

Doris Ulmann Research Paper

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Throughout Doris Ulmann's upbringing, she has displayed a set of morals that have differed from what was considered the "norm" during her time period of being alive. Her curiosity and ability not to judge others based on physical or genetic features made her a prime candidate to photograph/document dying societies that many would normally not care for. Regardless of race, ethnicity, or cultural background Ulmann did not form bias and tried to treat all people with respect. However, even with her hardest to try to understand these cultures, she could not document these cultures with complete accuracy. Doris Ulmann documented cultures to preserve them throughout the ages for future generations, but she could not capture the whole essence of these cultures due to her being an outsider.

The "essence of a society" is an umbrella term that should encompass multiple areas of said culture. One such area would be their traditions and moral values which play a major role in how the society interacts with the outside and within itself. This aspect is responsible for social norms within the culture, practices, and overall structure. A culture's essence could be divided into two parts, the side of their society they show to the outside world and the second side being a side that only members of the culture will have extensive knowledge on. The latter, which is usually obscured, makes it hard for an outsider to document or even fully comprehend the culture.

Julia Peterkins was an author that wrote sympathetically about black folklife. She was a woman who was raised and immersed in black culture, even referring to the people in those societies as her “friends.” She even learned Gullah, the language of the black population in that area, before she even spoke english.<sup>1</sup> Peterkins wrote the book *Roll, Jordan, Roll* which provided captions and descriptions to many of Doris Ulmann’s work. In a way, she was the voice to many of Ulmann’s photos which became immortalized in the book.

One of Ulmann’s work that Peterkins analyzed in her book was the *Chain-Gang* series. Chain-Gang is a form of punishment used in prisons that chains prisoners together and force them to do physically debilitating task. It so happens that in the south, this form of punishment was especially popular among african american inmates. Peterkin’s commentary on the subject was especially interesting as an outsider who had heavy connections to the black populace. “*Even the chain gang sings to the clinks of leg shackles as picks are swung deep into roadside ditches or slings pitch heavy dirt into mud-holes ground out by wheels on the country thoroughfares*”<sup>2</sup>

Julia Peterkins, who is an outsider, made an observation about Doris Ulmann’s photos on the chain gang and the prisoner’s ability to sing spiritual hymns; insinuating some enjoyment from the activity. If one listens to these hymns, the same can be assumed but that is nothing further from the truth. Despite Julia’s belief of these prisoners are using their innate talent, the reality of their situation was much more

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<sup>1</sup> “*Julia Peterkin, South Carolina, Black April (1927),*” University of Virginia, <http://www.virginia.edu/woodson/courses/hius324/peterkin.html>

<sup>2</sup> Julia Peterkins, “*Roll, Jordan, Roll,*” New York R.O. Ballou(1933), pg 116

harsh than she could imagine.

John L. Spivak was an author primarily active around the same time as Julia Peterkins, and wrote a book titled "*Georgia Nigger*" that detailed the lives of african-american prisoners in the south. Unlike Peterkins who made observations and inferences from the outside, Spivak had the former prisoners give him first hand accounts straight from their mouths themselves. "There is little to be to earned guarding the chained creatures who lay Georgia's roads but carrying a shotgun and leaning lazily against a shady tree... During his hours he was the lord and master. And though even poverty stricken crackers look down upon a guard, the sense if power in having men under him soothed the harassing struggle to house and feed and clothe a wife and brood of ragged children on the dollar and twenty-five cents a day the county paid him." <sup>3</sup>

Unlike Doris Ulman's work which focused on finding out truths solely based on photography, John L Spivak instead went and talked with the sources themselves; former chain gang prisoners. There was a noticeable contrast in the way this prisoner talks about their experience compared to what Peterkins said. The former prisoner uses metaphors to compare the overseer of inmates to a lord or master, talked about unsanitary conditions in cells that led to many illnesses/infections , officer's abuse of power to further dehumanize inmates, and even relations between prisoners, guards and the public. Even the "happy songs" which Peterkins heard could be seen as a sort

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<sup>3</sup> John L. Spivak, "*Georgia Nigger*," New York: Warren & Putnam, pg. 6

or coping mechanism or escape from their brutal reality which they could not physically get away from. One can truly get the sense of what it meant to be a prisoner of the chain gang through looking at Spivak's work that you can't get with Peterkin's.

