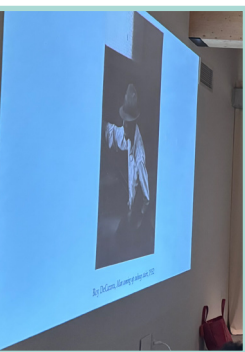




# Storytelling Through Archival Materials:

## A Night of Photographs and History with Dr. Makeda Best



*Photography Courtesy of MacKenzie Stevens*

**By Tyah-Amoy Roberts**

"With this exhibition, Dr. Best" sought to locate, explore, and contextualize Baldwin's oeuvre within the American photographic tradition," as she noted in her article of the same name."

# VOL.11

Dozens of people filled into the packed back room of the Wattis Gallery on October 15th, the inaugural day of their programming around labor, their curatorial research topic for the year. Curator, historian, and artist Dr. Makeda Best sat at the front of the room next to the presentation that accompanies her lecture, "Labor's Picture." The crowd was a mosaic of attentive students, curious scholars, and proud friends and colleagues of Dr. Best. Myself and a couple of my classmates helped organize this lecture as part of our core curriculum—Chloe King as the logistics coordinator, myself as the introduction lead, and Angie Cummings as the Q&A facilitator. I managed to cut through my own anxiety to give Dr. Best a quick hello, and to let her know that I would be delivering her introduction. Preparing for this role gave me the opportunity to dive deeper into Dr. Best's work, which left me with a reverence for her curatorial practice, especially as I move through the Visual & Critical Studies program in search of my own.

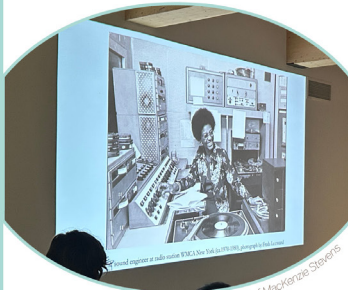
There was a low chatter until the lights lowered and Dr. Best launched into an anecdote on a stereographic image she displayed of self-emancipated Black



Photography Courtesy of Mackenzie Stevens

people, taken by Timothy O'Sullivan in 1862. She explained the historical moment that the image was captured in, the subjects of the photograph seen as fugitive and as contraband in their time. The more context she imparted onto the audience, the more it felt like the photo acted as a portal into that time. Dr. Best stepped into the visual analysis of this photographic artifact, then into historical analysis, and back to the visual with intense intellectual agility, all while weaving in helpful texts, primary accounts, and even more visual evidence.

We then moved into a retrospective on Dr. Best's San Franciscan roots with similar historic and textural detail. She emphasized the role of work that she saw in her community—her working class parents were



Photography Courtesy of Mackenzie Stevens

deeply enmeshed in the labor landscape of San Francisco's working class. Dr. Best's mother ran a rehabilitation program, many of the people she served being residents of Hunter's Point, a known superfund site. She spoke of the Tenderloin district, contrasting the assumptions assigned to the commu-

nity with her father's lived experience as a resident and former Silicon Valley engineer, looking for work by day and driving a taxi at night. She connected her lineage to the interest she has today in telling the story of the American working class, especially showing the dignity, visibility, and history of the working class during photojournalism's heyday.

Perhaps a crowd-favorite moment, Dr. Best projected an image of a young Black woman in a fur-lined coat in front of a storefront. She identified her as Emma Burtis Jones, a woman with harsh but common socioeconomic circumstances who did the best she could for herself and her small child. I found myself connecting emotionally with the woman in the photo, who I had never seen before but was illuminated and lively through the speaker's description of her. Dr. Best then identifies Ms. Jones as the mother of James Baldwin, wrapping the story in a nice bow that I thought was going to lead us into a retrospective on Baldwin's life—instead, something more interesting happens. Dr. Best reveals to us that this woman actually isn't James Baldwin's mother, and that her name was not Emma Burtis Jones. The crowd let out a chorus of gasps as she revealed that there is, in fact, no known information about the subject of this photograph taken by Ben Shahn in 1932 New York, which Dr. Best used to introduce her speculative exhibition *Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America*. With this exhibition, Dr. Best "sought to locate, explore, and contextualize Baldwin's oeuvre within the American photographic tradition," as she noted in her article of the same name.

We don't always have information about the *what* of an artifact—what it is, who made it, what it depicts. But we do often have a sense of the *why*, the history that informs a moment that is captured in a photograph.



Photography Courtesy of MacKenzie Stevens

An important aspect of Dr. Best's curatorial practice is having an intimate understanding of that *why*, in order to craft an exhibition that illuminates a moment in history through archival materials. When the archive itself is lacking in its ability to paint a full picture, her storytelling ability bridges those gaps. There is so much to learn from Dr. Best's approach, but I will come away asking one thing of every collection I find—what's missing?

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