

Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave "Clothed and in Their Own Form"

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

And, when it lists him, waken can
Brute or savage into man.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Freedom," 1854

So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood, or Douglas [sic] if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English & American humanity. The Antislavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness & nervousness[;] the might & the right is here. Here is the Anti-Slave. . .now let them emerge, clothed and in their own form.

—Emerson, Holograph, First Draft of Emerson's "Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies," 1844

If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.

—Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1845–1847

In October 1923, in his monthly column for *The Crisis* magazine, W. E. B. Du Bois wondered, "Why do not more young colored men and women take up photography as a career? The average white photographer does not know how to deal with colored skins and having neither sense of the delicate beauty or tone nor will to learn, he makes a horrible botch of

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portraying them.”¹ Du Bois knew whereof he spoke, as both curator and subject. He pioneered the use of photography to introduce “The New Negro” to the world in his American Negro Exhibit of 363 photographs of African American life (masterfully selected for maximum political effect) at the Paris Exposition in 1900.² As a trained historian, moreover, Du Bois well understood a simple rule for ensuring one’s immortality: stage events of potential historical import and have them photographed, preferably with one’s self positioned at the center of the image, which Du Bois so frequently did.

Du Bois is recorded in an extraordinary number of photographs, often positioning himself in profile against the face-forward poses of his historical fellow travelers—the prophetic voice, the helmsman, poised to lead either with or against the grain. So the point he was making about the rather uneven quality of the tones of black skin and the texture of black hair captured on film was, I would imagine, something that he had noticed in photographs of himself and other black subjects because black skin reflects (and that is the key word here) a wide range of phenotypes and is a full f-stop different, on average, from white skin.

The problem of capturing texture and detail in a photographic scene composed of elements of different luminance (for Du Bois’s purposes, lighter and darker skin and hair than those of standard white subjects) gave birth to “The Zone System,” attributed to Ansel Adams and Fred Archer and made popular, for my generation of photography students, in a book of that title by Minor White, which was required reading when I studied photography as an undergraduate at Yale.³ The Zone System teaches a photographer to see the subjects in a scene as a range of ten brightness

1. Quoted in Deborah Willis, “The Sociologist’s Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition,” in David Levering Lewis and Willis, *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress* (New York, 2003), p. 51.

2. See Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois’s Exhibit of American Negroes: African Americans at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Md., 2013).

3. See Minor White, *Zone System Manual: Previsualization, Exposure, Development, Printing* (New York, 1968).

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values, ranging from zero to ten, with zero as the blackest black, ten as the whitest white, and five as neutral gray. The skin of a white person, on average, would fall into zone five, but the skin of a black person, on average, would fall into zone four. And a black person's hair, depending on color and texture, could fall into zone three or really somewhere in-between. The difference between zones is equivalent to a full f-stop.

If a photographer meters a scene consisting of the range of light and dark elements found in, say, a group of black and white people, or even a group of black people, considering the great diversity of colors and hair textures embraced by the terms *black* or *African American*, with a meter that averages the light being reflected off of the various subjects in the scene, the darker elements in the photograph will be underexposed, appearing flat, textureless, and grey. This technological problem is solved in the simplest and cleverest of ways: using a reflected light exposure meter (we used a Luna-Pro hand meter) to meter the darkest areas of the scene in which the photographer wants detail and texture to appear in the developed negative and setting the camera's f-stop to that reading, rather than to the average of the overall scene. This is a solution that any outstanding photographer of black subjects, such as Carl Van Vechten or Gordon Parks, had to figure out in one way or another, even if she or he never heard of the Zone System.⁴ In general, metering for values in the darker elements of a photographic scene means a longer exposure time or a larger aperture opening, so that the darker "zones" can be exposed to more light as the photograph is being taken. The result is much greater detail in black skin and black hair textures, both on the head and in beards and eyebrows.