John Jacob Niles was a close companion of Doris Ulmann during her travels of dying off societies. He had years on years of firsthand experience on Doris Ulmann himself. It is safe to say that Niles knows more of Ulmann's photography than anyone else. After Ulmann's death Niles decided to record a "preface to the story of Doris Ulmann" in which he gives accounts and information on his former colleague. In one instance of Niles's recording he talked about a short story of one of his adventures with Doris Ulmann. "These were the people who she really wanted to get down on paper for posterity. She thought they would finally disappear, and there would be no more of them."<sup>4</sup> Though Niles would later disagree of Ulmann's philosophy, Ulmann herself saw great importance of what she was doing. She felt like she needed to photograph the people to prove that they once existed, as she states they will have an indefinite demise.

From the the previous paragraph, it seems that trying to document and understand these societies that have the potential to go extinct was one of Ulmann's main priorities in traveling for photography. This priority she felt she needed to see too was responsible for some of her greatest life's work. This conviction and initiative led me to wonder who was the estranged target audience that Ulmann was trying to reach?. As I delve further into my research of Ulmann and her work, I began to put things

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<sup>4</sup> "Doris Ulmann: Preface and Recollections," University Of Oregon Libraries, Spring 1958, <https://library.uoregon.edu/speccoll/photo/ulmann/nilestext>

together. During my research of Ulmann, I crossed by an article by Atlanta Magazine on Doris Ulmann, they gave the basic information, all around summary of her life and mention of featuring Ulmann's work into their Museum. Which the mention of their new exhibit on Ulmann opening up, they seemed to dedicate a whole little paragraph in their article about it that I found particularly interesting. "Despite her groundbreaking documentary photography, the affluent Ulmann was considered an eccentric who never gained the reputation of her contemporaries. From August through November, the Georgia Museum of Art is hosting the first complete retrospective of Ulmann's work."<sup>5</sup> The two main takeaways that I gained from that quote were that first Ulmann's work was not valued during its original period of publication and second is that her work is valued and resonates with us to be put in a museum. The fact that Ulmann wanted to photograph dying cultures before they die out tells us that the audience is she wants to reach is a time where these cultures with no longer exist; hence the future.

I believe that another target audience of Ulmann's work would be the people of her own time. The fact that Ulmann chose obscured societies to photograph were because she wanted to not only explore something out of her comfort zone but also something of that time which would have been considered not normal. She felt compelled to photograph the forgotten and almost gone societies which people from

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<sup>5</sup> "Doris Ulmann's photography aimed to preserve disappearing cultures in the Southeast," Atlanta Magazines, (August, 15 2018), <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/news-culture-articles/doris-ulmanns-photography-aimed-to-preserve-disappearing-cultures-in-the-southeast/>

urban cities like New York would have little to no knowledge of. Though she faced much criticism, she still wanted to release her work to the general masses of her time.



DORIS ULMANN, WOMAN WITH BASKET OF COTTON ON HEAD, PROBABLY SOUTH CAROLINA, CA. 1929-31. PHOTOGRAVURE FOR ROLL, JORDAN, ROLL,

This woman with a quilted basket on top of her head were on of the images I laid eyes on while reading on the Atlanta Magazine article about Ulmann. Without much background knowledge to what situation led to this exact photo, one can assume that Ulmann did not have prior background to this woman from what is to her a foreign group of people. The woman in that photo shows a modest lifestyle free of any posing or what would make anything look purposefully “propped.” Ulmann wanted to truly capture the “purest” part of these people free of any tampering from the outside world

including herself. She wants to emulate through photos who these people were through a still images which was a tough feat to accomplish. Ulmann did a superb job with her circumstances, but in the end her circumstances as an outsider played a huge role in why she fell short of truly capturing the essence of these societies.

