

VIRTUAL REVISIONS AND THE VERNACULAR IMAGE:  
THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ELIZABETH HOWE BLISS

by

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## **Abstract**

Virtual Revisions and the Vernacular Image: The Photographs of Elizabeth Howe Bliss  
Master of Arts, 2019

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In the waning years of the Progressive Era, an American social worker named Elizabeth Howe Bliss (1886-1974) traveled to Oklahoma and Kentucky on behalf of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) to report on child labourers and their education needs. During her investigations, Bliss photographed her subjects and surroundings, and these images, among others made in New York City and war-torn France, were recently acquired by the Smithsonian Institution despite their vernacular status. This thesis establishes a biographical trajectory for the previously unresearched life of Bliss and considers the bulk of, and impetus behind, her photographs, with an additional focus on those printed in *The Child Labor Bulletin* in 1917 and 1919, respectively. Further, this thesis argues for the virtual exhibition of vernacular images as a means for increasing their visibility amongst a diverse online audience, while simultaneously challenging norms that have persisted in downplaying their photo-historical value.

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## Preface

Some years ago, upon moving to Staten Island, New York, I became aware of a woman photographer born on the Island who had been active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Elizabeth Alice Austen,<sup>1</sup> known as Alice to her friends, created a remarkable collection of personal and public imagery that inspired me to seek out others like her. My research interests have since become attuned to early female photographers whose work has been anonymized, forgotten, and whose stories remain under-researched and overlooked.

When considering a topic for this thesis, I hoped to expound on such a woman photographer, and fortuitously, was offered an opportunity by Shannon Perich, Photography Curator at the National Museum of American History: Kenneth E. Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution (NMAH), in advance of my work there as an Academic Resident. The collection of images made available for my research was created by a woman named Elizabeth Howe Bliss (figure 1), and is comprised of 67 loose<sup>2</sup> snapshot<sup>3</sup> prints that depict children, adults, rural landscapes and urban areas, and were created in four distinct locales—New York City, made between 1915 and early 1917; various counties in Oklahoma, made



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<sup>1</sup> Austen (1866-1952) was a female photographer in New York who created a large collection of images over the course of her life; she should not be confused with Alice Austin (1862-1933), the Boston pictorialist, active around the same time.

<sup>2</sup> They are bereft of an album to give them a linear and temporal construction.

<sup>3</sup> Bliss made prints spontaneously and with a rudimentary application of image composition.

Figure 1. Unknown photographer, [*Passport Application Photo of Elizabeth Howe Bliss*], “United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925,” FamilySearch, accessed 2 February 2019. This photograph of Bliss was attached to her passport application, which was approved on July 17, 1917.

in March and April of 1917; the department of the Somme, France, made between August of 1917 and late 1918; and Kentucky, made in April of 1919. The prints exist in two specific dimensions: a smaller size of 2 ¼” by 3 ¼”, and a larger size of 3 ¼” by 4 ¼”, indicating the use of two cameras.<sup>4</sup> They are printed on paper that varies in thickness and exhibits aspects of matte, semi-gloss and glossy finishes. All prints except for one have a white border around the image. More than half the images— a total of 38— feature handwritten captions on their versos, in both pen and pencil, the majority of which, from my assessment, match ancillary samples of Bliss’s handwriting. Two of the images in this collection are similar to those published in *The Child Labor Bulletin*, and these, along with the remaining 65 images, exemplify a fascinating interplay between public and private spheres.

My methodological approach to this topic involved creating a historical biography—detailed in Chapter 2, “Elizabeth Howe Bliss: A Biographical Sketch” —as a way to consider her life in terms of the influences and ideals of her milieu. These I address in Chapter 3, “The Impetus Question: Why Make These Images?” Chapter 4, “The Bliss Photographs: Materiality and Content,” concentrates on the material and contextual aspects of her images. In Chapter 5, “Future Considerations: Virtual Exhibitions & the Vernacular,” I ultimately argue for the use of virtual exhibitions as a means of re-disseminating these photographs—as well as other vernacular imagery not readily accepted as art—in an effort to further widen the confines of the photographic canon. And because of the depictions of race and class in Bliss’s imagery, I felt it important to consider her impetus as a woman and photographer through a lens of intersectionality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> When the same subject is depicted in both a large and small print e.g. the interior of Bliss’s hotel room, the images differ in the angle from which they were shot and the proximity of the camera to the subject—different lens focal lengths and viewfinder placements sufficiently explain this.

<sup>5</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* no. 1 (1989): 140.



## Introduction

“...[T]he snapshot is caught between private function and public meaning.”

Douglas R. Nickel<sup>6</sup>

On dusty roads and byways, traversing urbanizing cities and their more rustic and rural counterparts, a small party of investigative journalists set out in March of 1917,<sup>7</sup> their senses attuned to the varying habitations ensconced within the boundaries of Oklahoma’s state lines. Renting motorcar “stages,” (figure 2) and horse-drawn carriages when train transport was not available, the travelers were



Figure 2. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Car Stopped on Dirt Road*], catalog number 2018.0168.0066, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. An image depicting an automobile “stage” advertising a route between Kiowa and McAlester, towns in Oklahoma, and both in Pittsburgh County.

mostly women, and likely the well-known male photographer, Lewis Hine. All white and educated,<sup>8</sup> this group was keen to record their experiences and encounters as a means for producing informative reports on behalf of their employer, the National Child Labor Committee. Though formed and based in New

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas R. Nickel, “Roland Barthes and the Snapshot,” *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (2000): 234.

<sup>7</sup> Three of the Oklahoma images in the NMAH collection are dated from March of 1917; Hine’s images from the same trip also date between March and April of 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy J. Duerden, “The Early Years, 1874-1900: Cairo, the ‘Sawdust City’ and Chicago,” *Lewis Hine: Photographer and American Progressive* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2018), 11, 18; most in the group were also well-off financially from inherited wealth. Hine was an outlier, whose parents had struggled to run a coffeehouse and restaurant.

York City, the NCLC envisaged a future of American labour practices that did not rely on the sweat and blood of children, a problem that was looked at in this time as one “inherited from...the industrial revolution and the establishment of the factory system.”<sup>9</sup>

With statehood mandated only a decade previously, Oklahoma—like its neighbouring territories—was making use of child labour, though less on an industrial scale<sup>10</sup> and more in the vein of “street trades,” including the use of children as chauffeurs, couriers and newspaper hawkers.<sup>11</sup> The NCLC had determined that in Oklahoma a child’s access to education was more important than child labour practices and the organization pushed for the federal enforcement of mandatory school attendance, especially as children at this time were being lauded “for [their] ‘teachableness’ and pliancy...that [they] might be actually better suited to the industrial world than adults.”<sup>12</sup> By sending agents into the field, the NCLC had direct access to the real-life ramifications of intermittent school attendance and its effects on Oklahoma’s youngest residents. Once codified, the resulting reports were disseminated by the organization as attempts to leverage legislative change through channels of its well-connected allies<sup>13</sup> and constituent members.

One such Special Agent<sup>14</sup> traveling in the Oklahoma crew, was a thirty-one-year-old New England woman named Elizabeth Howe Bliss. Educated as a social worker, and with previous experience as a public school teacher, Bliss was aptly skilled to serve in this capacity. Covering a distance of 5,374

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<sup>9</sup> Edith Abbott, “A Study of the Early History of Child Labor in America,” *American Journal of Sociology* 14 (July 1908): 37.

<sup>10</sup> Edward N. Clopper, “Introduction,” in *Child Welfare in Oklahoma: An Inquiry by the National Child Labor Committee for the University of Oklahoma*, ed. Edward N. Clopper (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1918), 5; as a new state, Oklahoma based its laws regarding industrial child labour on pre-existing statutes in other states, which were favourable to the health and safety of child employees; Oklahoma’s laws concerning children working street trades or their school attendance were weaker.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Hine, “Child Labor,” in *Child Welfare in Oklahoma: An Inquiry by the National Child Labor Committee for the University of Oklahoma*, ed. Edward N. Clopper (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1918), 106-110.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, “The Century of the Child,” *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Expert’s Advice to Women* (Reprint, New York: Anchor, 2005), 206.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Addams and Gifford Pinchot—who had a close relationship with President Roosevelt—were both well-known within the NCLC and were well-connected with those in the government.

<sup>14</sup> Bliss was listed in NCLC reports as overseeing the investigation of schools or education; different NCLC reports list her with alternating titles.

miles,<sup>15</sup> which took her and her associates through multiple, diverse counties,<sup>16</sup> Bliss encountered variations in Oklahoma's demographic makeup that owed to the state's geographic and economic factors as well as the entrenched and systemic effects of racial segregation. The 1918 NCLC publication, *Child Welfare in Oklahoma: An Inquiry by the National Child Labor Committee for the University of Oklahoma*, was created to provide the University of Oklahoma with empirical data drawn from the experiences of Bliss and her fellow investigators. It was shared with state legislatures who argued for the federal enactment of laws relating to education and children labour. Bliss's report, published therein, fills a lengthy chapter titled "Education," and includes recommendations for the reduction of class sizes and for the better outfitting of school facilities.

Bliss captured her involvement with the burgeoning state's populace through more than written observations, making photographs with two cameras even though their use was not a requirement of her work. Indeed, the only agent ever referred to as a photographer in the NCLC reports is Lewis Hine. And although other agents, like Bliss, could and did take photographs their status as field agents was never altered to reflect the existence of their photographs. Bliss's photographs—made for the NCLC in Oklahoma—were ultimately left unpublished,<sup>17</sup> and I had to consider that Bliss used them as images of reference, photographs she could look to for details when formulating her report. However, as my research progressed, I made the discovery of two additional reports that contained photographs made by Bliss—"In the Back Yard of Wall Street" and "French Children in War-Time"—and were featured in the NCLC's main organ, *The Child Labor Bulletin*. These reports—disseminated to members and the

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<sup>15</sup> Owen R. Lovejoy, "Thirteenth Annual Report of the General Secretary," *The Child Labor Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (November 1917): 159; the mileage accrued by each agent was listed in individual amounts annually in *The Child Labor Bulletin*; Bliss had the lowest mileage count of all her colleagues due to the fact that she joined the NCLC's traveling agents in the spring of 1917 and then left for France that July; she was not traveling alone—one of her images depicts a blurred hulk of a motorcar and a group of figures standing in the distance—providing an evidential glimpse of her colleagues.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss, "Education," in *Child Welfare in Oklahoma: An Inquiry by the National Child Labor Committee for the University of Oklahoma*, ed. Edward N. Clopper (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1918): 62.

<sup>17</sup> This specific report was meant for academics at the University of Oklahoma in addition to legislators whom the NCLC evidently concluded did not require images but rather data; Bliss—and Hine—were unaware of how the final publication would look, as neither had their photographs published in the report.

public<sup>18</sup>—prove that Bliss’s images were used for reproduction and that this was a likelihood for those she made in Oklahoma.

The topic of the first report and its accompanying photographs centered on child caregivers working in Manhattan. “In the Back Yard of Wall Street,” published in August of 1917, includes two images of girls holding younger children<sup>19</sup> (figure 3 and figure 4) similar to those in the NMAH collection which lack Bliss’s handwritten captions and thus any explanatory information. From its publication,

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*Child Labor Bulletin*

and earns \$1.00 a week; and little Veronica who is only 8 years old takes care of two children every morning and night for \$1.25 a week. She has been doing this for a year and a half and before that, “I minded my own baby.”

The eight members of this family live in two small rooms in a rear tenement. One room looks out on the yard but the other is an inside room without windows, dependent entirely upon the light from the kitchen. Mrs. B. realizes that there is not room



When you mind two babies you cannot always get to school on time.

enough for the children and she does not like the tenement, but as she says, “I have to pay \$9.50 for this. I looked around everywhere else but I can’t get anything better for less than \$12 or \$13, so I guess I stay here. Yes, I do have a hard time with all the children. You wouldn’t think I was only 30, would you? My man’s only 30 too.”

Veronica is under-sized, apparently poorly nourished and exceedingly frail looking. She works from a quarter to six in the morning until 8:30 and again from 4:30 until 7 at night. One of

years owing to these conditions. The hours of cleaning are as a general rule either at night or late afternoon and early morning. The women average about 6 hours a day cleaning, going to work at 5 in the morning and remaining until 8, and starting again at 5:30 in the afternoon and remaining until 8 or 8:30. Naturally, some one must “mind the baby” while they are away from home, and it is not strange that when they do not have children of their own old enough for this responsibility, they employ the child of a neighbor.

These children begin work often when they are only 7 years old. They get up at 5 in the morning, go to the house where their baby lives, dress the baby when it awakens, give him his breakfast and see that he does not get into any trouble until the mother returns at about half past eight. The child must then rush home, eat breakfast and get to school by 9 o’clock, where she remains during the day. In the afternoon she is generally back at work by 4:30. At this time she takes the child or the children outdoors, often going with them to Bowling Green Park. At about half past six she takes them home, gives them their supper and waits until either “the lady or the man comes home.” Her own supper she does not have until nearly 9 o’clock.

The wages of these children range anywhere from \$.75 to \$1.50 a week. This money is given to the mother, the children

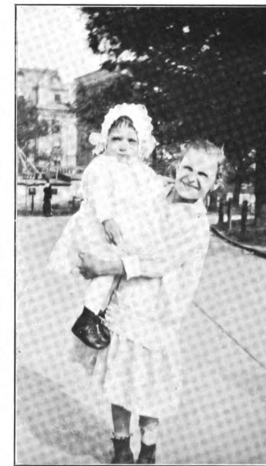


Figure 3. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [Untitled], variation of [Young Girl Holding Baby Boy], printed in the report “In the Back Yard of Wall Street,” *The Child Labor Bulletin* 6, no. 2, 1917. Figure 4. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [Untitled], variation of [Young Girl Holding Baby Girl], printed in the report “In the Back Yard of Wall Street,” *The Child Labor Bulletin* 6, no. 2, 1917. Both images are similar to those in the NMAH collection illustrated by figures 23, 24 and 25, shown later in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> The NCLC most often published images in reports meant for its members and the public to read.

<sup>19</sup> Five portraits of these girls were made in New York City; the two published images are similar to the three images in the NMAH collection; the likelihood is that the published prints were kept or discarded by the NCLC while the unpublished prints were returned to Bliss.

I concluded that Bliss made these images in New York City, her home locale after obtaining her master's degree in 1915<sup>20</sup> and before joining the NCLC agents on the road to Oklahoma in March of 1917.<sup>21</sup> Though the second report (figure 5), "French Children in War-Time," lacks a byline, it concerns Bliss and her personal experiences as a relief worker in France during the war. Published in February of 1919, the

#### FRENCH CHILDREN IN WAR-TIME\*

Back from service overseas with the Smith College Relief Unit comes Miss Elizabeth H. Bliss, the Committee's special agent for education, to whom the *Bulletin* is indebted for the opportunity of



I—Village of Canizy, Somme, France—Group of children waiting for distribution of milk. These children had lived in this village under German occupation for about three years and a half. When the Germans retired after the Battle of the Somme in 1916 they took with them all able-bodied men and practically all women between the ages of 16 and 50, leaving behind a population consisting of the very old and very young. Therefore the majority of these children were living with grand-parents, or possibly with their mother, but none of them had a father in the village at this time, as all the men were either in the army, or prisoners of war or civilian prisoners. The only milk available for these children was that coming from the farm of the Smith College Unit. Three times a week the truck went to this village with milk. This picture was taken just before the distribution was made.

\* Photographs by courtesy of Smith College Relief Unit.

