

A SERIES OF GOOD WORKS:
THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LEGACY OF REVEREND LONZIE ODIE TAYLOR

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ABSTRACT

Emily Ridder-Beardsley: A Series of Good Works: The Photographic Legacy of Reverend
Lonzie Odie Taylor
(Under the direction of Bernard L. Herman)

This thesis addresses the life and photographic legacy of early 20th century African American photographer, Reverend Lonzie Odie Taylor. I argue the self-taught photographer and Baptist minister's work helped shape narratives of self-definition in Memphis' Black community in the 1930s and 1940s. Taylor's images are grounded in his ideals and aspirations, highlighting themes of dignity, pride, and emancipation that counteract hegemonic stereotypes of Black communities promoted by outsiders in the Jim Crow South. This, I argue, reflects the construction of a productive new social imaginary, a concept borrowed from Charles Taylor. I conclude by arguing that, while many of L.O. Taylor's contemporaries were championing the visualization of the "New Negro," his position as photographer and minister provided him a unique opportunity to guide his community both spiritually and visually to aspire to self-determination, social mobility, and material success in a rapidly modernizing context.

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I would like to thank the entire staff at the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis, Tennessee, which houses the L.O. Taylor archive. In particular, I am grateful to its director, Judy Peiser, and her assistant, Mark Hayden, who have consistently shown me the greatest hospitality on my visits and have been invaluable assets in my research. Their knowledge, kindness, and dedication, to both my project and the Taylor archive, is truly an inspiration.

Without doubt, this manuscript was made possible by the guidance and counsel of my committee members: Bernard L. Herman, Glenn Hinson, and Claude A. Clegg. Their dedication

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I owe, perhaps, the greatest debt of gratitude to my family and friends: to my grandmother, Marie Ridder, who made my education possible. To my father, John Beardsley, and mother, Stephanie Ridder, both of whom have consistently ensured my success at every turn and read countless versions of this manuscript at my behest. To Sam Myers, whose flexibility, support, caring, and confidence I not only deeply appreciate, but also rely on. To George Stackpole, whose tutelage is unparalleled. To Jess Frasier, Meredith Goldbeck, Brian Miller Hart, Rebecca High, Anna James, Aaron Paison, Hunter Pendleton, and Eve White for your friendship, patience, and confidence. Finally, to my fellow scholars and cohorts Victor Bouvéron, Charlotte Fryar, Rachel Garringer, Anna Keneda, Zoe Van Buren, and Jaycie Voss, I thank you for all I have learned from each of you, and for having the opportunity to work alongside of you. It has been my pleasure.

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The largely unpublished and unseen photographic legacy of early 20th century African American photographer Reverend Lonzie Odie Taylor offers an extraordinary opportunity to engage the visualization of the urban Jim Crow South from the viewpoint of an African American artist. Taylor, a resident of Memphis and minister at the Olivet Baptist Church, was a talented self-taught photographer, producing over seven thousand images in addition to films, all created between the 1920s and the early 1960s. Armed with an Eastman View Camera No. 2, Taylor compiled a distinctively individual perspective on his time and culture. Focusing on the images taken in the 1930s and 1940s, viewers can begin to glean an understanding of one community's experience of major historical events including segregation, the Great Depression and the Great Migration. Regardless of the photographer's intent at the time of its creation, his body of work provides insight into this community as it negotiates the period between the World Wars. Taylor, through his photographs, was able to shape and lead his community into engagement with modernity in a way that was grounded in his ideals and aspirations – and positions contemporary viewers of his work to consider his archive in a way that creates opportunity to counteract the hegemonic stereotypes of segregated Black communities created during his lifetime.

It might seem most appropriate to begin with an overview of L.O. Taylor's life, but the archive itself is of paramount importance, so a full understanding of its contents and the ways in which they are imprinted with the artist's voice and vision is therefore necessary. Between the late 1920s and early 1960's Taylor produced over seven thousand images in addition to films and recordings, which hold immense value as artistic, historical, and social documents. A significant

portion of the still images are posed portraits, taken at Taylor's in-home studio, in various locations around Memphis, or on his travels. Complexities arise from the fact that so many of the images that Taylor produced were studio portraits, which are frequently composed for hire. It is incredibly difficult to differentiate between images in the archive that Taylor created as a photographer-for-hire and those that he created completely of his own accord, as no record exists to provide demonstrable evidence. Of course, there is a balance between the obviously candid shots and the composed studio portraits, but it is challenging to argue that a studio setting necessarily indicates a photograph was produced for commercial purposes. Thus, the interpretation of his photographs necessarily needs to blend his personal and professional lives as a photographer, in much the same way that interpretation needs to address the line between his work as an artist and a minister; both subjects which will be further explored. Ultimately, the ability to distinguish between images produced for-hire and those made without commercial incentives does not affect the fact that Taylor is intrinsically imprinted on each of the photographs. Further, he remains the author throughout, a fact that shapes this manuscript's interpretation.

Despite the fact that Taylor produced photographs over the course of several decades, the archive remains incredibly consistent, with very few changes in the photographic style and content through the years. The archive is dominated by images of people, predominantly studio portraiture relying heavily on the conventions of that genre. The more informal, or candid, images also tend to address a fairly narrow spectrum, again, dominated by images of people – whether at work, at play or in motion. Rather than interpreting this consistency as a lack of evolution on the part of the artist, I argue that it testifies to the steadiness of Taylor's vision, and

to the norms of the genre in which he was working. Taylor's vision created distinct narratives, which clearly emerge from individual photographs and their settings.



Fig. 1: Untitled (Proprietors of the Tri-State Bank of Memphis, Opening Day) 1946. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Images of prosperous Black businesses such as the Tri-State Bank, Daisy's Beauty Parlor or Hayes Funeral Home, for instance, represent the repeated acts of daily life in Taylor's community (Fig. 1). Portraits of migrants, train stations and soldiers in uniform, in turn, illustrate a community in flux, where members arrive and depart as cities further north, overseas battles or the lure of the West beckon (Fig. 2, Fig. 7). Finally, his studio photography addresses the aspiration for social mobility and the emergence of an urban black professional class. Taken as a body of work, the images collectively speak to community identity, with Taylor filling the role of narrator. This visual enterprise is ultimately given substance by the people in the images, and it is the people that humanize the archive. Even in the few cases where the images are not peopled – in his photographs of churches, for example – they still depict an intimate and profound human presence (Fig. 14). Thus, the Tri-State Bank image speaks to Black businesses, but also to proud proprietors on the bank's opening day. The smiling young woman visualizes

social mobility but, perhaps too, a freshly coiffed client of Daisy's beauty parlor (Fig. 3). While the couple posing on the step of a train perhaps represents the realities of the Great Migration, they also may portray a vital young couple determined to embrace a new life in a new city where greater opportunity might await.

It is notable that there is a complete lack of images in the archive that directly visualize the realities of the Jim Crow South. Taylor did not include photographs that address segregated life – such as marked entryways, water fountains, or signage indicating “White” and “Colored,” though such signing would have been evident throughout Memphis and around the country. Those realities are, however, present in the spirit of the archive. Both in his studio and street photography, Taylor almost entirely focused his lens on the Black community; in so doing, he created a vision of Black Memphis that operated outside of the reach of Jim Crow intentions.

