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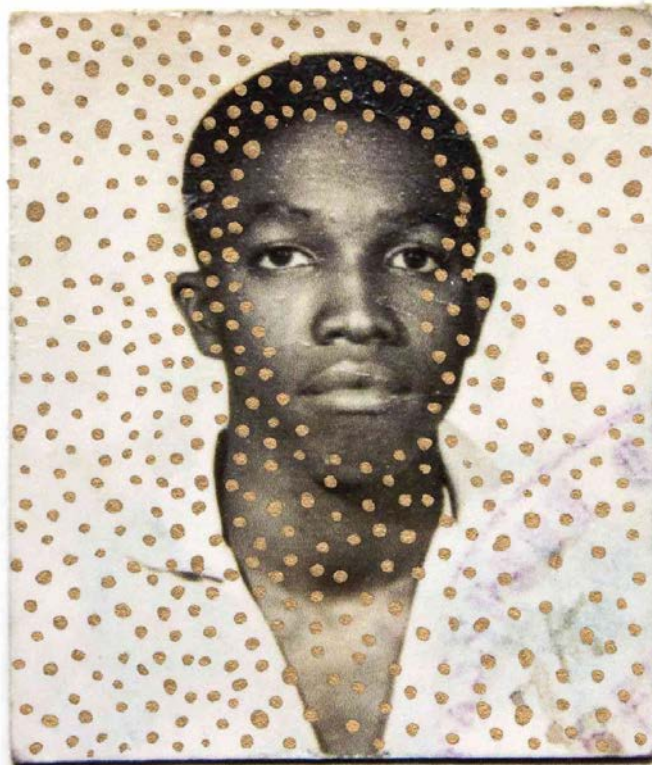
*** AMERICAN ***

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THE BATTLE OF AND FOR THE BLACK FACE BOY

By Nikky Finney | October 27, 2015



“Untitled,” from the series Passports, by Keisha Scarville

“I imagined a radical libretto made of Civil War history, Black history, and modern American headlines.”

— From Finney’s introduction to “The Battle of and for the Black Face Boy.”

Black boys needed to turn swamp forest into white gold!

In 1851 he is stopped and frisked,
packed inside the ice of iron,
in the hull of the *Jesus*, on his back
eighteen hours a day, one hundred
and ninety-two days, he has three
square feet of space and ten vertical
inches of air, the cat-o-nine tails
whips away, the jaws of the speculum
oris feed him horse pea mush,
startlingly, strike with wonder,
he is alive, the devil is beaten out
of his father, sharks nose the water
for his boat, one hundred times as
many black face boys thrown overboard
will eventually make the passage,
the new world's cardinal child is robust,
disposable, appraised and weighed,
in great supply,

Open wide black face boy, open wide, our brave new world will make great use of you!

I twist to my right looking for my father who is no longer three
rows over. Another boy my height and weight chained wrist to
ankle has split open the back of his head by beating it against the
wooden planks beneath us. His eyes have pitched and quaked and
rolled back now. Once on shore my name is Lawless and I am
barely breathing. They stand me up in a vat of palm oil. My black
face is the first microchip. It will be rubbed and watched for more
than two hundred years. As long as I wear this black face they can
find me anywhere. I have been hauled here by them for them. It is
illegal for me to be outside without them. It is against the law for
me to wear clothes with a pocket. A pocket is for privacy and
mine was stripped and thrown behind me in the salt waves. Now
that we are one big family a pass or a civil war will be required to
zigzag cotton into wool. On slave row I am marched to my strip
of red dirt floor. I am given my three square feet of space and my
ten vertical inches of air. In an almost dead boy's dream curl I
drink down the free hips of black women patted and swirled in
African coconut dust. Daylight comes. Plantation people walk by
stiffly in long ruffled skirts and top hats that hide the sweet sway
of the body. I grow into a man and learn they call this *manners* and
grace.

The women plundered with him
are opened and entered like fish
mouths, his sisters are swept and
blown into the air like dandelion,
pussy willows, weeping willows,
black-eyed Susan willows, each
will grow furiously, dangerously,
across the mantle of the new land,
peony girls will pop, top heavy
hydrangea women, drenched in
indigo and poppy, fluttering inside

the dark-eyed suckle of sugar
and cane, their motion picture
hips throwing seed,

Black boy rubbed back alive, rubbed up for luck, rubbed on for sale and battle!