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Figure 5. Elizabeth Howe Bliss (probably), "French Children in War-Time," *The Child Labor Bulletin* 7, no. 4, 1919. Images from this report are found among the Bliss materials at the Smith College Special Collections.

"French Children" report features images of war-affected juveniles—credited to the Smith College Relief Unit<sup>22</sup>—none of which are present in the NMAH collection. I have included this discovery because the

<sup>20</sup>As will be discussed later in this paper, the Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations—located in New York City—was Bliss's most likely entrée into her life as a field agent with the NCLC.

<sup>21</sup>Lewis Hine's name is often cited in *The Child Labor Bulletin* when the images printed are his. The fact that this report is authored by Bliss, just after her time living in New York City, and does not cite Hine as the photographer, speaks to her being their originator; there was a time lag in publishing through the NCLC—Bliss's Oklahoma report from 1917 was not published until the following year; the 1917 publication of "In the Back Yard of Wall Street" could date her images to 1916.

<sup>22</sup>Bliss's alma mater; Bliss was a member of the inaugural group of Smith College alumna who left for France in July of 1917.

very existence of these images—of which prints exist in a box of Bliss’s personal materials in the Smith College Special Collections—speaks to her continued activity of making photographs during the war.<sup>23</sup> In considering the whole of Bliss’s known photographic output, I believe the Smith College images fill the gap in her employment as an agent with the NCLC and allow for a truer arc of her photographic endeavours to be revealed.

While Bliss was anything other than an art photographer, the bulk of her photographs illustrate with perfect clarity the ways in which so-called vernacular images have and continue to be indicative of a larger visual history that was—until recently—repudiated by the reductive qualities of the photographic canon. Bliss created a selection of photographs with the purpose of reproduction in mind, and yet that intention is obscured by an amateurish rendering due to her use of smaller format film cameras and lower-quality lenses.<sup>24</sup> An era of exponential photo-taking<sup>25</sup> formed within Bliss a social habit, expressed as an unconscious action, that worked to engineer nostalgia<sup>26</sup> through the physical act of stopping time to be recollected in snapshot form (figure 6).<sup>27</sup> But Bliss further applied this habit to her working life, making images beyond the promoted realms of travel and home (figure 7 and figure 8),<sup>28</sup> thus widening the scope of what a woman could do with an amateur camera.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> One image published in the report is included Smith’s collection of Bliss-related materials.

<sup>24</sup> She was not using large format cameras or glass plate negatives, the combination of which would have spoken more to an impetus to make art images.


<sup>25</sup> The introduction in 1888 of the easy-to-use Kodak No. 1 camera—which came preloaded with film—marked the beginning of an ascendant photography market focused on the amateur photographer.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Martha West, “A Short History of Kodak Advertising, 1888-1932,” *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000): 35.

<sup>27</sup> An idea threading through much of the early twentieth century Kodak advertising was that the camera could serve as a better memory keeper than your own recollection.

<sup>28</sup> Kodak advertisements told consumers that the realms of travel as well as the domestic sphere were areas of life open to “kodaking,” itself a demotic, made-up verb meaning to shoot photographs with an amateur or Kodak camera resulting in the creation of snapshots.

<sup>29</sup> Frances Benjamin Johnston, “What a Woman Can Do with a Camera,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* 14, no. 10 (September 1897): 6-7; Johnston goes beyond the conception of the woman as amateur photographer suggesting that, through practice and dedication, a woman could support herself professionally through photographic means.



*Kodak Keeps the Story*

Just “click” the shutter of this easily-worked camera and to-day’s good times become to-morrow’s good pictures.

*Autographic Kodaks \$6.50 up  
At your dealer’s*

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y., *The Kodak City*

Figure 6. Eastman Kodak Company, “Kodak Keeps the Story,” *American Review of Reviews*, catalog number K0510, Ellis Collection of Kodakiana (1886-1923), Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920 Collection, Duke University Libraries, 1910s. This advertisement asserts that by utilizing a camera, special moments are recollected by the amateur photographer through her snapshots.



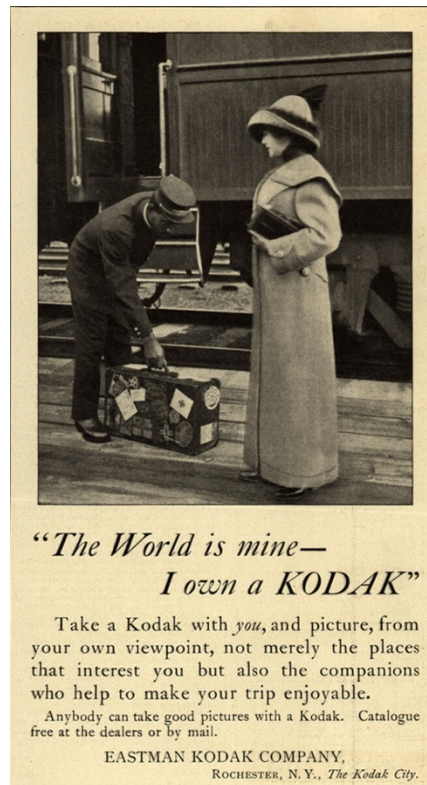


Figure 7. Eastman Kodak Company, “‘The World is mine—I own a KODAK’,” *Ladies Home Journal*, catalog number K0469, Ellis Collection of Kodakiana (1886-1923), Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920 Collection, Duke University Libraries, 1912. Figure 8. Eastman Kodak Company, “There’s a world of delight in KODAK Home Portraiture,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, catalog number K0064, Ellis Collection of Kodakiana (1886-1923), Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920 Collection, Duke University Libraries, 1906.

Many societal forces were in play as Bliss moved from adolescent to independent woman out in the world; she was affected most by Progressive Era politics, New Woman feminism and female-targeted camera advertising in the form of the Kodak Girl. Bliss’s career as an investigative social worker-cum-journalist joined with the inevitable coupling of her feminism and a gendered photographic practice, directly influenced her image making, and the blending of these two spheres of her public and private personas culminates in the varied intentions she had for her prints. While images of Oklahoma schoolhouses, teachers and students with their families were meant for NCLC reproduction, others that depict her hotel room, the roads her group traversed or the cars they used seem destined for her own eyes or to be shared among friends. With dual purposes for these images, Bliss becomes both the director of



and the actor within<sup>30</sup> the visual worlds she constructs. In *About Looking*, John Berger highlights this by stating that, “there are photographs which belong to private experience and there are those which are used publicly.”<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss was cognizant of both uses but compellingly left behind prints that often seem interchangeable or as an outright collaboration of the two.

An historical perspective of women’s early interactions with photography should be more than a conflation of pictorial art photographs and familial, home-centric snapshots. Lured to the feel of film and the satisfying click of the shutter by the insistence of the Kodak Girl ad campaign (figure 9) some women, like Bliss (figure 10), would go further, utilizing photography to capture the world beyond hearth, home and cradle. Though a multitude of amateur images were made to confer the illusion of social normalcy



Figure 9. Eastman Kodak Company, “The Kodak Story,” catalog number 2003.1274.0098, Eastman Museum, 1907. Figure 10. Unknown photographer, [Car Stopped on Dirt Road (Bliss)], catalog number 2018.0168.0064, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. This image depicts Bliss sitting on the running board of a motorcar with a camera on her lap.

<sup>30</sup> Certain prints feature her as their subject, with the photographer unknown; most probably one of her travel companions made these images.

<sup>31</sup> John Berger, “Uses of Photography,” *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): 55.

on their female creators, there were other photographically-minded women living outside the lines of expectation and decorum. Bliss, and other women of means, began flouting conventions and seeking to support themselves through their work, in an effort to ride the ideals of a liberated womanhood out into the wider world. Tying their engagements to social causes gave many a reinforced armour against critics who felt that women should be rearing children and perfecting a performance of feminine acquiescence.

Besides a contemporaneous mention of Bliss's wartime bravery in Edward Hungerford's *With the Doughboy in France: A Few Chapters of an American Effort*, some contemporary citations of her 1915 master's thesis, "Intimate Studies in the Lives of Fifty Working Girls," and a peripheral mention of her in James Carl Nelson's *Five Lieutenants: The Heartbreaking Story of Five Harvard Men Who Led America to Victory in World War I*, no academic or independent historical research has been undertaken to consider her life, her photographic contributions to American history, or in what ways the acceptance of her photographs by a major institution like the NMAH should be acknowledged.

The end of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a feminist movement pushing against gender restrictions and promoting female autonomy. Bliss would have considered herself one of these so-called New Women. She was the product of an era when, through the guise of mass market advertising, cameras were promoted as essential accessories for life, to be both ubiquitous and necessary. Bliss herself was a willing participant in the vernacular turn. She was a woman who sidestepped, for a time, the boundaries to which her gender had been societally assigned. Though initially guided by family money, and though continually buttressed by her white privilege, she was able to prove herself independently capable through words and images of her own creation. She was not a photojournalist per se, nor an art photographer, but her impetus to create images, and to disseminate a selection of them, was influenced by a feminism that promoted economic autonomy and the pursuit of higher education. Her image-making was carried out through a means to which she had been socially and photographically acclimated—the operation of simple apparatuses to apprehend what the mind might forget, the practice of making proof rather than something to delight the eyes. Her images provide contemporaneous insights into an American society wrestling with its moral character as well as its more rural and restless populations. The vernacular status

of photographs like Bliss's—lacking aesthetic qualities—deserves further consideration and critical engagement, as does the use of digital exhibitions as a tool for revising a photographic history that might not otherwise have use for such images.

## Chapter 1. Literature Survey

This paper considers pertinent primary and secondary sources, assessing their thematic congruities in relation to their strengths and shortcomings within three distinct spheres: *the formative*, *the contextual* and *the categorical*, with each area exerting a fundamental effect on my research.

### 1.1 The Formative

Elizabeth Howe Bliss did not become a social reformer behind a hermetic seal. Like many women of her era, a progression from childhood to adolescence began to coalesce with the rise of the New Woman,<sup>32</sup> an ideal threaded into a contentious movement for women's suffrage. Capitalism was surging due to its growing industrial teeth, and the world was one of imperial conquests<sup>33</sup> and colonialist sensibilities veiled as Progressive promises. But fissures abounded, as academic and activist, Angela Y. Davis, writes in her seminal 1981 work, *Women, Race & Class*, which foregrounds the racist and absolutist attitudes that sat within the heart of feminist and suffrage movements of this era, that "it was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that the woman suffrage campaign began to definitively accept the fatal embrace of white supremacy."<sup>34</sup> Though Davis's book occasionally suffers from outdated information,<sup>35</sup> it remains a fierce and fundamental statement of the divisions disrupting a clear consensus among late nineteenth and early twentieth-century women, especially in regards to race. At century's turn, many young women like Bliss subscribed to the tenets of these times, which included championing women's suffrage, though perhaps not fully conscious that their sentimentalities were still married to the peculiar institution.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," *The American Review* 158, no. 448 (March 1894): 271; the New Woman movement was a feminist epoch in which economic, academic and career autonomy were championed for women, as were attempts to challenge traditional gender roles and conventions.

<sup>33</sup> The United States entered the Spanish-American Civil war in 1898, a self-serving attempt at nationalist expansion.

<sup>34</sup> Angela Y. Davis, "Woman Suffrage at the Turn of the Century: The Rising Influence of Racism," *Women, Race & Class* (Reprint, New York: Vintage, 1983): 115.

<sup>35</sup> The section on Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman," speech is no longer factual given the information available to contemporary researchers. Davis cites Frances Dana Gage, who concocted a dialect for Truth's speech that was not her own and invented many of its key phrases.

<sup>36</sup> Phraseology used to describe the practice of slavery in the United States, especially as it pertained to the economic system in the American South.

Entering into dialog with Davis, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English's 2005 reprint of *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*, describes, in a chapter titled, "The Century of the Child," an additional threat to the feminist and suffrage movements at century's end: the "discovery of the child by adult male public figures...that the child is...a creature with its own needs."<sup>37</sup> Ehrenreich and English depict the deepening drag of the male arm of control over feminist "follies," like suffrage, successfully conflating notions of "a more scientific approach to child raising [which] promised to elevate the status of woman's traditional occupation...[thus creating a] stronger...argument for female suffrage."<sup>38</sup> This co-opting of women's desires for legislative liberation through the careful implantation of patriarchal domestic fantasies, would have been a strange setting for Bliss's coming of age. Though her initial trajectory saw Bliss abdicate the illusory pedestal of motherhood,<sup>39</sup> her social work was still an orbit centered on the child, the dedication to which captivated her written and photographic outputs.

American historian and professor, Judith Sealander's 2003 book, *The Failed Century of the Child*, delineates the objective failures of such an emphasis on children, who, along with their working poor parents, were in the throes of an industrial upheaval, a rising sun of capitalism that hoped never to have to set<sup>40</sup>. With mass employment of children<sup>41</sup> came their mass exploitation, as the machine of the market moved ever forward. In the chapter, "Children's Education," Sealander identifies a deeper impetus driving organizations like the NCLC, which Bliss was drawn to and did so much work for, regarding their activities in "child saving,"<sup>42</sup> thought to be accomplished by providing access to education and encouraging school attendance instead of employment. Though public perception saw this reform work as a means to eradicate an unsavoury side effect of a hyper-industrial society, a more nuanced consideration

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<sup>37</sup> Ehrenreich and English, "The Century of the Child," 202.

<sup>38</sup> Ehrenreich and English, 213.

<sup>39</sup> Bliss was thirty-two when she became a mother in 1919; her first child—a son—was adopted.

<sup>40</sup> The Russian Revolution in 1917, which saw the installment of a communist regime and was triggered by the destabilizing effects of the war, would be a blow to capitalism's supposed immunities.

<sup>41</sup> As the need for cheap labour grew with the expansion of industrial capitalism, and because there was no longer an enslaved workforce, children of working-poor adults became a natural preference as they could be paid less and made to work the same grueling hours as their adolescent and adult co-workers.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Sealander, "Introduction," *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 2003): 9.

could reveal how a push for “tax-supported mandatory secondary schooling nonetheless reflected deeper national unease about the civic costs of modernization.”<sup>43</sup> Though an intuiting of this specific anxiety may have eluded Bliss, she nevertheless carried out acts of soothing through the interplay of her text and photographs, constructing a tight narrative to induce assurances of societal control.

## 1.2 The Contextual

While these examples serve to illustrate the external situational forces that may have affected Bliss during her most impressionable years, additional sources speak to the specific social setting from which many of Bliss’s photographic proclivities<sup>44</sup> were formed. In Professor Nancy Martha West’s 2000 publication, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, she deftly illustrates how the nascent photographic market, under Kodak’s reins, used its advertising wiles to “urg[e] the female consumer to see photography not only as a necessary component of domestic life but as an integral part of fashion and beauty.”<sup>45</sup> With exposure to this advertising message in private, domesticated spaces—through periodicals and newspapers—as well as the real life embodiments of such a female-targeted directive in the public atmospheres of high school and a camera-obsessed, all-female college campus<sup>46</sup>—settings of conformity—young women signified their social and physical worth by taking up simple cameras.

In West’s chapter, “Let Kodak Keep the Story,” she suggests that this particular Kodak campaign “promised to erase the opposition between private family harmony and public disruption simply by domesticating and forgetting the world of turmoil.”<sup>47</sup> Laura Wexler further expounds on this idea of the domestic image, in that its visual content did not have to be relegated to the home, that images like Bliss’s, depicting poverty and racial segregation, work well within this domestic designation. In her book, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, published in 2000, Wexler writes that

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<sup>43</sup> Sealander, “‘Laying Down Principles in the Dark’: The Consequences of Compulsory Secondary Education,” 189.

