

THROUGH A LENS
DARKLY
BLACK PHOTOGRAPHERS AND THE EMERGENCE OF A PEOPLE
A FILM BY THOMAS ALLEN HARRIS

Digital (DCP & BluRay) / Documentary / 92 min / Color & Black and White / 2014



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Synopsis:

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.

Inspired by Deborah Willis's book *Reflections in Black* 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.

"An extraordinary new documentary by filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris, is at-once a deep, rich dive into the history of African American photography and — transcending the subject at hand — a master class in visual literacy."

-Mia Trams, Time Magazine

"CRITIC'S PICK! To describe Thomas Allen Harris's 'Through a Lens Darkly' as a history of African-American photography would be accurate but incomplete. Inspired by the book "Reflections in Black", Deborah Willis's groundbreaking and thorough excavation of a vital and neglected photographic tradition, Mr. Harris's film is a family memoir, a tribute to unsung artists and a lyrical, at times heartbroken, meditation on imagery and identity. The film is always absorbing to watch, but only once it's over do you begin to grasp the extent of its ambitions, and just how much it has done within a packed, compact hour and a half. Overall, he is a wise and passionate guide to an inexhaustibly fascinating subject."

- A. O. Scott, The New York Times

"A timely reminder of how images of African-Americans have been stereotyped and demonized by popular media... cannily juggles an overview of African-American history in general with the specifics of its photographic representation and talents...Harris sometimes echoes the work of his late mentor Marlon Riggs ('Tongues Untied') in poetic editorial rhythms."

- Dennis Harvey, Variety

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 2003 Deborah Willis approached me about making a film interpretation of her groundbreaking book, *Reflections in Black: Black Photographers from 1840-Present*. The groundbreaking book detailed the history of African American photographers from the invention of photography to the present. My photographic work was included in the publication along with my brother artist/photographer Lyle Ashton Harris. I'd known Deb Willis as a young photographer/filmmaker just starting out and our work around the African American archive had paralleled. For over 20-years, have been mining my family and extended family archives in my films, so I was eager to delve into this project. What I did not know was this project would take me on a personal journey to understand why it was so important for Black photographers, both professional and vernacular, to make photographs. Indeed, through this journey I was to learn that it was a form of activism and a strategy for survival in America.

WEB Dubois in *The Soul of Black Folks* wrote of the particular experience of African Americans called Double Consciousness: the dissonance between seeing ourselves "the other" while knowing ourselves to be who we are. And photography starkly illuminates the distance between these two conflicting legacies have framed the way in which I see myself as an African American. One is a legacy of pride and the other by a legacy of shame that is deep and terrible.

These two legacies and the way they are express themselves through photography exist within my family. My maternal grandfather, Albert Sidney Johnson, Jr. was an amateur photographer who spent his life creating a vast treasure trove of images. Photography, like education, was his passion and he was obsessed with taking photographs of his family extended family. Grandfather inculcated in all of the male members of the family the same zeal, including my brother and me, our cousins and his own brother. It was like a special rite of passage. He gave me my first camera when I was only six years old and even today I carry at least one camera with me at all times, just like he did. For Albert, photography was a means of unifying our extended family, knitting together the disparate branches and providing a means to connect one generation with the next. And they weren't just his images. My grandfather's living room was a gallery; filled with the images of famous Black leaders as well as the images of our forbearers, interspersed with his own photos, and included precious photos bearing the imprints of legendary Harlem photographers James Van Der Zee and Austin Hansen. Like grandfather's stories describing his great grandparents making their way out of slavery and building their lives into something despite the pervasive and crippling racial barriers they faced, the legacy of these photographic images proudly showed us who we were.

The second legacy came home to me through my father; Thomas Allen Harris, Sr. He never took any photographs of me, my brother, and our family. One of the prominent memories I have before he and my mother split up was him furiously wiping Vaseline off my face saying: 'Do you want people out there to think you're a greasy monkey!?' Greasy Monkey. From that day on, I have been haunted by this image, by my father's fear. It has infected me, put me on constant alert that I must somehow prove, (through my appearance, demeanor, representation,) my humanity and my worth to some anonymous stranger who might look at me and simply see a thug or a nigger or a greasy monkey. What was it that had so distorted our image of ourselves,

as fathers, as sons, as Black people in America? What secret wisdom enabled my grandfather to transcend this grotesque distortion of the spirit? And perhaps most importantly: Can these twin legacies coexist, in constant war with one another, in my body, in the mythic Black body, without tearing it apart?

