacks may have already opted to slide outside of history into an expressionist demi-life of sometime morbid, sometimes ecstatic signs, symbols, and gestures that signal their abandonment of, and by, civilization” (241). As Rampersad goes on to say, Ellison sought shelter from these fears by pursuing the art of photography: an art that he was tutored in by none other than Gordon Parks. Photography may, then, be said to have made visible for Ellison that which he most
feared would become invisible: African American life in general, and his novel might even be considered to be the negative of this effort, and the medium might even be said to be the negative that produced the novel: that ray of dark light shining in its linguistic precision.

In his darkroom poems, Harper extends the image of this precision by concretizing Ellison’s invisibility into a physical space. In the darkroom, Harper’s speakers find the same haven from the world at large as Ellison’s reclusive narrator does at the end of *The Invisible Man*. Just as the narrator goes underground, promising to return one day, so Harper’s speakers go into the darkroom—an environment in which they are allowed to develop (both figuratively and normatively) their own personal and intellectual identities. What distinguishes Harper’s poems from Ellison’s novel, however, is their apparent optimism. In contrast to Ellison’s notion of invisibility—which is famously problematic, in that it finally does not suggest historical progression or the possibility of improvement for the conditions of African Americans in the United States—Harper’s darkroom poems offer a more optimistic worldview through an ode-like celebration of creativity, family and, if you will, an African-American literary canon.

This optimism would seem to be a direct response to Douglass’s notions of the negated man and Du Bois’s notion of the double consciousness, in that Harper’s poems present us with a double-negative, whose final product is a positive image of the African American self. Reading the poem “Photographs,” one is even greeted by the possibility that, in the darkroom, the African American participates in a sort of double-negative: a procreation of not and not:

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Felt negatives work the pores
c coal black in darkness
double negatives;
n now in the light
t the emulsive side down
o on top of brown-gray paper
h human images rise. (Harper 132)
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resembles the negatives not merely because he is black, but because he is the source of positive creation—the source of rising “human images.” The speaker in “Photographs” is therefore also like Ellison’s narrator, in that he uses negation as a means of self-realization; invisible in the darkness of the darkroom, he is not an absence, but a presence that speaks out as Ellison’s narrator does from the underground. The darkroom, then, is the site from which Harper’s speaker will discover and retrieve truth. From there, he will return (as Ellison’s speaker in fact does) with a literary work. This work depicts—one might even say verbally photographs—the actual images of kin: a family of black light.

Such elements identify Harper’s darkroom poems all the more clearly with the Black Arts Movement and one of its more powerful affirmations of black pride: that is, the Black is Beautiful Movement. Indeed, one might even argue that the poems ingeniously concretize the Movement’s ideals through the double negative of the darkroom.

However, while parallels exist between the poems and the Black is Beautiful Movement, it is important to recognize the way that Harper’s poems shrewdly evade the problematic elements of Black is Beautiful: elements that such critics as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recognize as essentializing the African American as “an Other” whose existence is dependent upon age-old binaries.

In his discussion of the movement, Gates recognizes that, while it celebrates blackness, in so doing it actively promotes an identity created by “an Other.” Gates writes:

As healthy politically as such a gesture was, as revealing as it was in this country and abroad of the very arbitrariness of the received sign of blackness itself, we must also criticize the idealism, the notion of essence, implicit in even this important political gesture. To think of oneself as free simply because one can claim—one can utter—the negation of an assertion is not to think deeply enough. Négritude already constituted such a claim of blackness as a transcendent signified, of a full and sufficient presence; but to make such a claim, to feel the necessity to make such a claim, is already to reveal too much about perceived absence and desire. It is to take the terms of one’s assertion from a discourse whose universe has been determined by an Other. Even the terms of one’s so-called spontaneous desire have been presupposed by the Other. (53-54; emphasis in original)
Gates’s concern about appropriating imagery determined by “an Other” might be said to challenge the idea of appropriating the image of the negative man—and by association Harper’s use of the photographic negative as a source of African-American identity. While the positions and notions of this Other are inverted in the darkroom poems, these inversions merely reinforce a pre-existing binary and thus might even be said to reinforce the age-old perception of the African continent as a place steeped in darkness and the African(-American) mind as a source of naught.