<sup>44</sup> Her approach to photo-making was to take photographs quickly, spontaneously, and without aesthetic aspiration; Bliss’s NMAH images exhibit aspects of each.

<sup>45</sup> West, “A Short History,” 32.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Anastigmat,’ “From Nothing to \$150 a Week: How New England Druggist Built up Photo Department,” *The Pharmaceutical Era* 49, (January 1916): 283; Smith College was and continues to be strictly a women’s university.

<sup>47</sup> West, “‘Let Kodak Keep the Story:’ Narrative, Memory and the Selling of the Autographic Camera during World War I,” 184.

“domestic images...need not be—representations of and for a so-called separate sphere of family life,”<sup>48</sup> that “what matters is the use of the image to signify the domestic realm.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, in this vein, Wexler’s argument sustains the idea that the images Bliss was crafting of the traumas inherent in real-life unrest were in and of themselves a form of domestic imagery, in that they were framed by the interventionist activities of Bliss and her reformer colleagues, meant to be palatable to a public reading them as a means for social remediation.

From a critical perspective, both Susan Sontag’s, “In Plato’s Cave,” and John Berger’s, “Uses of Photography,” provide theoretical glue in affixing West and Wexler to expanded ideas of photography’s functions, its social utilities, and its multifacetedness. These essays partake in the naming of such possibilities, thus underwriting the ever-evolving concepts of how photography molds—and is molded by—its practitioners. With her amateur cameras and roll film, Bliss created non-pictorial, “domestic images” similar to those that Wexler suggests, that veer wildly between public and private intention. Both Sontag and Berger recognize that there is an implicit “violence”<sup>50</sup> in asserting a lens to make proof in settings of unrest, as the photographer moves away from the humane activity of tangibly helping in real time. The problematics of wielding a camera in spaces of war, natural disaster or in Bliss’s case—poverty and systemic racism—reveal conflicted outcomes. While Bliss’s reproduced photographs are meant to instigate legislative and societal transformation, the circumstances of their subjects—momentarily invaded by the camera—remain unchanged.

### 1.3 The Categorical

Finally, this literature survey seeks to address the categorical difference of Bliss’s imagery, as

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<sup>48</sup> Laura Wexler, “What a Woman Can Do with a Camera,” *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina, 2000): 21.

<sup>49</sup> Wexler, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Berger, “Uses of Photography,” 55-56; in relation to public photographs, this is further expounded upon in Sontag’s book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

its very materiality in the form of snapshot prints, deemed it an atypical format for dissemination in her own day<sup>51</sup>—when larger film formats translated to higher resolution and better reproducibility—and which demoted its place within the photographic canon until recently. Professor of Art History Geoffrey Batchen has written extensively on the contradictory category that is the vernacular, an image assemblage comprised of “photographs that preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy.”<sup>52</sup> In his influential article, “Vernacular Photographies,” published in 2000, Batchen describes the lack of scholarly and institutional attention previously provided to this unsettled grouping, as having created “a lacuna in photography’s history, an absence.”<sup>53</sup>

Batchen’s argument, which resulted in the reform of the lopsided photo-historical narrative, is further fleshed out by Kim Wolfe’s subsequent master’s thesis, “Flat Files: The Absence of Vernacular Photography in Museum Collections,” published in 2010. She expounds on Batchen’s summation on the state of vernacular imagery, writing ten years after the publication of his article that, “vernacular snapshots are [still] rarely found in museum collections, and those that are are not valued for their personal narratives, but for documentary qualities.”<sup>54</sup> Wolfe’s thesis decries the lack of expanding photographic acceptance for this imagery, especially concerning vernacular visual content discerned as being beneath the art/documentary dichotomy. Her contention that acquisition preferences for snapshots trend towards their perceived documentary-ness relates well to the contemporary trajectory of Bliss’s prints. Acquired for their historical potential, their content and captions document a diversity of people and locales, warranting their institutional inclusion in ways that their lack of a cohesive aesthetic would not. Within this same collection are photographs Bliss made which are more attuned to the private realm,<sup>55</sup> and this signifies a small success as far as Wolfe is concerned, as these images, when conjoined

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<sup>51</sup> The NCLC’s primary photographer, Lewis Hine, used larger film formats to the benefit of his final prints. When used to make contact prints or enlargements, these higher resolution images retained more detail leading to better-quality reproductions; snapshot images were used in other contemporaneous periodicals but were then often emphasized as amateur creations.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (January 2015): 262.

<sup>53</sup> Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 262.

<sup>54</sup> Kimberly S. Wolfe, “Flat Files: The Absence of Vernacular Photography in Museum Collections” (Master’s Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010): 3.

<sup>55</sup> Bliss made images of Native American women and black men and children which, with their colloquial captions, seem to have been destined for viewing with her friends or for herself.



with their documentary-designated counterparts, return to their pre-acquisition gestalt state as a unified whole, thus allowing them to subvert and de-fang institutional photographic genre-criteria when viewed as a group of “objects with multiple and changing meanings.”<sup>56</sup>

Eloquent and instructive publications on the topic of virtual exhibitions are few though their genesis is directly linked to the 2007 publication of University of Kansas Library staff member Sarah Goodwin Thiel’s *Build It Once: A Basic Primer for the Creation of Online Exhibitions*. Though no longer technologically relevant, it suggests an organized and ethical methodological approach for creating online exhibitions which remains an essential component for the initial and continued success of such virtual programming.

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<sup>56</sup> Wolfe, “Flat Files,” 56.

## Chapter 2. Elizabeth Howe Bliss: A Biographical Sketch

To better understand why Bliss employed a camera when it wasn't a required aspect of her work, a deeper contextual reading of her life needs to be dislodged from the tangle of supposed non-history where it continued to remain until the recent surfacing of her snapshots. What about Bliss's early years followed by her foray into higher education may have situated the camera as an integrated part of her personhood, as an apt accessory, a welcomed appendage, like an article of clothing<sup>57</sup> or her own hat hung on a hook (figure 11)?



Figure 11. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Interior of a Room*], catalog number 2018.0168.0047, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Bliss's hat and coat can be seen hanging from a door, and the verso of the image reads, "Hotel Oxford – Enid, Okla."

Elizabeth Howe Bliss was born into the comfort of familial wealth in Worcester, Massachusetts, on January 11, 1886. As the first child born to William Howe Bliss and Nellie Jane Winch, she was quickly absorbed into life at 100 Main Street,<sup>58</sup> a house considered to be one of the nicest in the town.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> West, " 'Proudly Displayed by Wearers of Chic Ensembles:' Vanity Cameras, Kodak Girls, and the Culture of Female Fashion," 112.

<sup>58</sup> *The Worcester Directory, Containing a General Directory of the Citizens, a Business Directory, and the City And County Register* (Worcester, Mass.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1916): 113.

<sup>59</sup> Ellery Bicknell Crane, *Historic Homes and Institutions and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs of Worcester County*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1907), 365.

Built on the purported bootstraps of her grandfather,<sup>60</sup> who was white, male and had fortuitous timing, the family's wealth from banking, real estate and railroad deals was ready to serve as a support to Bliss in her formative years. But monetary security provided illusory protection from life's hardships and was not a panacea. Three years into Bliss's early childhood, her mother, Nellie, succumbed to phthisis,<sup>61</sup> what is now called pulmonary tuberculosis, and died at the age of 29. Her father, William, remarried in 1891, to a woman from Maine, Florence Edith Weston, with whom he would have three additional daughters, Bliss's half-sisters who included Sarah, who lived just over a year, and Florence and Dorothea.

Bliss's relationship with her stepmother and half-sisters has been tough to tease out, but her home life setting was one where women were in the majority. Advertising which promoted cameras and picture-making,<sup>62</sup> was certainly making its way into the Bliss household through magazines geared towards female readers.<sup>63</sup> Progressive books,<sup>64</sup> pamphlets and periodicals concerning women's issues and suffrage, including those overtly promoting white superiority,<sup>65</sup> would equally find themselves in feminine hands. Bliss would later pursue the more active and adventurous avenue of social work and investigative journalism rather than serving as a geographically-stationary and classroom-situated educator, and women like her found inspiration in such writings as well as consumerist encouragement to integrate a camera into daily activities.

Though a cloak of feminine fortitude covered the Bliss residence,<sup>66</sup> family life remained reliant on domestic staff. In a household of established wealth, cooking and meal service as well as the cleaning

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<sup>60</sup> Crane, *Historic Homes*, 365.

<sup>61</sup> "Massachusetts Deaths, 1841-1915," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-69BC-J3?cc=14363156&wc=MJCN-829%3A1043014401>.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Hines, Jr., "Women in Photography," *Photo-Era: The American Journal of Photography* 17, no. 3 (September 1906): 141-49.

<sup>63</sup> Examples include *Arthur's Lady's Home Magazine*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Holland's Magazine*, *McCall's*, *The Woman's Journal* and *Vogue*, among others.

<sup>64</sup> Julia Ward Howe, *Women's Work in America*, ed. Annie Nathan Meyer (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1891); David M. Steele, "The Other Side of Town," *Ladies' Home Journal* 19, no. 1 (December 1901): 20.

<sup>65</sup> Mainstream advertising, articles, illustrations and photographs often presented the dominant white culture as the superior one; racist stereotypes were common in publications like *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Puck*, as cited by, and found within the *T. Burns Collection of Racial Stereotypes, 1880s-1983*, at the Duke University Libraries; Wexler, "Introduction," 8.

<sup>66</sup> Although Bliss suffered major losses with the deaths of her mother and half-sister, her homelife stabilized in the presence of her stepmother and surviving half-sisters; this is also evidenced in Bliss's drive to attend school and make something of her life, despite suffering another hardship in the form of tuberculosis.

of rooms were types of work outside the purview of women of means and status. In the Bliss home, three staff members are listed on the 1900 census<sup>67</sup> as living with the family, one serving as a cook while the other two provided services as domestic workers. All were white, female and either first or second generation Irish Americans. Elizabeth would have been immersed in the differences between their stations in life and hers, as the hierarchy of class would have been apparent and unavoidable, but her social conditioning regarding race would have remained unchallenged and may have solidified in the absence of interaction with people of color. Perhaps due to the dearth of black Americans living in Massachusetts at the turn of the century,<sup>68</sup> domestic staffing was assembled from the immigrant populations, rather than diasporic communities determined to disconnect themselves from the institutionalized racism of the Jim Crow South. As will be evidenced in Elizabeth's photographs of black segregated communities in Oklahoma to be discussed in a later chapter of this paper, she was not afraid to place her lens within proximity of black bodies, though her images seem more at ease with white immigrants, a group to whom she may have felt she had an established rapport.<sup>69</sup>

In 1899, at the age of thirteen, Bliss began five years at Classical High School, in her home city of Worcester, which encouraged an extra year of attendance for students planning to attend prestigious universities,<sup>70</sup> and where she was affectionately referred to as "Lizzie."<sup>71</sup> During this time, she did well enough in her studies to make the honor roll, though not always garnering As,<sup>72</sup> and she showed her affinity for the written word by winning a national essay contest.<sup>73</sup> In a conversation with me, Bliss's son,

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<sup>67</sup> "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY69Y9KKN?i=9&cc=1325221&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AM9BC-8WM>.

<sup>68</sup> Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States," Population Division Working Paper Series No. 56 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002): 106.

<sup>69</sup> The surviving image of the girls she interviewed for her master's thesis evokes a comfort between the photographer and her subjects.

<sup>70</sup> *City Document, No. 59: Address of Honorable Walter H. Blodget, Mayor of the City of Worcester 1905, with the Annual Reports of the Several Departments for the Financial Year Ending November 30, 1904* (Worcester: The Hamilton Press, 1905), 55; the class roll for the five year program is small due to the fact that it was geared to students preparing for admittance into top-tier universities.

<sup>71</sup> Classical High School, *Aftermath* (Worcester: Classical High School, 1904), 41.

<sup>72</sup> *City Document, No. 59*, 54.

<sup>73</sup> Classical High School, *Aftermath*, 14; Bliss won an essay contest sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Daniel Newhall,<sup>74</sup> recollected that during this time, Bliss, like her mother before her, struggled with the physical effects of tuberculosis, which may have affected her grades, and that she had a tough decision to either accept her failing health and imminent death or to focus on the future. While Daniel remembers his mother saying that the porch at her childhood home<sup>75</sup> was to be walled off and made into a sickroom, he claims her tenacity and willfulness to get well and go off to college revived her spirits, and she eventually recovered.

Bliss enrolled in the reputable all-women's university, Smith College, in nearby Northampton, Massachusetts, beginning her four-year undergraduate program in 1904. While there, she encountered a political and social climate centered on women, their rights and their abilities for social and political engagement. Her exposure came through on-campus presentations and speeches, much like one given her senior year by the renowned social reformer, Jane Addams.<sup>76</sup> Addams, who was a vocal and active supporter of women's suffrage was also a proponent of women taking up social work. Addams's presence and persona would have been well-received by a student body that had begun to mature during the initial wave of New Womanhood. The earliest iteration of this feminist movement, to which Bliss belonged,<sup>77</sup> was focused on "political activism"<sup>78</sup> as well as the pursuit of "higher education...[and] economic independence."<sup>79</sup> As the idea of what a New Woman could be was slowly co-opted by society at large, culminating in the appearance of the flapper in the 1920s, the original ideals surrounding the movement were slowly obfuscated, with the second wave of women tending to focus more on entering the consumer class.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Daniel also recalled that there were one or two amateur-style cameras found in his mother's attic many decades after her Oklahoma and Kentucky trips. He was not able to remember their makes or models.

<sup>75</sup> The house in Worcester at 100 Main Street.

<sup>76</sup> Addams was also on the board of the NCLC.

<sup>77</sup> Bliss makes specific choices—to pursue social work and journalism over teaching, to become financially self-reliant, and to obtain a high level of education with a master's degree—all decisions that point to the specific ideals of late and early nineteenth-century New Womanhood.

<sup>78</sup> Sonya Michel and Robyn Muncy, "Varieties of New Women," *Engendering America: A Documentary History, 1865 to the Present* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1999), 83.

<sup>79</sup> Michel and Muncy, "Varieties of New Women," 69.

<sup>80</sup> Michel and Muncy, "Varieties of New Women," 70.

From her place among the first wave of New Women, Bliss found herself focused on journalistic endeavours. In her senior yearbook in 1908, Bliss is listed as the president of the Smith College Press Board (figure 12), (quite separate from *The Smith College Monthly*—the campus’s catchall publication for



Figure 12. Smith College, *The Book of the Class of Nineteen-Hundred-and-Seven*, 1907. Bliss is listed as the president of the Smith College Press Board.

news, events and literature offerings—that was staffed by a separate cadre of girls.)<sup>81</sup> The Press Board’s members created individual printed press releases as they saw pertinent,<sup>82</sup> and contributed stories to local and regional newspapers.<sup>83</sup> I unfortunately did not have the resources nor the time to access Northampton’s early twentieth-century newspaper holdings. I will explore these periodicals in the future for their possibility to reveal Bliss’s inclusion of photographs with her news stories.

While Bliss helmed her own group, a classmate, Millicent Vaughn Lewis—who would later serve with Bliss in war-torn France—presided over the short-lived Smith College Ku Klux Klan club.<sup>84</sup> Though

<sup>81</sup> *The Book of the Class of Nineteen-Hundred-and-Seven* lists just three girls—Harriet Townsend Carswell, Katharine Doble Hinman and Margaret Hallock Steen—who were members of both the Press Board and the Monthly staff.

