
Primed to See: Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*

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A manila folder opens in an archive, and its photographic content delights its viewer and confirms her intuition. In the black-and-white photograph, a Black woman holds a Leica camera up to her face, directing her gaze toward the viewer through its lens in a self-portrait.¹ More photographs by this same individual are identified. The archive is the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the viewer is photographer Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and the date is February 1983, a few years before Moutoussamy-Ashe would publish the book *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* of 1986.² This archival encounter between Moutoussamy-Ashe and a compelling body of photographs by Eslanda Good Robeson, who was an image maker previously unbeknown to Moutoussamy-Ashe, served as a moment of discovery that reinforced the need to narrate the long-standing history of Black women in photography.

When Moutoussamy-Ashe found Robeson in the archive, it became the impetus for her to urgently pursue what would become *Viewfinders*.³ By the time of her visit to Yale, Moutoussamy-Ashe intuitively knew that Black women were part and parcel of photography's history, but her assertions were supported by limited tangible evidence. Happening upon Robeson in the Beinecke Library reaffirmed the existence of other Black women photographers. This essay augments the origin story of *Viewfinders*—in which a moment in the archive spurred personal momentum—by asking what enabled Moutoussamy-Ashe to identify her archival encounter as one of significance in the first place. Arguably, she was primed and poised to see differently. I address how the author arrived at this moment of readiness and focus, in which being grounded in Black photographic life and its contours afforded her the possibility of rewriting history, and in which each encounter—with a bit of information, a newsletter, an exhibition, a juxtaposition of images, or a publication—became a rehearsal, building to the sort of generative discovery that Moutoussamy-Ashe made in the archive. This essay is about what primed Moutoussamy-Ashe to find Black women photographers in the archive; it is about how Moutoussamy-Ashe came to see.⁴ *Viewfinders*, as a result, both anticipates

and responds to other, contemporaneous efforts to normalize and celebrate Black women behind the camera.

Born to an interior designer mother and architect father, Moutoussamy-Ashe grew up in the segregated South Side of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, and her family encouraged her pursuit of artistic interests from the time she was a child. Photographs fascinated her from an early age, especially those gracing the pages of Gordon Parks's striking photobooks.⁵ Moutoussamy-Ashe's formal training in photography at the Cooper Union, New York, where she obtained her BFA in 1975, enabled her to learn from street photographers Garry Winogrand and Tod Papageorge in addition to photography curator Anne Wilkes Tucker.⁶ From its inception in 1859, the then-radical Cooper Union educational model offered training in art, architecture, and engineering to students across the color line, men and women alike. Moutoussamy-Ashe is among several renowned Black artists, including Roy DeCarava, Paul Gardère, Palmer Hayden, Wangechi Mutu, Augusta Savage, and Jack Whitten, who attended the once tuition-free institution.

Moutoussamy-Ashe is the author of five books of photography, *Viewfinders* being the only publication to depart from her own body of photographic work, which consists primarily of landscapes, people and places, trees and nature, and experiments with abstraction. Her wide-ranging oeuvre includes arresting photographs such as a gelatin-silver-print portrait of Maya Angelou from 1993 (fig. 1). The topics of her publications vary, including photographs taken of daily life for the Gullah Geechee people on Daufuskie Island in South Carolina (*Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay*, 1982); an anthology of photographs that she took all over the world, including in South Africa and India, between 1973 and 2011 (*An Anthology: Faces, Places, and Spaces*, 2011); and two projects that offer visual meditations on flowers (*The African Flower: Singing of Angels*, 2001; *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing/Notables of Note*, 2011). Another photobook offers intimate views into her own family life and love for her daughter, Camera, and her late husband, tennis champion Arthur Ashe, whose shared values, and, later, his untimely death from AIDS in 1993, informed the course of Moutoussamy-Ashe's life. As an activist, she expressed her commitment to "instill(ing) in young people the kindred spirit of imagination and creativity."⁷ Moutoussamy-Ashe built a successful and hard-won career as both an artist, with exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and as a photojournalist, contributing images on assignment to newspapers and magazines including *Life*, *Smithsonian*, *Ebony*, and *Sports Illustrated*. More recent attention to Moutoussamy-Ashe's work includes the exhibition *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands* (2024–25) and related programming at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



FIG. 1. — Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe (US American, b. 1951). *Maya Angelou, Winston Salem, NC, 1993*, silver gelatin print, 25.4 × 26.7 cm. Image © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, courtesy of the artist, all rights reserved.

Moutoussamy-Ashe's book *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* offers a chronologically ordered account of individual Black women's engagement with the medium from the time following the storied announcements of photography's invention in 1839 to her own contemporary moment of the 1980s. Deborah Willis, now renowned as a photography historian and emerging as a significant curator at the time, served as an invaluable consultant, and a research assistant by the name of Kali Vertamae Grosvenor contributed tremendously to the project with visits to numerous archives in the US. Well received by reviewers and readers alike, the survey photobook notably went into a second printing just a few years later, in 1993, this time with Writers and Readers Publishing instead of the initial publisher, Dodd, Mead & Company.⁸ Both publishers released *Viewfinders* in soft- and hardcover. While the cover of the second edition features a still life of the author's flea-market collection of old photographs and cameras, an illustration of a four-by-five tripod camera of yesteryear graces the first (fig. 2).

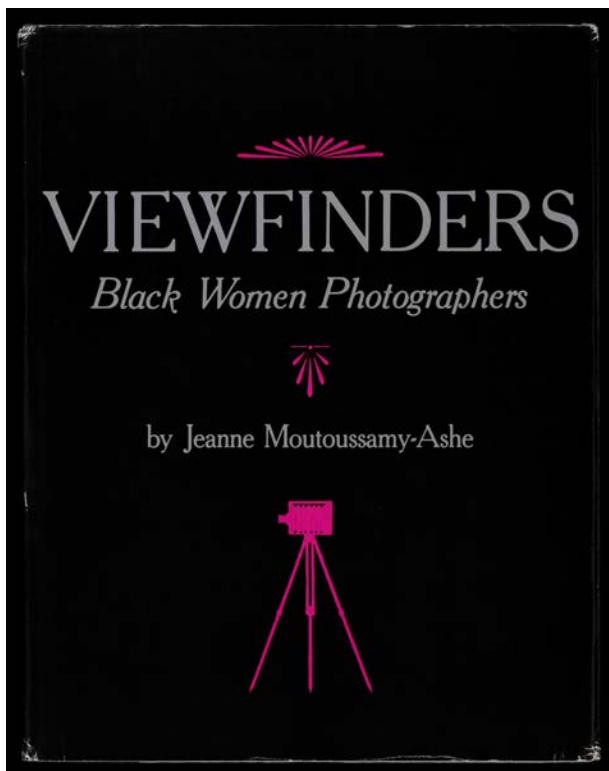


FIG. 2. — Cover of Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986). Designed by Claire B. Counihan. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153.