Necessary as it is to give Gates’s objections full consideration, however, two elements distinguish Harper’s poems from the problematic rhetoric of Black is Beautiful. Firstly, at no time do the poems’ speakers stipulate that black or darkness equates to good, or that whiteness or light equates to evil. Secondly, the poems do not portray African-American life in an idealized manner. Mixing descriptions of the darkroom with the quotidian aspects of domestic life—love, birth and poverty—the poems interest themselves in the relationship between gritty and technical details. If these details are superimposed with a layer of the mythical, this superimposition does not alleviate the obligation that the speakers feel toward reality. In short, one might say, there is nothing beautiful in watching a woman grind her teeth in her sleep, but reporting this event acknowledges an obligation to fact—and this obligation, of course, is borne out of the ekphrastic obligation a poet like Harper has to the medium of photography itself. As the title Images of Kin implies, these poems are images. They enter language with the compositional presentation of photographs. Thus, they are aesthetically forbidden to engage an essentializing rhetoric while simultaneously required to behave in accordance to fact.

One of the most telling instances of this acceptance of fact comes at the end of “Photographs.” Here is the final stanza:

The iron water cools;  
paper shown to light  
turns black  
as skin on my arm. (Harper 132)

Without a working knowledge of the darkroom, it is easy to miss the significance of the concluding lines of the poem. The stanza comes after an intense series of descriptions that follow the process of making a photographic positive. At the end of this process, when the positives are all but finished, the semicolon indicates a sudden, radical change to the environment of the darkroom. Light enters. As anyone
familiar with pre-digital photography knows, the entrance of light into the darkroom amounts to destruction. Light—the same agent that “drew” the image on the negative—destroys that which it drew. Were one to seek a simple allegorical message—a message that might challenge the photocentric notions of photography, and so might even be said to challenge the supremacy of light in Western thought itself—one could interpret the conclusion of the poem as a demonstration of what occurs when there is too much light. In other words, one might argue for a simple polemic: When the presence of the white body enters, destruction occurs.

However, such a reading neglects the activity described in the narrative. What is fascinating about the end of this poem is how the color that corresponds to that of the speaker’s arm is created by the sudden admission of light. He is not like the finished positive; he is like the ruined one. Such an association does not invoke the Black as Beautiful aesthetic or even the idea of bearing witness to history. Instead, it suggests that—in this poem, at least—the speaker is associated with those agents of destruction that delete this history and destroy the extensive work that has gone into the creation of its documenting images.

The optimal word to describe the end of “Photographs”—and indeed to describe the darkroom poems as a whole—is ambiguity. An ambiguous suspension is achieved throughout these poems. In this suspension, overall value judgments and essentialisms are invoked, but, in a manner that reminds us that photography itself employs both light and darkness, these judgments and essentialisms are countered by their opposites. But while we might stress the dynamics of this suspension, in a very simple sense, it is borne out of the realities of domestic life in the modern West. What is generally termed “the civilization of the nuclear family” is described and framed through the creative process of Harper’s darkroom. Thus, while Harper invokes the mythical, never does he depict the life of his speakers as non-Western or primitive. The technical exactitude of the woman photographer—her expertise in developing—is coupled with a vision of life in the modern world; a life engaged in the very rational work of living.

In this portrait, there is a natural admixture of light and dark that parallels the realities of photography itself. Harper’s intimate awareness of the photographic process is too great for him to ignore the vital role that light plays in creating the images of kin, and so, in their resistance to the overtly photocentric notions that developed around photography, these poems do not simply hail photography as “the art of fixing a shadow”—and thus the art of the African American—but also refute such absolutes by alluding to the necessity of light and darkness. In this way, Harper’s darkroom poems may be said to cross the color line. Using the darkroom
as their guiding metaphor, they bridge the gap between black and white with a powerful sort of ambiguity. To my knowledge, no other collection of poetry in English has maximized this metaphor to such a degree. Indeed, Harper’s darkroom poems do not merely maximize the metaphor of the darkroom, but extend it beyond the dimensions of a room, so that this confined space, and the chronotope that it dramatizes, pass into the larger arena of darkness in general. For Harper, the African American becomes the living embodiment of this chronotope. The darkness of the body departs from the darkness of the room, figuring the images of kin as the images of discovery and creation themselves. As lanterns of darkness, these bodies exhibit the origins of all things; neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, they are hailed as exemplifying the life that shines darkly behind all.

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