

DECONSTRUCTING *THE BOSS*: AN ANALYSIS OF A PHOTOGRAPH BY PRENTICE HALL POLK

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Prentice Hall Polk's *The Boss* (1932, fig. 1) is a gelatin silver print portrait. The original image was reportedly taken on Polk's Eastman Kodak box camera in his private studio in Tuskegee, Alabama.¹ The image reproduced in this essay was printed in 1981 and is from the International Center of Photography's website.² The title of this P.H. Polk portrait, *The Boss*, is intriguing and the viewer is at once drawn in by it. One questions not only how an African American woman in depression-era Alabama, dressed in her moth-eaten work wear is immortalized in a beautiful, painterly, professional photograph but also how she meets the camera's gaze with such arresting confidence. How does this woman, of presumably humble origins and occupation, convincingly become "the boss" to the viewer? Polk's *The Boss* could be characterized as a typical pictorialist depiction of a humble,

working-class person whose status is elevated via the photographer's lens and artistic touch. However, it is the combination of a skilled Black photographer with his Black sitter's confident bearing which produces a portrait that is indeed unique for its time. The stance and steady gaze of his subject results in a striking and powerful pose that is far from Natalie Rosenblum's categorization of it as a transformation of "rural people into ingratiating genre types, emphasizing industriousness and nobility of character through their choices of lighting and pose."³

In this paper, I will examine how Polk's use of European fine art portrait and chiaroscuro technique in combination with the poise of his subject results in a photograph that exemplifies the democratization of portraiture. While viewers are at first drawn into the portrait by its painterly effects, striking tones, and the beautifully highlighted face and head of the subject, they must simultaneously confront their own preconceptions of the subject's social status in relation to her race, clothing, and the era

of the photo as well as the subject's gaze in light of the work's title. *The Boss* can be viewed as both an artistic portrait and a social statement.

The lighting, sharp lines, and contrasting tones of *The Boss* initially draw the viewer in, recalling Rembrandt's painted portraits. In an interview with Pearl Cleadge Lomax in 1979, Polk recalls discovering Rembrandt in the photography correspondence course he took: "I read after Rembrandt ... Rembrandt went to the shadow side

... if you look at most of my pictures, you'll see most of them are from the shadow side ... It helps you leave people near as you can to who they are."⁴ Polk illustrates his understanding of how using light and contrasting tones to highlight certain areas of his subjects' faces draws out their personalities and elicits an emotional response from the viewer. In *The Boss*, the subject gazes directly at the viewer and creates a relationship with them. Her eyes, lips, and chin are lit up, further highlighted by the stark white kerchief



Figure 1: Prentice Hall Polk. *The Boss*, 1932. Tuskegee University Archives.

