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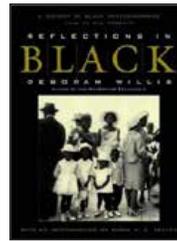
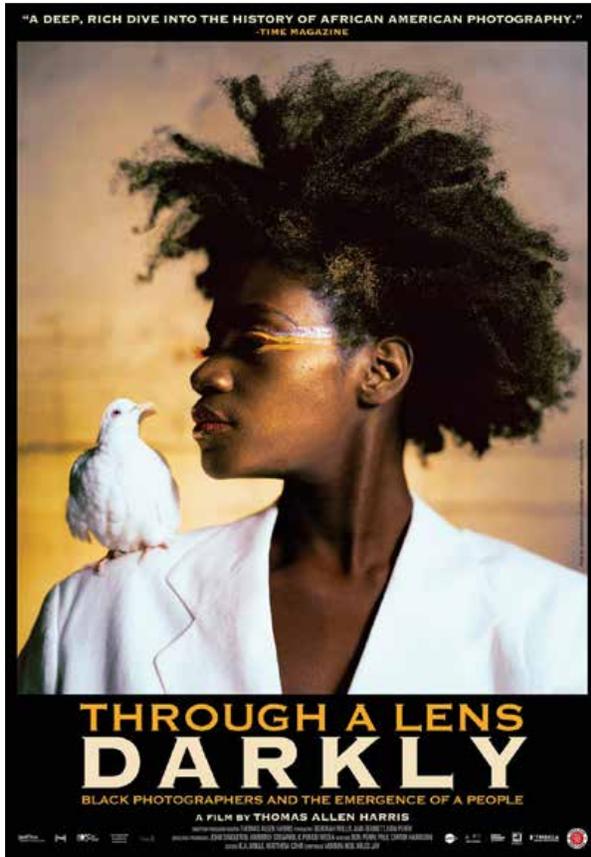
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#### SUMMARY

Inspired by Deborah Willis's book *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* and featuring the works of Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Anthony Barboza, Hank Willis Thomas, Coco Fusco, Clarissa Sligh and many others, "Through a Lens Darkly" introduces the viewer to a diverse yet focused community of storytellers who transform singular experiences into a communal journey of discovery – and a call to action.

The first documentary to explore the role of photography in shaping the identity, aspirations and social emergence of African-Americans from slavery to the present, "Through a Lens Darkly" probes the recesses of American history by discovering images that have been suppressed, forgotten and lost.

Bringing to light the hidden and unknown photos shot by both professional and vernacular African-American photographers, the film opens a window into lives, experiences and perspectives of black families that is absent from the traditional historical canon. These images show a much more complex and nuanced view of American culture and society and its founding ideals.

The film begins with the filmmakers' consideration of conflicting legacies regarding his humanity and self-worth as an African-American. He assembles a community of photographers and artists who shake up the familiar foundations of the images that have shaped the popular cultures view of what blackness is and who black people are.

Throughout the film, the work of pioneering black men and women photographers, whose images have helped reclaim the collective self-worth and humanity, are highlighted, uncovering a rich history of African-American contributions to the development of photography as an art form and a force to be reckoned with.

#### DIRECTED BY

Thomas Allen Harris

#### WRITTEN BY

Thomas Allen Harris  
Paul Carter Harrison  
Don Perry  
Deborah Willis

SOURCE: Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com>

# THROUGH A LENS DARKLY

BLACK PHOTOGRAPHERS AND  
THE EMERGENCE OF A PEOPLE

90 MINUTES • 2014

Best Diaspora Documentary from the African Movie Academy Awards.

Outstanding Documentary from Image Awards.

Festival Programmers' Award  
from Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival.

Social Justice Award from Santa Barbara International Film Festival

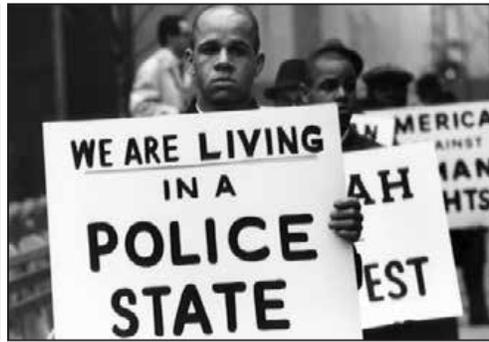


Photo by James Van Der Zee | Two photos by Gordon Parks | Photo by Coreen Simpson

## tips for teachers

BY BRADLEY WILSON, MJE AND HOWARD SPANOGLA

*Reflections in Black*, the first comprehensive history of black photographers, is described as a “groundbreaking” pictorial collection of African-American life. Certainly the movie based on the book brings to life those images and photographers and shows them in their historical context.

As A.O. Scott said in the 2014 *New York Times* movie review, “Such images can still cause pain, in no small part because the attitudes they reflect don’t entirely belong to the past. ‘Through a Lens Darkly’ takes on a grim timeliness when you think about the role that photographs — shared and sometimes counterfeited on the internet and social media — played in the aftermaths of Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, and Trayvon Martin’s killing in Florida in 2012. It is still depressingly easy to find images that pathologize and dehumanize young black men.”

Before watching the film, discuss the following questions with class.

- Photographers often view their role as exposing something to the public that was being hidden. How does that pertain to race and photography since the early 1800s?
- What is the danger of not knowing your own history?
- Can a photograph bridge a nation divided by race?

It might also be helpful to review the history of the development of photography in America and a timeline of race relations in America before watching the film.

