

Eudora Welty as Photographer, Photographs by
Eudora Welty, Edited by Pearl Amelia McHaney
with contributions by Sandra S. Phillips and
Deborah Willis, UP of Mississippi, 2009

Louis Mazzari



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- ¹ *Eudora Welty as Photographer* is part of a growing appreciation for her achievements as an artist in two fields, rather than an admired writer who also took pictures. It is a new collection whose forty-three prints from the mid- and late-1930s, and critical essays written for this volume, advocate for Welty as an important photographer whose work can stand alongside Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and other New-Deal documentary artists.
- ² These photos selected by Welty scholar Pearl McHaney, editor of *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews*, are founded on formal balance and the play of shape and light and texture. But Welty's love of these elements never overpowers her eye for the detail that opens to the mystery of humanity—or, as Welty saw it—the “fullness and emptiness of this stranger's life.” (19) They exhibit a strong sense of compositional formalism often softened by the small, tender gestures of humanity in the slouch of a sharecropper's schoolboy, in a fortune-teller's mystic gaze, in a woodchopper's enduring stance.
- ³ Many of the images in this collection show modernist artistic preoccupations and perspective, sharing some of the characteristics of Surrealism, Cubism, and Expressionism within a context of everyday life. McHaney ends the volume, for instance, with a shot of a cow in a field crowned by a beautiful formation of clouds rising as though from her mind in a mist of grandeur and absurdity, comedy and pathos—a Surrealistic dreamscape stamped onto a naturalistic and quotidian scene.

- 4 Somehow, though, Welty manages to find a hinge for these photos that often allows the mystery of lives and scenes to also function as a documentary. As McHaney recounts in her introductory essay, Welty was rejected in her application for work under the renowned Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographic project to document rural life in the South and throughout the country. Welty had intended her own work to capture the warmth of Dorothea Lange's FSA photographs, in particular. *Eudora Welty as Photographer* reveals that concern. Welty is closer here to Lange than to Walker Evans, for example, in the sense of closeness and affection for the folk she portrays. Evans brilliantly illuminated the lives of people. Welty illuminated the people themselves.
- 5 Welty's goal was, in a sense, supra-historical. Not so much documenting historical circumstances, but arresting a particular moment of human life within its blazing and tender immediacy. McHaney offers Welty's description of her own conception of her work. "Framing a few square inches of space for the fraction of a second, the photographer may capture—rescue from oblivion—fellow human beings caught in the act of living. He is devoted to the human quality of transience. Here lies whatever value his picture-taking has." (18)
- 6 Welty claimed her photography, "was 'personal and particular' rather than 'phenomenal,' that is to say, neither social realism nor documentation." (15) McHaney's selection calls attention to this orientation. Her essay makes a case for Welty's attitude of professionalism, her strong ambition for her photography, and her accomplishments.
- 7 In her biographical sketch, McHaney writes of Welty's love for and practice of the visual arts. McHaney presents a Welty who was running on two tracks simultaneously—writing and photography—and with equal emphasis. As a child, Welty always played with the visual arts, drawing and sketching. At the University of Wisconsin in the late 1920s, she studied art and design, as well as literature. (*Early Escapades*, by Patti Carr Black, UP of Mississippi 2005, reprints a number of Welty's first cartoons and other visual work). And afterwards, while at home during the early 1930s, Welty shot fashion photos and newspaper advertisements, while also editing radio news and writing human interest stories for a Jackson newspaper. She applied to the *New Yorker* and to *National Geographic*, but she also applied to study with preeminent New York photographer Berenice Abbott at the New School of Social Research. And as a young adult, she learned the craft of photography from her father, who had helped open Jackson's first camera shop, and she shot fashion photography for a living. Welty bought herself a developer from the Mississippi Highway Department and installed it in the family kitchen. Her application to the FSA was rejected, but she did join the WPA as a junior publicity agent, during which time she both wrote and took photos. The work allowed Welty to see and reveal with both pen and camera what she called "The real State of Mississippi, not the abstract state of the Depression." (15)
- 8 *Eudora Welty as Photographer* consists mostly of photos shown in exhibitions in Jackson, Chapel Hill, and New York City in the mid-1930s. Some of the photos in this selection were chosen from previously unpublished contact prints. A number of books of Welty's photos have been published since 1971's now-legendary *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: A Snap-shot Album*. Two subsequent collections were published by small presses before the University Press of Mississippi collected more than two hundred images in *Photographs* in 1989. Mississippi's Department of Archives and History published two small collections during the 1990s, the State Historical Museum

published *Eudora Welty: Other Places* in 1995, and the Museum of Art published a collection in 2002. The University of Mississippi Press has published each of the three subsequent collections, *Country Churchyards*, in 2000, *Some Notes on River Country*, in 2003, and now, *Eudora Welty as Photographer*. A more comprehensive chronology of Welty's notable writing and photographic dates is included in the volume.