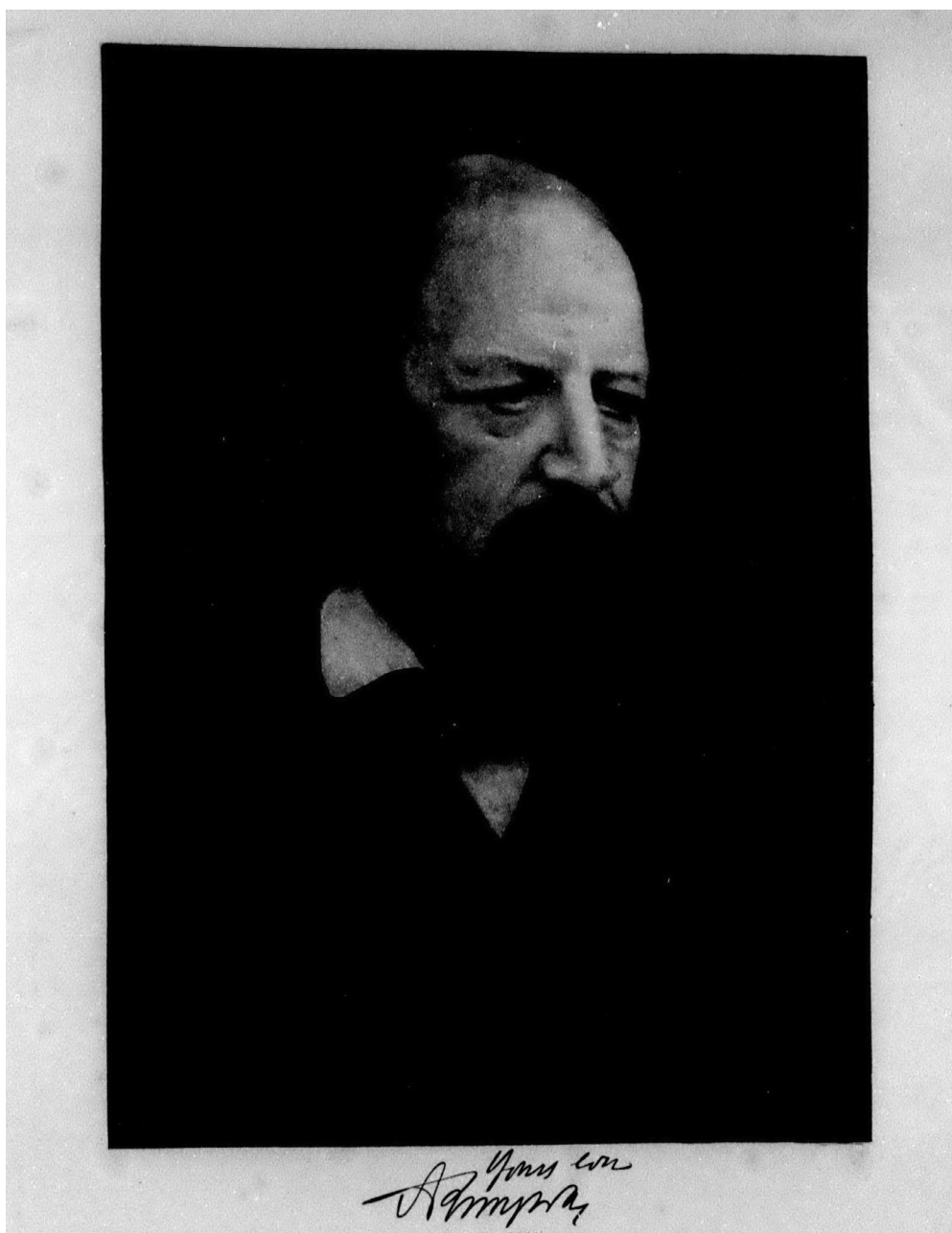


Figure 2: Julia Margaret Cameron. *Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, 1866. Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

on her head. Light also delicately glints on her earrings, enhancing the halo of light around her head, thus encouraging focus on the facial expression and eyes. The plain black background does not distract but rather pushes the image into the foreground, further guiding the viewer to look up and engage with her highlighted face. Polk has used no special effects, yet there is an air of drama and impending movement in this sharply focused image. Confidence, humour, and perhaps a little bit of impatience radiate from her expression and stance

and, notwithstanding her work-worn attire, the subject exudes self-assurance. In approaching his subject from the shadows, Polk has indeed shown us who she is.

In addition to its being a striking portrait, *The Boss* can also be viewed as a social statement that tells us not only something about the subject through her gaze, but also something about the work's importance outside of its existence as a photograph. Therefore, *The Boss* cannot be properly analyzed in a social context without discussing the photographer,

including his race, and the era and place of his photography studio. Prentice Hall Polk, born in Alabama in 1898, began to study photography when he enrolled in the Tuskegee Institute in 1916. As there were no white photography schools that would accept Polk because he was Black, he began a correspondence course after graduation to continue his studies. In 1924, Polk moved to Chicago where he was taught by Fred Jensen and, by 1926, returned to Tuskegee where he opened his own studio. He began teaching at the Tuskegee Institute Photography Department and from 1933 to 1938 was the department head.⁵ Polk admitted in an interview that in studying photography, "my prime motive was to make a living, and I wanted to do it on my own."⁶ However, his ability to connect with people, his artistic eye for detail, and his perseverance enabled him, as an independent African American photographer, to produce truly compelling portraits such as *The Boss* in an era entrenched in racism and inequality.

In *The Boss*, the photographer and the photograph are jointly representative of the ultimate phase of democratization of not only the camera and its technology but also of portraiture. As noted by Rosenblum, the "impulse to represent human form goes back to the dawn of art."⁷ However, what initially began as the impulse to create a permanent record of ourselves evolved into a luxury, available only to the elite. As a middle class began to emerge in parts of Europe, Great Britain, and America from the mid-seventeenth century, the demand for portraits increased and they were no longer solely for the aristocracy and royalty.⁸ The burgeoning business in portraiture, spurred by the almost simultaneous inventions of the daguerreotype and calotype photography in France and England respectively, began the process of further democratizing image creation, which would eventually reach every echelon of society. It should be noted, however, that despite the democratization

of photography, there remained inequalities in image creation. Racism meant that Blacks and other minorities were often excluded from the expanding field of photography (and most professions) and they were denied opportunities for education and training. Economic standing also determined the equipment and materials photographers had access to. For example, photographer Doris Ulmann chose "to use only expensive platinum paper that allowed much more subtle gradations of shading to be distinguished."⁹ This being considered,

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the high-quality result and circumstances surrounding *The Boss* being taken as a portrait were extraordinary for their time and place.