Although both are nearly identical in content, the first edition deserves close consideration. With dimensions around the size of standard printing paper, *Viewfinders* is a commercially made book. The images were photographically reproduced as offset lithograph or letterpress half-tone prints, mostly from negatives that enabled fidelity to the original photograph.⁹ Other photographs whose negatives were unavailable are not of the same reproduction quality but can be cherished for the historical value of the image. As a survey book, *Viewfinders* is slanderer than most, and the individual photographs are generously arranged on the page with space to spare (fig. 3). The credit lines repeat vertically in small print, gracing the corner of each photograph and leaving little doubt as to the name of each photograph's maker. This layout is in sharp contrast to a scrapbook or collage aesthetic, in which dense imagery creates an effect of busyness and confluence.¹⁰ Instead, each photograph in *Viewfinders* is carefully balanced on the page and distinguished from others around it. Its "bookness" is elegant yet practically didactic.



FIG. 3. — *The Photographer, Bongo Player, Young Man with Cowbell, and Street Music*, ca. 1950s, by Inge Hardison (US American, 1914–2016), spread from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 116–117. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Art © Inge Hardison. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Following a contextualizing introduction, *Viewfinders* is organized into five historical sections that span the nearly 150 years of photography from 1839 to the decade of the book's publication. Across the sections of the two-hundred-page book, Moutoussamy-Ashe profiles thirty-three individual photographers through short essays that offer biographical accounts of their engagement with photography. Generative to each section is the inclusion of black-and-white photographs. In some cases, a portrait photograph of the photographer is included, while in others we see an advertisement for their photography business or distinct examples from their bodies of work. The reader encounters traditional studio portraiture, abstractions of clouds and experimental work, an intimate series of a baby's delivery, photojournalistic views of political marches, a modernist depiction of the built environment, and more (fig. 4). The concluding sections feature a bibliography of the photographers featured, reminiscent of an earlier publication by Willis, along with two general listings of names grouped by the dates 1860–1960 and 1960–80, a geographical index, notes, a selected bibliography, and an index, all features that facilitate the book's presentation as a distinct contribution to photographic history.¹¹

A close look at this immensely important effort to document, collate, and narrate the *longue durée* of Black women in photography and its relationship to other projects from around the same time allows us to better understand its genesis and impact. As this essay will demonstrate, a separate research project by Moutoussamy-Ashe and published scholarly work by other writers added to an emerging critical dialogue.

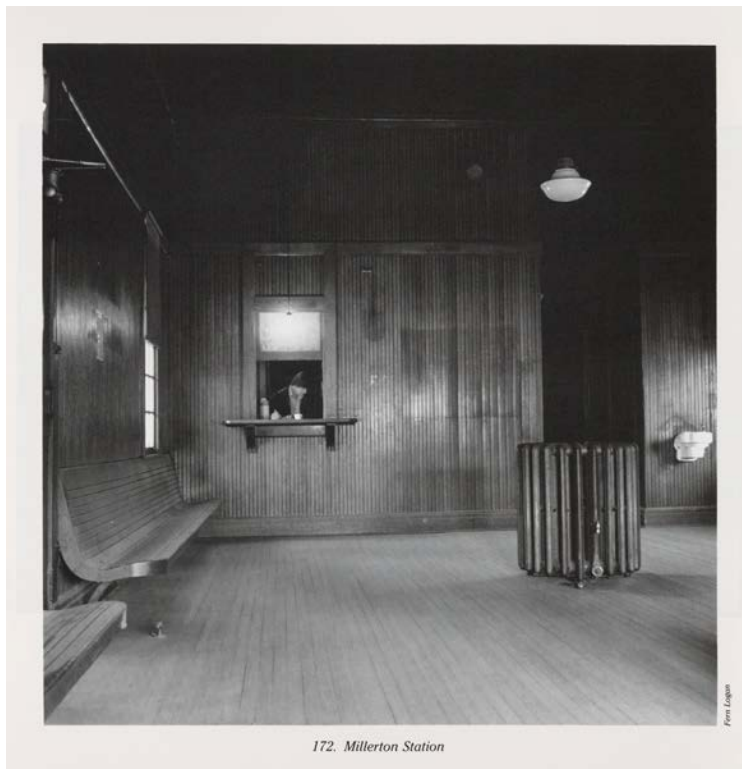


FIG. 4. — Fern Logan (US American, b. 1945). *Millerton Station*, ca. 1985, from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 167. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Art © Fern Logan. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Elsewhere, exhibition interventions and short-lived initiatives set an important revisionist tone. Such examples are germane to the project of writing Black photographic history, a process that “rarely constitutes the object of study.”¹² This essay’s object of study is *Viewfinders*—the book itself—and the various antecedents, contemporaneous interlocutors, and modes of visibility that reposition the writing of this history of photography as pioneering. In so doing, it acknowledges Moutoussamy-Ashe’s intrepid efforts to set in motion a distinct kind of history for readers to reckon with while paying tribute to the many contributions that anticipate and add to such an expansive history of Black women photographers.