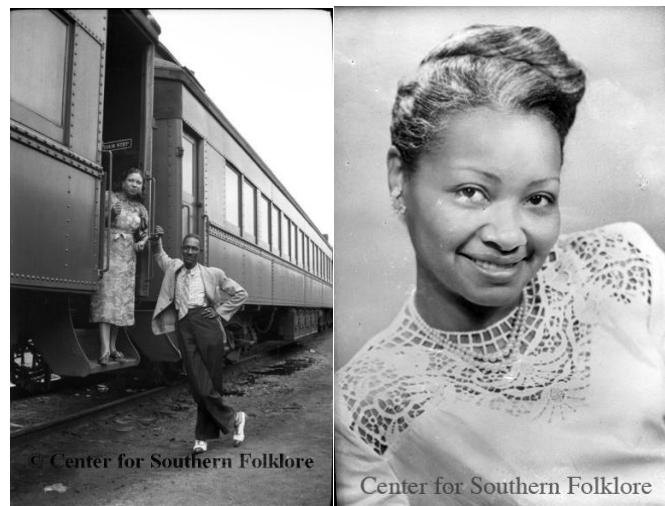


Fig. 2: Untitled (Couple and a Train) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Fig. 3: Untitled (Woman's Studio Portrait) ca. 1930s-1940s Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Taylor's archive reveals more than just one individual artist's life and work, however: it is also a window into the power of photography to construct a new identity for African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. The place of photography in African American communities involved issues of self-representation, a notion that can be traced back to Frederick Douglass. As Douglass once noted, "[The picture making faculty] is a mighty power, and the side to which it goes has achieved a wondrous conquest."¹ Douglass saw that photographs, so new in his time, could be used to represent the complex humanity of his American compatriots who had been branded as slaves. His exhortation was to use photography in the service of education and emancipation to create images that could speak to the cultural identity of African Americans during a time when they were gaining their freedom – but in environments that challenged that freedom at every turn. Taylor's work, some six decades later, resonate with these values and objectives. As we shall see, Taylor's images tell narratives of pride, dignity, empowerment and the creation of social capital.

Reverend L.O. Taylor was born in Osceola, Arkansas on October 2nd 1899 to William and Nona Taylor.² At the age of 15, he was called to minister, and in 1923 he migrated to Memphis to begin his work at Pilgrim Rest in Memphis, gaining entrée thanks to fellow minister and friend Reverend Fields. Members of the church's administration insisted that he marry before he could become a pastor, leading to his first marriage which quickly failed, but resulted

¹ John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd & Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York & London: Liveright Publishing Corporation: 2015): 133.

² The information presented in this section was gathered from a series of interviews conducted by employees of the Center for Southern Folklore with Taylor's family and friends including: Blanche Taylor, Oretha Cannon, Lula Adams, Alberta Fields, Reverend C.E. Thomas, Daisy Cooper, Reverend James L. Netters, Bishop P.L. Johnson, Charles Washburn, and Reverend Ernest Tatum and Mrs. Tatum. All unpublished transcripts are available through the Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis, Tennessee.

in the birth of his only child, Homer Taylor. After leaving Pilgrim Rest, Taylor became the pastor of First Baptist and was introduced to his second wife, Blanche, interestingly also by Reverend Fields. After their marriage in 1928, Taylor began one of two terms as the preacher of Olivet Baptist Church, the first lasting three years and the second, after a brief hiatus, spanning nearly two decades. As the minister of Olivet, Taylor's energetic and accessible preaching style drew many new congregants, eventually leading it to become Memphis' largest Black Baptist church. His friend and protégé, Reverend James L. Netters cites this as one of his greatest accomplishments, "He built one of the largest congregations, one of the largest Black congregations in the city of Memphis, on simple preaching."³ That simple preaching style was characterized by allegory, where a pencil might become a metaphor for a life well-lived or a broom would stand for life in the church.

I remember one he preached that's just the type of message he preached. That, he took a little bundle of sticks and put them together and tied a little band around them. And he was preaching a sermon on love, and family life, and sticking together. . . And as long as those sticks were together you couldn't break them. He tried with all the force of his power, you know the strength of his hands and he couldn't break them. But he took them apart and one by one just popped each of them in half. And the example was that as long as you stay together as a family, and as people, and even as a church, Satan can't break you up, can't take you apart.⁴

His preaching style, today, can be glimpsed in a small book Taylor produced during his tenure at Olivet entitled *Bits of Logic*, a collection of poems, anecdotes and lessons, which was sold to congregants and the Memphian community. The book reflects the simplicity and accessibility of Taylor's sermons, but friends and family members stress that the written words do not do justice to his charismatic presence behind the pulpit.

³ James L. Netters, interviewed by Debbie Bowman, Mount Vernon Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, May 1, 1979.

⁴ Netters, Bowman, 1979.



Fig. 4: Untitled (Reverend L.O. Taylor & Blanche Taylor) ca. 1930s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

It is unclear exactly when Taylor began his work as a photographer, but it is certain that by the early 1930s he started to take snapshots of family, friends and members of his congregation. In the early years, Taylor established relationships with local print shops and studios including the Nolan Picture Company, Ed's Camera Shop and the Hooks Brother's Studio. Henry Hooks, a noted predecessor in the world of African American photographers, became a close friend of Taylor's and likely helped influence and guide his growth as an artist. In 1937 Reverend and Mrs. Taylor moved into a home on Hunter Avenue in North Memphis, where he set up his own studio, complete with lighting and backdrops, as well as an upstairs darkroom where he would develop his own images, rinsing them in the bathtub.

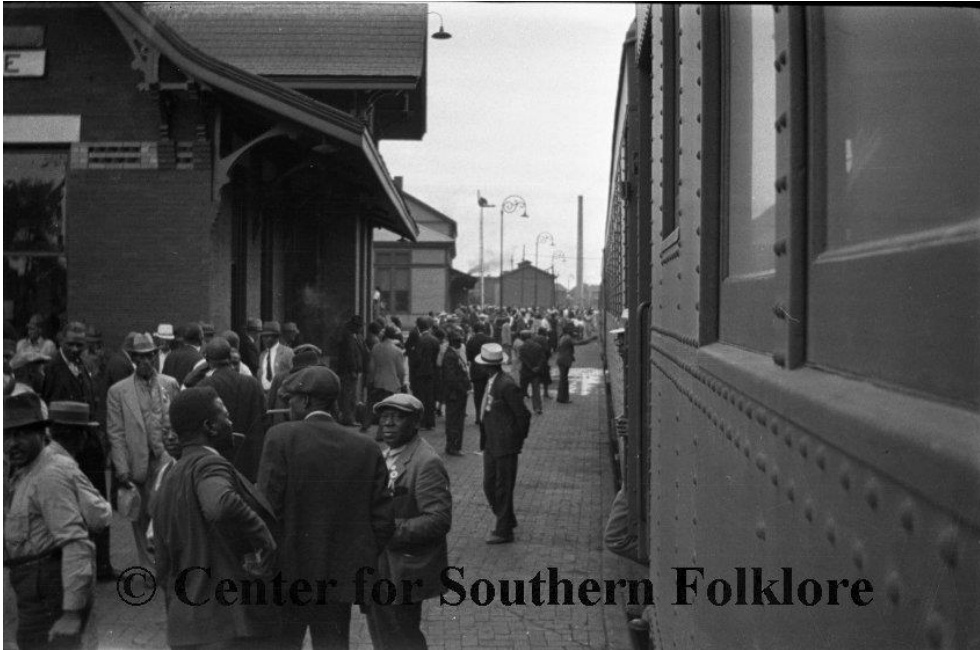


Fig. 5: Untitled (Train Station Platform) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Taylor's photographic legacy also includes images taken outside of Memphis (Fig. 5). Each year, he would travel to the National Baptist Convention, held in cities throughout the United States. Mrs. Taylor recalls boarding segregated Pullman train cars that would carry them to Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Detroit, among others.⁵ During their trips, Reverend Taylor would take film footage and photographs, both along the journey and at the conventions. Upon returning to Memphis, he would organize shows at local churches and schools for community and congregation members, which were received with great enthusiasm.