- 9 However, there is no mention of how or why these particular photos are being published now. What is the organizing principle behind the publication of these various books of Welty photographs? What were the criteria for choosing these particular images? For readers just coming to Welty's photography, there is no help in knowing where this collection fits into Welty's body of work and why these prints are being published now.
- 10 In terms of the presentation of the images, McHaney has created page spreads that combine similar elements, approaches, and themes. "The photographs are paired to contrast and to complement," McHaney writes, "to surprise and to suggest, to please and to challenge." (vi) Photos strongly based on geometry and bold patterns of light and shade are fit together. Photos strong in human detail are paired. Those with a sense of narrative are combined. Nature scenes face nature scenes. This kind of pairing makes the case that Welty strove to explore several different modes of photography. Indeed, some of this collection is documentary, other photos border on abstraction, while others are extraordinarily painterly. The dramatic light and shadow of the potter at work, "Potter," (41) for example, is as beautifully accomplished as Caravaggio.

The two additional essays

- 11 Sandra S. Phillips, chief curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, has written on other photographers, including Helen Levitt, who shared an attraction to the spontaneous moment. Welty used the word "snapshot" in reference to her work, and Phillips takes up the term in defining Welty's as a personal, warm, and informal expression. And there's a similar sense, between Welty's work and the colloquial snapshot, of the intimacy of private intentions. Phillips recognizes that Welty's compositions are too carefully composed to be true snapshots. But if Welty's resembled snapshot photographs, it was because, as Phillips writes, "they offer a world of particulars and of memory that was appealing and useful to her." (76) She observes the simultaneous sense of work that "is gently personal, always observant, full of fellow feeling." (77)
- 12 The formal quality of Welty's work combined with the sense of the passing human moment results in a profound moment on each page. "The human face and the human body are eloquent in themselves," Phillips quotes Welty as saying, "and stubborn and wayward, and a snapshot is a moment's glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling." (78)
- 13 Phillips sees Welty's later photos as moving toward peculiar angles of vision, "imparting a certain unreality to the subject, even an unintended surrealism," (76) and cites a dreamlike arrangement of lines and figures in the construction of a circus sideshow and a parader blowing his trumpet into the clouds over his head. To this

viewer the surrealism seems highly intentional. You see that in the way she crops these photos with an eye toward geometry and odd juxtapositions.

- 14 Deborah Willis, a historian of African American photography, wrote a short essay about the egalitarianism with which Welty met the black Mississippians she photographed. Few white southerners through the 1930s had such intimate access to the unguarded emotions of black southerners. These photos of Welty's are startling in the strength of their respect for their subjects. Unlike the FSA photographers that she unsuccessfully tried to join, Welty was actually an insider among those she photographed. An unobtrusive local, she was a known quantity, rather than a stranger with a camera. "I was never questioned, or avoided," Willis quotes her as explaining. "There was no self-consciousness on either side. I just spoke to persons on the street and said, 'Do you mind if I take this picture?' And they didn't care. There was no sense of violation of anything on either side." (82)
- 15 Indeed, in Welty, there is never a sense of violation. She never pushes herself on her subjects. Never intrudes on those whose moment she is sharing. Look on page 40, for instance, "Tomato packers on a break," at the way she photographs and crops the twenty or so tomato pickers taking a break from their work. At first glance, she is as interested in the bright sun in the field outside the shed in which the packers gather as she is in their moment of rest. She is outside this group of men, who are grouped in the shade, apart from her. But while she keeps a physical distance from their circle, her sharp eye captures in their expressions the communion of relief they are sharing. Welty shows us, in this moment, the packers' immediate past and present, as well.
- 16 Here, as elsewhere throughout this collection, she is both inside and outside her subjects' lives, and Welty simultaneously reveals and shares the immediate moment and the longer day, the fellow feeling among the group and her awareness of the larger world, intimate and broadminded, at once.

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Thèmes : Recensions, Trans'Arts

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