### EXPANSION

- Gordon Parks (Chapter 7, starts 1:00.34) as the groundbreaking photographer, writer, activist and artist. Making the invisible the visible. His power and results? Enhance by introducing his compelling film and autobiography: *A Choice of Weapons*.
- Power of Female Photographers (Chapter 8, starts 1:16.31). Focus on Ming Smith, Deborah Willis and Lorna Simpson. Evaluate their artistic power. Discuss specific quotes in the film.

**The documentary should not be viewed without a warning and a discussion of the power of images that depict nudity and the aftermath of crimes appear throughout the film and are always used to illustrate the power of photography.**

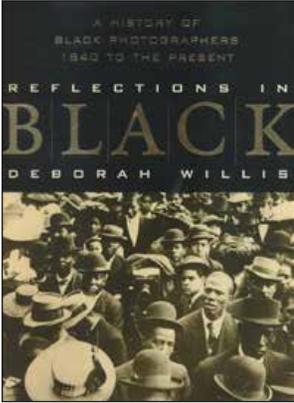
### SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO PAGE 32 QUESTIONS

1. Until recently, the majority of images of black people in American society were not representative of their lives.
2. Answers will vary widely. Each should promote a discussion.
3. The film repeatedly uses the family album as a metaphor for the collection of images in American society. The discussion includes why the images in family albums of black families are not included in the overall body of work.
4. Answers will vary.
5. The images were not seen as relevant by the authors.
6. Jules Lion. He was an early African-American artist documenting the people and buildings in Louisiana.
7. She sold her images to support herself. She also used the images for self-fashioning, to show herself as a person of great respectability.
8. While taking dignified portraits of black people in the mid-1800s, he also worked to abolish slavery and to give black people the right to vote.
9. That from slave to man.
10. “We basically freed the slaves. We freed ourselves.” 186,000 according to historian Robin D.J. Kelley
11. Less than human; it all but obliterates the images of the families rebuilding themselves during Reconstruction
12. A negative and fictional representation of black people that originated in the post-bellum South
13. Eastman helped establish the photography department at the Tuskegee Institute and created the “American Negro” exhibit at the 1900 World’s Fair with images that showed prosperity and a life after slavery with images by W.E.B. DuBois.
14. The official magazine of the NAACP; always present black people positively, participating as full citizens.
15. Images of black people being hung or burned; they are not just a record of things happening but are participants in the staging of the spectacles, a mass media display.
16. Painstaking portraits of blacks living in New York, particularly the Harlem Renaissance.
17. An African-American with light skin appears to be a white person.
18. He published images of the ordinary lives of people in Harlem as part of his book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.
19. Becoming part of the story, the black press documented the trial of a 14-year-old black boy who had been murdered.
20. Photography allows individuals to share their lives, including their racial identity, with others.
21. Answers will vary widely. Each should promote a discussion.

# ACTIVITY

## THROUGH A LENS DARKLY

**DIRECTIONS:** Below are a series of questions about the movie. Answer each on your own paper while watching the film then discuss your responses in small groups.



The documentary is based on a book by Deborah Willis. Why was this book significant?

**DIRECTIONS:** Below are the names of noteworthy African-American photographers. Identify each person in a complete sentence. What is each person known for?

1. James Presley Ball
  2. Anthony Barboza
  3. C. M. Battey
  4. Roy DeCarava
  5. Carrie Mae Weems
  6. Gordon Parks
  7. P.H. Polk
  8. Jamel Shabazz
  9. Coreen Simpson
  10. Lorna Simpson
  11. Hank Willis Thomas
  12. James Van Der Zee
1. The film opens with a 1963 quote from James Baldwin, novelist and civil rights advocate. "Every Negro boy and every Negro girl born in this country until this present moment undergoes the agony of trying to find, in the body politic, in the body social, outside himself/herself, some image of himself or herself that is not demeaning." What did he mean?
  2. Photographer Carrie Mae Weems said, "Very early on, I realized there was really something wrong with the way in which the black subject had been imaged vis-à-vis the media. I'd never seen black people look like that." Describe one of the images portrayed during her discussion and the subsequent discussion by Clarissa Sligh about the distortion of the black subject.
  3. What is absent, hidden from the family photo album?
  4. Thomas Allen Harris asks, "How was, is, the photograph used in the battle between two legacies: self affirmation and negation?" How do you think photography is used?
  5. Why were no images from black photographers included in the early books about the history of photography?
  6. Who brought the daguerrotype from France to New Orleans? Why is this significant?
  7. Sojourner Truth, the first black woman to use photography, used her images in two ways. How?
  8. Frederic Douglass created more than 150 portraits of himself. He also fought political battles for what?
  9. "The negro has basically saved the nation." What transformation did Harper's newspaper, known as *Harper's Weekly*, discuss in 1863?
  10. How many black men fought in the Union Army?
  11. How were African-Americans portrayed, according to Kelley, in D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation"?
  12. What is the black brute?
  13. Booker T. Washington had George Eastman on the board of Tuskegee Institute. Of what significance was this?
  14. What is *The Crisis* magazine? What was the magazine's mandate on how to depict black people of the time?
  15. "I couldn't look at these pictures," historian Bridget Cooks said. What pictures? Why are they important?
  16. What was the "new Negro" of James Van Der Zee?
  17. What does it mean to be "passing for white"?
  18. According to Ron Carter, legendary jazz bassist, DeCarava had a sixth sense. "My impression of his photographs is that he sees the music," Carter said in an NPR interview. What did Carter do?
  19. Why was the 1955 Emmett Till trial significant?
  20. Through photography, Carrie Mae Weems says, we have to open up the possibilities of what blackness can be, she said. What did she mean?
  21. In your own words, what was the main point of the Thomas Allen Harris film that is based on the book *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis, who also was a producer of the film?