Doris Ulmann, was born May 29, 1882 to a prominent jewish immigrant family. She was a New York native who attended school to be certified as a teacher, she learned to value people regardless of their social-economic or ethnic background. After tending to her ill mother through her final sickness, she got married at the age of thirty-two and attended Clarence H. White School of Photography; the first photography school in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Ulmann's love of photography, extensive credentials, and open mindset all led to her being a perfect candidate for the task she was trying to accomplish, but the simple fact that she was an outsider will always hold her back from fully understanding other cultures. Even Peterkins, as mentioned above, who was practically raised in the culture of the Gullah always found herself somewhat disconnected from their hardship simply because she was not Gullah herself.

One relevant example of this is the case of the Chopped Cheese Sandwich and the reporting of said sandwich by the Internet based media group "Insider." The Chopped Cheese sandwich is a delicacy widely enjoyed in the lower income neighborhoods of NYC that can be ordered in any Deli. A representative from Insider

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<sup>6</sup> "*Doris Ulmann (1882-1934)*,"The Library Of Congress, August 2010, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/womphotoj/ulmannessay.html>



chose to report on this sandwich and uploaded her findings in the form of a video to the internet. The video was met with extreme backlash as many felt the wording of information in the video was plainly wrong and ignorant. The representative from Insider used a particular phrase “Most New Yorkers don't even know it exists”, which riled up many who were familiar with the sandwich. Some even claiming the company is partially to blame for Whole Foods seeking to overcharge for a lesser version of the sandwich, making this sandwich not only less affordable to lower income families but less delicious too. Furthermore, the people angered claimed that the video is one example of the negative effects of gentrification and accused the company of “Columbusing”(acting as if they have discovered something that has already been discovered by others). Though Ulmann’s work does not face such hard criticism and by no means did her work give off this extreme of an effect, it still shows the complications of an outsider cueing in to a foreign culture.

This claim does not mean the research of Ulmann is incomplete or unreliable, far from it as a matter of fact. To anyone who has had no formal introduction to cultures such as the Gullah, Ulmann’s research can provide critical information. Paired with Peterkin’s research, one can easily procure a plethora of knowledge that would be rather hard to come by all at once; making Ulmann’s research priceless. However, one must tread carefully due to the fact that Ulmann/Peterkin’s work would need to be paired with that of others to enhance its effectiveness tenfold.

In-Closing Doris Ulmann accomplished her goal of preserving cultures she captured for future generations. Her work is in such places as museums, libraries, and college classrooms. Her pictures provide a portal to the past to societies that were largely not paid much attention too. Her work is widely relevant pertaining to such situations as the Gullah people and their struggle to preserve what culture they have left. However, though her work is invaluable, it must be acknowledge that her work alone is not enough to completely capture the essence of certain societies and cultures. This is due to a barrier produced that separates her(an outsider) from the cultures she research. Her research would have to be supplemented with that of others to paint a fuller picture of said societies. Overall, the photos she captured will be invaluable to research on these societies regardless of her status as an outsider.

## Annotated Bibliography

**"Doris Ulmann (1882-1934),"The Library Of Congress, August 2010,**  
<https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/womphotoj/ulmannessay.html>

Published on the Library of Congress was a short piece on Doris Ulmann. It was broken into short sections; early life, becoming a photographer, impacts she made, and etc. This article provides us with dates and some focal points in her life, making it easier to understand why and how some of the events transpired in her life. The article was published by Beverly W. Brannan ,Curator of Photography, in 2010. The purpose was to introduce readers to Doris Ulmann and better understand her without going to in-depth into her life. The author of the article has legit and relevant credentials so one can without doubt trust the information in this passage.

**Philip Jacobs, "*The Life & Photography of Doris Ulmann*," (Kentucky:University Of Kentucky, 2001),**

The book was written by Philip Jacobs in collaboration with The University of Kentucky. The book is a biography chronicling the life and photographic career of Doris Ulmann. The book is comprised of first hand account journals and actual photos of Ulmann's work to authenticate the information provided. The book gives in-depth knowledge of Ulmann's upbringing and personal life which would be rather difficult to find. It provided accounts from relatives and associates of Ulmann to further validate the information being stated. The book also provides cited sources and references to further validate the information being stated.