An Opened Book

The book’s influence on Black women photographers in particular is legendary.¹³ This is the book to which Black women photographers across the African diaspora turn for evidence of trailblazers who came before them. For South African photographer Zanele Muholi, the book “changed my life in so many ways.”¹⁴ This is the book that authors Laylah Amatullah Barrayn and Adama Delphine Fawundu of the independently published anthology *MFON: Women Photographers of the African Diaspora* (2017) recognize

as groundbreaking. It is one that the editors and contributing writers Joy Gregory and Taous R. Dahmani of *Shining Lights: Black Women Photographers in 1980s–90s Britain* identify as greatly influential to many—especially to the women who published *Polareyes*, a one-off journal issue of 1987 dedicated to the photographic portfolios of contemporary Black British women photographers.¹⁵ For writer and director Crystal Whaley, *Viewfinders* inspired the film of 2022 *The Sound She Saw*, on Black women photographers, one among many examples of the book's expansive reach. Yet evidence of its impact remains confined largely within Black, feminist, and specialized media outlets or through anecdotal claims. Little recognition emerges from the various overlapping academic fields that share interest in photography and the project of charting its more expansive history.

A more capacious narrative begins in the pages of *Viewfinders*, unfolding along an arc that starts with Mary E. Warren, the first Black woman photographer on record (1866), and advancing chronologically to conclude with the work of numerous Black women photojournalists of the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Since the early twentieth century, Black women could regularly engage in photography as part of their professional lives. They became studio operators, like Winifred Hall Allen, Alberta H. Brown, and Ruth Washington; journalists, like Julia Jones and Lenore Davis; or military personnel, like Elizabeth “Tex” Williams. The contents of *Viewfinders* demonstrate a vast and sweeping history of Black women in photography through text and, perhaps more subtly, through the images themselves.

Many of the photographs featured in *Viewfinders* depict Black women displaying ownership of and expertise with their photographic equipment. The first page of a six-page spread on Vera Jackson features her portrait taken by her husband, Vernon Jackson, in which she is confidently wielding a large four-by-five camera and a flashbulb contained within a halo reflector (fig. 5). The etymology of the word *photography* means to write with light; the portrait of Jackson conveys a sense of professional control over when and where that light emanates. Yet the ease with which the camera becomes a tool for entertainment and leisure can easily place the perception of Black women's serious commitment to photography in the realm of passive product consumption, seen through more mainstream images of Black women with cameras. Such a distinction is evident in a comparison between this portrait and a commercial advertisement for the Sylvania Blue Dot Flash camera, in which a smiling Black woman faces toward the viewer, holding a camera up to her face with two hands. Overpowering rays of light emanate from the camera, obscuring her eyes and the camera itself while displacing her viewpoint (fig. 6). In the advertisement, the technology of photography is employed to position and locate the Black woman within its framework. By contrast, Jackson, the steady and calm proprietor of the camera and flash-unit bulb attachment, embodies professionalism in her fitted peacoat, a classic design evoking the naval forces. Equipped to endure the potential chill of taking pictures outside, even her clothing emits a sense of readiness and command lacking in the advertisement's model.



FIG. 5. — Vernon Jackson (US American, 1907–83). *Vera Jackson Holds a Graflex Speed Graphic Camera with a King Sol Flash*, ca. 1940, 28 × 36 cm. Image courtesy of the Tom & Ethel Bradley Center at California State University, Northridge.

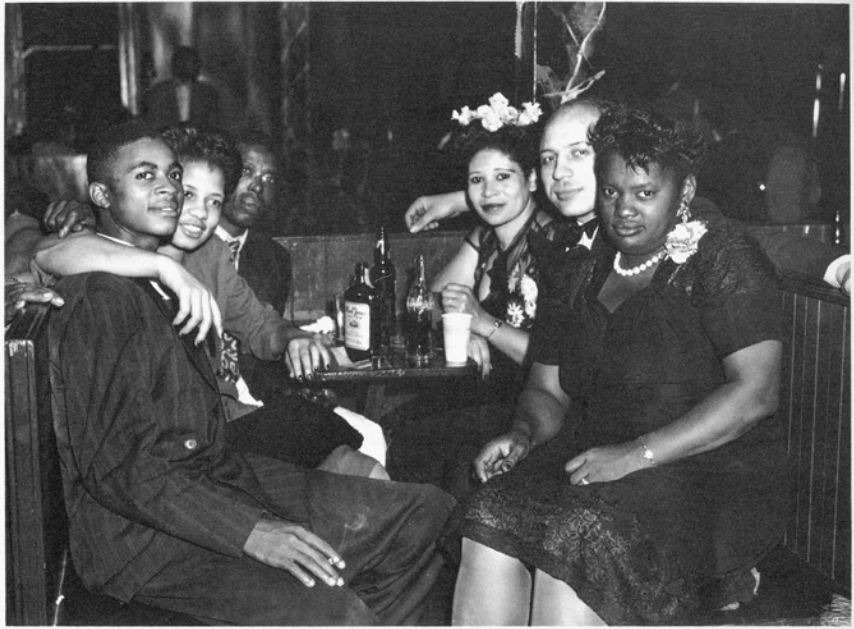
Consistently, Moutoussamy-Ashe trains her reader's eye to visually engage with images that depart from those within a more popular sphere of associations. While textual information within the book charts key aspects of photography's history, the photographs themselves are the pivotal contributions. No reproductions of works by long-acknowledged pioneers Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, William Henry Fox Talbot, or Alfred Stieglitz are found within the pages of *Viewfinder*. Yet notably, Moutoussamy-Ashe's telling of history does not exclude the canonical roster of white, male photographers, now internationally famous through the publication of Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (1964). Her introductory chapter includes the names that have come to define the medium's early history—Daguerre, Talbot, Stieglitz—because these individuals are also part of Black women's history of photography. As cultural critic Greg Tate reminds us, talking about artists of the postnationalist Black aesthetic of the mid-1980s: "They feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by nonblacks as part of their inheritance. No anxiety of influence here—these folks believe the cultural gene pool is for skinny-dipping."¹⁷ To walk with Tate and to proclaim that Daguerre, for example, is part of Black women photographers' inheritance reframes the terms of photography's history. While not condoning Black women's absence from the official story, Moutoussamy-Ashe's gesture



FIG. 6. — “Our Flashy Side,” advertisement for the Sylvania Blue Dot Flash camera, 1976, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Collection of the author.

of positioning Daguerre as chosen kin to Black women photographers demonstrates the nuanced and expansive nature of artistic discourse for many Black image-makers of the mid-1980s.