This is not a problem that would have plagued Du Bois's hero, Frederick Douglass, or marred photographs of him, as daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and other genres deriving from plate cameras depended on long exposures for all photographic subjects. This is why early portrait photographers often used headrests to lock their subjects into place, to keep them from moving, as any movement during that long exposure time would have blurred the resulting image.⁵

Large-format cameras render subjects in greater detail, in general, than

4. See Carl Van Vechten, *O, Write My Name: American Portraits, Harlem Heroes* (New York, 2015).

5. In 1841 exposure times lasted several minutes; a decade later they were several seconds, owing to improvements in lenses and the chemical used to develop the images. Despite this dramatic reduction in exposure times, many studios continued to use head-and-body rests to stabilize their subjects through the 1850s, and a few were still using them at the end of the century. See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York, 1982), chap. 5; "Experiments in Photography," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 13 (Aug. 1856): 429–30; and Michel Frizot, *The New History of Photography* (Köln, 1998), p. 104.

35mm photographs possibly can. The reason? Resolution; a 4 x 5 inch image is approximately *sixteen* times the total resolution of a 35mm image. And because Du Bois revered Douglass—even writing several drafts of a poem he never published on his feelings about his hero's passing upon hearing of Douglass's death in 1895—this is something that he probably noticed when studying Douglass's image in black-and-white. Indeed, the photographs of Douglass are remarkable by and large for the sheer technical quality with which they have represented the tones and textures of their black subject's skin and hair, as well as a remarkable degree of detail in the subject's clothes. It is difficult to imagine that Douglass failed to notice how crucial depth of field and exposure time related to the images of himself he most frequently circulated were. Because he was photographed more than any other American of his time and because, as John Stauffer explains, "he had his pick among photographers and the photo shoot was a kind of *pas de deux* between him and the photographer," it shouldn't surprise us that Douglass not only used photographic images of himself, like he used his oratory—first in the battle to end slavery, and second to insure full citizenship rights for the Negro—but also *theorized* about photography, its nature and uses.

Douglass was, by all accounts, a master orator on his feet, summoning rhetorical tropes and figures seemingly at will to maximum effect. For someone so urgently concerned with effecting immediate political change, he was extraordinarily patient in making his case, drawing upon a storehouse of rhetorical strategies to make that case most effectively and eloquently. One of his favorite tropes was chiasmus, repeating two or more words or clauses or grammatical constructions, balanced against each other in reverse order; a rhetorical *x* somewhat akin to a linguistic seesaw. "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."⁶ Repetition with a difference, as any good musician knows, can produce a most delightful effect in a keen listener.

And as chiasmus always entails a form of reversal, its potentially political uses are as great as its aesthetic uses, particularly if one is a fugitive slave implicitly making the case for his common humanity with his white reader through the text that reader is holding in her or his hands. Here, rhetoric is called upon to reverse the world's order, the order in which the associations among *slave* and *black* and *white* and *free* appear to have been willed, fixed, and natural. To reverse this supposedly natural order of things, to show that what seemed fixed was actually arbitrary (and evil), Douglass

6. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* (Boston, 1845), pp. 65–66.

seized on the political potential inherent in this figure of reversals as the overarching rhetorical strategy of his carefully crafted first book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, which can itself be read as an extended chiasmus.⁷

Through a series of binary oppositions that comprise his extended chiasmus, Douglass sets out the salient characteristics of the world the master had made as they occur to the slave child. Masters are your fathers; slaves are your mothers. Masters are white and ride in carriages drawn by horses when the sun is high; slaves are black and arrive on foot in the middle of the night. Slaves tell time by the cycle of the seasons and the planting, growing, and harvesting of crops; masters mark time by the calendar, linear time. Masters know their exact birth date; slaves cannot. Masters figure the realm of culture, which they also inhabit; slaves figure nature, which they are thought to embody. Masters connote and carry civilization, culture; slaves denote and embody savagery, barbarity.