It is additionally unclear how Taylor viewed his work as a photographer fitting into his professional life. Mrs. Taylor describes how her husband would charge people for the prints he made them, as well as for work he did on commission such as funerary pictures. Reverend James L. Netters suggests that, to Taylor, photography "was a hobby that he . . . developed into

⁵ Blanche Taylor, interviewed by Debbie Bowman, 2386 Hunter Ave. Memphis, TN, July 25th 1977.

something that would help him to be more independent.”⁶ This evidence indicates the fact that Taylor did see his work in a type of professional capacity, using it as an avenue for income. Many of Taylor’s friends and family also spoke of his dedication to the churches where he pastored, noting that he would frequently complete repairs and make purchases for the churches using his own funds. Thus, it would seem that any financial gain he received from his photography was bound to his work as a minister, at least to some extent. This is further evidenced by Netters’ paraphrasing of one of Taylor’s central beliefs that, “the minister should always have something that he can rely upon to be independent. That he didn’t have to beg his people for anything.”⁷

In 1967, Taylor ended his preaching career at Greater Hyde Park church, a church he built and started himself. He received the honor of Pastor Emeritus and continued to be a member of the congregation for the remainder of his life. It appears to be around the same time that Taylor stopped taking photographs. When asked, friends and family members cite his failing health as the reason for his retirement from both endeavors. Some of those who knew him acknowledge his history of alcoholism, which may also have been a contributing factor.⁸ However, they emphasize that wasn’t what was important about him and explicitly told interviewers it was not how they remember him or defined his legacy. They opt instead to recall his kindness, his preaching, his dedication to his congregations, and his love of photography.

⁶ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

⁷ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

⁸ Taylor’s alcoholism is very rarely spoken about in any of the available oral histories used to compose this paper. Typically, when the subject came up, interviewees requested the recording device be turned off so the information given wouldn’t be recorded. I have chosen to acknowledge it here because this may have contributed to Taylor’s decision to stop producing images, and also because it was the reason he was eventually asked to step down as pastor of Olivet Baptist Church. It should be noted, however, that the problem developed late in Taylor’s lifetime, outside of the time frame being addressed here, making it peripheral to the arguments that I set forth.

Reverend C.E. Thomas, who became the pastor of Greater Hyde Park in 1975, describes Taylor as restless at the end of his life. He says, “I think the church kept him alive. He wanted to see it be left in good hands and then he’d be satisfied.”⁹ Only two years after Thomas began leading Greater Hyde Park’s congregation, Taylor died at the age of 76.

To be sure, Taylor’s work as a photographer was linked to his ministry. Indeed, the images themselves are an extension of his preaching, as they exhort Black pride, dignity, and respect. Preachers are expected to live the type of lives they preach and to enact the Christian principals of good works, which they in turn expect from their congregants. Similarly, Taylor’s photographs visually spurred his community to enact better lives for themselves by inviting them to see the goodness in themselves and the world.

Taylor’s portrayal of his community speaks to questions about who he represented, how and why – and also about whom he omitted. In portraying ourselves and our communities, we often present what we wish others would see, obscuring that which is unflattering. We construct narratives and build visions of ourselves and those around us based on how we would like to be perceived. We create living snapshots that can be compiled to communicate who we are, or who we aspire to be, and our place in society. Charles Taylor speaks broadly about the “social imaginary,” that is, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”¹⁰ The Taylor

⁹ Reverend C.L. Thomas, interviewed by Debbie Bowman, 623 Alston Avenue, Memphis, TN, April 25th 1979.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

archive builds just such a social imaginary, one in which the artist presents a view of his community through a curated lens.

The individual lives and community pictured by Taylor during this time period were inevitably influenced by the Great Migration and therefore in some ways transitory. Between 1916 and 1970 five to six million African Americans migrated from rural to urban areas across the United States, with a vast percentage of that number relocating in the first half of that period.¹¹ Urban settings such as Memphis became home to flourishing Black communities that, because of Jim Crow, were segregated and, in some ways, self-sustaining. Thus the community pictured by Taylor was one in flux. Moreover, what Taylor pictured was an idealized community, as he focused his lens on the aspirational, emergent middle class of Black Memphis. In many ways, his community was facing questions of modernity; the archive is the imaginary he created in response. For the purposes of this discussion, modernity is being viewed as a time in which individuals were beginning to embrace technology, commodities and commercial culture and striving towards self-determination.¹² Archive is being used to define Taylor's body of work: a collection of images conscientiously gathered by one individual and reliant on the will of its creator.¹³ In this case, it is a curated archive, in which iterations of the real community are often

¹¹ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "The Great Migration," <http://www.inmotionaame.org/print.cfm?migration=8>, accessed 4/14/16,

¹² A further discussion of modernity will follow, largely guided by the work of David Harvey in: David Harvey, "Modernity and Modernism" & "Modernization", in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge & Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

¹³ The notion of archive set forth in this paper was informed by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* or *Das Passagen-Werk*, using: Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). I consider the Taylor archive's analogies to Benjamin's work - a manuscript that examines the arcades of Paris and that was left incomplete upon Benjamin's death in 1940. If we contemplate the unfinished project it reveals several theoretical facets of archive's definition - not necessarily because it is a work of comprehensive archival theory, but because it can be used as a tool to enlighten larger truths. First, Benjamin's project might lead us to accept that archives do not necessarily need to be completed. In Taylor's case, the images he collected during his lifetime are theoretically complete, but we have no proof that he didn't desire to continue his work or have specific subjects or locations for photographs that never

‘Taylored.’ The Great Migration, Jim Crow and the Great Depression were the historical frames that built a modern social reality, which are then transformed by Taylor to shape an idealized picture of African American middle class urban life.

Deborah Willis’ *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* confirms Douglass’ notion of the immense power of the photograph to represent community. She views the images as having a concrete purpose: challenging stereotypes of African Americans. In the foreword to Willis’ work, Robin D. G. Kelley announces this theme, saying,

In a time when the deliberate distortion of black images in popular culture was as common as ice vendors in turn-of-the-century cities in August, the camera became a mighty weapon in the hands of pioneering black photographers. The same photographic technology responsible for the circulation of minstrel caricatures, of dim-witted watermelon-eating Negroes, of alleged African cannibals, of happy-go-lucky darkies whose lives revolved around dice and razors, was used to create counterimages of African-American life – images of dignity, pride, success, and beauty.¹⁴

By utilizing the power of representation, Black communities, such as Taylor’s, were able to alter the way that they were perceived from the outside and performed from within. From this viewpoint, one begins to see early Black photographers, such as Taylor, as champions of social

came to fruition. Despite the fact that the Taylor collection may be incomplete – as Benjamin’s work remains – it can still be considered an archive. Taylor and Benjamin’s work have another factor in common: their existence within the bounds of an institution. In Benjamin’s case, the manuscript was left unpublished and was completely unknown to the academic or institutional world until some 40 years after his death. In Taylor’s case, too, it wasn’t until after his death that the images were taken into institutional hands to be catalogued, sorted and eventually professionally exhibited on a small scale. They both, then, resist the concept that in order to exist as an archive, objects must be held within an institution. Furthermore, in both cases, the hand of the maker – whether Taylor or Benjamin – is not what guided the publication or institutionalization of either archive in the end, although the hand of the author was instrumental in creating the archive. Both are created by scraps and pieces that create a larger whole, which leads to my third contention regarding archive: they are always provisional. They are reliant on the minds of their makers, by what they chose to build, keep or, in Taylor’s case, record photographically. Taylor’s archive, like Benjamin’s, was incomplete, provisional, and brought into institutional and public contexts by a third party.

¹⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, foreword to *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*, by Deborah Willis (New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 2000), ix.

change, using the power of their agency to control their visual representations and through that, the very defining principles of their communities.



Fig. 6: Untitled (Two Couples Posing on a Stoop) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

In constructing his social imaginary, Taylor opted to present an edited version of social reality in the Black Memphian community. Here, the idea of curation is particularly resonant because of the ways in which curators formulate narratives and thus control the viewer's experience, at least to some degree. By creating a selective body of work or display, curators are capable of shaping dominant themes and messages that guide insight and knowledge – or at the very least present alternative points of view. In the case of Memphis, the city has had an admittedly difficult history: facing race riots following the Civil War, a tumultuous time during reconstruction, lynchings, and a frequently corrupt political machine.¹⁵ The birth of the Black musical legacy of Beale Street also saw the rise of gambling halls and gangs that formed the

¹⁵ For an overview of the history of Memphis and Beale Street see Preston Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis*, (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

foundation of the city's underbelly just as much as glittering personalities such as W.C. Handy formed its celebrity. Taylor opted not to picture these elements, turning his attention instead towards blossoming businesses, industrious workers, joyful occasions, and church congregants. Consider the images above and below, as a visual reference of Taylor's enterprise in the social imaginary. Instead of characterizing young Memphian men and women as rebellious bacchanals, he creates images of dapper, hard-working, and upstanding American citizens, often eager to serve their country despite the deep divisions they faced daily (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). Thus, the social imaginary created by Taylor curates a visualization of a dignified, successful, socially mobile, and aspirational community. His compiled works eschew an overarching or totally inclusive narrative of African American life in Memphis, in favor of a selective presentation of Taylor's preferred account.