Moutoussamy-Ashe was primed to recognize a range of photographers, including those who could not be identified by name. While most of *Viewfinders* is organized around identifiable photographers, a section titled “Camera Girls” brings unnamed women photographers of the 1940s into history through the recollections of Charles Williams, a Los Angeles nightclub owner. *Camera Girls* was a common term used to describe women employed to take group- and couple-clientele portraits at nightclubs during a time when the availability of camera equipment and merchandise in general was limited due to the shift in production priorities in the US following World War II.¹⁸ If people had difficulty gaining access to film, cameras, and fully equipped darkrooms, then a nightclub like Williams’s could offer this service while simultaneously reinforcing the relationship between photography and Black leisure during historical contexts when photographic material was in short supply. The women would work the crowd, cameras in hand, and produce photographs of groups posing and beaming for the camera, carefully positioned to include everyone’s faces (fig. 7). The section on the Camera Girls within the publication also stands out as the only published interview of the many that Moutoussamy-Ashe conducted. Through this interview with Williams,



89. *The Lido, during WWII*

FIG. 7. — Winifred Hall Allen (Jamaican American, 1911–). A group at the Lido nightclub in Harlem photographed in the style of Camera Girls, ca. 1940s, from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 80 (detail). Art © Winifred Hall Allen. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

readers gain a sense of the types of questions Moutoussamy-Ashe asked to elicit the historical narrative of Black women photographers. The tone of these conversations and the nature of her interviewing process can only otherwise be experienced if one goes into the Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe Manuscript and Research Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. A look in the archive illustrates some of the choices Moutoussamy-Ashe had to make as a writer, along with the approach she took in charting a history.

In the archive, we gain insight into the life of Jamaican-born Winifred Hall Allen, a New Negro-era photographer whose work preceded and expanded chronologically beyond the short run of the Camera Girls phenomenon. She owned a studio and worked as a portrait photographer and photojournalist in Harlem for twenty years. Allen is mentioned in the earliest known scholarly thesis on photography in Harlem as “the most successful black photographer on the block.”¹⁹ While such proclamations of success characterize her appearance in that early scholarship, the account offered through *Viewfinders* and Moutoussamy-Ashe’s research is more tempered by the challenges and precarities of life’s duration. Allen’s ambitions did not translate into the enduring pride and distinction one might expect. By the time Moutoussamy-Ashe tracked down Allen and interviewed her in the early 1980s, the once-determined Black photographer and astute businesswoman had disposed of more than half of her

photography collection.²⁰ Cockroaches had taken up residence in the closet shoeboxes in which the few photographs she had kept were stored. Moutoussamy-Ashe persuaded Allen to part with some of the negatives; the twenty-six examples in *Viewfinders* are Allen's only published photographs. As Moutoussamy-Ashe shares with the readers of *Viewfinders*, Allen did not consider her own forays into photography earlier in life as historically relevant or exceptional. One year following the publication of *Viewfinders*, Black feminist writer Jewelle Gomez laments that "(Allen's) sense of the prevailing culture's sentiments about their lack of worth was, of course, sadly accurate."²¹ The insufficient recognition of Allen's contributions to the field and the disheartening conditions of her photographs illustrate the difficulties of writing history when the sense of collective value is absent. Reflecting on her project *An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (1989), Willis writes that many of the overlooked contemporary Black photographers, "had their archives discarded because they believed no one cared."²²

Considering the archive of research materials for *Viewfinder* alongside the materials that made it into the final book, it becomes evident that Moutoussamy-Ashe had to selectively read between the lines of the narratives with her interviewees to squeeze out a history that, for some, does not register as History with a capital *H* and, more unfortunately, is seen as "unfit for history."²³ The resistance to and the erasure of this important history is unintentionally carried out by those whose names should be celebrated as much as it is actively inflicted by the larger societal systems that devalue Black women, from which, evidently, no one is spared. It is, as theorist Christina Sharpe might describe it, the weather.²⁴ Sharpe uses the weather as a metaphor for the all-consuming ubiquity of anti-Blackness through legible and illegible ways. Because, of course, the devaluation of Black women is a collective narrative, a story whose basic plotline we all know—one in which the protagonist can represent a range of subjects with varying complexities, complications, and nuances but is nonetheless resigned to being inferior or unfit for history. *Viewfinders* streamlines history to displace the depths of anti-Blackness through legibility. A collection of facts and ideas neatly chronicled and arranged on the page subdue the residuals of devaluation that are yet still present as structural norms. A range of book publications, exhibitions, and initiatives dedicated to image makers set the foundation for challenging such norms. Arguably, this concatenation of emerging efforts played a part in readying Moutoussamy Ashe and others to chart a different history.

Spanning Outward

Before *Viewfinders*, only two books had offered a surveylike, historical consideration of Black photography, serving a markedly radical departure from Newhall's canonical *History of Photography*, which, by its fifth edition in 1982, still failed to include any Black photographers. During the year 1983, curator Valencia Hollins Coar published *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840-1960*, a sweeping chronological survey that includes only

one woman photographer, to accompany an exhibition of the same title. Willis released *Black Photographers, 1840–1940: A Bio-Bibliography* in 1985, just a year before Moutoussamy-Ashe's book came out.²⁵ Significantly, in comparison, *Viewfinders* focused on Black women photographers, and was the first book to do so. As a model to build upon, Willis's and Coar's publications offered important interventions into a history of photography dominated by white, male photographers.