This conflict set me on a mission to use my voice as an artist/filmmaker /scholar to better understand and to interrogate Black representation. I selected photographers whose work engaged in history and representation vis a vis the African American subject. These photographers/artists were a combination of people whose work I have been in dialogue with over the years as well as people that came to us through Producer Deborah Willis. Deborah and I were chiefly responsible for selecting the photographers to be interviewed in the film. Deborah is widely considered to be the Queen of Black photography and, I wanted to honor her and her work of 35 years of uncovering archives, assembling and promoting Black photographers through her many books and shows in museums and galleries across the world. Many of the photographers, like me, were featured in Deborah's book *Reflections in Black* and its accompanying tour show.

The same is true of the scholars, several of the scholars were personal friends and colleagues of mine but many came to us through Deborah Willis as she has had her finger on the pulse of Black Photography for over 35 years. As a Producer she helped to identify interview subjects to speak about specific historical moments and figures. Building off of the work that Deborah did, we conducted over seven years of extensive research both on lesser known Black Photographers as well as on the production and circulation of stereotypical images of African Americans. Our research team, led by Producer Ann Bennett, uncovered and assembled more than 15,000 images for the film from institutional archives and the archives of professional photographers. In addition, through our community engagement project, the **Digital Diaspora Family Reunion Roadshow**, we collected another 6000 images from personal family archives across the USA. Out of these we selected approximately 950 images to tell the *Through A Lens Darkly* story.

THROUGH A LENS DARKLY is a journey of affirmations (and contradictions) that begin by invoking the memories found in the images contained in our extended Black family's hidden photographic archive, while trying to reconcile the shame of a history that our forebears would rather forget. Moving from 1840 and the invention of photography to the present, the film updates and broadens the work of my mentor Marlon Riggs, particularly his groundbreaking *Tongues Untied*, in its assembly of a diverse yet focused community of storytellers to follow and transform a singular journey into a communal journey of discovery and a call to action. We – artists, photographers, historians, cultural critics, poets – have come together in the course of making this film, like members of a lost tribe, in order to achieve collectively what individually has been at times too daunting. To find the strands of truths revealed, the stories lost, hidden, forgotten, discarded, which will help us to understand the singular traumas that underlie our collective experience and have resulted in these two warring legacies which reside within each of us. Legacies which cry out for reconciliation, which demand atonement, before we can put them to rest and find the peace that our spirits long for. It is as if these images from the past

are speaking to us, expectantly looking at us, as we the living decide between the darkness and the light, hoping that we choose the right path so that they, too, can finally rest in peace.

When you look at a Black person...When I look at a Black person... African... American...me...them...us...you...Who do I see? Who do you see? Do I see us now? Do I see us then? Do I see us in a time yet to come? Am I looking through a lens darkly?

The film offers a critical reappraisal of the historical record by interweaving the stories and images of Black photographers, who have been documenting Black communities and the progress of Black people in America from before the Civil War right through to our present day. This linear progression is interrupted with contemporary insights into how the impact of these rarely seen images and the history they record resonates in the issues, concerns and lives of individuals and families even now. Building on the foundation of Deborah Willis' work to uncover the hidden legacies of Black photographers, our tribe includes a diverse group of fellow photographers, artists working with photographs, scholars and colleagues, including, among others: Renee Cox, Coco Fusco, Glenn Ligon, my brother Lyle Aston Harris, Clarrisa Sligh, Hugh Bell, Adger Cowens, Chester Higgins, Chuck Stewart, Robin Kelly and Richard Powell, Carrie Mae Weems and Pat Ward Williams. Together we create a contemporary griot circle, interpenetrating our present with artifacts from the historic past, and weaving these precious strands of memory into a tapestry that illustrates the richness, brilliance, depth and complexity of American history. In the process, we shed light on people, places, events, and stories that have rarely been told outside of the immediate circle of families and scholars.