Fig. 7: Untitled (World War II Women's Army Corps Nurse) ca. 1939-1945. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

It is worth noting that Taylor's social imaginary cannot be wholly gleaned through individual photographs, which makes the notion of archive all the more relevant. Whatever his initial intention, he amassed thousands of images that, when viewed as a whole, provide visual evidence of a particular point of view and consequently position any discussion of his social imaginary. This task becomes impossible without considering the entire archive and the overarching narratives it promotes. The archive itself becomes still more important when considering it was curated by Taylor himself. Each photograph included – and being considered here – is therefore representational of the photographer's intentions, whether stylistically, professionally, or anecdotally. As a whole, then, the archive creates a narrative of abstract ideas that allow contemporary viewers to perceive what kind of social imaginary Taylor was attempting to construct and to what end.

It can be argued that, just as Taylor's sermons relied on allegory, so too do his photographs, again linking his photography to his work in the church. Allegory is generally understood as a narrative in which abstract or spiritual ideas are conveyed through characters, figures, or events. In visual art, allegory tends to be more contained in a single image – think of Botticelli's *Primavera* or *Birth of Venus* – or in multi-panel compositions, like Thomas Cole's *The Voyage of Life* series. In Taylor's case, individual images can suggest allegories of abstract ideas like emancipation, the dignity of labor, or social mobility; but the narrative quality of allegory is achieved more through the archive as a whole, and through the curatorial efforts Taylor invested in it. Just like his allegory of the bundle of sticks being stronger as a group than individual objects, so the images are more powerful together: as a group they convey complex narratives about the construction of a new, empowered, African American identity. In this way, the curated archive, like his sermons, becomes an extended allegory.

The evocation of ideas about mobility and emancipation suggest a consideration of Taylor's work within the context of modernity, for his work is surely expressive of modernity even if it is not explicitly modernist in style. Here the practice of David Harvey and other writers comes to mind of differentiating modernity from modernism: the former being the social conditions that resulted from the processes of modernization, the latter the cultural codes or styles that artists used to express modernity.¹⁶ Modernization was very much a part of Taylor's experience: rural to urban migration, mechanization, and technological changes in transportation and communication. So too, were the social conditions of modernity: on the one hand, the disturbing effects of rapid changes in social relationships and geographical dislocations; on the other, hopes for greater emancipation and economic progress. Taylor produced his body of work in a social environment many associate with the apex of modernity, and his work is thus influenced by and expressive of this context.

The focus of this discussion is on three aspects of modernity that are shown through Taylor's images: the ambition for social progress, the assertion of identity, and the emergence of commercial culture. In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Harvey argues that one of the key concepts of modernity is 'creative destruction.' He notes, "The image of 'creative destruction' is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the political dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project. How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before?"¹⁷ In many ways, Taylor's photography aims to picture this new world, which was being created through the destruction of the old world of slavery and in spite of the

¹⁶ Harvey, *Condition*.

¹⁷ Harvey, *Condition*, 16.

existence of Jim Crow. Images of commercial enterprises like the one below highlight Taylor's goals in several different ways (Fig. 8). To begin with, it pictures a flourishing Black business, one that can be presumed to be successful because of the presence of name-brand merchandise and a carefully maintained interior. More important to the narrative are the individuals present in the image, both the proprietors and the customers. All of the individuals are stylishly and crisply dressed, whether the shopkeeper in his carefully pressed bowtie and vest or the customer in her fur stole. The business has several customers, so it is clearly a successful company. The customers are lined up at the counter, suggesting that they intend to make purchases. The implications of all these visual cues is that all of those pictured have achieved the acquisition of commercial capital, as well as some upward social mobility.



Fig. 8: Untitled (Shop Interior) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

The following quotation by Harvey addresses the importance of artists in modernity's efforts towards the assertion of identity and the rise of social progress, "If 'creative destruction' was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the artist as individual had a heroic role to play (even if the consequences might be tragic). The artist, argued Frank Lloyd Wright . . . must

not only comprehend the spirit of his age, but also initiate the process of changing it.”¹⁸ For Taylor, this meant recognizing the visual narratives being created about his community and compatriots and then challenging them with new images that promoted what he saw as a more accurate account. By comprehending and challenging social conditions, Taylor was engaging in the “creative destruction” central to modernity. Perhaps what is most interesting is the way in which Taylor chose to challenge pre-existing narratives and bolster concepts of modernity through the creation of his social imaginary. Return, for example, to the image of the Tri-State bankers, a group of successful businessmen standing outside of the flagship location. Taylor is promoting the notion of achievement in modernity through hard work and financial gain with the overt suggestion that they will lead to prosperity in the modern world. He hides any evidence, visual or otherwise, that suggests success or contentment might be attained through what in his view constituted crime, moral corruptness, and social dysfunction. Instead, he imagines and displays the image of Black Memphis that he finds most suitable, one in which success and social mobility were achieved through good works, commitment to the church and an honest living.

¹⁸ Harvey, *Condition*, 19.



Fig. 9: Untitled (Lucie Campbell with Awards) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Fig. 10: Untitled (A Cook) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Consider how the above images demonstrate the types of narratives that Taylor's images convey about his community and its relationship to social progress and self-identity. The first image is of celebrated gospel singer Lucie Campbell, while the second is of an unidentified cook (Fig. 9, Fig. 10). The image of Ms. Campbell very clearly promotes narratives of fame and success: she is well dressed, posed in front of a mantel piece, behind flowers and a trophy, all of which suggest a celebrated person. The cook might seem to be completely opposite: he is in his work clothes, and posed in front of bins that are labeled "cooking grease" and "trash." But he is not stereotyped; he is dignified and presented as a distinct individual, even if dressed for labor. In that sense, the image of the cook accomplishes the same task as the portrait of Lucie Campbell: on an aspirational scale it conveys hopefulness, and is also a visualization of dignity and pride. The photograph of the chef makes visible a concept that remains a central concern of the modern middle class: the value of honest labor. Modern aspiration to participate successfully in material culture and commercial culture are achieved through financial gain and for communities like the

one being represented by Taylor's social imaginary, a day of honest hard work is the paramount way to obtain this goal.

Beyond revealing ambitions for progress and self-identity, Taylor's photography also makes visible the relationship of modernity and commercial culture. Many of the images represent economic aspirations and material acquisitions, capturing successful Black-owned businesses and their proprietors, finely attired men and women, and the ability to travel, among others. Commodities were often the visible emblem of the economic and material progress central to the promise of modernity. As Harvey notes,

And apart from the general consciousness of flux and change which flowed through all modernist works, a fascination with technique, with speed and motion, with the machine and the factory system, as well as with the stream of new commodities entering into daily life, provoked a range of aesthetic responses varying from denial, through imitation to speculation of utopian possibilities.¹⁹



Fig. 11: Untitled (Girls with Puppies and Car) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Certainly, Taylor's work reflects a fascination with commodity culture and the ways in which it might be deployed to shape impressions of his community. Many of the images describe a

¹⁹ Harvey, *Condition*, 23.

commodity culture, either through the use of material objects such as clothing, or through images of labor such as cooks or traveling salesmen. One of the devices Taylor uses most frequently, as evidenced by the two photographs bookmarking this page, to represent material progress is the automobile, which is of particular interest because it represents both commodity and technology (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). Vehicles are a symbol of technological innovation and economic status, a role they emphatically play in Taylor's images. In these two images, the vehicles are being used as props but are part of a deeper narrative, that suggest that in order to participate in modernity, one must be capable of engaging in commerce and material culture. Of particular note, in the image of Mr. Hayes, the vehicle has been customized with special modifications, including a chrome overlay on the grill reading "Memphis," which elevates the vehicle's status and enhances the image's visual argument. The inclusion of objects in his photographs reflects Taylor's notion of commodity culture and how he wants to see it enacted in his community. Furthermore, the consistent presence of images that contain modes of transportation challenge the very geography of segregation, which was intentionally designed to create boundaries and stasis. Consider, for example, the way transportation was used to threaten Jim Crow during the Civil Rights Movement: Homer Plessy refused to ride in a segregated train car in 1892; Rosa Parks showed her dissent by not surrendering her seat on a bus to a white passenger in 1955; and in 1961 activists launched the Freedom Rides to protest segregation in interstate bus terminals. Images containing modes of transportation are consistently visible through the archive; so too is a quiet resistance to the topography of Jim Crow.