**Heather Northway, "*DORIS ULMANN – PHOTO ETHNOGRAPHER: A LINK BETWEEN PICTORIALISM AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY*"(University Of Southern California, 1987)**

Heather Northway wrote this 194 page paper as a thesis. This book has an outstanding amount of sources with all the references. This book talks about Ulmann's photographic career with a focus on what type of photographs she was taking. This is a helpful source to sort out the different styles of photographer Ulmann indulged in. The author of this paper takes a more analytical look at

Ulmann's life as if trying to connect the dots and trying to draw a complete picture of her life. The amount of detail put into this nearly 200 page paper with sources seems to be credible enough for it to be a source I could use.

*Doris Ulmann's Portraits: The Mark Of Living Intensely*, New York Historical Society Museum and Library, (February 5, 2014), <http://blog.nyhistory.org/doris-ullman/>

The article provides a short summary of Doris Ulmann's life before photography but focuses on some of her well known projects. This article is useful in providing us with a character description of Ulmann indirectly through her work. There was a strong focus placed on her relationship with John Niles and their travels together to document different populations through photos. The article also provides us with pictures that feature people from different races and backgrounds. From the time period which Ulmann was active in and the type of work she did, we can safely deduce the type of person she was in life.

*"Doris Ulmann's photography aimed to preserve disappearing cultures in the Southeast,"* Atlanta Magazines, (August, 15 2018), <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/news-culture-articles/doris-ulmanns-photography-aimed-to-preserve-disappearing-cultures-in-the-southeast/>

The short article was a piece written in honor of a new exhibit featuring Doris Ulmann in a Georgia Museum. It gives the clear distinction of Doris Ulmann trying to preserve cultures on the edge of disappearing through her work rather than actually trying to save them. The article also highlights the fact that Doris Ulmann's style evolved into a more documentative style over the course of her career. This short piece gives two very crucial pieces of information necessary to have a deeper understanding of Doris Ulmann's work. Atlanta Magazines is a well known journalist company with a staff chalk full of learned writers.

*"Jacob Riis,"* Encyclopaedia Britannica, (February 7, 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacob-Riis>

This was an introductory article to introduce readers to the work of Jacob Riis. His background and a short summary of his career as a muckraker that exposed horrendous living conditions in downtown Manhattan. It is important to understand the work of a photojournalist like Jacob Riis since many could confuse the work of

Doris Ulmann for a muckraker. By exploring Jacob Riis, I can draw clear distinctions and even compare the two. Encyclopaedia Britannica is a well known company that is known for being the oldest publisher of the Encyclopedia. Their database is vast with many articles and pieces on a large array of people.

*"An Introduction to Photojournalism,"* The SpruceCrafts, (September 4, 2018), <https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/an-introduction-to-photojournalism-2688644>

This article in short describes what Photojournalism is, how it is used, and its impacts. It gives very short examples of photographers using it and how they implement it in their work. To better understand Doris Ulmann's work, we must understand the way photojournalism works. This is due to the fact that when a photographer chooses to take photos of people's lives in their natural environment, you are documenting that person's life which is a form of photojournalism. Doris Ulmann's travels and most famous photographs can be all traced to this concept, so it is absolutely crucial for readers to learn about it.

*"Doris Ulmann: Preface and Recollections,"* University Of Oregon Libraries, Spring 1958, <https://library.uoregon.edu/speccoll/photo/ulmann/nilestext>

John Jacob Niles was documented in this piece, giving his preface to the story of Doris Ulmann. He goes on to describe many aspects of Doris Ulmann, from the clothes she wore, the way she interacted with others, her personality, and personal anecdotes. Niles was a close companion of Ulmann's who traveled with her on her ventures to capture photographs of different communities. He spent years with her and probably knew more about her life as a photographer more than anyone else. This first hand account from one of Doris Ulmann's close acquaintance could come can is a very useful tool to understand her inner workings as a person and a photographer. This detailed description might expose revelations about Ulmann that one was previously oblivious too.