It is the age of cotton futures,
iron slave collars and copper
yoke bracelets, the foreheads of
black face boys are tattooed with
the bone white of the master's
initials, BMI, he hears them talking
through their sweet tea liquor
vote *no* to the Union and *yes*
to keeping slaves in their fields
(in their beds), Generals Lee,
Beauregard, Stonewall Jackson,
John Hunt Morgan, the cotton
Confederacy lifts into the orange
air of the Republic, pointing
a rusty 1861 *Kill Every Nigger*
Tillman gubernatorial submarine,

Slavery now! Slavery tomorrow! Slavery forever! Slavery on the moon!

Four score and forever I am told to never look him in his eye.
A clamp is kept on my mouth. I learn to count on the rest of my
staring body for everything that I need to live. I forget their eye-
rules sometimes when he divides us up and sends us away from
each other like biddies. I draw my chin up just enough to see what
kind of creature is standing before me. I have to look at him to
make sure I never forget. After I look he beats me at the whipping
tree for staring. I raise my chin and stare again at his backside as
he walks away. What kind of creature could pull a mother from
the fingers of her child or a husband from the elbows of his wife?
Into the back of his neck and shoulders I send my eyes to remind
him there will be no forgetting what he has done. Before he turns
and catches me staring again I stagger back to the wagon to strap
on the mule's harness that is my coat and move on down the row.
I need none of his pockets for the keeping of these plantation
black and whites.

The age of enlightenment is over,
here comes the time of civil war
pell-mell, the battle of Ft. Sumter,
the delicate dance of the cakewalk,
jump and jute, collide, mid-air,
Charleston's cannon balls, African
banjos, English lutes break the air
in one accord, the age of cotton and
peach preserve, the birth of war
paint and dead arm photography
take the floor, pale humans curtsy,
bow, flash, grin, then shoot each
other in the face, the music of the
age is classical, arguing who is and
is not free, the plentiful, unsurpassed,
forever calculating, black face boy,
is now and forever,
dragged center stage,

Henceforth and forever more the Republic can never afford to be disinterested in black face boys!

A joint announcement is made,
black face on black face boys
from this day forward shall be
the Republic's prototype, usufruct,
his instincts and his chemistry,
will be used to sell tobacco,
hot dogs, box seats, toothpaste,
all in his persuasive name, used
to calculate how to boldly break
the union, sweetly save the union,
ink amendments, acquire but
never allow the Siamese twins
Freedom & Equality to marry,
ink declarations and squander
proclamations, South to North,
everyone agrees off record that
he will never be much to crow
about, but they will never take
their eyes off him, never will he
be forever free, and everywhere he
tries to move the music of his
soft tapping feet will sound out
train trestle, iron bells, smokestack,
gold coins, siren bullets, panic,
what they can sell of him will be
well marked, but never will any
black face boy parts be labeled
leading or man, black skin,
the Republic's first microchip
is strategically placed,
is working very well,



"Jamey's Horse," Maringouin, Louisiana (1997), by Jack Spencer

Black face boy the world is changing but we still have a great and growing use for you!

My black skin is the kind that won't wash off on or off their
minstrel stage of war. I will stay black. Will keep myself alive. Will
move upstream with the living. Will will my black body into our
great fight for freedom. This Lawless son knows that to fight is to
belong. I belong. To my first life. To this nowadays life. To the
next life coming fast. I will keep imagining a future with a pocket
and without a pass. I will keep moving this black boy body. In my
night sleep my feet push on up the road and the dirt floor hears
me. Some throats are cut every night. Some songs play on every
morning.

Stripped of culture, hulled of
history, shucked of language,
religion, the black face boy
begins to make himself all
over again, from okra seeds
dry tucked beneath his Atlantic
Ocean tongue, from liars' tongues,
from black and blue memory,
he takes flour from the cotton
boll, milk from cow teats, odd
and end iron from the hull of
the *Jesus*, eggs and gristle from
beneath warm wet feathers in
the coop (necessary for flight),
the wishbone of a frying chicken
is pushed way down inside his
woolly hair for height, luck, sass,
a mountain climbing attitude,
there has never been one who
had to make himself all over,
from okra and rice, for this he
should be called Sweet Son of
the New World, Sweet Evening
Prancing Star Gazelle, Mr. Boy
Liberty, Sweet Delicious Titanic
Man-To-Be, Son of Mr. Swagger
& Mr. Dash, the Republic's silent
cinematic heartthrob,

Step forward Nigger! Save your country! The Recruitment poster rings out!