Fig. 12: Untitled (Mr. T.H. Hayes, Founder of Hayes Funeral Home) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor.
Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

A close reading of the above image reveals quite a lot about the ways that modernity is denoted by commodities. At face value, the photograph depicts a man posing with his vehicle in what we can easily assume to be the 1930s. Upon deeper observation, viewers will note he is posing in a way that recalls a hunter's stance, implying ownership and power, making the car his trophy. His impeccably tailored suit and the cigar in his left hand imply success and pride, as well as the monetary means to obtain these luxury items. His facial expression, on the other hand, is more reserved, a reminder that, in this era, African Americans displaying too much power or pride might be seen as threatening or put him in danger of retaliation from whites. The importance of commodities to this particular person is unquestionable, suggesting his economic advancement and personal pride even in the contexts of the Jim Crow South. Taylor employs such emblems of modernity deftly and with great effect, using them to confirm his view of a community in economic and social transformation.

Taylor occupied a distinct, and in many ways unique, position in his community because of his roles as pastor and photographer – roles that are brought into full complementarity. According to the available oral histories, he was known throughout Memphis for his artistic talents and willingness to take family portraits or document community events such as weddings and funerals. These images and films, like those he gathered on his travels were among those he would present back to the community during gatherings at local schools and churches. In much the same style as his preaching, Taylor would guide his audience through the film and photographic displays, narrating throughout the show so people and places pictured could be identified. Alberta Fields recalled these showings, explaining, “And then he operated this movie machine. He would take the pictures when we would go to conventions and places like that and bring those pictures back. And to see those pictures you would feel like you almost were on the trip with him.”²⁰ Mrs. Taylor recalls the delight this brought to the community, reminiscing, “They liked his work. They’d laugh at themselves, and they’d enjoy it. . . . They enjoyed it because they would be good pictures.”²¹ This reveals not only the way in which Taylor created the social imaginary of his community, but also that he would re-present that imaginary back to members in a way they appreciated.

Many of Taylor’s contemporaries fondly remember the shows, and their descriptions paint a picture of highly anticipated community events. Oretha Cannon, who worked as a photographic assistant to Taylor in addition to being a member of his congregation, recounts how he would announce when and where shows would happen – typically on Friday or Saturday evenings – after his Sunday sermons. An interesting blending of the religious and secular begins

²⁰ Alberta Fields, interviewed by Debbie Bowman, 1805 South Parkway, Memphis, TN, June 12th 1979.

²¹ Blanche Taylor, interviewed by Robert Jones and Katie Sandweiss, 2386 Hunter Ave. Memphis, TN, August 13th 1977.

to emerge from the fact that he would announce the shows in church after his sermons. This notion is especially evident when considering that they would often be staged at schools, which at the time were spaces known to blur the line between the secular and spiritual, since the same community members would have been present in both spaces and interfacing on similar levels. Alberta Fields noted that Taylor would organize these shows up to two or three times a week and also asserts that the audience, while not typically as large as those for his sermons, could be substantial.



Fig. 13: Untitled (Studio Portrait of Two Women) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

The performative element of Taylor's shows opens up the notion of the evangelical and provides a further link between his ministry and photography. As a minister, he preached the Word of God from the pulpit, but through his photography, he preached the Word of his own social imaginary and the principals of good works. In taking the photographs, he would build the world he aspired to live in, while in the shows, he re-presented that vision to the community

itself. He was literally putting on display what he desired to see of his community, what he desired the community to see in itself, and what he desired for outsiders to see, accomplishing this goal through the use of material objects, successful enterprise, or fashion, as in the photograph above (Fig. 13). Simply put, the secular performance might be seen as an enactment of the construction of the social imaginary. He was creating a speculative slide show that might inspire recognition, but also galvanize his congregants and motivate the materialization of the imagined social reality Taylor was trying to construct. In this way, the performances imbue the images themselves with a proxy agency, investing them with the capacity to act through and influence the community.²² Agency is the ability or capacity to act, one in which actors are bestowed with operative power. Although agency is inherently a human capacity, the concept

²² The theory of agency is discussed by Alfred Gell in, “The Theory of the Art Nexus,” in *Art and Agency an Anthropological Theory*, Alfred Gell, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 12-27 & by Bill Brown in, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28-1 (2001): 1-16. Bill Brown notes that objects are given potential and significance when they enter the field of experience.

“Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project.” That’s how Leo Stein schematically put it. Although the experience of an encounter depends, of course, on the projection of an idea (the idea of encounter) Stein’s scheme helps to explain the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut. (pp. 4)

To Brown, the agency of an object is completely reliant on the force it exerts over human experience. In some ways, this might be viewed as proxy agency, rather than agency in full, as narratives are constructed around objects instead of through them. Objects must be rendered visible through sensory engagement in order for them to have the ability to act or be experienced and, conversely human experience is inevitably shaped by things.

Gell ponders agency from a slightly different perspective, looking at how it directly relates to art objects and artifacts. He begins with a given: that the relationship between people and things (art) is inherently a semiotic process – though not in a linguistic form – and that that processes exists in a social realm. He goes on to explain that “Social relations only exist in so far as they are made manifest in actions. Performers of social actions are ‘agents’ and they act on ‘patients’ (who are social agents in the ‘patient’ position *vis-à-vis* an agent-in-action).” (pp. 26) This might be seen to be a similar concept as that of proxy agency, but Gell advances that notion, providing art objects with much more autonomy and power.

“Art objects are not ‘self-sufficient’ agents, but only ‘secondary’ agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates . . . The philosophical theory of ‘agents’ presupposes the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the human agent; but I am more concerned with the kind of second-class agency which artefacts acquire once they become enmeshed in a texture of social relationships.” (pp. 17)

This second class agency is actually quite powerful as it re-envision objects as an extension of the self and thus supplied with the owner’s agency. By interacting with the material world, humans instill objects with agency, or proxy agency, which in turn allows human agency to become action.

stretches into the realm of material culture, where the term proxy agency is more appropriate. Proxy agency suggests that although an object is an affecting presence, it cannot accomplish this task independently; rather, it is imbued with agency by the people who create and transmit it.

Beyond discussing the work Taylor's photography accomplishes, it is worth noting the impact Taylor had as a community leader. Taylor was known for his dynamic sermons, which drew people to his congregation, but his personal life was also compelling. He was known throughout his community for his deep commitment to and love of people. He was dedicated to helping those in need, both spiritually and personally. Remembering him in interviews, many people recalled times he aided them financially after they had lost a job or suffered through illnesses, did repairs to church and community properties, secured child care, or loaned out his personal vehicle to those in need.

We just looked to him for whatever we needed... Because everybody know [*sic*] that if Reverend Taylor was helping you, somebody in the neighborhood would do something for you because Reverend Taylor said do it. . . And that's the kind of influence that he had with so many people in the community, the city, and in particular his neighborhood.²³

What emerges from these descriptions is a vision of a stalwart leader and a spearhead of his own lived community. Indeed, Reverend Netters went so far as to assert, "He was community."²⁴

²³ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

²⁴ Netters, Bowman, 1979.