Then, all of a sudden, Douglass reverses these associations—turning them upside down just as surely as if he had grabbed the two branches on each side of the *x* of the chiasmus with both hands and flipped them—showing that we had gotten these associations wrong all along, that there was nothing natural or fixed about them after all; that they were constructed, arbitrary, and in fact evil; perversions of the natural order of things in which all men and women are meant to have equal rights. The world the planters have made shows that it is they who are the real beasts, the cannibals, because they consume their own flesh, consuming the children whom they have fathered, through rape and adultery, insuring that those children remain slaves by violating one of the most sacred tenets of Western civilization, that the child should follow the condition of the father, not the mother.

What's more, he argues, the planters have converted subjects into objects and turned human beings into property, sentient beings into things. This is a world in which human beings have been reified as property, the strangest and most barbaric reversal of all, a world in which an abstraction, an idea, has not only been treated as if it were real, natural, concrete, but has also been *institutionalized*. Douglass's job, the political work of his rhetoric, is to strip away the veil behind which this universe of illusion operates, defining its functional processes and machinery and unveiling its systems, apparatuses, thereby subverting its claims to be natural and fixed.

7. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York, 1987), chaps. 3–4.

Along the way he reveals the identity of the culprits who constructed this perverted apparatus, the cannibals who eat their own children.

Slavery, Douglass is saying, is an abstraction that we have mistaken for the concrete, an idea that we have confused with the eternally real. On the strength of his mastery of figures and tropes, Douglass summoned his powerful rhetorical *x* to destroy this world order, as if his words possessed the might and the power of the *logos*, the power to make and unmake worlds. Slavery is, in the end, an arbitrary set of power relations, not a fixed, *natural* entity; a manifestation of an idea in which the social is expressed through the traded, in which subjects (“You have seen how a man was made a slave,” Douglass says) are turned into objects, rendered passive and determined. Once exposed for what it is, the world the master has fabricated can be destroyed, *x*-ed out, as it were: now “you shall see how a slave was made a man.”

The apparatus of the camera obscura is the optical counterpart of chiasmus, literally the *x* at the back of the box, the mechanism that reproduces, rotates, and reverses a scene, transforming it into an image flipped 180 degrees. And here, Douglass anticipated Karl Marx: “If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.”⁸ The camera obscura is the device that turns the natural, visual world upside down. It is the device that made photography and the camera possible. (Insertion of a mirror reverses the image so that what is being filmed appears “normal.”)

And the large format of early cameras, the cameras that photographed Douglass—plate cameras, such as daguerreotype (which could also be used to make tintypes and ambrotypes) and wet-plate collodion cameras—demanded long shutter speeds to imprint the image onto photographic plates shielded from light in the enclosed black box. This process yielded photographs with great depth of field, ideal for revealing details of the darker zones of the subject’s hair color and texture, the crease, fold, and quality of one’s clothes, and, more importantly for Douglass and the black abolitionists, the range of skin colors that even then were all grouped under the rubric of “black.” It was this depth of field in the dark zones of a subject or scene, rendered through these long exposure times, that was too often missing in images of black people shot by photographers who undermetered or underexposed snapshots of black subjects, turning the darker

8. Karl Marx, “From *The German Ideology*,” *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster (New York, 1986), p. 27.

zones of the black body neutral, which led Du Bois to complain in his *Crisis* editorial in 1923 about the graying or erasing of black detail in photographs being created by “white photographer[s].”