While Polk was not alone in being an African American photographer in the 1930s in the American South, he was unique in his self-employment as a photographer and the exhibition of his work as an artist for the Southeastern Photographers Convention in Atlanta.¹⁰ Likewise, the female subject of *The Boss* was not the only African American woman to be photographed in her era, but she certainly stands out in her powerful, immortalized image.

With respect to Rembrandt's style and the chiaroscuro technique, *The Boss* can be compared, stylistically, to certain portraits done by Anglo-Indian pictorialist photographer Julia Margaret Cameron in the latter half of nineteenth century.¹¹ Similarities to *The Boss* are found in a photogravure portrait by Cameron of her friend Alfred, Lord Tennyson (fig. 2).¹² Cameron's Tennyson portrait has stark tonal contrast of a lit facial portion on a black background that does not distract the viewer's attention from the subject. Additionally, Tennyson's forehead, upper face, and eyes are highlighted. His white collar against a dark jacket below and beard above act further to pull the viewer's eyes upwards. While Tennyson's gaze is not directed towards the viewer, he looks to be engrossed in thought, reminding the viewer of his literary mind and hinting

at his personality. Just as Polk's forward-gazing subject in *The Boss* connects with the viewer through her eyes and hints at the strong character we relate to, Tennyson's averted gaze draws one in to wonder about his thoughts.

Notwithstanding the fact that Cameron concentrated on allegorical works and attempted to transform many of her subjects into "characters," she was concerned with revealing the truth of the inner person through portraiture and that characterization.¹³ In her essay "Art of the

Future," Heather Witcher points to Cameron's poem "On a Portrait" as illustrating the photographer's desire to summon palpable personality through portraiture, which must also apply to the straight photography portraits in her body of work. In particular, the fourth stanza, below, expresses beautifully the emergence of character through portraiture: "And yet the head is borne so proudly high, / The

soft round cheek, so splendid in its bloom, / True courage rises thro' the brilliant eye, / And great resolve comes flashing thro' the gloom."¹⁴

Polk, in very different verbiage, echoes the sentiment of Cameron's poem when he says, "When I make a picture, if I can't reach you and you can't reach me, then we can't get together. It won't be a good picture ... If you can't touch a person in some way, you don't get a good picture."¹⁵ Polk recognized the

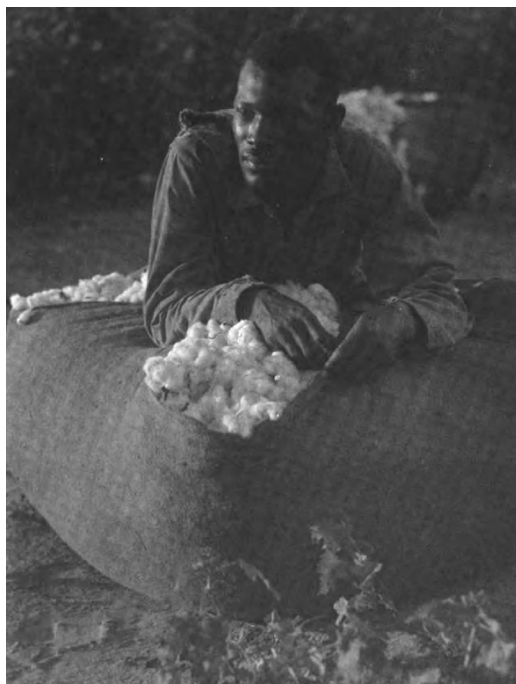


Figure 3: Doris Ulmann, Untitled, c. 1925-34. Reproduced in Doris Ulmann and Julia Peterkin, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: R.O. Ballou, 1933), 235.

importance of the three-way relationship between photographer, subject, and viewer in the creation of symbiotic experience in portrait photography. The photographer must first recognize photographic traits in his subject and through the relationship created with the subject, artistically express those elements in a way that enables the viewer to see the subject's character and elicit emotion from the viewer. The lines in

Cameron's poem are easily applied to the experience of viewing Polk's *The Boss*. The subject's expression and stance, together with the painterly effect of lighting, indeed enable her "great resolve to come flashing thro' the gloom."¹⁶

Another way to examine *The Boss*, as there is scarce scholarly literature written about it, is to consider what it is not. Notably, Natalie