Fig. 14: Untitled (The Olivet Baptist Church) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

This view of Taylor is consistent with the narrative evidenced by his work as a minister. As a young preacher, newly arrived in Memphis from Arkansas, Taylor brought a number of close friends and family members with him to Pilgrim's Rest in Memphis, many of whom would become permanent residents of the city. His reputation, as well as his congregation, expanded when he moved to Olivet. "[Olivet] stayed packed. It was full every Sunday. People used to come out, out of town to hear L.O. Taylor preach."²⁵ His sermons were an incredibly effective tool in spreading the Word of God to a diverse audience. "That was the kind of sermons he preached most of the time. So simple that even a child could understand them and yet so meaningful to life, that the most intelligent and the most aged person sitting there could relate to them, in a way that was meaningful."²⁶ As fellow minister Reverend C. E. Thomas recalls, the style was so compelling that, "at that time he was very popular in the city of Memphis, and he

²⁵ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

²⁶ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

always carried a crowd. All you had to do was let someone know that L.O. Taylor would be there and you'd have to rush to get a seat. That was just how popular he was."²⁷

Taylor's popularity was far from fleeting, and a great number of his congregants were steadfastly loyal to their minister. When he left Olivet after eighteen years behind the pulpit, many of the members left as well, simply because he was no longer there. When he opened Greater Hyde Park some years later, many of those who had previously been at Olivet returned to his ministry, becoming the first members of the newly established congregation. This type of fluid building and dismantling of community recalls Bruno Latour's "Actor Network Theory", in which a spokesperson (in this case, Taylor) defines a group. Individual actors then necessarily help to build it by joining or leaving, thus causing the group to remain in a state of flux while simultaneously cementing its existence.²⁸

²⁷ Thomas, Bowman, 1979.

²⁸ The concept of Actor Network Theory is explored by Bruno Latour in, "The First Source of Uncertainty: No Group, Only Group Formation," in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Latour speaks of the fluidity of communities by exploring the concept of Actor Network Theory (ANT). He juxtaposes the sociological concept of the social – an overarching binding force present in all communities – with ANT by arguing that society and the social can be best explained by networks of associations and mapped through traces of individual actors rather than beginning with a predetermined group, an argument that resonates with the emic versus etic divide. He states,

The choice is thus clear: Either we follow social theorists and begin our travel by setting up at the start which kind of group and level of analysis we will focus on, or we follow the actors' own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups.

The first source of uncertainty one should learn from is that there is no relevant group that can be said to make up social aggregates, no established component that can be used as an incontrovertible starting point (pp. 29).

Latour argues that the construction of groups is constantly in motion, as individual actors build, join, and leave groups while, simultaneously, other actors inevitably and necessarily build, join and leave anti-groups – groups that either stand in direct opposition to, or in some way contrast the original formation. Put simply, "In ANT, if you stop making and remaking groups, you stop having groups" (pp. 31). In other words, Latour imbues each member of a community with agency, something which might otherwise be denied from a macro-social point of view because ANT more directly accounts for individual actors and their actions. Latour posits that a great deal of a group's agency is endowed to a spokesperson – something he believes is absolutely necessary to define a group. They are further required because, ". . . all need some people defining who they are, what they should be, what they have been. [Spokespeople] are constantly at work, justifying the group's existence, invoking rules and precedents and, as we shall see, measuring up one definition against all the others." Ultimately, this agency extends well beyond the spokesperson, however, as it is imbued in every actor within the group. "In many ways, ANT is simply an attempt to

Perhaps what is most interesting about the community or group that Taylor creates through his work as a minister is that, unlike in his photography, as a minister he included those who might be considered outsiders. Outside the walls of the church, Taylor would reach out to the Memphian underbelly – its drunks, prostitutes, gamblers, and homeless. He was known to provide them aid by helping to pay their rent, or by buying them necessities. Reverend Netters reminisced,

But I think [Taylor] had the idea that if this wino would get the feeling that he would help him in his needs, that he would come to him for other needs and this was an opening of a door between him and the wino. And surely enough, that man whom he gave 50¢ and he knew that he was going to buy wine with it. . . But later on this fellow, when he decided that he'd had enough of it in the street, he came to Reverend Taylor and asked him to help him, and he was able to help him into the church, and the man straightened his life up and really became a really productive citizen. . . And to me that was the highlight or the apex of his ministry, to deal with bringing people of all caliber together.²⁹

This story clearly illustrates Taylor's commitment to the Christian principle of good works. Further, in reaching out to the poor or members of the social underbelly, Taylor is imagining an unbounded audience that is seeking hope and salvation. This points, again, to the central role of aspiration in his social imaginary. Further, it resonates with the community showings that Taylor organized to present his photographs to an audience, as those are also consistent with ministering and an apostolic core.

Despite the fact that these community outliers are not physically present in Taylor's images, they are nonetheless visualized in the spirit of the curated archive, as well as in the ideals represented by his social imaginary. The notion of material success is commonly preached through the images, with the sentiment that gaining commodities equates to success in modernity

allow the members of contemporary society to have as much leeway in defining themselves as that offered by ethnographers" (pp. 41).

²⁹ Netters, Bowman, 1979.

and, in some ways, might also equate to spiritual attainment. In showing his photographs to those who have already achieved spiritually and materially, he is providing affirmation. By showing them to those who have not attained the same goals, he is encouraging aspiration. In order for his community to attain the status of his social imaginary, members need to know what they ought to be seeking. Through his images, Taylor suggests those around him aspire to a modern lifestyle that challenges pre-existing negative stereotypes of Black communities. Simultaneously, through his ministering, he is urging people to seek spiritual attainment through adherence to the principles of good works and dedication to the church. Taken together and within the context of modernity and material culture, that spiritual attainment might equate to honest labor, which could promote one's participation in commercial culture and an elevated social position, which individuals in Taylor's images represent. With that in mind, return to the photograph of the hard-working, dignified, self-possessed chef, or to the image below of a jeweler at work, both of whom might now be seen to have realized both Taylor's goals for his community's spiritual and material objectives, both hallmarks of his photographic construction of modernity (Fig. 15). It ought to be noted, however, that the same level of material success was gained by others in the Memphian community through means Taylor would not have suggested to his community – hustling, dealing, or gambling, for example – lifestyles that might be appealing to those who he eschewed in his social imaginary.



Fig. 15: Untitled (Jeweler in his Studio) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Taylor's work as a minister, photographer and community leader is perhaps most evident through his steadfast commitment to mentoring the next generation. He accomplished this mission in two ways: one, by teaching photography out of his home studio and the other by training young Baptist preachers. He would instruct rising ministers in sermon writing, preaching, how to connect with crowds, and strategies to grow their ministries. Although not involved with the Civil Rights Movement directly, he fostered and later ordained Reverend Netters, who would become a leader of the movement in Memphis, fighting alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the city's sanitation strike³⁰ and standing on stage with King during his "I

³⁰ For an in depth account and analysis of Martin Luther King's work in Memphis and the Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968 see: Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

Have a Dream” address.³¹ During a time when many seminaries in the United States would not have been open to Blacks, the tutelage of ordained ministers such as Taylor would have been critical to those who received the calling anywhere facing Jim Crow laws during this epoch. According to congregation members who experienced both Taylor and his successors’ sermons, Taylor instilled stylistic lessons in his pupils, as well as techniques and general knowledge. In this way, the spirit of Taylor’s work as a minister continues to be a dynamic presence in religious communities in Memphis. Reverend Thomas noted this fact, saying,

[He was an] outstanding person. And I try to emulate his life as much as possible. For I was inspired, even though I didn’t know the value of the man until he was dead. But as long as I live, he’ll live, because I try to instill in other youngsters coming up the principles that he instilled in me when I was coming along.³²

Taylor was an educator in photography, as well. He began by teaching his wife, Blanche, to take and develop photographs using his equipment and home studio. In interviews, Blanche Taylor recalled often staying up until the wee hours of the morning developing pictures in the bathtub of their Hunter Avenue home. He went on to take many neighborhood youths under his wing, showing them how to use a camera and take pictures. Oretha Cannon was among those he mentored. She reminisced about her early days and his teaching style, saying, “And so he taught me to make pictures. Well, he started with . . . how to load the camera. Because he said first things first.” Once she became proficient with technique, Taylor brought her into the studio.