Moutoussamy-Ashe writes this history, when possible, by interviewing Black women photographers, privileging the voices of artists themselves. Previous recuperative books that involve this strategy include artists Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy's two-volume *Black Artists on Art* (1969–71), and *Contextures* (1978) by artists Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips; each work stakes a claim at a time when the words of Black artists were being documented and validated, sometimes for the first time.²⁶ *Viewfinders* also joined the ranks of publications that were produced by African American photographers as meaningful efforts to visually amplify aspects of Black life. Examples include Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* from 1955, a field-defining photobook surely known to Moutoussamy-Ashe.²⁷

Part of the force of Moutoussamy-Ashe's contribution is the very fact that *Viewfinders* is a book as opposed to a more ephemeral format. *Viewfinders* was originally published by New York-based Dodd, Mead & Company, a reputable and popular publisher, especially for Black literature. Aligning with the years of the civil rights movement, starting in the 1950s Dodd, Mead & Company published several anthologies of Black poetry, essays, folklore, and humor. The sale of *Viewfinders* was mobilized through the reputation preceding its publisher, the publisher's efforts to advertise it, and multiple reviews of the book's merits and weaknesses, geared directly toward the intended readership.²⁸ Through its publication, *Viewfinders* entered the capitalist sphere of the commodity world. As photography historian Anne McCauley writes: "The information included in photographic texts carries not only ideological but economic weight."²⁹ A print book released by an established publisher is produced with the intent of sale, a force less prevalent in the production of pamphlets, journals, and exhibitions. The commercial aspect becomes the engine behind the book's visibility and dissemination, which departs significantly from noncommercial efforts to share newsletters, articles, and exhibition materials. Yet, impact is not contingent upon the widespread distribution channels of book publications. Instead, as the next section will demonstrate, the grounds for renewed thinking are often located in ephemeral or archival materials of little circulation and attention.



Just one year before the publication of *Viewfinders*, Moutoussamy-Ashe completed a twenty-page research paper on the history of Black students at Cooper Union, a project that gave her experience in archival research and oral interviews.³⁰ The document, later partially published in a Black-student directory by Cooper Union, sheds light on an extensive roster of Black artists who attended Cooper Union from the nineteenth

century to 1994, when the register was published.³¹ Moutoussamy-Ashe was particularly focused on the inclusion and matriculation of Black students in the school's early history, many of whom are left out of the current roll call of significant figures. Within the document, she highlights the "firsts"—those who were the first Black students to achieve a specific milestone—a trailblazing designation that traditionally dictates the importance of Black individuals in society. Yet she does so in ways that not only reveal the accomplishments of Cooper graduates but, importantly, the circumstances through which they come into view, just as she did with Allen in *Viewfinders*. For example, Daisy Brown, possibly the first Black woman graduate of the engineering school, came to the attention of an alum through a Cooper Union bronze metal, etched with Brown's name, found at a flea market. For Moutoussamy-Ashe, bringing renewed attention to Brown would allow the school to "promote dignity by standing on the very foundation on which it was built."³² Through the Cooper Union project, history is punctuated and influenced by the very presence of individuals, not necessarily by evidence of prolific contributions. Such an outlook laid the methodological groundwork for *Viewfinders* as a survey of Black women photographers, many of whom had no extensive archive or notable accolades.

The mentorship and other impactful learning experiences that Moutoussamy-Ashe had at Cooper Union enhanced the development of *Viewfinders*. While at Cooper Union, she took classes on African art with art historian and practicing artist George Nelson Preston, which influenced her decision to pursue an independent study in West Africa in 1974 along with photographer Frank Stewart. Visiting Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, standing at the porthole looking out at the vast horizon of the sea, traversed for centuries by slave ships, informed her subsequent exploration of Daufuskie Island, off the coast of South Carolina, a place defined by the legacy of enslavement and rich Gullah culture. Such experiences fueled an acknowledgment of the inherent link between the African American and African experience. This transformative trip to Ghana and later, South Africa, where she photographed life under apartheid (1977–78), combined with her interest in capturing an underrecognized history of her alma mater, offer an understated genealogy for many of her subsequent projects.³³ More broadly, these projects fueled her curiosity and desire to visually engage with the vastness and complexity of Black life.

The accomplishment of *Viewfinders* can also be framed within the context of exhibitions, artists, and photography-centered initiatives from the 1970s and 1980s that demonstrate the contours of her dynamic engagement with a range of art and visual-cultural worlds. Just Above Midtown was an innovative, self-funded gallery space driven by an experimental ethos and dedicated to the support and exhibition of Black artists in Manhattan, including those making conceptually charged work across fields, including performance, abstraction, sculpture, and video. The exhibition roster in 1978, the year Moutoussamy-Ashe had *South Africa: Impressions*, her first solo exhibition there from 11 April to 6 May, gestures toward a relevant context for understanding the emergence of *Viewfinders* outside of a historiography of books alone.

The construction of history is not limited to scholarship. Indeed, “long before average citizens read the historians who set the standard of the day . . . they access history through celebration, site and museum visits, movies. . . . To be sure, the views they learn there are, in turn, sustained, modified, or challenged by scholars involved in primary research.”³⁴ Just Above Midtown provided this kind of sustaining force through a chain of programs that offered Moutoussamy-Ashe a context for and access to Black creativity in advance of her project to survey a longer history of Black women in photography.

In 1978, during the last year at its 57th Street location before an eviction and relocation downtown, the intimately small space of Just Above Midtown hosted an array of projects within months of each other that included artist Houston Conwill’s series of performances as part of his exhibition *Notes of a Griot*, in which evocations of ancestral chanting, whirling, and dancing were central. Moutoussamy-Ashe’s display of photographs of everyday life in apartheid Africa (*South Africa: Impressions*) followed Conwill’s show along with a string of others, including a show on origami-paper collages; an exhibition of earlier twentieth-century work by African American studio photographer James Van Der Zee, brother of Jennie L. Welcome, called *Black Has Always Been Beautiful*; and solo and group shows with eccentric titles such as *Booga Bear Paintings* and *Pocket Art*.³⁵ Just Above Midtown represents the kind of environment in which Moutoussamy-Ashe developed her identity as an artist and sharpened her awareness of the boundlessness of Black creative endeavors, past and present. The influence of the kinds of experiences afforded by Just Above Midtown may have buoyed Moutoussamy-Ashe in continuing her momentum and dedication to expanding upon the dynamism of Black creative life, this time through a focus specifically on the remarkable breadth of Black women photographers.