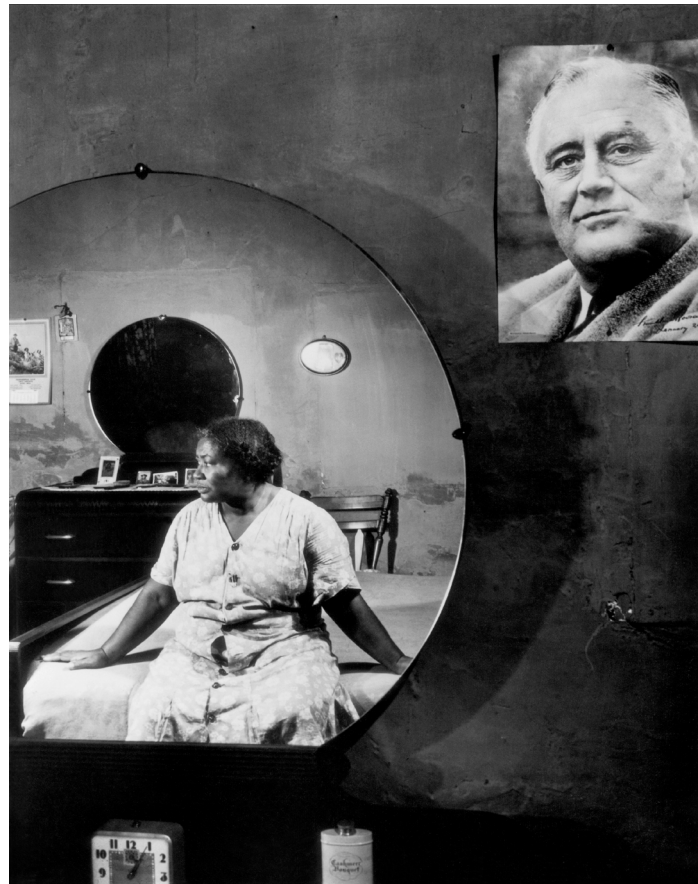


Figure 4: Gordon Parks. *Negro Woman in Her Bedroom*, 1942. The Gordon Parks Foundation.

This portrait, with its nod to fine art through its Rembrandt-style lighting effects, is simply about the individual as opposed to telling a story of challenging social circumstance and deprivation.

Rosenblum's assertion of its categorization, mentioned above, requires scrutiny. This portrait has been characterized as belonging to the genre of photographs that aim to romanticize or confer nobility onto the lower echelons of the working classes. An interesting comparison can be made with the photography of Doris Ulmann by which the marked differences between Polk's *The Boss* and nostalgia-tinged images of the less privileged become evident. Like Polk, Ulmann had her own studio and produced portraits of people from many walks of life. However, she was "drawn to people on the margins of society."¹⁷ She was an affluent New Yorker of eastern European descent who, in the 1920s, felt compelled to "leave her comfortable Park Avenue apartment ... looking for groups of people whose rural way of life ... was quickly passing away."¹⁸

The starting point from which Ulmann approached her subjects produces a vastly different result than that of Polk's photograph, *The Boss*. As can be noted in an untitled photograph by Ulmann, above (fig. 3), there is a voyeuristic, pictorial quality that also verges on documentary style.¹⁹ It captures a moment of pastoral labour, truthful in its occurrence but posed as per the photographer's ethnocentric vision of another person's life. The subject, in his pose, leaning on a cotton bale and at rest from work, is detached from both the photographer and the viewer. This feeling of detachment is compounded by a stillness, a sense of exhaustion, and an unfocused gaze. Additionally, the size of the cotton bale dwarfs the man, encompassing more of the foreground than he does. Ulmann's photograph is tinged with colonialism and anthropological interest notwithstanding her idealization of the underclass in the Appalachian region of the South. This photograph gives the viewer nothing to contemplate with respect to the subject, who is immortalized merely as a cog in

the wheel of Ulmann's nostalgic image of country labour. The viewing experience of this image is vastly different from Polk's compelling portrait of *The Boss*, whose all-encompassing presence in the foreground, facial expression, and eyes tell their own story and express personal agency. In addition, Polk's subject's confident stance, eye contact, and acknowledgement of the presence of the photographer, and therefore, that of the viewer, remove any suggestion of anthropological image-collecting of the "other" for the purpose of possession. The beautifully lit face that highlights the steady, forthright gaze of *The Boss* forces the viewer to disregard the shabby work attire and instead contemplate her character and own sense of self—not that which has been imposed upon the subject by the caricature-like creation of the photographer as part of a scene as in Ulmann's worker photograph.