<sup>82</sup> A collection of Press Board-specific press releases is held in the Smith College Special Collections; I did not have time to consult these records during my visit to Smith, but I hope to rectify this with a return trip.

<sup>83</sup> “Flying Club,” Smithipedia, *Smith College*, accessed 15 July 2019, <https://sophia.smith.edu/blog/smithipedia/student-life/flying-club/>; “Valentine’s Day Deliveries at Smith,” Smith College Archives, *Smith College*, accessed 14 July 2019, <https://smitharchives.wordpress.com/2009/02/12/valentines-day-deliveries-at-smith/>; “Sylvia Plath (1955),” Smithipedia, *Smith College*, accessed 15 July 2019, <https://sophia.smith.edu/blog/smithipedia/alumnae/sylvia-plath-1955/>; the Smith College Press Board provided the opportunity to its members to serve as correspondents for local news publications.

<sup>84</sup> Smith College, *The Book of the Class of Nineteen-Hundred-and-Seven* (Buffalo, New York: Hausauer-Jones Printing Co., 1907), 90.

this club existed—officially—for a single year,<sup>85</sup> it speaks to the social acceptance of racist beliefs during this time, as well as the lack of diversity on the Smith campus that would deem such a club worthy of forming. Though its president, as named above, was a key participant in the Smith College Relief Unit, notable for its altruistic impetus, this seeming disconnect between Progressive women and racist beliefs was nothing new, and in fact, had been a strand intertwined with feminist and women's suffrage dialogs for some time.<sup>86</sup> Bliss was not a member of Lewis's club, and thus she was not a blatant—or proud—racist. However, like many white people in this era, Bliss utilized a distinctive vocabulary relating to black Americans that was contradictory, shifting drastically between its use in public versus that of the private realm, and to be discussed later in this paper.

Between her graduation from Smith in 1908, and the start of her master's program at Columbia University in New York City in 1913, Bliss taught English as a public school teacher in Watertown, New York.<sup>87</sup> Though teaching was a socially acceptable form of employment for young women,<sup>88</sup> she ultimately decided to pursue social work. The widespread coverage of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, which claimed the lives of 146 workers, most of them Jewish and Italian immigrant women and girls in 1911, put the dangers of industrial disregard for the safety of young workers at the fore of public discourse. Whether Bliss consciously related this horrendous event with unchecked capitalism, and to what extent, cannot be ascertained, but it profoundly affected those who were engaged in the reform movements based largely in New York City,<sup>89</sup> a locale Bliss soon sought out as her next home.

Bliss's time at Columbia University pursuing a master's degree in social work marked a shift in the kinds of social interactions she was to have. Unlike the predominantly white and well-off enclaves of

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<sup>85</sup> Claudia Keenan, "Puzzling Out the Klan at Smith College," *Through the Hour Glass, Evoking American History: New Stories and Other Times*, accessed April 18, 2019, [https://www.throughthehourglass.com/2018/12/puzzling-out-klan-at-smith-college\\_12.html](https://www.throughthehourglass.com/2018/12/puzzling-out-klan-at-smith-college_12.html); the Smith Ku Klux Klan club had an official presence on campus in 1907—Bliss's junior year.

<sup>86</sup> Angela Y. Davis, "The Anti-Slavery Movement and the Birth of Women's Rights," 34; "Racism in the Woman Suffrage Movement," 70-86.

<sup>87</sup> Smith College Senior Class, "Alumnæ Department," *Smith College Monthly* 16, no. 2 (November 1908): 140; Tisdale to Bliss, telegram, 1908, box 11, folder 22, Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College; "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed Feb 2, 2019, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQGRKQ94MW?i=32&cc=1727033&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3AM221-NFT>.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen Weiler, "Women's History and the History of Women Teachers," *Journal of Education* 171, no. 3 (1989): 9.

<sup>89</sup> The NCLC headquarters were based in Manhattan.

Worcester or Smith College,<sup>90</sup> New York City was threaded through with the lives of humanity's most diverse, with many of those lives intersecting lines of class, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation and physical and mental disability. New Yorkers, like Bliss, were incapable of avoiding these different facets of the human experience within the density of the city especially when combined with the continued rise of industrial capitalism. The detrimental effects of such a system on the city's more vulnerable classes was asserted through the daily newspaper and from the illuminating screens of the cinema. Building on the past outrage of events like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, films like *Children of Eve*,<sup>91</sup> released the year Bliss was finishing her graduate studies, served as a reminder of the continued injustices plaguing the nation's young labourers as well as signaling that a socially-concerned trajectory was a righteous one. As her degree reached its end, she focused on the plight of young working girls in New York, most of whom were immigrants working as seamstresses in the hand sewing trade, as the topic of her master's thesis.<sup>92</sup> Using her social work and growing investigative skills, she interviewed fifty of these young workers, producing multiple case studies that still resound as accurate records of exploitative child labour in New York City in 1915.

With the completion of her thesis, Bliss did not return to Worcester,<sup>93</sup> choosing instead to remain in the city. Sometime between the summer of 1915 and early 1917, Bliss found employment with the National Child Labor Committee, helmed by two Progressive-minded ministers, Owen Lovejoy, and Alexander McKelway, who oversaw personnel comprised of field agents and administrative workers who staffed NCLC offices in New York City and Washington, D.C. The mostly likely avenue for Bliss's integration into the NCLC was through the Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations, started by the Smith College Club of New York around 1914.<sup>94</sup> The Bureau provided training and occupational placement to women seeking career alternatives to teaching, with social work serving as its main focus. Lewis Hine,

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<sup>90</sup> Caldwell Titcomb, "Key Events in Black Higher Education," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.jbhe.com/chronology/>.

<sup>91</sup> John H. Collins, *Children of Eve* (New York City: Edison Studios, 1915) 35 mm filmstrip, 5 reels, 73 min.

<sup>92</sup> Bliss, "Intimate Studies in the Lives of Fifty Working Girls," Master's Thesis (New York: Columbia University, 1915).

<sup>93</sup> The creation of the images used for the "In the Back Yard of Wall Street," were made after Bliss's thesis was published in 1915 and before she left with the NCLC agents for Oklahoma in 1917.

<sup>94</sup> "Work for the College Woman: The Intercollegiate Bureau of Occupations," *The Hartford Courant*, January 11, 1914, X4.



who had worked as the NCLC's official photographer since 1907,<sup>95</sup> was likely introduced to Bliss on the train en route for their assignment in Oklahoma.<sup>96</sup> Though they both had enrolled at Columbia University's Graduate School of Social Work,<sup>97</sup> Hine had attended a decade earlier, thus this would have been an unlikely locale for a first meeting.

Bliss's first effort with the NCLC, a report entitled, "In the Back Yard of Wall Street," focused on the indignities suffered by immigrant children whose lives had been drawn into an alternative labour market. It concerns young girls nannying for the small children of working parents. Bliss writes of their long and late hours for little pay—the majority of which went to their mothers—and she rests the blame for these young girls' misfortunes on their fathers' "enforced idleness"<sup>98</sup> and subsequent drinking during the economic downturn due to the war.<sup>99</sup> She conflates and implicates the broken system of reliable employment with meritocratic reward, reducing the source of the problem to a Progressive talking point: that industrial capitalism—with its favouring of the young, exploitable labourer—provided less reliable work for adults. Though these girls are not toiling in factories or sweatshops, an impassioned Bliss tells us their plight is just as disheartening.

Bliss's Oklahoma assignment for the NCLC was given to her in the spring of 1917, almost a year after the public immolation-lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, and four years before the Tulsa Race Massacre that would result in white residents violently attacking and destroying a prominent neighborhood known as the black Wall Street. Bliss and each of the agents traveling with her were given a specific investigation focus,<sup>100</sup> such as children's access to education or the occurrences of child labour, but it seems no rule was set against the size or socioeconomic status of the locations they could travel to.

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<sup>95</sup> Duerden, " 'Sociological Photography,' " 67; 1907 marked the year that Lewis Hine was given his first big assignment by the director of the NCLC, Owen R. Lovejoy.

<sup>96</sup> Both Hine and Bliss captioned their photographs with dates in March of 1917, suggesting they left New York and arrived in Oklahoma concurrently.

<sup>97</sup> Timothy J. Duerden, " 'Sociological Photography,' 1905-1910: Child Labor and the Pittsburgh Survey," 60-61; in 1904, Hine enrolled at Columbia whilst concurrently pursuing a master's degree in education at New York University, which he completed in 1905.

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss, "In the Back Yard of Wall Street," *The Child Labor Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (August 1917): 122.

<sup>99</sup> The United States had yet to enter into the conflict, but the domestic economy was lagging under the war's effects.

<sup>100</sup> Bliss focused on details relating to the status of schools and the access they provided to children; Hine investigated instances of child labour; additional agents had their own specific topics.

While Oklahoma initially took a laissez-faire approach to the enforcement of segregation, by 1915, the state had surged to the front of the “separate but equal” pack by “becoming the first state in the Union to segregate public pay telephone booths.”<sup>101</sup> While Bliss visited the working poor comprised of white and black residents alike, her visits were segregated by the state-sanctioned dividing lines of Jim Crow racism. Bliss and her colleagues spent weeks traveling in Oklahoma to capture the essential aspects of its child labour and education issues, and Bliss’s own report, “Education,” seems to successfully argue the strengths and weaknesses of Oklahoma’s education system, albeit a separate and unequal one rigidly separated by race. In the case of the “negro schools,” Bliss felt that they “should be supported in the same manner as those for white children,”<sup>102</sup> noting that while many of the white schools were bad, those for black children were considerably worse.<sup>103</sup>

That April, while the group was in Oklahoma City, Bliss opened her newspaper<sup>104</sup> and learned of the US declaration of war on Germany. Soon after, she received a notice from a Smith alumna<sup>105</sup> proposing the formation of a group to provide direct aid to areas in France hit particularly hard by Germany’s attacks. In late July, Bliss and the other members of the hastily formed Smith College Relief Unit boarded the *SS Rochambeau* ocean liner (figure 13) bound for France, arriving in Paris on

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<sup>101</sup> James M. Smallwood, “Segregation,” Oklahoma Historical Society, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=SE006>.

<sup>102</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss, “Education,” in *Child Welfare in Oklahoma: An Inquiry by the National Child Labor Committee for the University of Oklahoma*, ed. Edward N. Clopper (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1918): 98.

<sup>103</sup> Bliss, 98.

<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss (Newhall) to Daniel Newhall, 8 March 1966, box 142, folder 7, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries; Bliss recalls her exasperation with this particular newspaper—whose name she could not recall—as it featured the announcement of a local sports team’s recent victory on the front page rather than the American declaration of war—which was printed on an interior page.

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss (Newhall) to Daniel Newhall, 8 March 1966, box 142, folder 7, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries; Bliss writes that only Smith alumna of a certain age and occupation were sent the notices regarding the Smith College Relief Unit; she writes that she was sent a notice because, “[she] was a social worker;” Bliss does not specify who the originator of Relief Unit idea was.

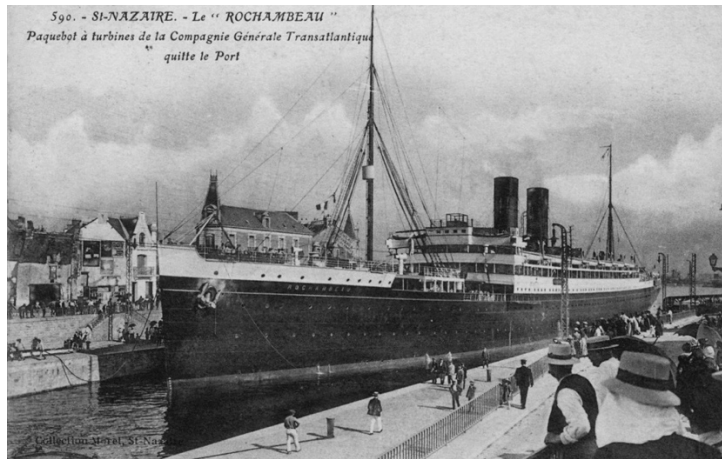


Figure 13. “St-Nazaire – Le ‘Rochambeau,’ ” Morel Collection, numbered postcard from series, *Delcampe.net*, c. 1919.

August 14.<sup>106</sup> Once they neared the front, her group was initiated into the operations of the Red Cross, which had established relief areas in advance of the Unit’s arrival. In addition to nursing duties—which were learned in the field—Bliss and her cohort worked directly with French families and children who had suffered throughout the continued fighting.<sup>107</sup>

Many women served the war effort on the Western Front.<sup>108</sup> Some of them, like Anne Morgan, author of *The American Girl*, and daughter of John Pierpont Morgan, or like wool-mill heiress, Margaret Hall, understood the power and value of photographic imagery, and were able to, like Bliss, embed themselves as war zone relief workers with its visual potential in mind.<sup>109</sup> Unlike these contemporaries, Bliss did not rely on family money to propel her through her war work. In letters from the Somme sent home to friends, Bliss mentions her financial concerns and wonders if her decision had been right to leave

<sup>106</sup> “Relief Unit of Smith College in France Aids Ally,” *The Hartford Courant*, November 23, 1917, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Ruth Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt: The Smith College Relief Unit in the Somme* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1920).

<sup>108</sup> Sandra Opdycke, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Backward: 1914-1965,” *The Routledge Historical Atlas of Women in America*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Routledge, 2000), 80.

<sup>109</sup> “Photographing Devastated France,” *Anne Morgan’s War: Rebuilding Devastated France, 1917-1924*, the Morgan Library & Museum, website for the exhibition held from September 3 to November 21, 2010, accessed 15 March 2019, <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/anne-morgans-war>; Alan Govenar and Mary Niles Maack, *Anne Morgan: Photography, Philanthropy & Advocacy* (New York: The American Friends of Blerancourt, 2016); Anne Morgan understood the powers of photography to influence public support of the war relief effort, and while she herself was not a photographer, she was able to commission images to be made on her behalf; Margaret Hall, *Letters and Photographs from the Battle Country: The World War I Memoir of Margaret Hall*, eds. Margaret R. Higonnet with Susan Solomon (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2014); Hall devoted much of her time to photographing the ravages of war in France.

the NCLC and the decent pay it had provided her.<sup>110</sup> She also laments a lost opportunity for photographic endeavours, writing to her friend Blanche that “they have taken our cameras away from us so no more pictures and of course I carelessly omitted to take most of the ones I wanted and now it’s too late.”<sup>111</sup> The cameras must have been returned as she confides in her diary (figure 14 and figure 15) in February of the following year, “spent all a.m. taking pictures madly and using up films.”<sup>112</sup> While Bliss was busy photographically during her time in France, the only photos that remain from this period reside in the

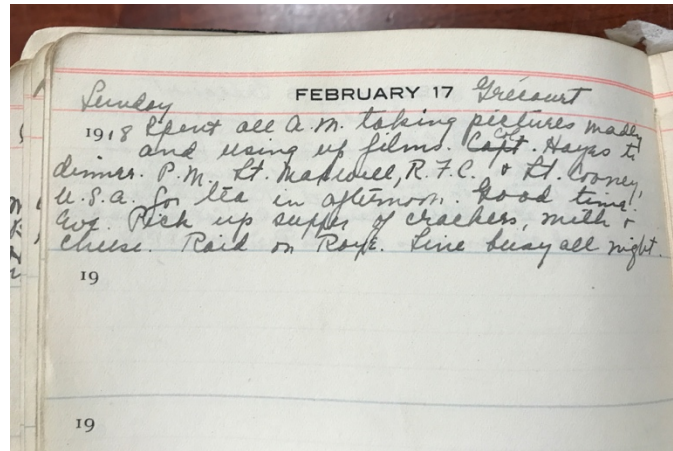


Figure 14. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, diary kept during her time as a war relief worker and nurse in France, front cover, diary 2 of 2, box 142, folder 9, 1918, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries. Figure 15. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, diary kept during her time as a war relief worker and nurse in France, inner page, diary 2 of 2, box 142, folder 9, 1918, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries. This image shows Bliss’ diary entry from February 17, 1918, while she was in Grécourt, France, part of the department of the Somme.