In a letter to the editor of the James Van Der Zee Institute’s *Photo Newsletter*, dated 21 March 1973, Moutoussamy-Ashe writes, “After studying the current issue . . . I felt encouragement. I felt a vibration and wanted to say, hey sister, I know how you feel. The important thing was that something was said, about me, for me.”³⁶ From 1972 to 1974, the institute, founded in 1969, produced the *Photo Newsletter* about six times a year. Each issue, of no more than eight to twelve pages, covered a range of materials relating to photography in service of the institute’s larger mission to promote the work of Black photographers. The newsletter evinced an emerging moment in which efforts to document and narrate histories of Black photography were taking shape. Briefly housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York before moving to the Studio Museum in 1978, the James Van Der Zee Institute operated through donations, a dedicated staff, and seed funding from the Rubenstein Foundation. The stewardship of a small collection of photographs also demonstrated the institution’s mission.

The issue that Moutoussamy-Ashe referred to in her statement of encouragement was volume two, number one (January–February 1973), the first and last issue of the Institute’s *Photo Newsletter* to focus solely on Black women photographers (fig. 8). Her comments may have also been made in response to the newsletter’s announcement of a



FIG. 8. — Cover of *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (January–February 1973), published by the James Van Der Zee Institute. Kansas City, MO, Spencer Art Reference Library at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

two-week exhibition on Black women photographers to be hosted at the newly opened Community Folk Art Gallery of Syracuse University, one of the earliest exhibitions on record of its kind.³⁷ It can be surmised that the women featured in the newsletter issue were also included in the exhibition. These photographers include Elaine Tomlin, the only Black woman staff photographer in the 1960s for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Ardina Seward, one of the first African American women photojournalists in the news broadcast industry; June Clark Greenberg, cofounder of the Women's Photography Co-op in early 1970s Toronto; Ming Smith, the first Black woman photographer to have her work enter MoMA's collection, in 1979; E'Lois Kinnon, a contributor to the *Chicago Journal: The South Side's Free Weekly Newspaper*; and Mikki Ferrill, the accomplished freelance photographer whose early assignments include covering the 1968 Olympics.³⁸

Other efforts to document and recognize the history of Black photography took form elsewhere—for example, in the pages of the first *International Black Photographer's Newsletter*, a six-page document produced in the summer of 1981.³⁹ The newsletter, regrettably, would not continue beyond its first couple of issues, despite the ambitions of a small cadre of photographers who had successfully spearheaded the *Black Photographers Annual*, whose four volumes, each a substantial endeavor—for example, the second volume featured about fifty Black photographers within more than a

hundred beautifully curated pages—ran over a seven-year period (1973, 1974, 1976, and 1980). Conceived by the visionary and influential Kamoinge Workshop, a small collective of Black photographers involved in the larger umbrella organization of the *International Black Photographers* (IBP), *The Black Photographers Annual* provided exposure to photographers frequently left out of the photography- and art-publishing arenas. The hopes of producing its drastically shorter and less designed newsletter as a more frequent quarterly publication never came to fruition. With then-executive editor of *Essence* magazine, Cheryll Y. Greene, at the helm of this later initiative, the newsletter features short blurbs describing the organization's founding and its aim to honor and celebrate the more senior members of the Black photography community, many of whom participated in the Kamoinge Workshop.⁴⁰ Of particular interest on the newsletter's final page are a few paragraphs describing what Greene and curator Gylbert Coker envision for the IBP archive. In the plan for a permanent location separate from the archive's initial location at the residence of a fellow IBP member, the authors clarify the importance of such an archive, one that would house original works, slides, portraits of photographers, oral histories, and other kinds of materials, those "relating to the history and development of Black photography."⁴¹ Building this archive would depend heavily upon the "the rich resources right at hand in our photographic history,"⁴² a large and active community portrayed in a group photograph taken by Anthony Barboza and reproduced in the issue; Moutoussamy-Ashe is identified near the right edge of the frame, one among the scattering of women pictured (fig. 9). Also reflected in the newsletter's pages, this community took shape around gatherings like the IBP dinner, at which attendees Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Arthur Ashe appear in a photograph seated with photographers Al Fennar and John Pinderhughes.⁴³

Across the Atlantic in Britain, another short-lived publication further substantiates ongoing efforts to gather and articulate a space in which Black photographers are recognized, particularly Black women photographers. Highlighting photographic portfolios of contemporary photographers alongside short, critical essays, the British magazine *Polareyes* had a curtailed run in 1987 that lasted for only one issue. A burst of available funds from the Greater London Authority and the Arts Council facilitated its creation, while a quickly dwindling budget prevented the publication of subsequent issues. Nonetheless, an editorial board of women artists spearheaded the one-shot project to center the creative commitments and voices of contemporary Black British women photographers, which reflected an expanded understanding of Blackness with the inclusion of contributions by British artists of African descent along with artists of Southeast Asian and Indigenous backgrounds. Along with articles that center Black women photographers, the issue includes a review of *Viewfinders*, a reprinted article from volume 4 (1980) of *The Black Photographers Annual*, and a mention of Van Der Zee—all evidence of the burgeoning transatlantic momentum toward established discourse around the production of photography in Black life. Relevantly, *Viewfinders* primed the creators of *Polareyes* to see. As historian of photography Taous R. Dahmani writes, "*Viewfinders* . . . became an object of legitimization that allowed a journal like *Polareyes*



FIG. 9. — Anthony Barboza (US American, b. 1944). *3rd Annual Black Photographers Dinner Honoring Monetta Slate and Chuck Stewart #2, 1981*, from *International Black Photographer's Newsletter*, 1981. Image courtesy Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment, 2017.40.

to fit into a historical and transatlantic tradition.”⁴⁴ Because of *Viewfinders*, the photographers of *Polareyes* could locate their efforts not only within a roster of British contemporary artists but along a longer and broader trajectory of Black women in photography. Indeed, as writer Camille Crain Drummond notes, “Using the book format to establish dominant and authoritative narratives of the historical and cultural record of entire peoples is as old as the book itself.”⁴⁵ *Viewfinders* affords different options of possibility for inclusion and redress because it charts a genealogy that had never been expressly outlined before. It offered, and still offers, an anchor for Black women photographers to locate and position themselves, sometimes most impactfully through curated modes of visual engagement.