As previously mentioned, Polk was not unique in being an African American photographer at the time, nor was the anonymous woman in *The Boss* unique as a female African American subject. The portrait's uniqueness lies not only in its expression of personal agency and self-determination, but also in its lack of obvious agenda. For example, African American photographer Gordon Parks was also working in the South in the 1930s and '40s, albeit in different circumstances than Polk's. Parks was employed by the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.) through U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal,²⁰ which provided opportunities for African American male photographers, specifically.²¹ The job of the F.S.A. photographers was to document the social effects of the Great Depression and Parks produced meaningful images of African Americans within his F.S.A. role, such as *Negro Woman in Her Bedroom*, in 1942 (fig. 4).²² While Parks did not create images to fetishize specific cultures, ethnicities, or classes of people, they succeeded in fulfilling the government agenda of highlighting

the degrading circumstances and lack of control that was the reality for a specific population of the United States. The woman in *Negro Woman in Her Bedroom* wears similar attire to that of Polk's subject in *The Boss*, but her posture and environment tell a different story. Similar to Ulmann's image of the cotton worker, the woman in *Negro Woman in Her Bedroom* is detached from both the photographer and the viewer. She is included in the photograph to underscore social context in a curated background that provides subtext to narrow the viewer's field of interpretation. Both Ulmann's and Parks's images highlight the uniqueness of Polk's *The Boss* as a portrait, not only in terms of its formal qualities and its depiction of the subject, but also its title. It is difficult to imagine *The Boss* being created or titled by a photographer in any circumstance other than Polk's. Through the lens of a white photographer in that era, it is doubtful that the subject would have appeared so naturally posed and confident, and the title of the piece would seem trite, if not condescending.

Notwithstanding *The Boss*'s artistic merit, the fact that the lower working class, African American woman in *The Boss* is the sole subject of a professional photograph is what makes it so compelling and astonishing for its era. This portrait, with its nod to fine art through its Rembrandt-style lighting effects, is simply about the individual as opposed to telling a story of challenging social circumstance and deprivation. She may be of humble circumstance, but she is far from humiliated. The power behind *The Boss* most certainly comes from the marriage of photographic artistry and its confident subject; however, it is also communicated through its lack of overt visual cues. There are no props in the background, the subject holds nothing to indicate profession, intellect, or status. This piece was created for the sake of itself by a photographer and subject of similar social standing.

The Boss is a strong representation of the democratization of photographic portraiture that had occurred by the 1930s. P.H. Polk created *The Boss* as a piece of art that not only showcased his talents but also communicated the pride and dignity of his subject. Based on its iconography, the intention behind this portrait appears to be strikingly similar to portraits, both painted and photographed, that were made throughout history as luxury items for the elite. In this way, *The Boss* is effectively a social statement. However, because every individual approaches an image with their own perspective and interpretation of the photographer or artist's intention, this analysis of *The Boss* will not be universally true for each viewer. Nonetheless, it is a thought-provoking, striking image by a talented photographer that is worthy of being part of the conversation. ✱

Editors: Juliette Karmel & Victoria Ranea

NOTES

1. Malaika Kambon, "P.H. Polk, One of '10 Essential African-American Photographers,'" *Bay View*, February 10, 2015.
2. Prentice Hall Polk, *The Boss*, 1932, gelatin silver print, 29.4 x 24 cm, International Center of Photography, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/p-h-polk?all/all/all/all/0>.
3. Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 5th ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2019), 323.
4. P.H. Polk and Pearl Cleadge Lomax, *P.H. Polk, Photographs* (Atlanta: Nexus Press, 1980), 102.
5. Pearl Cleadge Lomax, "P.H. Polk," International Center of Photography, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/p-h-polk?all/all/all/all/0>.
6. Polk and Cleadge Lomax, 103.
7. Rosenblum, 39.
8. Ibid.
9. Leatha Kendrick, "Portrait of Doris Ulmann," *Appalachian Heritage* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 6.
10. Polk and Cleadge Lomax, 105.
11. Rosenblum, 74.
12. Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson and His Friends, Nineteenth Century Collections Online* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), 26.
13. Heather Bozant Witcher, "'Art of the Future': Julia Margaret Cameron's Poetry, Photography, and Pre-Raphaelitism," *Victorian Studies* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 208.
14. Witcher, 207.
15. Polk and Cleadge Lomax, 104.
16. Witcher, 207.
17. Kendrick, 3.
18. Kendrick, 3.
19. Julia Mood Peterkin and Doris Ulmann, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. (New York: R.O. Ballou, 1933), 235.
20. Rosenblum, 369.
21. Rosenblum, 369.
22. Rosenblum, 539.

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