<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Blanche and Peter, 17 November 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries; Elizabeth Howe Bliss to unknown recipient, December 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Blanche, November 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss, diary entry, 17 February 1918, box 142, folder 9, diary 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

repositories of the Smith College Special Collections.

Bliss's overseas efforts ended upon the announcement of the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Bliss, who was in Paris at the time, lamented not being at the Front when word of the war's end came.<sup>113</sup> Upon returning Stateside, she reincorporated herself into the inner workings of the NCLC, which had continued its operations throughout the duration of the war. Bliss's decision to request her position back was based on her desire to continue the work she found satisfying and to return to consistent pay,<sup>114</sup> and she was able to negotiate her own return date on her own terms.<sup>115</sup> Her role as investigator was reinstated, and in January of 1919, she was off to New England—including stops in Burlington, Vermont, and Concord, New Hampshire<sup>116</sup>—though here excitement waned at the thought of “spending [her] days in queer country hotels for weeks.”<sup>117</sup>

The NCLC offered an investigative opportunity in Kentucky for the duration of two months, to begin that April,<sup>118</sup> which she accepted. In the brief interim, the organization encouraged her to recount her relief work experiences in the badly-damaged department of the Somme during the war. Though published in *The Child Labor Bulletin*<sup>119</sup> without a byline, the article “French Children in War-Time,” describes Bliss's experiences with the Smith College Relief Unit in great detail including the group's opening of a social center for boys and girls to teach them “manual training...and sewing”<sup>120</sup> skills,

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<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss [Newhall] to Daniel Newhall, 25 September 1966, box 142, folder 7, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries; Elizabeth Howe Bliss to unknown recipient, December 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Blanche and Peter, 1 July 1918, box 142, folder 3, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Richard Ager Newhall, 7 January 1918, box 5, folder 23-24, Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College.

<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Richard Ager Newhall, 31 January 1919, box 5, folder 23-24. In the Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College; I have yet to find Bliss's reports, published or otherwise, relating to this trip, as this information has been gleaned directly from her personal correspondence.

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Richard Ager Newhall, 31 January 1919, box 5, folder 23-24. In the Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College.

<sup>118</sup> The caption on the verso of image number 2018.0168.0023, which depicts Bliss herself in Kentucky, lists the date as “April 1919.”

<sup>119</sup> The National Child Labor Committee, “French Children in War-Time,” *The Child Labor Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (February 1919): 259-62.

<sup>120</sup> The National Child Labor Committee, “French Children,” 260.

respectively. Included in this report are photographs accompanied with explanatory captions, with the Relief Unit cited singularly for the photographic output. From the details in Bliss's correspondence and private diary entries, it is clear that at least one of these images originates from Bliss's lens.<sup>121</sup>

Although she had succeeded in returning to her old life, Bliss still corresponded with Lieutenant Richard Newhall, whom she had met when he and a fellow officer, "stopped in at the local Red Cross headquarters,"<sup>122</sup> while on a brief break from overseeing troop movement in Beauvais, France—and to whom she provided medical assistance after a bad injury on the battlefield. They were soon engaged and married on June 21, 1919,<sup>123</sup> in the Church of the Messiah in Manhattan.<sup>124</sup> Newhall and Bliss (figure 16)



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<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to unknown recipient, 21 December 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries; Elizabeth Howe Bliss to unknown recipient, November 1917, box 142, folder 2, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

<sup>122</sup> James Carl Nelson, "A Very Present Existence," *Five Lieutenants: The Heartbreaking Story of Five Harvard Men Who Led America to Victory in World War I* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012), 218.

<sup>123</sup> "New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829-1940," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed 17 March 2019, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:2474-HN6>.

<sup>124</sup> "Social and Personal," *The Hartford Courant*, June 25, 1919, 13.

Figure 16. Unknown photographer, [Untitled], c. 1919, box 11, folder 16. In the Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College. An image of Elizabeth Howe Bliss and Lieutenant Newhall.

left New York to take up residence at 33 Concord Street, in Cambridge, Massachusetts,<sup>125</sup> while Newhall finished out his contract as Instructor and Tutor in History at Harvard University.<sup>126</sup> Newhall was offered the position of Assistant Professor of History at Yale University to begin that fall,<sup>127</sup> and Bliss—now Elizabeth Newhall— was off to yet another locale, and a new life, as an academic's wife. While her letters recount excitement about this change,<sup>128</sup> she ultimately left the NCLC and her life as a social reformer behind. The Newhalls raised three children<sup>129</sup>—two sons and a daughter—and eventually returned to Massachusetts where Richard taught at Williams College until his retirement in the mid-1950s.<sup>130</sup> He died near Williamstown, Massachusetts, in June of 1973, and Bliss died shortly thereafter, in January of 1974.<sup>131</sup> They share a gravestone in the Williams College Cemetery.

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<sup>125</sup> "Social and Personal," *The Hartford Courant*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> "Richard A. Newhall," John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, accessed July 28, 2019, <https://www.gf.org/fellows/all-fellows/richard-a-newhall/>.

<sup>127</sup> "Richard A. Newhall," John Simon Guggenheim, accessed July 28, 2019; "Obituary—Richard A. Newhall," *Bennington Banner*, June 21, 1973, 7.

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Mother and Father Newhall, [March or April] 1919, box 11, folder 22, Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College.

<sup>129</sup> "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch*, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:K4XM-FQJ>.

<sup>130</sup> "Dr. Richard Newhall, 85, Dies; History Professor at Williams," *New York Times*, June 20, 1973, 44.

<sup>131</sup> "Richard Ager Newhall," a virtual memorial on *Find A Grave*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/119010925/richard-ager-newhall>; "Elizabeth Bliss Newhall," a virtual memorial on *Find A Grave*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/119010952/elizabeth-newhall>.

### Chapter 3. The Impetus Question: Why Make These Images?

A consideration of the influences driving Bliss' photo-making is imperative. Her vernacular tendency was born from a "photography...not practiced by most people as an art,"<sup>132</sup> as she had no aesthetic ambition for her photographs. The advent of roll film and easy-to-use apparatuses meant that image-making could feel natural and unencumbered, as it had "ceased to be a ritual and [had instead become] 'reflex.'"<sup>133</sup> Making images then, was not about elevating moments for aesthetic pleasure, but about capturing them and considering them at a later time.

Kodak superseded its emphasis on ease of operation by proposing that the camera should serve as dialog-maker and memorialiser. Nancy Martha West, who points to Kodak's specific implementation of their "Let Kodak Keep the Story" campaign, begun in 1907 and lasting decades, determines that the subtext of such a strong statement equaled "the relentless message to consumers that their memories could not be trusted to preserve their life stories."<sup>134</sup> As this advertising would have been prevalent, Bliss is sure to have encountered it, and in considering the construction of her own narrative, a camera would have been seen as necessary to preserve, and make proof of her own experiences, especially those comprising her social work and investigations.

In Susan Sontag's essay, "In Plato's Cave," a further assertion is made, with this eventual everyday usage of photography becoming something more akin to "a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power."<sup>135</sup> Many women in Bliss's era understood the social implications of carrying and using a camera. With Eastman Kodak's "Kodak Girl" ads in persistent circulation, the emphasis on the making of images would be less focused on the "ritual"<sup>136</sup> of image capture itself—a process concerned with making a photograph aesthetically and technically superior—but rather as something done to satisfy a social craving, the mere act of photographing superseding in social

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<sup>132</sup> Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 8; while Sontag is making a reference to the state of photography in the 1970s—specifically the rise of postmodernism—she articulates the reasoning behind a continued proliferation of quotidian photographs—a phenomenon already well-established in Bliss's era.

<sup>133</sup> John Berger, "Uses of Photography," 53.

<sup>134</sup> Nancy Martha West, "'Let Kodak Keep the Story,'" 166.

<sup>135</sup> Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," 8.

<sup>136</sup> Berger, 53.



importance the materiality and pictorial quality of the photograph itself.

In Bliss's later camera-wielding years she was more geographically adventurous, often utilizing her camera as a sort of shield, a palpable partition between her own physicality and that of her human subjects, whilst concurrently employing her lens as an extension of her curious eye, occasionally treading so far as to enter the realm of the voyeur or the unabashed tourist. Some of her images are unambiguously aggressive. One of two such images depicts an older black man dancing for spare change (figure 17),

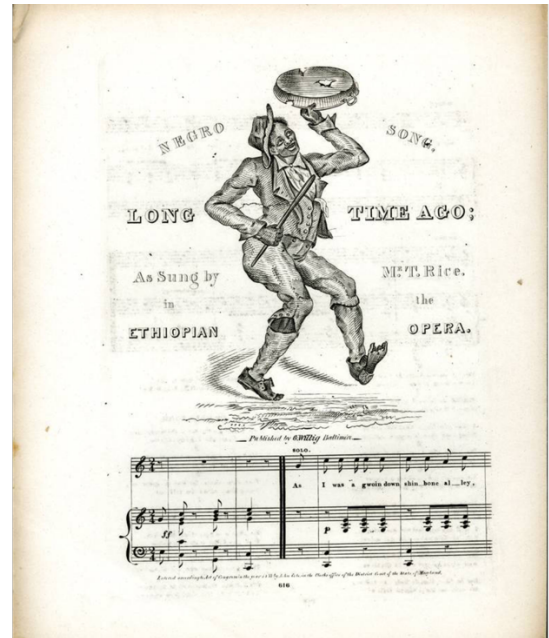


Figure 17. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*African-American Man Dancing at Railroad Station*], catalog number 2018.0168.0056, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Figure 18. “Long Time Ago Negro Song...As Sung by M.T. Rice in the Ethiopian Opera,” catalog number cg430n1257\_1, Page 430, Butler Collection of Theatrical Illustrations, Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries, 1833. Early iterations of the Jim Crow character depict him with a makeshift drum fashioned from a damaged pan and a stick to beat it with. As the popularity of minstrel shows grew, the stick was transmuted into a cane.

where Bliss has openly placed herself in line with him—independent from the throng of people—capturing his bent back and the straight line of his cane. Beyond curiosity, this image was snapped as something familiar (figure 18), a literal profile of a specific stereotype of black man—clothes shabby with

cane in hand—dancing for his livelihood. To Bliss, this was a real-life Jim Crow,<sup>137</sup> and her lens seeks to prove it.

Other images are paparazzi-like in their zeal to document two Native American women (figures 31, 32 and 33) —seen later in this paper—whose gazes remain hidden, steadfastly opposed to Bliss’s prying lens as it decimates the space between camera and subjects with each image shot. Not every peopled photograph that Bliss took was as brazen.<sup>138</sup> Many of Bliss’s prints lack this aggression, and instead retain a feeling of amateur carelessness, of being un-stylized and in the moment. They remain focused on their subjects but with less insistence on hemming them in.

From a social engagement perspective, Progressive reformers like Bliss were aware of the prior uses of concerned imagery combined with textual reports. Jacob Riis’ efforts to capture slum life in New York City using “social scientific methods of careful observation and deployment of statistics and photographs [became] hallmarks of the Progressive movement,”<sup>139</sup> and solidified the approach for taking cameras into communities destabilized by poverty. Riis’s use of photography, made more versatile by new innovations like flash powder combined with unadulterated access to his subjects’ living and working situations, enabled future concerned photographers like Lewis Hine to take up where his work left off. Though Riis was the brains behind this admixture of investigative journalism and revelatory photography, Hine became its moral conscience, as he sought “to develop a way of communicating that required no speeches to be understood and be effective,”<sup>140</sup> something he accomplished by directing his lens in accordance with the principles of “the Social Gospel.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> The Jim Crow persona was invented by the white entertainer, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who performed as the character while in black face. Rice claimed that Jim Crow was based on a real person, but he was an amalgamation of racist tropes and stereotypes.

<sup>138</sup> As a white woman exerting her privilege to photograph anyone she chooses; the black man nor the Native American women could exercise the same freedom.

<sup>139</sup> Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom, “Introduction,” *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xv.

<sup>140</sup> Kate Sampsell-Willmann, “Social Testimony: Lewis Hine’s Expertise,” *Lewis Hine as Social Critic* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 86.

<sup>141</sup> Sampsell-Willmann, “Social Testimony,” 86; the Social Gospel was a social justice movement perpetuated by Protestants, and included religious Progressives like Jane Addams —those in the movement viewed societal ills like child labour, addiction, poverty, crime, etc., as issues to be improved upon through an application of religious tenets and social activism.

In addition to Riis and Hine, female photographers such as Frances Benjamin Johnston and Gertrude Käsebier, were also making images of society's supposed wounded, often those outside the white and monied power structure, in an effort "to support the contemporary order."<sup>142</sup> Their photographs employed an elevated art-aesthetic to soften their subjects, a sort of visual taming,<sup>143</sup> seamlessly denigrating the agency of their sitters as well as propping up nationalistic fantasies of allegiance and assimilation. While Bliss's images engendered their own form of outsider-smoothing, their existence as small, non-art snapshots used for mass reproduction altered the language of their discourse. In this vein, they were less effective as individual images of colonial triumph but could satisfy, on the printed page, the socially curative desires of the NCLC's readership.

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<sup>142</sup> Laura Wexler, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>143</sup> Wexler, "Introduction," 11.

## Chapter 4. The Bliss Photographs: Materiality and Content

Much can be gleaned regarding the creation of these snapshots when considering the presence of Lewis Hine on this trip. Hine, the NCLC's primary photographer, was, like Bliss, in charge of his own written report. In addition to images Hine made of child labourers, his Oklahoma investigative topic, he created an additional cache of large format negatives and prints<sup>144</sup> that relate to the report topics of Bliss and their field colleagues. While Hine's notes indicate the images he took of the work undertaken by specific agents, the subjects he labeled for Bliss's report do not overlap with her own images.<sup>145</sup> Some of these Hine images also perform technological feats that Bliss's rarely do—he shoots images of young children in tight spaces indoors—and due to their clarity and lack of blurring, indicate his utilization of a flash lamp.<sup>146</sup> Bliss's two images of the interior of her hotel room seem more likely made with natural window light—sunlight can be seen hitting the floor and the closet door frame—combined with a tripod or side table to hold the cameras steady.

Bliss's use of two cameras,<sup>147</sup> especially when Hine had the skill, savvy and organizational endorsement for such an endeavour, is puzzling. One camera may have been her personal apparatus making images for research and diaristic record-keeping; the other on loan from the organization, to create the photographs Bliss would submit for reproduction. As it was not uncommon for the NCLC to supply an occasional camera to agents before sending them out in the field,<sup>148</sup> this is a very real possibility. Beyond being used as illustrations in the NCLC's printed publications, photographs were also

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<sup>144</sup> Roughly 134 of Lewis Hine's Oklahoma prints dating from March and April of 1917 reside in the Library of Congress's National Child Labor Committee Collection; other examples may exist at the Eastman Museum and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County as both institutions have Hine archives.