A Model for Looking

The thoughtful inclusion of photographs within published materials can model and generate ways of looking. For example, in the fourth volume of the short-lived but influential *The Black Photographers Annual*, an untitled photograph by Moutoussamy-Ashe appears on the left-hand page of a spread opposite an untitled photograph by Harlem-based photographer Paul Phillips, their compositions visually in dialogue (fig. 10). In Moutoussamy-Ashe’s image, a woman in the middle distance sits on what



FIG. 10. — Interior spread featuring *LaGuardia Airport, New York, NY, ca. 1978*, by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, and an untitled photograph by Paul Phillips, from *The Black Photographers Annual 4* (1980): 28–29. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 94-S306. Art © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and Paul Phillips.

appears to be a climate-control ventilation bench that runs under a wall-length window with a blurred view. The expanse of space between the woman and a strolling man partially in view at the lower edge of the other side of the photograph mirrors the open area between a pair of two well-dressed men and one fashionable woman standing on a windy pier in Phillips's image. Despite different locations and contexts, the sophisticated spread's paired photographs work in tandem to advance a dynamic visual dialogue.

All too often, pairings did not work in the favor of noteworthy photographs and their subjects. In the article "Showing Our Faces: A Century of Black Women Photographed," published a year after *Viewfinders*, Gomez points to a different kind of unfortunate but persistent pairing. Describing a newspaper article, Gomez laments that "on one page we celebrated the age of America's first black vamp Dorothy Dandridge, sitting backstage about to go out and work her black magic; on another we were assaulted by the relentlessly degrading advertisements for wigs, skin bleaching creams and hair straighteners."⁴⁶ While a Black woman may be seen as exemplary, there simultaneously exists a correlation to supposed imperfections in need of correction. By contrast, in *Viewfinders*, Vera Jackson's portrait of the great Dorothy Dandridge, cocktail in hand, spotlights the star through directed lighting, evoking glamorous repose (fig. 11).

Through its intentional page layout, *Viewfinders* celebrates the cocktail portrait in connection with a second Dandridge portrait, along with smiling portraits of Black female stars Phillipa Schuyler and Hattie McDaniel and a group portrait of women celebrating the birthday of Mary McLeod Bethune. The book's arrangement of photographs constellates and centers the work of Black women image-makers—who control the viewfinder—and allows Black women to occupy the camera viewfinder's focal point. Like the various efforts that primed Moutoussamy-Ashe to recognize Robeson's significance on that day in the Beinecke, so too will *Viewfinders* continue to prime readers to disrupt marginalizing versions of photography's history, anchoring and inspiring more generative narratives.



FIG. 11. — Vera Jackson (US American, 1911–99). *Portrait of Dorothy Dandridge*, n.d., from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), 89 (detail). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 86-B10153. Book © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, reproduced with permission.

Operating within cultural and academic institutions, historians of photography are encouraged to tell new narratives that are often anchored by a shared set of well-known texts on photography. Yet responses to the important call to develop groundbreaking research tend to overlook the methods and interventions gifted by Black women, contributions that could significantly inform and enrich the canon. What might it mean, for example, to disrupt the loop of a long-standing citational practice by exchanging the discourse around one leading text from the 1980s—say, Roland Barthes’s canonical *Camera Lucida*—for another, such as Moutoussamy-Ashe’s *Viewfinders*, taking into consideration her contemporary interlocutors and the various discursive antecedents and successors of the project? Such a relational intervention resonates with photo theorist Ariella Azoulay’s construction of history as a rewind as opposed to the creation of something new. To frame the reclaiming of history as the answer to today’s most pertinent research questions serves as a departure from writers who commonly place the ambitions of world-making within the possibilities of Black futures as opposed to Black pasts. As Azoulay writes, “To counter the imperial promise of a new beginning . . . [we must be] tuned to a different modality: that of rehearsal, reversal, rewinding, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating, and on and on.”⁴⁷

Indeed, being primed to discern Black photographic life and all its contours affords one the possibility of rewinding and rewriting history.

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Notes

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1. Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Self Portrait*, New York City, 1938, gelatin silver print, 20.3 × 25.4 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 237.2023, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/450592>.

2. Pronounced "Jean-ee Ma-two-sah-me" according to the author in Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union," interview by Avia Hurley and archives librarian Mary Mann, 28 September 2021, New York, Cooper Union Archives and Special Collections, MG.014, box 1. Moutoussamy-Ashe visited Yale University on the occasion of her spouse Arthur Ashe's receipt of the Yale Kipthuth Award bestowed to distinguished athletes on 10 February 1983. She found Robeson's work in the Carl Van Vechten Papers. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, "An Oral History with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe" interview by Kalia Brooks, *BOMB*, Oral History Project, 11 September 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2014/09/11/jeanne-moutoussamy-ashe/>.

3. In Moutoussamy-Ashe's own words, "My interest in writing a book on black women photographers started in the spring of 1982 [*sic*] when, on a visit to Yale university's Beinecke Rare Books Library, I was looking at photographs from the Carl Van Vechten Collection. It was in this collection that I first saw photographs of well-known black Americans that were stamped with the name E. G. Robeson." Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead, 1986), xvii.

4. For a compelling contribution on how the art world came to "see" photographers in Chicago's Black Arts Movement (BAM) see, Romi Crawford, "Black Arts Movement Photography in Chicago: From Impermanent Institutions to a Tentative 'Arrival,'" in *Never a Lovely So Real: Photography and Film in Chicago, 1950–1980*, ed. Michal Raz-Russo with Grace Deveney and Romi

Crawford (Art Institute of Chicago, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.53269/9780865593237/06>. In the essay, Crawford considers what she calls the "tipping point, that fulcrum-like moment when art, especially art made by minoritized persons, enters into wider circulation and more formal institutional contexts." Crawford, "Black Arts Movement Photography in Chicago," 2.

5. Moutoussamy-Ashe would later know Gordon Parks as a friend and a work connection through NBC. See Raymond Arsenault, *Arthur Ashe: A Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), 413.