I first learned to print my pictures on the contact machines. So that meant you get a billfold size, just the size of whatever is on the film. Then he taught me how to enlarge that film picture. . . And I mixed all of his fluid . . . and, you know, finished all his pictures. . . And he taught a lot of young boys and girls, you know, how to make pictures.

³¹ The Mount Vernon Westwood Church website, “Senior Pastor”, <http://mt-vernon.org/index.php/2-uncategorised/166-senior-pastor-netters>, accessed 09/3/2016.

³² Thomas, Bowman, 1979.

He didn't – they didn't learn to develop because he couldn't, they couldn't use his machines.³³

Cannon herself did not go on to pursue a life as a photographer, nor did any of the other kids Taylor instructed, perhaps due to the fact that he only taught a select few to develop.

Despite the dual nature of his educational work, Taylor's direct dual legacy never materialized, at least in terms of aspiring young photographers to pursue the trade. His work as a minister continues through successive generations of Memphian preachers, while his photographic tradition has largely been forgotten by a larger public audience. The two are linked, however, by a shared sense of community and its boundaries and limitations. Taylor continues to act as a spokesperson for his community, since his voice lives on through sermons that continue to be preached even to this day by those he taught and mentored. Through his photography, however, he lives on as a community documentarian, the objects themselves becoming testaments of lived experience. Though, perhaps, Taylor didn't realize it at the time, he was making a major contribution to history and art history, visualizing narratives that continue to shape the way his time and present might be understood. In this way his archive might be used as a "surrogate," through which an understanding of the community itself and its members' experience of major historical events might be gleaned.³⁴

³³ Oretha Cannon, interviewed by Debbie Bowman, Olivet Baptist Church, 2084 Southern Avenue, Memphis, TN, April 10th, 1979.

³⁴ The term 'surrogate' here is drawn from an essay by Stacey McCarroll Cutshaw & Ross Barrett entitled "In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday," in *In the Vernacular: Photography of the Everyday*, in which the authors argue that all photographs can be assigned to one (or more) of four categories: proof, archive, yardstick and surrogate. The role of the surrogate is ascribed "as a substitute or stand-in for experience" (pp. 22).



Fig. 16: Untitled (Two Men at the Beach) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

The concept of the surrogate suggests looking at photography as a window into an experience, and photographers as auteurs of that experience.³⁵ Considering Taylor as an auteur resonates with the notion of the artist building a social imaginary. In film studies, certain directors are labeled auteurs because their individual bodies of work reflect their creative goals and, when films are examined collectively as an anthology, an individual director's visions can be mapped through their filmography. Taylor's photographic archive might be viewed in a similar light as a single director's film collection, and be utilized as a tool to develop an

³⁵ The term 'auteur' was coined in filmmaking. The theory holds that films reflect the creative visions of their directors and that, when examined as an anthology, an individual director's visions can be mapped through their filmography. The theory further holds that directors are responsible for the distinctive qualities imbued into each work. The term was originally coined by Francois Truffaut in his essay for *Cahiers du Cinema*, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1954) and has since become a standard discussion in film theory. It has been further developed by many authors, including Andrew Sarris in "Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (2009). It is being used here as a way to describe photographers' unique ability to artistically capture and represent the world around them and to convey lived experience to an audience.

understanding of the narratives he is advocating. If Taylor is the auteur of his visual body of work, then the social imaginary he is constructing through them can be charted in the images.



Fig. 17: Untitled (Fred Golliday & Family) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

The portrait above is an excellent example of what appears to be the message of the Taylor archive: the family's clothing suggest they are working class, the tidiness of their appearances – his clean shaven face or her crisp matching coat and hat – along with their stances suggest self-respect and an aspiration toward an elevated social position, or, perhaps, simply dignity (Fig. 17). Further, the position of Mr. Golliday's hands on his son seems to be squaring the child's shoulders and straightening up his back, almost as though encouraging the boy to stand tall and proud. Thus, this family portrait contributes a similar message to Taylor's narrative of his social imaginary to the chef and jeweler already discussed: the dignity of honest labor and the power of self-definition, both of which are recurring themes for the auteur.

Auteur theory further holds that directors are responsible for the distinctive qualities imbued in each work. In Taylor's case, the distinctive qualities of his photography include the promotion of material culture, aspirational social mobility, and self-definition; additionally his artistic style leans towards portraiture. These include images of individuals or groups taken in Taylor's home studio, photographs of men and women with their cars, or families posed on their lawns. There are also, however, images that are more reminiscent of snapshots: two men splashing in the water on the beach in their church clothes, or a group of fishermen on the banks of the Mississippi River (Fig. 16, Fig. 20). In addition to locations and content most frequently represented, there are physical hallmarks that are distinctive to Taylor's images and indicative of a self-taught, rather than classically trained, artist. Recall, for example, the image of the two men standing in the surf, which is noticeably out of focus, or the overexposed photograph of Mr. Hayes posing with his car. Taylor's images are frequently oddly framed, like the one below, in which the group of pantomiming students are not quite centered in front of the backdrop and several of their feet are awkwardly omitted (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18: Untitled (Student Pantomime Group) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

It would be remiss to argue that these compositional errors make the images less valuable aesthetically or the narratives they construct any less powerful, but it would be equally negligent not to discuss them. In many ways, they remind us of the photographer's presence, as well as acting as a visual indication of his role as auteur. Cultural critic bell hooks touches on the concept of the photographer as auteur in her essay, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," examining the issue through the lens of her own personal, childhood experiences.

Our father was definitely the 'picture-takin' man. For a long time cameras remained mysterious and off limits to the rest of us. As the only one in the family who had access to the equipment, who could learn how to make the process work, my father exerted control over our images. In charge of capturing our family history with the camera, he called and took the shots.³⁶

The power held by a photographer may seem familiar. Most people expect that a photographer, especially one situated in a studio, will have artistic control over the setup, execution and product of any given shoot. When considering a photographer as an auteur, however, the concept of control becomes paramount, since each individual photograph contributes to the photographer's final, overarching project. It should be acknowledged that viewing Taylor as an auteur becomes complicated by the fact that there is no record, either from the artist himself or otherwise, of what he considered the purpose of his photographic project. Thus, in the context of viewing Reverend Taylor's collection posthumously, one can only utilize the visual evidence present in the archive to surmise the narratives he wished to advance.

These ideas are applicable to contemporaries of Reverend Taylor, despite the fact he never publically defined himself as an artist or professional photographer, as did many of his compatriots. A great number of these photographers were trying to reshape the image of African

³⁶ bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, ed. bell hooks (New York: The New Press, 1995): 60.

American communities in a time of adversity, beginning alongside Taylor at the turn of the 20th century. They were among the first to establish viable careers centered on photography, primarily through independent commercial studio operations, like James Van Der Zee and C.M. Battey, or through institutional employment such as Prentice Hall Polk and Addison N. Scurlock, who became official photographers for the Tuskegee Institute and Howard University, respectively. Almost all were practicing in urban, rather than rural areas, and they were frequently self-taught or trained through apprenticeship, instead of receiving formal training. Perhaps the strongest similarity between Taylor and his contemporaries is the role they served as photographers endowed them with a prominent place in their communities, allowing them to interact with a multitude of individuals and promote visual narratives both of and to members.

Between 1900 and 1940, African-American photographers flourished in larger cities. Generally, these photographers were ambassadors to African-American communities. Through their studio doors came rural, urban, and foreign-born blacks, including members of the working class, such as laborers and domestic workers, as well as artists and educators. Photography did not discriminate, and its low cost made the portrait available to many.³⁷

The description of Taylor's contemporaries' subjects seem perfectly to reflect those who Taylor himself most frequently represented. While excluding images of those who did not fit the mold of his modern social imaginary, he nonetheless managed to include a diverse cross-section of working and middle class Memphis – including migrants brought to the city over the course of the Great Migration. Taylor clearly recognized the importance of the immigrant population to the city's fabric, going so far as to include a poem dedicated to local-migrant and urban-rural relations in *Bits of Logic*.

Quite often the man that has lived in town,
For about a tenth of a century;

³⁷ Deborah Willis, *Reflections*, 35.