The war blooms, fragrant rotten
Technicolor collision, out-a-sight
black face boys are renamed *Contraband*
and the *Great Available*, the tall
bearded statesman from Kentucky
lines them up on land and sea, but
every white face North and South
fears replacing the hoe in his black
hand with an even blacker musket,
Ball's Bluff, the battles of Whereas
and Heretofore are coming fast,
the age of iron peeled off his black
neck and pushed into a black barrel
is here, the black face boy will step
out and fight his way to freedom
but he wonders if history will
ever carte-de-visite the many
black boy ways he's
had to move,

General Lee paints graffiti on a recruitment poster when no one is looking. Just underneath a black face he writes, whispering as he scrawls, "You are now and forever our great disposable!"

The patent pending president
invents a hoisting machine,
fascinated with gadgetry, incendiary
weapons, he has a penchant for
freedom and metaphor, ironclad
warships, and aerial reconnaissance,
he fights with breech loading
cannons, placing his black face
boys squarely on the flaming
checkerboard of the Republic,
hoisting them up and over,
and in, and there, and down,
wherever, however, needed,

Repeat after me: We are engaged in a great Civil War. Say it again! Again!

After Big Bethel and Wilmington,
Hoke's Run, Bull's Run, Camp
Wildcat, the hidden horrors of
Andersonville, the massacre at
Ft. Pillow, 2 x 3, six hundred
hearts beneath six hundred sets
of surrendering black arms, high
eye in the air, shot down, the battle
of and for the black face boy
moves into the heat and heart
of the every day war, the feuding
brothers believe they are fighting
for honor, love of and for their
different ways of life, suffering
and pride turn rivers and streams
ruby white & blue, back and forth,
they win, they lose, they blame
each other, whole families burn
whole families down, four years
of muck and misery,

The black face boy is why we are here. He is the cake of all our trouble!

June 20 1864 Private William Johnson who walked away from
camp without a pass is escorted back to his own private tree. On a
high up hill in plain sight of the witnessing Confederate line the
Union stops the war to hang him by his black face neck. Willie
Johnson is charged with what I Lawless will be charged with one
hundred and fifty years next. It is the black face boy's charge.
Rape + Walking Away. It is a brother's fight we have been pulled
inside the heart of. *A point must be made* is what the brothers say
around their fire pits after Willie swings high in the air above
them. Before they cut him down they say liquor loud so that every
black face boy yet unborn including me can hear *Just because a man
thinks he is a man he can not walk away regular—here and there—like
other men.*

On Navy ships a black face boy
is called a *Hand*, the first he hears
of this his fingers touch the tar

of his own cheeks there in the
dark sea of night, a full blueberry
moon bent over his set shoulders,
Denmark Vesey stands starboard
holding David Walker's Appeal,
out on the open water 18,000
black face boys and 11 black face
girls sign up to sail, to fight in
freedom's fight, once on deck
they boldly learn how to walk
without a pass, their pants are
finally made of deep pocket wool,
they volunteer to step the length
of the cutter all night with their
shoulders pulled back free, new
free black walking human flags,
flags in a brand new free black
wind, port to port they close their
eyes, feel their bodies push away
from chains and cotton to a new
horizon no longer on pause, alive,
reel-to-reel—