<sup>145</sup> One of eight similarly-titled images that relate to Bliss's Oklahoma work is captioned: "[School garden - Jefferson School. See Bliss report.];" all the images, including those that relate to the other investigators in the group, are held within the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress

<sup>146</sup> "A Brief History of the Camera Flash, From Explosive Powder to LED Lights: Flash Lamps," *PetaPixel*, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://petapixel.com/2015/10/05/a-brief-history-of-the-camera-flash-from-explosive-powder-to-led-lights/>; a handheld T-shaped apparatus that held dry flash powder that was ignited with a battery hooked to the camera's shutter.

<sup>147</sup> The use of multiple cameras by Bliss will be discussed at further length later in this paper.

<sup>148</sup> *National Child Labor Committee Treasurer's Statement, Month Ending June 30, 1910*, a report published in 1910 regarding the NCLC's fiscal status; named within this report is a Mr. Browne, who accompanied Lewis Hine to investigate Delaware street trades and canneries, and was lent, "1 camera... [for use in his] investigations," under "Treasurer's Statement, June--#4;" though the NCLC created notations of budgeted items, they did not specify the kind of camera models they would loan.

exhibited, made into lantern slides for lectures, used for advertisements, as well as rented and sold.<sup>149</sup>

With such a range of options for photographic dissemination, it would not be surprising for Bliss to conduct her investigations with a camera in tow, especially if the images captured could be translated into a larger paycheck or used to gain a wider audience for her investigative work. Ultimately, the Oklahoma publication went to press without the inclusion of photographs, perhaps because its primary use was as a research resource for the University of Oklahoma rather than for rousing public sentiment. Bliss was not alone in this exclusion—Lewis Hine’s images from this trip also went unpublished. They reside in the Library of Congress’s National Child Labor Committee Collection.

What remains is an interesting miscellany of prints made by Bliss in the field. One image depicting a white family in front of their shack has been printed twice, and on the verso of the brighter and better contrasted of the two images (figure 19), an extended caption reads: “Sperry, Okla. Family of 15 living in one room shack. 3 children sleeping in Cyclone Cave. Other 3 members of family refused to pose. March 25, 1917.” The dual prints (figure 20 and figure 21) and the specific, ordered details seem to mark this as an image Bliss thought had merit for future publication.

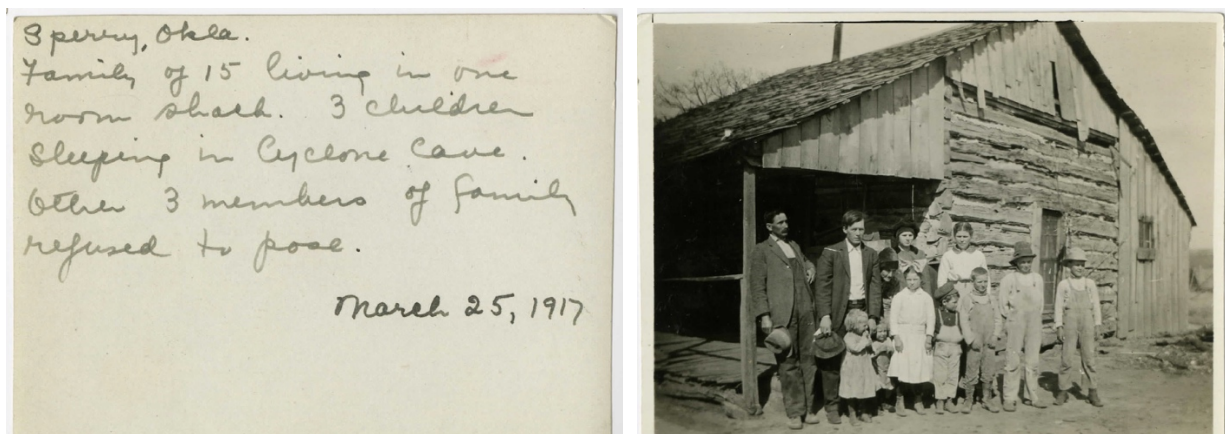


Figure 19. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Family of Twelve Outside Log Cabin*] verso, catalog number 2018.0168.0013, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, 1917. Figure 20. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Family of Twelve Outside Log Cabin*], catalog number 2018.0168.0013, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, 1917.

<sup>149</sup> Lovejoy, “Thirteenth Annual Report of the General Secretary,” 155.



Figure 21. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Family of 12 (Twelve) Outside Log Cabin*], catalog number 2018.0168.0012, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, 1917. One of two prints made from the same negative. For reproduction purposes, this image is the less-polished of the two.

As mentioned, Bliss's master's thesis focused on young, white, immigrant girls working as seamstresses in New York City. An interesting inclusion within the NMAH collection is an undated print (figure 22) belonging to the smaller of the two size groups. It depicts twelve preteenagers and one young



Figure 22. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Group Portrait on Front Steps*], catalog number 2018.0168.0025, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1915.

child, all female, and posed asymmetrically,<sup>150</sup> standing and sitting on a set of stairs. Most of the girls hold light-colored pieces of fabric, rags to be repatriated into garments of fashion. Many of the girls are smiling, while some look down and continue with their work. One girl, unaware of the camera, is captured with eyes closed and rubbing the bridge of her nose. This image, while prearranged, is also an act of spontaneity. It is visibly different from the others in the grouping; it has no border, which may have been cut away following the printing process, and the semi-gloss paper it was printed on is noticeably thicker than the other images in the collection. This print is the earliest extant image in the collection and serves as evidence for the integration of photography into Bliss's investigations as a means for documenting details.<sup>151</sup>

A subset of three photographs in the NMAH collection show school age girls holding what I first assumed were their siblings, thinking perhaps that these were images of Bliss's own kin. Two<sup>152</sup> of the images (figure 23 and figure 24) show the same younger girl, while the third image (figure 25) is of a different subject. Both girls are wearing dresses and holding a smaller child in their arms. As the photographs' protagonists, the girls smile for the camera while their child appendages appear disinterested. The setting in the images can be discerned as park-like, with the same walking path, buildings and trees visible in the background. Within Bliss's "In the Back Yard of Wall Street"

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<sup>150</sup> An example of directed posing.

<sup>151</sup> Bliss's master's thesis was printed without the inclusion of photographs.

<sup>152</sup> Within this subset there are five images—two of one younger girl, three of the other—made by Bliss in New York City. The two published photographs are not in the NMAH collection, though their three variants—shown above—are; the whereabouts of the published images from the "In the Back Yard of Wall Street" report have yet to be determined.





Figure 23. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Young Girl Holding Baby Boy*], catalog number 2018.0168.0028, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1915. Figure 24. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Young Girl Holding Baby Boy*], catalog number 2018.0168.0027, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1915. Figure 25. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Young Girl Holding Baby Girl*], catalog number 2018.0168.0029, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1915. Similar images were included in Bliss's 1917 report "In the Back Yard of Wall Street," published in *The Child Labor Bulletin*.

report, I discovered that her text was interspersed with prints similar to the NMAH images and reveals the girls to be caregivers for their neighbours' children, essentially serving as underpaid and overworked babysitters. Bliss was beyond a novice photographer by this point, having made the evidentiary image of the young seamstresses within the two years prior. Interestingly, these images only obtain their documentary power when blended with her text, as they would otherwise succeed only in their ordinariness.

Many of Bliss's snapshots of Oklahoma are equally banal, though a selection of them finds Bliss plumbing a supplemental narrative within the context of race in the American South. From her visits to segregated neighborhoods within the cities of Tulsa and Braggs, Bliss captured images of black children



near dilapidated housing (figure 26) as well as a group of black adults (figure 27) standing



Figure 26. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*African-American Children Outside Tent*], catalog number 2018.0168.0006, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. The verso reads: "On the road to Braggs Muskogee County Oklahoma."



Figure 27. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Public Library in Segregated District, Tulsa*], catalog number 2018.0168.0017, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. The verso reads: “Segregated Colored District —Tulsa, Okla. 3/29/17.”

in front of their neighbourhood library. The difference between the images is striking. The print of the children—in their threadbare attire— seems bound up in pity and dejection whereas the print of the men transmits opportunity and optimism as they stand upon the steps of their own library. With the children, Bliss’s camera gets close, underscoring her comfort drawn from her previous experience photographing young people. Alternatively, the image of the adults, all men, has been taken from farther away, likely across the street, with a distance that speaks to a conscious understanding that getting too close, as a white woman, could have deadly consequences for her subjects,<sup>153</sup> though a more direct reason may have been the result of trying to fit the men, the building and the sandwich board sign within the confines of the frame. While Bliss’s time was earmarked for investigating the Oklahoma education system and its young participants, her touristic eye had wandered to where the signifiers of white society had all but disappeared.

While these specific images do not definitively fix her to the intentions and interventionist underpinnings of white savior-dom or superiority,<sup>154</sup> additional snapshots in this vein are problematic, especially from a contemporary vantage point. Two prints, (figure 28 and figure 29) one large and one small, show the same subject, an older black man dancing for spare change, and the verso (figure 30) of the larger image reads, “Darkey dancing jig. R. R. Station, Kingfisher, Okla.” A contemporary reading of

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<sup>153</sup> Wexler, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>154</sup> Wexler, “What a Woman Can Do with a Camera,” 22.



Figure 28. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*African-American Man Dancing at Railroad Station*] large, catalog number 2018.0168.0056, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Figure 29. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*African-American Man Dancing at Railroad Station*] small, catalog number 2018.0168.0055, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. The top of Bliss's handbag can be seen in the bottom center of the image.

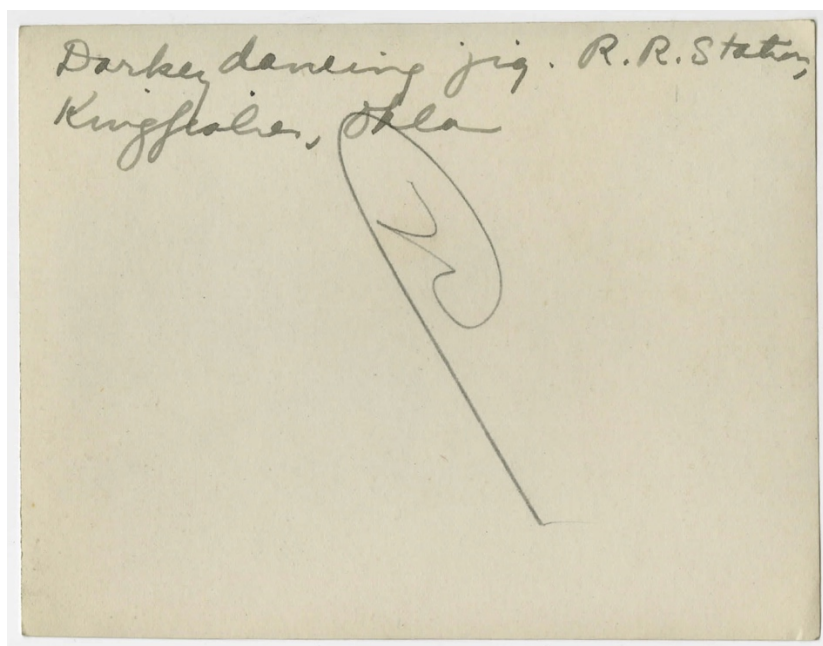


Figure 30. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*African-American Man Dancing at Railroad Station*] large, verso, catalog number 2018.0168.0056, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. An illegible pencilled mark left by the print processing technician is located in the center of the verso.

the term “darkey” elicits strong racist overtones, and even in Bliss’s day, it carried racist weight. It was not innocuous,<sup>155</sup> and instead was an echo of a slave-owning past, evoking the stereotype of a black man happy in his place as human chattel.<sup>156</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, advertisements and other media publications had no qualms about referring to black Americans with a specific destructive slur,<sup>157</sup> in which case “darkey” was more benign in certain—white—circles. However, a term like this is not found in Bliss’s publicly-disseminated “Education” report, where her terminology never strays from the word “negro,” nor on a selection of image versos where she instead uses “colored” or “segregated” to refer to the racial makeup of the neighbourhood she was in

An additional three images, two large and one smaller print, depict two Native American women walking and then stopped and standing on a street corner. These prints, referred to previously in the text, have a cinematic flow, of one moment following the next as if in sequence, with the first smaller image showing the women from a distance across a street (figure 31), and the latter, larger prints (figure 32 and figure 33) having caught up with them. The women have been turned from outliers to central subjects, and the images, when viewed in sequence, appear as a pursuit, a chase carried out through a viewfinder.

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<sup>155</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 102, 109, 115.

<sup>156</sup> Lemons, “Black Stereotypes,” 102.

<sup>157</sup> David Pilgrim and Phillip Middleton, “Nigger and Caricature,” *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University*, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature/>; Robert Johnston, “Slanguage of Amateur Photographers,” *American Speech* 15, no. 4 (December 1940): 359; even the slang of amateur photography included the racial slur ‘nigger,’ which Johnston’s article states as meaning, “a large opaque screen, used to screen lights which would otherwise enter the lens directly and cause flare;” though printed in 1940, it is appropriate to assume that this slur had been a part of the vernacular of amateur photographers for some time.





Figure 31. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*People on Sidewalk*] small, catalog number 2018.0168.0060, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Figure 32. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Native American Women Waiting at Street Corner*], large, catalog number 2018.0168.0061, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917.



Figure 33. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Native American Women Waiting at Street Corner*] large, close-up, catalog number 2018.0168.0062, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917.

Within the frame of the larger images, a sign behind the women reads, “School Books,” a disheartening message considering the forced education and assimilation of Native American youth in previous decades.<sup>158</sup> In both shots where Bliss is within close proximity, the women have kept their faces turned away, anonymizing themselves to their best abilities, ultimately maintaining control over the uninvited and intrusive interaction. On the back of both prints, Bliss has written, “Squaws at Kingfisher, Okla.” She relies on a term meant to diminish the agency of indigenous women. As personal images, these snapshots could be later digested as tokenized examples of the people Bliss experienced through the privilege of her lens.

Bliss’s use of the above phrases, when centered in the appropriate framework of their time, was not malicious but rather part of an inherited white supremacist lexicon, born out of the othering of groups perceived as unlike the dominant social order, an order to which Bliss herself belonged. Bliss was fluent in social decorum, never using “squaw” or “darkey” in her professional written work—in which she denounced the unjust system of racial segregation—nor on images meant for publication and the public’s eyes. Bliss’s choice of language denotes the intention of her images, with the colloquial—and racist—signifying photographs for herself, to glean details from, or for showing off to family or friends. The non-discriminatory verso language counters this, matching up with the lexicon of Progressive intentions marking these images as appropriate for publication and public dissemination.

The NMAH collection also includes Hine-like images of school houses, teachers and their pupils (figure 34 and figure 35), which appear more staged, with directed posing, and with more social coding

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<sup>158</sup> Anne Ruggles Gere, “Indian Heart/White Man’s Head: Native-American Teachers in Indian Schools, 1880-1930,” *History of Education Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 40.; Wexler, “Tender Violence: Domestic Photographs, Domestic Fictions, & Educational Reform,” 103.