Makes himself a little clown,
 By laughing at the man from the country
 He thinks it makes him a little wise,
 With those who hear him speak;
 When a farmer he starts to criticize
 But it proves he's mentally weak.
 For perhaps, my friend, it isn't as clear
 As it should be explained to you;
 For if the man in the country fails this year,
 The man in town fails, too.
 You make like to be called the town man,
 It makes you proud, no doubt;
 But if you've never been to the country,
 That's nothing to boast about.
 For if the truth was told on most of us,
 There is something that I fear;
 That half of us who filibust,
 Just moved to town last year.³⁸

Like his photography, this poem – and indeed the entirety of *Bits of Logic* – is another act of preaching. He is carefully critiquing class and social prejudice, denouncing negative elements present in his community. Once again, he is making clear that he expects both himself and his community to pursue a good life through good works. In a sense, he is demonstrating that he lives the life he preaches and expects others to do the same.

It should be noted that many artists and writers, not just photographers, produced works dealing with the realities of the Great Migration, perhaps most famously Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* and Jacob Lawrence in *The Migration Series*.³⁹ Lawrence, like Taylor in the above

³⁸ Lonzie Odie Taylor, *Bits of Logic*, (privately printed manuscript, n.d.; collection of the Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis): 31.

³⁹ Jacob Lawrence was an African American painter who lived from 1917 to 2000. Originally titled *The Migration of the Negro*, the seminal work is comprised of a series of fifty-nine tempera painted panels that serve as a visual record of the African American exodus from the south, painted between 1940 and 1941. When seen all at once in sequential order, the panels visualized the narrative of the Great Migration – beginning in a southern train station where crowds of African Americans move towards entryways marked ‘Chicago’, ‘New York’, and ‘Boston’ to the final panel, where a line of African American men and women line up at the polls to cast their ballots and participate in the election process. Between those two images, the narrative tells a story of hardship in the South and the hope for new possibilities in the North. For a detailed explanation of Lawrence’s work see: Elizabeth Hutton Turner,

poem, deals directly with the struggles faced from within African American communities. Panel 53, titled “African Americans, long-time residents of the northern cities, met the migrants with aloofness and disdain” and depicts a Black couple, the woman clad in an elaborate fur coat and feathered hat, the gentleman in a tuxedo and top hat, averting their faces from the viewer in a gesture of scorn and superiority.

Taylor can, however, be differentiated from his contemporaries because of his ministerial work. Other photographers at the time primarily interacted with their communities in commercial settings for business purposes. Taylor, on the other hand, interfaced in much more intimate spaces – whether in his home studio or at his churches – and often with spiritual objectives. In other words, his role as a minister gave him special access to his community, made him more capable of reaching its members, and afforded him the status of a trusted counsel. His role as a community leader, both personally and spiritually, thus positioned him as an individual capable of shaping both the visualization and the enactment of community values. He was endowed in a unique way with the power of suggestion, allowing him not only to envision his social imaginary, but also to spur his community to enact his visions for emancipation, liberty, and emergence into the middle class.

Jacob Lawrence: The Great Migration Series (Washington DC: Rappahannock Press, in association with The Phillips Collection, 1993).

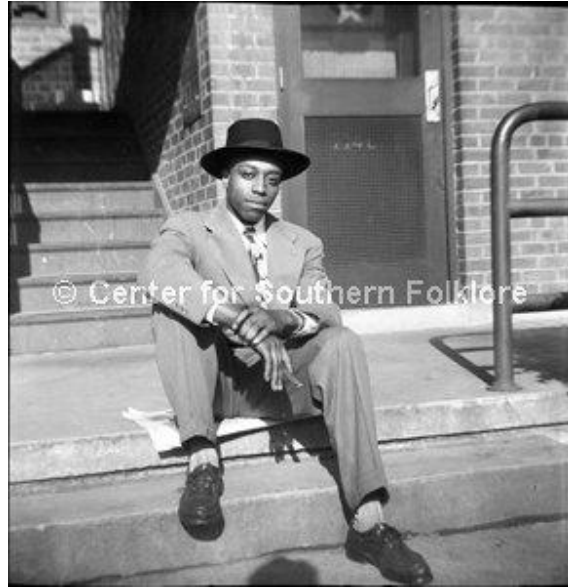


Fig. 19: Untitled (Young Man on Stoop) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

Black photographers practicing in the early part of the 20th century were regularly focusing their lenses on the working and emergent middle classes. Unlike Taylor, however, others tended to include community outliers in their photographic archives, as Taylor did as a minister, but not as a photographer. As a result of the Great Migration, for his Northern counterparts especially, there was a secondary project to accomplish: visualizing the “New Negro.”⁴⁰ Henry Louis Gates explains,

African Americans reinvented themselves, as more than a million souls removed themselves from provinces to the metropole, from the periphery to the center, from the South to the North, from agriculture to industrial, from rural to urban, from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. The greatest transformation of all, of course, was a ‘new’ Negro

⁴⁰ Deborah Willis, *Reflections*, 35. According to Willis, “the term *New Negro* was first used on June 28th, 1895, in an editorial in the *Cleveland Gazette*.” The term was applied to what has been referred to in this paper as the emerging Black middle class: African Americans who had achieved a certain amount of financial gain, success in business and/or education, since the Civil War and despite segregation and discrimination.

culture, the outcome of the exchange of traditional southern and northern black cultures and the resulting synthesis of the two.⁴¹

Despite the fact that Gates positions the concept of the “New Negro” in terms of its prevalence in Northern cities, it is very much in accord with Taylor’s endeavors to modernize the urban South. First, in order to create a new image and culture for African American communities, communities must face Harvey’s “creative destruction,” where old traditions and cultural practices are replaced by new environments with increased social and professional possibilities. These increased possibilities lead to the opportunity for upward social mobility, as well as to the ability to participate in commercial and material culture.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the achievement of all of these goals allows individuals to partake in what might be seen as the most important ambition for Taylor in modernity: self-definition. By demonstrating the ability to succeed and achieve, Black communities could counteract the ever-present visual, textual and commonly-held stereotypes propagated by dominant structures. Photographers and their images were perfectly positioned to disseminate evidence of Black success and thus promote the narrative of the “New Negro.” Or as bell hooks notes, “Access and appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic. In the world before racial integration, there was a constant struggle on the part of black folks to create a counter-hegemonic world of images that would stand as resistance, challenging racist images.”⁴² All of this is very much in line with Taylor’s project and the ideals he was attempting to communicate to his community.

⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “New Negroes, Migration and Cultural Exchange,” in ed. Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Jacob Lawrence: The Great Migration Series* (Washington DC: Rappahannock Press, in association with The Phillips Collection, 1993): 19.

⁴² Hooks, *Glory*, 57.

Finally, the formulation of the notion of the “New Negro” resonates with the formation of Taylor’s social imaginary. In both instances, narratives of progress, emancipation, self-definition, and above all aspiration are being alluded to. Faced with extreme social and cultural transitions, Blacks who relocated as a result of the Great Migration found a way to imagine and fashion a new identity for themselves in their new communities, engaging with their new realities in ways that altered their identities – both from within and without. In doing so, they were reimagining their place in the fabric of the American landscape and promoting narratives about themselves and their communities that renounced negative stereotypes and promoted a more idealized image. In a sense, they were curating the way in which they wished to be defined, similarly to how the curated Taylor archive works to construct his social imaginary. By controlling the visual narrative, both Taylor’s individual community and the larger populace were defining and enacting the concept of the “New Negro,” by building and executing a social imaginary. The completion of that project, in both cases, has created the opportunity for contemporary viewers and scholars to revisit, and subsequently reinterpret, a chapter of African American history so frequently dominated by hegemonic narratives surrounding Jim Crow, the Great Migration and the Great Depression. L. O. Taylor thus stands at the center of a great project to refashion African American identity in the twentieth century.



Fig. 20: Untitled (Fishermen on the Mississippi River) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.



Fig. 21: Untitled (Woman at Piano) ca. 1930s-1940s. Photographer: Reverend L.O. Taylor. Permission of L.O. Taylor Collection, Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, TN.

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