Papa Quincy is always there to keep me moving. The flashing
storied images of him walking the wet salty planks of a ship in his
navy pea coat. His flat cap with matching red flared scarf stained
heavy with the ivory of guts and dried whale blood. Not all of us
came by chains. Four hundred counted here and there with whale
tattoos from another day and time. A time when black face boys
were given hunting spears without fear of whose flesh the tip
would tear. His whale soaked face making him a maritime man.
Long before any uncivil war pushed to name anyone who looked
like him *Contraband*. He fought the humpback and the blue for
their sweet burning oil not Confederates for their blackened
cotton. The story that traveled to me told that he knew John
Robert Bond of Liverpool who enlisted to "help free the slaves."
So many black boys wearing the knot of the Navy in order to slip
the knot of the noose. Never shackled on his back for eighteen
hours. Never chained in the ice of iron for one hundred and
ninety-two days. These ones sailed and reached back for black
faces just like their own. On the high seas there were black literate
sailors reaching for Philadelphia newsprint and any word of their
brothers chained away in the South. I see Quincy Lawless
whenever I move through any minute of my day. I stride to his
side without thinking and stare into his history. Whispering as he
leans over the ship's railing to read to the black face men that I
will never know. He uses his long black pointing finger as he holds
tightly to all of us with every word *O' yes O' yes one day dear
brothers of the bottom land you too will belong.*

Niggers in wool riding on ships! Next thing you know they'll want God's sweet acres and Bess his mule!

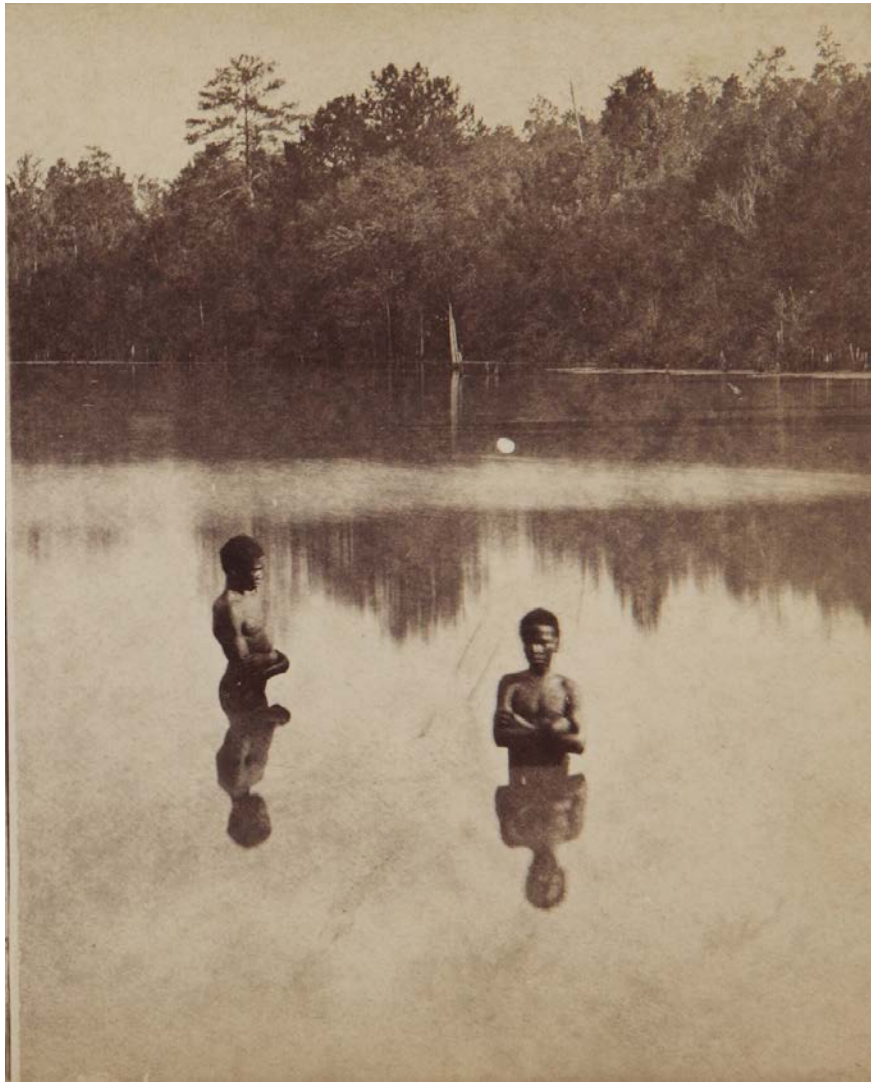
It is the age of the final count,
under the silk of Alabama fields,
beside the charcoal of Tennessee
streams, in Maryland pushback
sand, inside the Potomac, the long
brown thigh of the Mississippi,
750,000 bodies of brothers and
ex-slaves, side by side, five hundred
thousand more hacked by war,

now bandaged and wandering
hospitals and field stations, there,
nineteen black boy legs cut away
atop a pile of all white arms, here,
one teal blue eye motionless in a
honey jar, staring across the room
at one black boy, eyeless, but alive,
on the floor,
squat and bleating,

We still need you black face boy! In wartime! In Peacetime! You are truly boy of boys!