- Thomas Allen Harris

Director, Producer, and Writer of ***Through a Lens Darkly***

About Digital Diaspora Family Reunion

This is my fourth feature documentary film that has mined my family and extended family archive. As I have toured with my previous films around North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, people often come up to me after the screenings to share stories about their family photographic archive and their desire to do something creative with it. I kept thinking about their common concern: about how to give people a structure to pursue their own historical investigations through their family archives. So when I started, *Through A Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, (TALD) I thought to create a companion project that would offer a possible solution and thus the transmedia project Digital Diaspora Family Reunion was born.

Digital Diaspora Family Reunion: One World, One Family (DDFR) is a multimedia-driven social engagement project designed to provide a home for the many stories and photographic images slowly gathering dust in some forgotten corner of the attic or buried in boxes somewhere. DDFR is comprised of this website, www.DDFR.TV, and a traveling experience called the DDFR ROADSHOW, which combines the best of Antiques Roadshow and StoryCorp, to gather together the neglected shards of our past residing in our archives and repurposing them for a new generation seeking some connection between themselves and the world as they know it. DDFR brings together individual personal and family narratives within a context that helps to expose the commonalities of our shared experiences and the bonds of our universal values. Truly, we are One World, One Family and we hope that DDFR becomes like our universal refrigerator door, where we post images of the ordinary miracles that make life worth living. Please join us our extended DDFR family and add your stories and images to our digital diasporic family album.

- Thomas Allen Harris

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Deborah Willis
Lyle Ashton Harris
Carrie Mae Weems
Thomas Allen Harris
Hank Willis Thomas
Robin Kelly
Arthe Anthony

PHOTOGRAPHERS: Interviewed btw 2005 - 2007

1. Anthony Barboza
2. Hugh Bell
3. Dawoud Bey
4. Renee Cox
5. Adger Cowans
6. Jonathan Eubanks
7. Jack Franklin
8. Chester Higgins
9. Jamel Shabazz
10. Clarissa Sligh
11. Ming Smith
12. Chuck Stewart
13. Hank Willis Thomas

PHOTOGRAPHERS/Artists: Interviewed btw May 1st, 2008- May 10th, 2008

14. Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe
15. John Pinderhughes
16. Danny Dawson (2nd Interview as photographer)
17. Michael Chambers
18. Carrie Mae Weems
19. Glenn Ligon
20. Coreen Simpson
21. Accra Shepp
22. Lyle Ashton Harris
23. Robert Sengstacke
24. Albert Chong
25. Pat Ward Williams
26. Frank Stewart
27. Deborah Willis (2nd Interview as photographer)

PHOTOGRAPHERS/Artists: Interviewed September 2011

28. Lorna Simpson
29. Lola Flash
30. Radcliff Roye
31. Sheila Pree Bright
32. Dawit Petros
33. Lyle Ashton Harris
34. Delphine Fawundu-Buford

SCHOLARS: Interviewed btw 2006 - 2007

1. Ron K. Brown
2. Marcus Bruce
3. Lisa Gail Collins
4. Danny Dawson
5. Coco Fusco
6. Ed Guerrero
7. Nell Painter
8. Cheryl Wall
9. Deborah Willis

SCHOLARS: Interviewed btw May 1st, 2008- May 10th, 2008

10. David G. Berger
11. Mel Watkins
12. Camara Dia Holloway
13. Richard Powell
14. Brian Wallis
15. Theresa Leininger-Miller
16. Barbara Krauthamer
17. Robin D.G. Kelley
18. Kellie Jones