Figure 34. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Rural School 26, Muskogee Co.*], catalog number 2018.0168.0041, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Figure 35. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Three Young Children in Front of House*], catalog number 2018.0168.0036, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c.1917.

and Progressive subtext. Bliss has organized her subjects and posed them, directing their eyes and smiles to the camera. In figure 34, Bliss has included a horse in the foreground and cows in the rear of the photograph, an attempt to translate the ruralness of her subject's environment to the city dwellers making up the NCLC's membership roster.<sup>159</sup> One child on the left is unruly, looking out and away from the camera, but as a collective whole, the image is packaged to speak for the ordering of a young territory—benefitted by the Manifest Destiny<sup>160</sup> metaphor of tree stumps and the bare earth cleared for a schoolyard—including its frontier children. Figure 35 depicts three children in their shabby clothes, standing in front of a building. The siding of this structure is damaged in multiple places and the door is

<sup>159</sup> Many of the well-known names associated with the NCLC were those of people living in New York City and other metropolises on the Eastern Seaboard.

<sup>160</sup> A widely perpetuated idea that the wild expanse of America's western territories was to be settled by white Americans as part of their spiritually-divined destiny.

left open—perhaps a building busy with comings and goings. Like figure 34, this image clarifies the conditions in which these young people exist. Both images are devoid of blatant meaning to allow for integration with Bliss’s text, where Progressive language can complete the message.

Images more suited to Bliss’s personal realm feature travelogue-like shots of automobiles and carriages, farm animals, an unpaved proto-highway, and views inside of and looking down from hotel rooms. Bliss even features as the subject of some images, an obvious extension of photographic proof that she herself had been a participant in the stories she would work into her writing. Additionally, there are three photographs with Kentucky written on their versos with only one (figure 36) listing the date as 1919. These images cement Bliss’s continued engagement with the NCLC upon returning from France

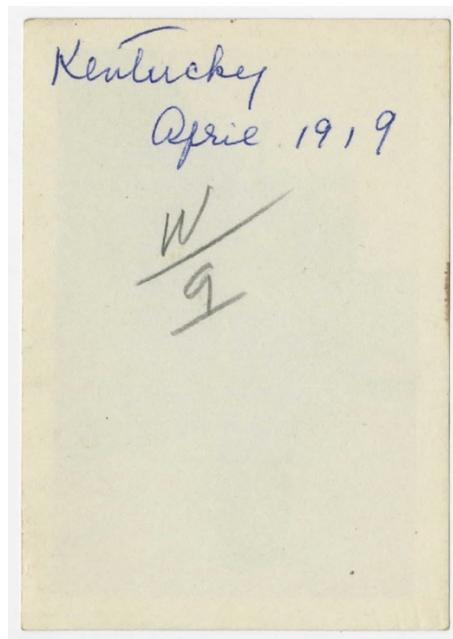


Figure 36. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [Untitled], catalog number 2018.0168.0023, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, 1919. The verso shows Bliss’s handwritten caption, “Kentucky April 1919,” in pen; a pencilled code, “W/9,” left by the print processing technician, is just below it.

and provide evidence for her renewed employment as a special agent, as well as her continued use of a camera in the field. Bliss most certainly took more images than what was acquired by the NMAH,<sup>161</sup> and I hope that these photographs may be in other collections awaiting their provenances to be teased out.

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<sup>161</sup> Elizabeth Howe Bliss to Mother and Father Newhall, [March or April] 1919, box 11, folder 22, Richard A. Newhall Papers, 1903-1973, Williams Special Collections, Williams College; in this letter, Bliss writes to her future in-laws about the trip she is



While the exact models of cameras Bliss employed is unknown, based on the extant print sizes, possibilities include a folding or box camera for the smaller prints, like a Kodak No. 2 Folding Pocket Brownie (figure 37) or the No. 1 Autographic Kodak Junior (figure 38), both of which produced 2 ¼" by 3 ¼" negatives. For the larger prints, Kodak Film Premo No. 1 (figure 39) seems viable, which used packs filled with sheet film. The Premo was easier to wield than other medium or large format cameras

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|   |         |
|---|---------|
| No. 1 Autographic Kodak, Junior, with No. 1 Kodak Ball Bearing shutter and Kodak Anastigmat lens, <i>f. 7.7</i> , . . . . . | \$15.00 |
| Do., with No. 0 Kodak Ball Bearing shutter and Rapid Rectilinear lens, . . . . .  | 10.50   |
| Do., with meniscus achromatic lens, . . . . .   | 9.00    |
| Autographic Film Cartridge, 6 exposures, 2¼ x 3¼, . . . . .   | .20     |

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EASTMAN KODAK CO., ROCHESTER, N. Y., *The Kodak City.*

Figure 37. Eastman Kodak Company, "The New Folding Brownies," found under "Photography/Camera Ads of the 1910s," Vintage Ad Browser, accessed May 23, 2019, c. 1907. Figure 38. Eastman Kodak Company, "The No. 1 Autographic Kodak, Junior," *Country Life in America*, catalog number K0207, Ellis Collection of Kodakiana (1886-1923), Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920 Collection, Duke University Libraries, 1915.

about depart for Kentucky and how busy she will be with her work there; because she has taken photographs during all her previous NCLC assignments, the fact that only three images survive from this trip suggests that any others that were made are lost, were thrown away or are in institutional collections elsewhere.

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**Rochester Optical Division, Eastman Kodak Co., Rochester, N. Y.**

Figure 39. Eastman Kodak Company, “Out-of-Doors Days,” found under “Photography/Camera Ads of the 1910s,” Vintage Ad Browser, accessed May 23, 2019, c. 1910s.

at that time and produced 3 ¼” by 4 ¼” negatives. Contact prints<sup>162</sup> were made from both sets of negative sizes. It is important to note that larger film and print sizes were used for the “In the Back Yard of Wall Street” images, than for the snapshot print of the young female seamstresses. Encouragement by the NCLC for larger, higher resolution prints for reproduction purposes is likely.

Because she was a less-technical photographer, Bliss had the bulk of her negatives professionally processed and subsequent prints made at drugstores which offered these photofinishing services. The

<sup>162</sup> The print sizes correlate to standard negative widths of the time; in this case the negative sizes listed above are approximately the same dimensions as the prints.

presence of a negative and print wallet (figure 40) in the Smith College collection underscores this



Figure 40. Eastman Kodak Company, film negative and prints wallet, box 142, folder 10, c. 1917, The Sophia Smith Collection – World War I, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College Libraries.

use of photo printing services, even while she engaged in her war relief duties in France. The differences in the verso captions, some in ink, some in pencil, speak to their being marked up with whatever writing utensil Bliss had on hand, indicating that the prints were not made concurrently. When arriving in a new town, exposed film could be dropped off for processing with prints ordered simultaneously. Variations in the photofinisher's pencilled marks still remain, proving that she visited a druggist more than once (figure 41 and figure 42). Additionally, the snapshots within the NMAH collection have been printed on different



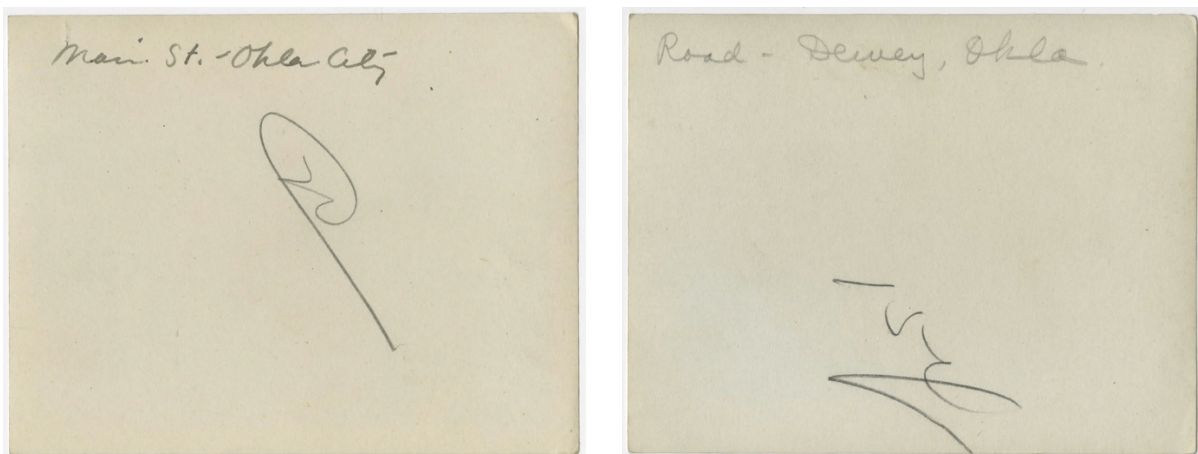


Figure 41. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Main Street, Oklahoma City*], verso, catalog number 2018.0168.0059, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Figure 42. Elizabeth Howe Bliss, [*Dirt Road*], verso, catalog number 2018.0168.0054, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, c. 1917. Dissimilar pencilled photofinishers' marks are visible on the print versos in figure 41 and figure 42, indicating a different photofinisher made each print. Both images are from Bliss's Oklahoma trip.

papers with a variation of finishes ranging from matte to semi-gloss to glossy. Often, the duplicate images have been printed on more than one kind of paper, indicating that their visual effect was an important aspect of their final function. If Bliss ordered test prints on the road, better-quality reprints were possible once back home in New York. Every drugstore would stock its own assortment of photo papers,<sup>163</sup> and would offer a quick turnaround, an especially helpful aspect when someone like Bliss wanted to review images quickly and while in transit.

Though Bliss's images are not aesthetically studied like those made by Lewis Hine, a deeper consideration of these prints is necessary—especially concerning their materiality—and can serve to highlight the alternative histories of social reformers during the Progressive Era and the roles that white women played in documenting their work in the investigative field.

<sup>163</sup>Drugstore photofinishers made recommendations based on what was in stock; as this trade became more common, the array of cameras, papers and accessories available at drugstores grew in tandem.

## Chapter 5. Future Considerations: Virtual Exhibitions & the Vernacular

“...photography deserves to be considered as though it were not a fine art.”

John Berger<sup>164</sup>

In regards to institutions acquiring and showing photography like Bliss's, especially art museums, diminishing the boundaries of the white cube to allow snapshot photography inside has been a practice engaged in numerous times as of this writing.<sup>165</sup> This does and should lead to questions regarding the influence of the art and collector's markets' on expanding art-historical parameters, as it seems that more institutional acceptance of these images corresponds with the increase in their acquisition in the private marketplace. Also of issue are the revisionist ramifications<sup>166</sup> of integrating what has long been deemed outsider imagery into what has been an established, and purportedly settled, formalist fold.<sup>167</sup> Because of this possible vernacular validation, exhibition considerations for this wide-ranging photographic typology need to be addressed, as “ultimately the culture of vernacular photography in all of its messy diversity may beg for a better understanding than a museum exhibition can provide.”<sup>168</sup> With their emerging status, vernacular images deserve the opportunity to be properly platformed for public digestion. In considering physical exhibitions like the National Gallery of Art's 2007 exhibition, *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978*, which limited vernacular's worth to the purely aesthetic, I would argue that an online exhibition is a better venue for contextualizing what consists of imagery born out of that which continues to be a prevalent pastime—the making of everyday images through an everyday lens—a slight apparatus that in Bliss's day was fixed to a box or folding camera and has now metamorphosed into the cell phones that most people own and use daily. The mass quantities of images, the majority of which exist outside

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<sup>164</sup> John Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” *Understanding a Photograph* (Reprint, London: Penguin Group, 2013): 17.

<sup>165</sup> Some examples include the Metropolitan Museum of Art's, *Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* (2000), The Eastman Museum's *A History of Photography* (2016-17), The Rijksmuseum's, *Everyone a Photographer* (2019), and the Morgan Library and Museum's, *Among Others: Photography and the Group* (2019), among others.

<sup>166</sup> If vernacular photographs in the form of non-art, non-documentary, personal imagery—the banal, the mediocre, the commonplace—find widespread institutional acceptance, will this be a reflection of the recognized potential for historical value that these items have? Or is this merely the next iteration of the art market validating images previously deemed valueless to the benefit of a museum seeking to enhance the worth of acquisitions which, unlike many masterwork paintings, are still commonly available? How do changes in institutional acquisition habits directly influence the scholarship regarding the acquired imagery?

<sup>167</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311-19.

<sup>168</sup> Catherine Zuromskis, “Outside Art: Exhibition Snapshot Photography,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 2008): 440.

the formalist conventions of art,<sup>169</sup> derive a value from their universality, their everyday-ness. They exist in direct opposition to the deification of singular artworks, and thus seem better suited to the vastness of the internet and the varied tastes therein.

Beyond the simple blog post, the digital exhibition may be the key to engaging virtual museum visitors while simultaneously memorializing and further validating previously denigrated imagery, outcast outtakes of the seemingly benign or banal. As evidenced in the case of Bliss, images that may at first glance appear mired in an amateur-aesthetic and a veneer of commonplace, are anything but, and a strong argument can be made for their value as historical “texts,”<sup>170</sup> to be utilized as primary sources for independent researchers, instructors and scholars alike. By making these images available in an online format, the photographs are positively repositioned, their digital presentation serving as an intermediary between vernacular’s existing complexities, its tensions wavering between “document/narrative [and] record/fiction.”<sup>171</sup> The online display of these images lessens the constrictions and alleviates the contortions that are required of them within the traditional exhibition space, and allows their eccentricities the virtual room they need to be adequately explored.

While Sarah Goodwin Thiel’s, *Build It Once: A Basic Primer for the Creation of Online Exhibitions*, stands alone as far as printed matter on the subject of creating a digital exhibition from the ground up, its 2007 publication date renders it an outdated resource. Though she recommends software like DreamWeaver as a means for creating online exhibitions, in 2019, the choice for software or online services to host such exhibitions are myriad and are at the discretion of the institution or individual. This is especially true considering that each institution has its own digital templates and interfaces with which it constructs its online exhibition programming.<sup>172</sup> But this also means that bureaucratic challenges exist

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<sup>169</sup> “Formalism,” Arts and Artists—Art Term, *Tate*, accessed 4 July 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/formalism>; everyday and personal images, when considered for their formalist qualities—like their visual appeal and construction—would not be deemed valid as artworks; a postmodern approach to these images respects their alternative materiality but would still find them lacking in aesthetic value.

<sup>170</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, “Preface,” *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), xvi; Wexler, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>171</sup> Wolfe, “Flat Files,” 2.

<sup>172</sup> This is true even among the different museums that co-exist beneath the Smithsonian Institution umbrella. For example, the United States Postal Museum uses different online exhibition programming software than the NMAH.

in terms of who can create and control such content—does the creator need to be a curator or can they be affiliated with the imagery in some other way? The vetting for this kind of content and for its digital caregivers tends to increase with the prestige of the museum: the greater the prominence, the narrower the ease-of-creation for online exhibitions.

Some beneficial aspects of this online format are that these exhibitions are better equipped to maintain user's attention through the use of interactive elements with the option of including didactic captions and texts. Myriad forms of supporting objects can be included which can then hyperlink to their external collection source. Multiple narrative formats are possible,<sup>173</sup> and the ability to foreground alternative or suppressed histories and to prioritize imagery that may reflect or has been created by BIPOC,<sup>174</sup> can help to offset and destabilize the traditionally-accepted colonialist trajectory of the white male photographer and the patriarchal spaces where these images have been cultivated to flourish. Additionally, if the exhibition can be kept online indefinitely, it functions as another form of image preservation, making it possible to maintain both the context and the content of the imagery, while allowing for consistent, unencumbered access to multiple diverse audiences.

