



# Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History Part III, March 25 - 26, 2011 Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

*The Black Body and the Photographic Archive*

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Researching beauty through photographic archives is a paradox. I will discuss a variety of factors that has transformed and informed my thinking about the politics of creating and preserving an archive on black beauty. I will discuss images published in newspapers in the 1920s that began as an archival project in the black press focusing on the topic of “exalting black womanhood.” In my research I have come to believe that a photograph of a black subject is persuasive and pervasive in determining how beauty is discussed in contemporary culture. *Posing Beauty in African American Culture*, the research project, will also explore the contested ways in which African and African American beauty has been represented in a historical and contemporary context through a diverse range of media including photography, film, and advertising. The images featured challenge idealized forms of beauty in art and popular culture by examining their portrayal and exploring a variety of attitudes about archiving images through topics and categories such as race, class, and gender. I will reflect upon the ambiguities of beauty in an archive, its impact on contemporary research projects, and how the display of beauty affects ways in which we see and interpret the world and ourselves.

I discovered early on in this research, there is no consistent visual record of black female self-representation in early photography. I did find, however, a “Runaway Slave wanted” notice boasting a \$50 reward,” that described the desire to have a “rather good looking” house servant “returned to the subscriber”—an indication of beauty and desire voiced in the public arena of slavery. A cropped carte-de-visite, pasted to the handwritten ad suggests, in my view, that this enslaved woman named “Dolly” had been photographed for her owner, who then reproduced multiple images. My research offers a framework in which to imagine the history behind photographs housed in private and public collections and digital archives. Also central to my work is an ongoing critique that focuses on how photographs empowered and dehumanized the black body since the 1840s. I noticed in six years of teaching courses focusing on the topic of the black body and beauty, I have found that the subject is popular among both freshmen classes and graduate students. Race, class, gender and ethnicity became factors of each class discussion, as did the central question of how beauty is constructed, envied, and accepted in visual culture. Our discussions ranged from personal perceptions to society’s contradictory relationships with beauty to the possibility of creating new standards for collecting photographs on the topic of beauty.

### *Biographical Note*

Deborah Willis is Chair and Professor of Photography and Imaging at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, where she also has an affiliated appointment with the College of Arts and Sciences, Africana Studies. A 2005 Guggenheim and Fletcher Fellow, 2000 MacArthur Fellow, 1996 Recipient of the Anonymous Was a Woman Foundation Award and artist, she is one of the nation's leading historians of African American photography and curator of African American culture. Some of her notable projects include *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers - 1840 to the Present*, *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. DuBois and African American Portraits of Progress*, *The Black Female Body in Photography*, and *Let Your Motto be Resistance*. Her most recent works are *Posing Beauty African American Images from the 1890s to the Present*, *Michelle Obama, The First Lady in Photographs*, and *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her 'Hottentot'* (editor). *Michelle Obama, The First Lady in Photographs* garnered Dr. Willis 2010 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work Biography/Autobiography, and she is the 2010 recipient of Photographic Education's National Conference's Honored Educator Award.