It is the age of electricity,
Black Mary moves quietly out on
the dust bowl prairie, the kneeling
Confederate flag is really a rusty
1865 Tillman submarine sinking
into the deep, *Kill Every Nigger* is
now disappearing beneath the
bubbly pearl of waves, General Lee
takes up his pen at Appomattox
to finally sign the old etiquette
of the Old South away, promising
to, in the future, give black face
boys more than three square feet
of space and ten vertical inches
of air, the new promise fools the
Republic into believing all involved
have left the darkness behind,
all have not, but if you throw your
eyes far enough, word on the western
prairie promises, Black Mary rides
roughshod on wooden pulsar wheels,
she and her black woman stagecoach
delivering mail to the outer banks
Republic and the tumbleweed nuns,
a shotgun squared between her legs,
a tobacco pipe is barbed wired
between her lips,

Soon it will be the age of moving
pictures and television, and after
that the battle of the newest steam
engineered trains arriving late at the
station, COLORED & WHITE
will peer atop every southern water
fountain, black face boys and girls
will march and sing to the drumming
of water hoses while levitating
shoeless across the Edmund Pettus
concrete lift, desiring immediate
adoption of the Republic's illegitimate
moon-faced cousins,
FREEDOM & EQUALITY—



Untitled photograph (ca. 1875), by J.N. Wilson. From the Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American collection at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library

At 109 Uncle Julius Lawless called it the age of black chicken skin. Everybody listening and remembering on the porch was nervous. They had a feeling trouble in double doses was on its way. First a black face boy from Atlanta took his last walk on his last balcony in Memphis. Then two more black face boys stepped up to the winner's block to raise their black-gloved fists over Mexico City. Grandma says the age of plastic has cometh and ice is now melting on continents where ice has never melted before. Even I know the waters of the world are beginning to churn with our greed and ignorance. Dynamite and exclusion have become the national rage. Four little girls from Bombingham have been watching over us in their flaming Sunday school dresses for fifty years. The black face boys I know know little has changed even with all the changes. The black face boys I know know their great uncles walked from West Virginia to Washington with their inventions in their arms and on their backs. Our music and our perfect calculations pushing the mean world ahead.

You are never to be trusted black face boy. You are guilty of things that haven't even happened yet!

It is the age of liars, co-liars, fear,
gun shows dot the land like golden
bales of amber wheat, the Republic
is deeply worried about the gates
of the old city, it used to be clear
who could walk in without a pass
and who could not, who could stay
and work with or without a pocket
or a pass and who could not,
who could vote and who could be
Mr. President, it used to be easy
to tell who was who (in their beds),
black face boys know who they are,
they are the sons of men, just like
other sons know, they are boys who
want what other boys want, the wild
freedom to invent, to freely be them-
selves, the freedom to not have one
thing in their pocket needed to get
safely home, the freedom to have
nothing to prove, to play basketball
freely, to not play dead every night
while freely walking home late from
the free hoop park, the freedom
to never hide their heart, their hands,
their heroes, or their wicked walking
on their high horse haunches,
that free bow legged walk that makes
black boy country waves, the black
boy freedom to weave, swagger,
swerve and not be stopped, not be
tasered down (blessed be what the
cell phone sees), running-for-their-life
black boys, still given three square feet
of space and ten inches of
black boy air,

We will never give you room. The only war ever fought here at home was about making room for you. Now! You are it!

It is the 8th age of extinction,
scientists are bringing the woolly
mammoth back, prison cities
rise on the Republic's new map,
newly coined black face boys
spend their days locked down,
side by side, on their Atlantic
Ocean backs, eighteen hours
on federal concrete, human forks
and spoons, living out their time
in the new ice of new iron,
black boys with back pockets
and front, it is the age of not
enough black face boy poets,
tea salesmen and fresco painters,
the age of electric cars and electric
black face boys, the age of shooting
black face boys in their black electric
faces and backs, the Republic's
new red velvet big tent show,
the age of white boys growing up
on the treble and bass of black
boy songs, while black boys now
and in the future, never get to grow
up, black boys who are gunned

down by the fathers of those,
buying and listening to their music,
shot again as they knock on the
door of the Republic needing help
with a dead battery, *Honey, he says*
all he needs
is a jump,

Jump black face boy! Jump! Nobody jumps as high as a black face boy!

