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Review of *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas* By Alan Govenar

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Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas. By Alan Govenar. Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1996. Photographs, appendices, index. vi + 272 pp. \$49.95.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries photography grew in popularity and accessibility. Better technology in film and processing, which made the medium more economical and easier for the amateur to execute, proved photography to be both a creative and enterprising activity appealing to an ambitious middle class. African Americans were among those who took up the camera, traversing rural communities in the developing South in search of steady work. The more successful photographers set up studios in towns and cities, basing their practice on portraiture and commemorative photography. Alan Govenar's *Portraits of Community: African American Photography in Texas* is a study of some of Texas's better established African American photographers. At the same time, it depicts the history and development of

Texas's African American middle class and directly addresses the dearth of scholarship on African Americans in the state. The work of Texas-based African American photographers, Govenar maintains, is little-known and under-appreciated. Moreover, the best known images of African American life in Texas come from the work of white photographers like Russell Lee, whose Depression-era photographs highlighted the poverty and desperate living conditions among sharecroppers. Such imagery is absent from *Portraits of Community*, which should not be surprising. The ideology of the African American middle class eschewed depictions of poverty which were seen to reinforce the racist notion of inferiority. Instead, black businesses—particularly newspapers—sought photographs that displayed the African American community in a positive light, illustrating the results of Booker T. Washington's economic "lifting as we climb" program in portraits of industriousness and thrift. In an economic sphere defined by segregation, African American photographers could not and, with the notable exception of Gordon Parks, did not make a living from depictions of poverty and racial violence.

Organized by urban region, *Portraits of Community* presents the work of over twenty African American studio photographers in Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Tyler, Lubbock, and Houston. Govenar terms this work "vernacular and community photography," or photography done for personal use, an approach, he argues, dominant among African American photographers in Texas. His study's real value, however, lies in the range and scope of the work represented and the window it opens on life in a segregated Texas.

Perhaps the book's most intriguing photographs are by Lubbock-based Eugene Roquemore, who died in the late 1960s and, as is too often the case, left no personal testimony about his photographic work. To fill this gap, Govenar includes observations by Roquemore's widow and an acquaintance which, unfortunately, do little to reveal his working

mode. Roquemore's hand-held, snapshot aesthetic produced photographs unique in this volume for their compositional fluidity and looseness, showing an affinity with the work of Robert Frank's 1950s project *The Americans* and Aaron Siskind's 1930s and 1940s Harlem Document project. Like Frank, Roquemore captured daily life's brutal incongruity; like Siskind, its studied solemnity. Roquemore's "Wedding Couple," for example, probably from the 1960s and taken at night, depicts a bride and groom embracing in front of a car imbued with the glow from the camera's flash. There is a narrative power in this image—a stolen moment just barely visible in its grainy rendering, the car door left ajar in expectation of the honeymoon escape. The rough-hewn technique and the awkwardness of the frame prevent the photograph from becoming a studied cliché.

Roquemore also finds a solemn austerity in a small parade along a desolate street in Lubbock. Taken from above, the photograph reveals the flat landscape one associates with Texas and the inexpensive, low-level construction typical of small towns. In a more studied image, he portrays three playful majorettes. With background obscured in deep black, they form a latter-day "three graces" pose, conveying both the exuberance of youth and the iconography of classic composition. In these photographs, Roquemore moves beyond Govenar's category of "community" photographer, creating a unique perspective on both community and landscape.

In general, African American photographers from the late nineteenth century through the mid-1960s emphasized photography as a public document and social record. Positive images attacked racist America by calculated omission—by *not* showing the inhumanity of poverty and blight. This contrast between social reality and the visual evidence of a thriving black middle class is what begs further investigation. Additionally, the poor reproduction value of so many of the photographs prevents the book from resting on the power of its imagery.

Although incomplete, *Portraits of Community* does delineate a beginning. The questions regarding the African American studio photographer's practice as a counter-assertion to racism that Govenar's study leaves unanswered deserve to be addressed by future historians.

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