6. For the most recent biography on the photographer, see Candice Jansen, "Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe," a biography produced as part of the research programme *The Origin of Others: Rewriting Art History in the Americas, 19th Century–Today* in partnership with the Clark Art Institute Archives of Women Artists, Research & Exhibitions (AWARE), 2025, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/jeanne-moutoussamy-ashe/>.

7. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "An Oral History with Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe," n.p.

8. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (repr., Writers & Readers, 1993.)

9. Many thanks to special collections conservators Lou Di Gennaro and Dawn Mankowski at New York University's Bobst Library for helping me to formulate this descriptive language upon viewing the book on 14 May 2025.

10. For example, see the collage-like layout of Toni Morrison, *The Black Book* (Random House, 1974.)

11. Deborah Willis, *Black Photographers 1840–1940: A Bio-Bibliography* (Garland, 1985).

12. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon, 1995), 22.

13. In addition, *Viewfinders* notably served as the inspiration to Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (Abbeville, 1994). Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, interview with the author, 22 April 2025.

14. Zanele Muholi, "Zanele Muholi: Faces & Phases," interview by Deborah Willis, *Aperture*, Spring 2015, <https://issues.aperture.org/article/2015/1/1/zanele-muholi-faces-phases>.

15. Joy Gregory and Taous R. Dahmani, *Shining Lights: Black Women Photographers in 1980s–90s Britain* (MACK & Autograph, 2024), 407. See also Taous R. Dahmani, "Polareyes: A Magazine by and for Black British Women Photographers as a Site of Resistance in London, 1987" in *Resist, Organize, Build: Feminist and Queer Activism in Britain and the United States During the Long 1980s*, ed. Sara Crook and Charles Jeffries (State University of New York Press, 2022), 244–74.

16. For more information on Mary Warren, See Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 10–11. Hereafter, short citations refer to the 1986 edition.

17. Greg Tate, "Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), 207.

18. For a journalistic account of Camera Girls in New York City, see Berton Roueché, "Hawkins Is Inside," *The New Yorker*, 30 November 1946.

19. Myrtle Evangeline Pollard, "Harlem as Is" (master's thesis, College of the City of New York, 1936).

20. Winifred Allen file, New York, The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe manuscript and research collection, Sc MG 343.

21. Jewelle Gomez, "Showing Our Faces: A Century of Black Women Photographed," *Ten.8*, no. 24 (1987): 17.

22. Deborah Willis, quoted in Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "Making Space: Deborah Willis and the Archive of Black Visual Culture," *Camera Obscura* 35, no. 3 (2020): 135.

23. Stephen Best, "Introduction: Unfit for History," in *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Duke University Press, 2018), 1–26. Many thanks to Emily Brady, author of the book *Let the World See What I See: Black Women Photographers from the Harlem Renaissance to Black Power* (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming), for bringing this to my attention. Emily Brady, conversation with the author, 28 June 2023.

24. Christina Sharpe, "The Weather," chap. 4 in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 102–34.

25. Valencia Hollins Coar, *A Century of Black Photographers, 1840–1960* (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1983); and Willis, *Black Photographers 1840–1940*.

26. Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art*, 2 vols. (Contemporary Crafts, 1969–71); and Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (Just Above Midtown, 1978).

27. Taous R. Dahmani, "Missing Photobooks: A Symptomatic Reading on the Reasons for and Impact of the Lack of Publications by Black British Photographers in the 1970s and 1980s," in *The Photobook World: Artists' Books and Forgotten Social Objects* (Manchester University Press, 2023), 78.

28. These include G. Craven, review of *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*, by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Choice* 24 (1986): 110; Marilyn Richardson, "From Negative to Positive," review of *Viewfinders*, by Moutoussamy-Ashe, *The Women's Review of Books* 3, no. 12 (1986): 7–8; David M. Johnson and Yolanda Burwell, "[Review of] Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*," *Explorations in Sights and Sounds* 7, no. 1 (1987): 55–56; and John Loughery, review of *Viewfinders*, by Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Woman's Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 49.

29. Anne McCauley, "Writing Photography's History Before Newhall," *History of Photography* 21, no. 2 (1997): 87.

30. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union."

31. *The Cooper Black Book*, compiled/ designed by Dave Riggins "True," 1994, New York, Cooper Union Archives and Special Collections, Collection of Registers and Directories, RG.010, box 5.

32. Moutoussamy-Ashe, "A History of Black Alumni at Cooper Union."

33. See Candice Jansen, "Black Colored Memory," in *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe: South Africa, 1977/1978*, ed. Michal Raz-Russo (Steidl; Gordon Parks Foundation, 2025), 200–211.

34. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 20.

35. For information on Jennie L. Welcome, see Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders*, 28–30. Also see the MoMA exhibition history list for the Just Above Midtown Archives, <https://research.moma.org/c.php?g=1409558&p=10437693>.

36. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, letter to the editor, 21 March 1973, *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (March–April 1973): 5.

37. Despite my efforts to find additional information on this historic exhibition, I could only find a brief mention in the newsletter. Dolores Ashley, "The Black Woman Photographer," *Photo Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (January–February 1973): 7–8.

38. Other featured photographers include Deborah McCready, Carole Butler, Leigh Abernathy, and Jennifer Bryan. Ashley, "The Black Woman Photographer," 7.

39. *International Black Photographer's Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1981), Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, VAO4.01.3.234.do, https://archives.vmfamuseum.org/repositories/2/digital_objects/2105.

40. For more information on Kamoinge, see Sarah L. Eckhardt et al., *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop* (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2020.)

41. Gilbert Coker and Cheryll V. Greene, "The Archive: What We Envision," *International Black Photographer's Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1981): 4.

42. Coker and Greene, "The Archive," 4.

43. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, interview with the author, 22 April 2025. An image was reproduced in the IBP newsletter, and the identities of its subjects were confirmed by Moutoussamy-Ashe during the interview. The location of the original photograph is unknown.

44. Dahmani, "Polareyes," 247.

45. Camille Crain Drummond, "The Designer Elevating the Present and Future of Photobooks," *The PhotoBook Review*, no. 018, in *Aperture*, no. 40 (2020): 5.

46. Gomez, "Showing Our Faces," 16.

47. Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 56.