But how many images not unlike Bliss's have been left to moulder, were split up and sold on eBay, or thrown away as a kind of detritus, thought to be valuable only to the person to whom they were central? How much history has been lost because the materiality of the image was deemed indicative of its content—the idea that a snapshot was somehow an inferior means for marking historically important moments? As Geoffrey Batchen writes, the very presence of vernacular images like these “muck[s] up the familiar story of great masters and transcendent aesthetic achievement, and disrupt[s] its smooth Euro-American prejudice... [and thusly these images exist as] the part of its history that has been pushed to the margins.”<sup>175</sup> Banishing these images to the realm of *other* to mitigate their challenge to established paradigms has been a detriment to the historical and photo-visual record and has dismissed imagery, like

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<sup>173</sup>Santos M. Mateos-Rusillo and Arnau Gifrau-Castells, “Museums and Online Exhibitions: A Model for Analyzing and Charting Existing Types,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 32, no. 1 (January 2017): 46-47.

<sup>174</sup> An acronym which stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

<sup>175</sup> Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 262.

Bliss's, that represents the paradox of their very nature. Like textual primary documents, these images, too, cannot fully be trusted to adequately reflect the "truth;" like any potential source, photographs in general "cannot say what [they let] us see,"<sup>176</sup> and as Batchen expounds, "cannot always let us see what we want [them] to say."<sup>177</sup> But through their outright dismissal, certain vernacular images—those akin to Bliss's—have been denied their historical potential, orphaned and left to founder, untethered from the narratives that birthed them.

Though institutional acceptance is burgeoning, Bliss's images might not have found a permanent home had they not entered a public history museum. In such an institution, each snapshot can be appropriated for the contradiction it represents, that of "both a constructed narrative and a visual document...used to create a record, but...also used to script personal histories."<sup>178</sup> Because Bliss was unchained from the kind of aesthetic expectation that encircled the concerned image output of photographers like Lewis Hine, it was possible for her photographs to alternate between public and private presentations, thus benefiting both realms as a fluid bridging of the two. A more complete, though by no means "true" or "definitive" picture of Bliss the person, of Oklahoma's troubles and tensions in 1917, and the small, often peripheral, details that serve to distinguish time and place, is only possible when these images are considered en masse.

Conversely, the unromantic materiality and non-aesthetic of Bliss's snapshots do not necessarily signify them as appropriate for institutional acceptance elsewhere, though the growing trend towards welcoming the more visually interesting of this type onto museum walls as *objets d'art* cannot entirely be ruled out. However, this means of exhibition would almost certainly exclude Bliss's more diaristic prints, with their curious rather than concerned anatomy designating them as too inchoate by contemporary standards to be shown in tandem. It would also do a disservice to the selection Bliss had meant for dissemination, those to be shared widely as consumable imagery, to both influence and inflect. Confining

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<sup>176</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 100.

<sup>177</sup> Batchen, "Seeing and Saying: A Response to 'Incongruous Images,'" *History and Theory* 48, no.4 (December 2009): 33.

<sup>178</sup> Wolfe, "Flat Files," 2.



them to physical spaces would be anathema to the very nature of their intention as these images were not meant for a select few to see, or to be hung as individual artifacts, rather they were to be paired with textual copy and explanatory captions, codified for the printed page and copiously duplicated.

## Conclusion

The category of vernacular photography remains in a morass,<sup>179</sup> and may be impossible to definitively tame. Regardless, its contentious confluence of public and private spheres should continue to be made welcome in the realm of photography's history, especially as this history has been rigidly shaped by an art-historical hand. History, and photography's history, need not be neat and easy on the eyes. The anti-aesthetic<sup>180</sup> of an everyperson photography sheds light on the lives and leisure, the realities real and constructed, that were brought into existence while history was flowing around and through them.

The photographs of Elizabeth Howe Bliss, born from her social conditioning and her social work, aptly intertwine these dual strands of public and private imagery. They are at once elements of proof and constructed nostalgia, and the forging of the two is the crux of her Oklahoma trip, and the place where her images take historical root. Her snapshots, each a singular object emitting multiple narratives, are the admixture of intention and reflex, the work of both a storyteller and of the actor herself. While not art images, these snapshots nonetheless maintain elements of intrigue, investigation, travelogue, innocence, and historical breadth. As both time capsule and primary source, they contextualize an era when women were joining their male colleagues on the road in the business of social betterment and provide insights into a nascent Oklahoma afflicted with an inherited Southern racism.

Undoubtedly, these images require further study, especially concerning the extent of the visual details depicted within their frames. The deeper exploration of these images as historical image-texts and "domestic" windows will be quite fruitful as I devote further time to this endeavour. Additionally, the creation of a digital exhibition as a means for harboring these images in a highly-accessible space while allowing them to promote themselves as viable and vital historical objects, has been initiated through the creation of a Bliss "collection," *Snapshots & Social Change: A Collection of Photographs by Elizabeth*

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<sup>179</sup> "Vernacular Photographies: Responses to a Questionnaire," *History of Photography* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 229-31.

<sup>180</sup> Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), xv.

*Howe Bliss* (figure 43), within the Smithsonian Learning Lab.<sup>181</sup> Though things like the materiality of the

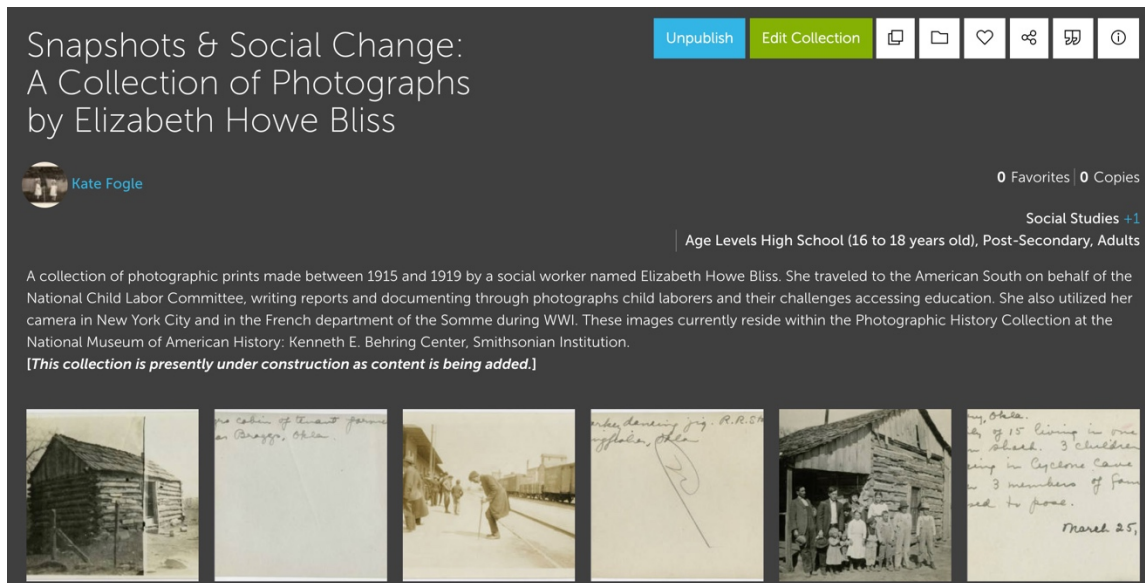


Figure 43. Kate Fogle, *Snapshots & Social Change: A Collection of Photographs by Elizabeth Howe Bliss*, online exhibition hosted by the Smithsonian Learning Lab, created July 28, 2019.

photographs get lost in digital translation, this offering can serve as a placeholder whilst a permanent institutionally-sanctioned online exhibition can be approved.

Ultimately, the life of Elizabeth Howe Bliss as viewed through her snapshots, is one of curiosity and of amateur rather than artistic craft, and her images represent the efforts of that era's white women to push their own boundaries while ultimately upholding similar borders around others. As a woman of means, she made the choice to spurn aspects of her privilege<sup>182</sup> to instigate what she considered social change and to invigorate her own existence. Many of her images may be unique in their documentary affect due to what they captured and continue to portray of the world, especially when compared to the homebound snapshots made by Bliss's amateur female peers,<sup>183</sup> but the combined bulk of these vernacular photographic endeavours provide a definitive view of photography's multifaceted function.

<sup>181</sup> The SI Learning Lab is a digital platform that allows images and other data to be organized, exhibited and shared by registered site visitors; the temporary online exhibition, *Snapshots & Social Change: The Photographs of Elizabeth Howe Bliss*, can be found at: <http://learninglab.si.edu/q/1l-c/gginGaYTqG3hyheu>.

<sup>182</sup> Bliss made the choice to seek employment on her own terms, thus opting out of a life propped up by family money.

<sup>183</sup> An interesting aspect uncovered by this research suggests that many women employed in areas of reform, relief and social work were utilizing small, amateur cameras and sharing those images amongst themselves. In the Smith College Special Collections, additional snapshot images not created by Bliss were found in her box of materials. Written on their versos are the names of their makers, most attributed to female colleagues of Bliss.

The continued inclusion and digital proliferation of images like Bliss's will help to further amend the historical damage wrought by the confines of a Newhallian art-historical arc<sup>184</sup> which, while currently pliant, still has room to bend. As Batchen writes, "to truly understand photography and its history...one must closely attend to what that history has chosen to repress."<sup>185</sup> As the institutional door for vernacular photography has slowly, but selectively, begun to open, every effort should be made to remove it fully from its hinges.

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<sup>184</sup> Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," 262.




<sup>185</sup> Batchen, 263.

## Appendix I

### Elizabeth Howe Bliss Collection

Accession Number: 2018.0168

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian

| <u>Image</u>  | <u>Title</u>                                | <u>Catalog Number</u> | <u>Location</u> | <u>Date</u> |
|---|---|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------|
|    | [ <i>Boy standing outside Delmonico's</i> ] | 2018.0168.0001        | Claremore       | c. 1917     |
|    | [ <i>Siding clad building</i> ]             | 2018.0168.0002        | Claremore       | c. 1917     |
|  | [ <i>Store and lunch room</i> ]             | 2018.0168.0003        | Claremore       | c. 1917     |
|  | [ <i>Wooden cabin</i> ]                     | 2018.0168.0004        | Braggs          | c. 1917     |



[*Canvas Tent*] 2018.0168.0005 Muskogee c. 1917



[*African-American Children outside Tent*] 2018.0168.0006 Muskogee c. 1917



[*Storefronts*] 2018.0168.0007 Most likely Oklahoma c. 1917



[*Four children in front of porch*] 2018.0168.0008 Sperry c. 1917



[*Four children standing in front of porch*] 2018.0168.0009 Sperry c. 1917



[*Young boy  
standing in  
front of log  
cabin*]

2018.0168.0010

Sperry

c. 1917



[*Entrance to  
Cyclone Cave*]

2018.0168.0011

Sperry

1917



[*Family of 12  
(twelve) outside  
log cabin*]

2018.0168.0012

Sperry

1917



[*Family of 12  
outside log  
cabin*]

2018.0168.0013

Sperry

1917



[*View from  
Hotel  
Window, Tulsa*]

2018.0168.0014

Tulsa

c. 1917



[*Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0015 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0016 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Public Library  
in  
Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0017 Tulsa 1917



[*Two children  
playing in dirt  
yard*] 2018.0168.0018 Tulsa c. 1917





[*Shack in  
Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0019 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0020 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0021 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Segregated  
District, Tulsa*] 2018.0168.0022 Tulsa c. 1917



[*Grandmother  
Winch?*] 2018.0168.0023 Kentucky 1919



[Grandmother  
Winch? ]

2018.0168.0024 Kentucky 1919



[Group portrait  
on front steps ]

2018.0168.0025 Most likely  
NYC c. 1915



[Baby seated in  
a carriage ]

2018.0168.0026 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[Young girl  
holding baby  
boy]

2018.0168.0027 NYC c. 1917



[*Young girl  
holding baby  
boy*]

2018.0168.0028

NYC

c. 1917



[*Young girl  
holding baby  
girl*]

2018.0168.0029

NYC

c. 1917



[*Pickett Prairie  
School, Creek  
Co. ]*

2018.0168.0030

Creek

c. 1917



[*Crowd of  
Truants,  
Central City*]

2018.0168.0031

Central City

c. 1919



[*Young boy in  
knickerbockers*] 2018.0168.0032 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[*Young girl in  
gingham skirt*] 2018.0168.0033 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[*Young girl in  
white dress*] 2018.0168.0034 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[*Young girl  
with short dark  
hair*] 2018.0168.0035 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[Three young children in front of house]

2018.0168.0036

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[School group portrait]

2018.0168.0037

Mead

c. 1917



[School group portrait]

2018.0168.0038

Mead

c. 1917



[Ballard School Work Shop]

2018.0168.0039

Undetermined  
locale

c. 1917



[School Children at Prairie View School, Creek Co.]

2018.0168.0040

Creek

c. 1917



[*Rural School  
26, Muskogee  
Co. ]*

2018.0168.0041 Muskogee c. 1917



[*Children in  
schoolyard*]

2018.0168.0042 Most likely  
Oklahoma c. 1917



[*School Boys,  
Prairie View  
School, Creek  
Co. ]*

2018.0168.0043 Creek c. 1917



[*Group of 11  
children*]

2018.0168.0044 Most likely  
Oklahoma c. 1917



[*Schoolhouse,  
Washington  
County*]

2018.0168.0045 Washington c. 1917





[Interior of a room ]

2018.0168.0046

Enid

c. 1917



[Interior of a room ]

2018.0168.0047

Enid

c. 1917



[Field ]

2018.0168.0048

Bartlesville

c. 1917



[Cows at pasture ]

2018.0168.0049

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[Sow with piglets ]

2018.0168.0050

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[*Sow with piglets*]

2018.0168.0051

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[*Mule-drawn wagon*]

2018.0168.0052

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[*Cows in the road*]

2018.0168.0053

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[*Dirt road*]

2018.0168.0054

Dewey

c. 1917



[*African-American Man Dancing at Railroad Station*]

2018.0168.0055

Kingfisher

c. 1917





[*African-American  
Man Dancing  
at Railroad  
Station*]

2018.0168.0056 Kingfisher c. 1917



[*Street scene*]

2018.0168.0057 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[*Man unloading  
wagon*]

2018.0168.0058 Undetermined  
locale c. 1917



[*Main Street,  
Oklahoma City*]

2018.0168.0059 Oklahoma  
City c. 1917



[*People on  
sidewalk*]

2018.0168.0060 Kingfisher c. 1917



[Native  
American  
women waiting  
at street corner]

2018.0168.0061

Kingfisher

c. 1917



[Native  
American  
women waiting  
at street corner]

2018.0168.0062

Kingfisher

c. 1917



[Woman sitting  
in partially  
covered  
carriage]

2018.0168.0063

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[Car stopped  
on  
dirt road]

2018.0168.0064

Most likely  
Oklahoma

c. 1917



[Streetcar full of  
passengers]

2018.0168.0065

Oklahoma

c. 1917



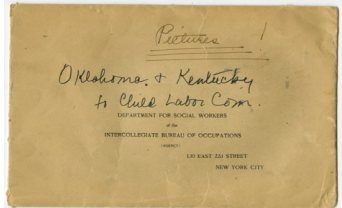
[Car stopped  
on  
dirt road]

2018.0168.0066      Oklahoma      c. 1917



[Man standing  
next to car]

2018.0168.0067      Most likely  
Oklahoma      c. 1917



[Photograph  
envelope]

No number      c. 1919

#### NOTE

I use [Untitled] when referring to the [Grandmother Winch?] images (2018.0168.0023 and 2018.0168.0024). The research proves these images are not of Nellie Winch and are actually of Bliss.

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