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By Naomi Elias August 29, 2025

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The Harlem Book of the Dead
James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, Camille Billops Primary Information, 2025

Death arrests the body like a photograph arrests time. The attempt to photograph death then poses a unique challenge, one that photographer James Van Der Zee took up in spectacular fashion in his artist book of funeral portraits, *The Harlem Book of The Dead,* first printed in 1978 and now re-published over forty years later. “How living are his portraits of the dead,” Toni Morrison professes in the book’s foreword. Though his photographic career began with a small box camera he won as a teen, the work that earned Van Der Zee renown began after he opened his own commercial photo studio in Harlem in 1916 and began to document the neighborhood amidst a massive demographic change that saw an influx of Black residents. His studio was perfectly positioned to capture the golden years of the Harlem Renaissance with portrait work of weddings, sport clubs, community groups, and families that helped many in the emerging Black middle class document milestones and quotidian moments alike. Though Van Der Zee’s commercial career spanned a wide-array of subjects, sculptor and filmmaker Camille Billops was particularly intrigued by his 8x10 funeral portraits. This prompted her to gather over thirty of them into this book in which they sit beside poems from poet and playwright Owen Dodson and a lengthy and informatively discursive personal interview between Billops and Van Der Zee.

Van Der Zee’s funeral portraits were commissioned at a time when mainstream newspapers didn’t believe Black deaths merited coverage. This kind of historical erasure is an American tradition of sorts, dating back to the way slaves, after their labor and bodies were exploited on plantations, were further dehumanized with unmarked group graves. In recent years the *New York Times* has attempted to correct this oversight with *Overlooked*, a dedicated series of overdue obituaries from as early as 1851 for those who—largely due to their sex or race—were not remembered properly in their lifetimes. The series has since reported the deaths (and notable lives) of Gwendolyn B. Bennett, a Harlem Renaissance poet, and Mary Eliza Mahoney, America's first trained Black nurse. While this retroactive solution is laudable, Van Der Zee’s gelatin silver prints are novel for recognizing the value of photographing Black deaths and the rituals that accompany them early, as well as for the narrative-structuring he presented that turned their deaths into richly-layered visual stories.

“I could always see beauty where it didn’t exist,” Van Der Zee explains in the interview. As a studio photographer he would regularly manipulate his raw photographs by retouching negatives to do away with wrinkles or hand-draw fine jewelry onto women to create, in his view, the most beautiful version of his subjects. In this way his photographs weren’t documents or facts but backdrops against which to create his art, which was devoted to manifesting Black dignity. His images of the dead are also the product of manipulation, the beautification is not only corporeal but also conceptual. In *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, death—when set against ethereal lighting, props, staging, and superimposed mixed media—is staged as heavenly transition.

Images in the book are grouped into chapters that represent distinct demographics of the Harlem community such as “Mothers & Prophecies,” “Fathers & the Better People,” and “Children & the Mystery of Birth.” In the latter, Van Der Zee’s own daughter, Rachel, who died at sixteen, is photographed in her coffin. It is filled with enough white gossamer fabric to create the illusion she is asleep on a cloud. The brightness of the material produces a halo of light around her face. In the top right corner, Van Der Zee placed an insert of Jesus extending his hand down to her expectantly. In the bottom right corner, he’s superimposed a poem, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar,” which employs an extended metaphor comparing death to a one-way sea voyage into “the boundless deep.” In the photograph, the poem is unattributed and its lines have been rearranged and slightly altered. In Billops’s interview, Van Der Zee doesn’t really remember his daughter’s funeral, perhaps a product of his old age at the time of conversation. But his photographs betray his sentimentality.
Van Der Zee, whose father was an Episcopal church sexton, makes ample use of religious imagery in his work. His photographs of the soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment—who fought alongside the French in WWI due to US segregation laws—are trenchant collages of war iconography and religious symbolism. In one, a casket rests below images of flag-waving troops on a battlefield and angels. Dodson’s poem in this section, “War Games,” reads: “We wanted the sun to shine / on our cufflinks / On our children, into our hair / not on medals, or uniform buttons.” It ends with an “Amen.” The religious imagery is particularly potent in his portraits of dead infants, which resemble paintings of saints. They are composed in ways that emphasize their innocence, whether sheathed in flowers, held in the arms of their still-living and grieving parents, or seated amongst angelic figures and toys. In one, he forgoes his usual square 8x10 format and molds the photograph to the outline of a tombstone or arched church window. The photograph of a child glowing white covered with a veil by a winged angel would not look out of place as an illustration for stained glass. In his description of the plate, Van Der Zee explains he chose the large insert for the portrait to “fill it up” because few flowers were brought in for the child. Though these children’s lives were short, his camera made them sacred.

Both Van Der Zee and Dodson passed in 1983, shortly after the book was first published. Now, over forty years later, their work lives on in conversation with new artistic works that exist to proclaim Black deaths matter. In a 2017 piece for the *New York Times*, journalist

Jasmine Sanders noted the returning popularity of the mourning tradition of “R.I.P. tees,” commemorative T-shirts that have been artistically customized—airbrushed with graffiti, dyed, or screen printed—with the name and face of a deceased loved one. In a paperless era, these shirts serve the same purpose as a funeral leaflet. Sanders writes that the shirts “function as a refutation of the supposed anonymity of gun violence … a declaration of the singularity of death as well as that of grief.” The day before the funeral for Michael Brown—the teen whose death at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson kickstarted the 2014 Ferguson protests—his mother Lesley McSpadden was photographed wearing a memorial T-shirt featuring her son’s face emblazoned with the phrase “He Was Special 2 Me.”

During the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, cities across America had the phrase “Black Lives Matter”painted onto their streets, the sites of so much Black death. These murals, bold if performative declarations, can also be seen as mourning rituals. Van Der Zee’s photographic portraits are significant because of their specificity, closer in purpose to painted portraiture. In the book’s afterword, academic Karla FC Holloway notes the way Van Der Zee’s post-mortem photography harkens the “high art” of Victorian era mourning rituals like memento mori and “claims the Black body as a grievable subject, one worthy of an artist's gaze and a community’s memory.” The way he foregrounded glamour and echoed the traditions of white high society for his Black subjects, while a matter of personal taste, takes on political significance in funeral art because it showed a reverence for the Black body that didn’t exist outside his studio.

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