SCHOLARS: Interviewed September 2011

19. Cheryl Finley
20. Deborah Willis
21. Greg Tate

PRODUCTION TEAM

THOMAS ALLEN HARRIS - Producer, Director, Writer

Raised in the Bronx and Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania, Thomas Allen Harris is the founder and President Chimpanzee Productions, a company dedicated to producing unique audio-visual experiences that illuminate the Human Condition and the search for identity, family, and spirituality. Chimpanzee's innovative and award-winning performance-based documentary films - *VINTAGE – Families of Value, E Minha Cara/That's My Face*, and *Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela* - have received critical acclaim at International film festivals such as Sundance, Berlin, Toronto, FESPACO, Outfest, Flaherty and Cape Town and have been broadcast on PBS, the Sundance Channel, ARTE, as well as CBC, Swedish broadcasting Network and New Zealand Television. Mr. Harris' video and installations – including *Splash, Black Body, AFRO (is just a Hairstyle) Notes on a Journey Through The African Diaspora* and *Alchemy* - have been featured at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial, the Corcoran Gallery, Reina Sophia, London Institute of the Arts, Gwangju Biennale, and the Long Beach Museum of Art. Harris has received numerous awards and fellowships including a United States Artist Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, Rockefeller Fellowship, two Emmy nominations as well as Sundance Film Institute Directors Fellowships and a Tribeca Film Institute Nelson Mandela Award. A graduate of Harvard College and the Whitney Independent Study Program, Harris has taught at a variety of institutions including University of California San Diego where he received tenure as an Associate Professor of Media Arts. A published photographer, curator, and writer, Mr. Harris lectures widely on the use of media as a tool for social change.

Dr. DEB WILLIS – Producer

Deborah Willis, Ph.D, is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and has an affiliated appointment with the College of Arts and Sciences, Africana Studies. She was a 2005 Guggenheim Fellow and Fletcher Fellow, and a 2000 MacArthur Fellow, as well as the 1996 recipient of the Anonymous Was a Woman Foundation award. She has pursued a dual professional career as an art photographer and as one of the nation's leading historians of African American photography and curator of African American culture. Professor Willis has just received the honored educator award at the Society for Photographic Education.

ANN BENNETT – Producer & Multimedia Producer

Ann Bennett is an award winning filmmaker, journalist, and educator who has worked on historical documentaries and multi-media projects for public television, cable networks, and non-profit organizations including; PBS, HBO, Harpo Films, The History Channel, ROJA Productions, The Apollo Theater, and The National Civil Rights Museum. Ms. Bennett studied

documentary production at Harvard College and holds a Masters of Arts degree from The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She has been honored with a variety of Film & New Media fellowships including; The USC Annenberg School for Communication Institute for Justice & Journalism, The National Black Programming Consortium New Media & Technology Institute, The American Film Institute Digital Content Lab, The CPB/PBS Producers Academy, Center for Experimental Television Residency, The Independent Feature Project Documentary Lab, and The Bay Area Video Coalition Producers Institute for New Media Technologies.

DON PERRY – Consulting Producer, Writer

Mr. Perry is Chief Operating Officer of Chimpanzee Productions, Inc. He was co-writer and co-producer of Thomas Allen Harris' feature-length documentary E MINHA CARA/THAT'S MY FACE, TWELVE DISCIPLES OF NELSON MANDELA, Digital Diaspora Family Reunion (DDFR.tv); Marriage Equality: Byron Rushing and the Fight for Fairness (2011). Mr. Perry is an experienced financial and management consultant with a wide ranging background in commercial finance. He is a Certified Insolvency & Restructuring Advisor and was Executive Vice President - Finance for Wyndhurst Associates, LLC, a boutique financial restructuring and turnaround management firm prior to his association with Chimpanzee Productions. Prior to joining Wyndhurst, Mr. Perry founded a strategic management consulting practice providing services to emerging growth companies focusing on business turnarounds; developing e-commerce strategies and services; mergers and acquisitions; business and process re-engineering; organizational design and development; and corporate finance. Mr. Perry holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations and Development Economics from Williams College. He received his Master's in Business Administration in Strategic Management from the Peter F. Drucker Center, Claremont Graduate University.

CREDITS

Director, Producer, Writer
Thomas Allen Harris

Inspired by the book:
“Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present”
by Deborah Willis

Producer
Deborah Willis

Producer
Ann Bennett

Consulting Producer
Don Perry

Executive Producer
John Singleton
Kimberly Steward

Writers
Don Perry
Paul Carter Harrison

Editors
K.A. Miille
Matthew Cohn

Composer
Vernon Reid

Additional Music and Opening Theme Composed and Performed by
Miles Jay

Director of Photography
Martina Radwan

Associate Producers
Sabrina Hawkins
Sheila Maniar