Through the peephole the Republic peeps at me. Junior Lawless of the dark woolly-haired crew. Lawless Jr. of the woolly dark-eyed caravan. Whenever they look at me they see Civil War. Rape. The great historical dismissive black boy walk away. When they shoot me and leave me in the street for four hours facedown on the hot summer pavement while my mother screams on the porch they see sugar plantations melting in the distance. They see cotton fields handed over to boll weevils on a British silver platter. They see money on fire. They see their great granddaddy's wooden arm and bloodshot eyes in a ditch. They see their great grandmothers facedown in the red mud cotton rose fabric hiked up to her hip. They see me coming and want to go Civil War on me. When I walk in they see a musket loaded between my legs ready to shoot. They see Sherman walking on baby blue water down to the sea. They see my black body and they see 10000 bloody trenches in tow filled with white boy body parts. My nappy loud hair is the 51000 of Gettysburg still rotting in the field. My double subwoofers and tweeters playing The Notorious B.I.G. at 50 decibels is the 23000 shot in twelve hours at Antietam. They see me in black shiny neon skin. They see me and trouble tickertapes like sea smoke through their annual Confederate reenactments. All because of me. Me and my little need to be free.

It is the age of wily Wall Street,
the Republic strikes up the money
making band needing to sell nothing
for something, that is what profit is,
so the deep pockets of the Republic
think future and focus on music
and muscle, once again the Republic
fixes its blue eyes on the sons of
black face boys, those who first
aroused the first big money micro-
chip, a whole country founded on
their rich black skin, immediately
they separate those who can run,
pass, and jump and perhaps even
hold a high velvet note, from those
whose black faces are not smooth
enough and must stick to selling
fake Civil War memorabilia
on the corner,

Look away now boy, look away, remember, don't look me in the eye, look away now boy, look away!

It is the age of surrender,
black face boys, still in great
supply are made into the new
Republic's old moneymaker,

“Heads” he stays and entertains,
“Tails” he goes to jail, the black
face boys on the corner with
trinkets and souvenirs to sell,
first resist, then remember,
then get busy reinventing,
like their fathers, they can only
use their minds and what is left
on their backsides as tool and
dye, they loosen and lower their
pants beyond the Republic’s
legal hip line, cinching the sail
cloth of their whaling fathers
in their left hand, while pushing
their black boy freestanding
legs out in front to the right,
they know not to run unless
a metronome game clock ticks
in tandem with every leap,
but their legs can’t help it,
they move in black face boy
stride and time,

Like a pod of black face whales
moving through an oil slick,
they move in silent refusal of
their generation’s allotment of
their three square feet of space,
their ten vertical inches of air,
this up-to-date, still disposable,
abreast-of-the-times, foremost,
black face boy, this cardinal son,
is not seduced by cannon fire,
suffering or death, he knows
what he knows and he knows
what the Republic will never
admit, he knows what and who
the cherished beloved is, he was
there when it was built, he built
it, when the only thing there
was dirt, to dig, to move, to sleep
on, when the only thing there was
sun up and sun down, was dreams
to chase out of his head, a cotton
tom-tom pounding, the sound
of slaves ringing up on cold cash
registers before sinking to the
bottom of the Atlantic, was whips,
was an iron bit that reached from
his mouth to his eyelashes,
was his chest pushed into a tree
that a whip had long long
ago stripped clean,

He is here & here & now,
there & there & now, and
he has seen and knows what
the Republic betroths to each
and every beloved boy, one orb,
one tassel, the right to move
freely, to get the hell up and go,
the trendsetting, newly minted,
streamlined, black face boy,
first ordained by their civil war,

empties his pockets, cinches up
his long illegal legs,
and again, like his father,
shrewdly,
starts to move,

the black face boy has reinvented walking.



"Black Boy with Flag," from the Robert L. Scott Collection of 19th and 20th Century African American Vernacular Photography

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