I believe that Du Bois was troubled by the *sameness* the new roll-film cameras were producing in depicting black subjects; plate cameras, for all of their limitations, were marvels at capturing *difference*, even *differences within difference*, as it were, as in the case of the individuality of former slaves. Think of these as *differences from within*, black-to-black difference. And Du Bois understood, almost implicitly, why it was important in the larger quest for civil rights to chart the specificity—the uniqueness—of the members of the black community, all the while claiming its unity as a group for political purposes. This was his point when he curated those 363 images of American Negroes and American Negro Life at the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris Exposition in 1900. The range of “black” phenotypes he exhibited—virtually all of them middle or upper class, and a very large proportion of them “black” only in a country with a law of hypodescent, the so-called one drop rule (which became codified with *Plessy v. Ferguson*)—was one of the most astonishing of the various political messages that his exhibition intended to project, revealing a history of both rape and forced race mixing as well as extraordinarily class-as-color diversity in “a small nation of people,” as Du Bois himself described the Negroes in his exhibition, a “nation” larger even than the populations of Canada, Poland, Saudi Arabia, or Australia.⁹

Douglass used photography in the same way, registering through image of himself after image of himself that the Negro, the slave, was as variable as any human being could be, not just in comparison to white people, but even more importantly among and *within* themselves. Ralph Waldo Emerson once mused, in his journals, that “at night all men are black.”¹⁰ Douglass would have responded that not even all black men are black at night in exactly the same way; even blackness, as we have seen, occupies distinct zones. Not only do all black people *not* look alike, Douglass repeatedly is attesting through these photographs, but even one black subject doesn’t “look alike” over time; even he varies from self to self, never remaining static, a self always unfolding: dynamic, growing, changing, evolving. “The man is only half himself,” Emerson wrote in “The Poet,”

9. Quoted in Lewis and Willis, introduction to *A Small Nation of People*, p. 18. And see Todd Gustavson, *Camera: A History of Photography from Daguerreotype to Digital* (Toronto, 2009), chaps. 8–10.

10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960–82), 9:125.

“the other half is his expression.”¹¹ Douglass manipulated the *expression* of what we have to call his selves over at least 160 photographic portraits and three full-length autobiographies.

Douglass made that point most audaciously, I would say, in the bold manner in which he changed such fundamental details, in his three autobiographies, as the identities or characteristics of his own mother and father. “My father was a white man, or nearly white,”¹² he tells us in 1855, after telling us several times in the first chapter of his slave narrative published just a decade before that “my master was my father.”¹³ What was Douglass *seeing* when he looked at these selves of his, and what cultural and political *work* was he asking these images, over such a long period of time, to do, both in his own personal quest for fame and in his long-term quest for the larger cause of the freedom, equality, and citizenship of the Negro people?

Though it is astonishing that Douglass was the most photographed man in nineteenth-century America—according to Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier—it does not come as a surprise that he was the most photographed black man in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Why wouldn't Douglass have been drawn to this seductive technology to further his antislavery political agenda, to show the *variation* in forms of black subjectivity, indeed to display individual black *specificity*, especially his own, in his larger process of becoming “a Representative American man—a type of his countrymen,” as his friend, the brilliant man of letters, James McCune Smith would describe him?¹⁵ Even “the representative colored man in the United States” *presented* a range of selves over time.¹⁶ As any biographer of Douglass knows, there was not *a* Frederick Douglass; there were many Douglasses. And that, for him, was his ultimate claim on being fully and equally and complexly *human*. (After all, we know this about ourselves, don't we?) Not only did the black object actually, all along, embody subjectivity, but this subjectivity evolved and mutated over time. The Frederick Douglass in the first photograph of Stauffer's marvelous book is not the same Frederick Douglass registered in the book's final photograph (figs. 1–2). And that, I think, is

11. Emerson, “The Poet,” *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joseph Slater and Alfred R. Ferguson, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 3:4.

12. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, 1855), p. 52; hereafter abbreviated *MB*.

13. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, p. 2.

14. See Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*.

15. James McCune Smith, “Introduction,” in Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. xxv.

16. Gates, Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett, introduction to *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture*, ed. Gates and Jarrett (Princeton, N.J., 2007), p. 2.



FIGURE 1. Unknown artist, *Frederick Douglass*, c. 1841. Sixth-plate daguerreotype. Collection of Greg French.

one of the most important political points about “the nature of the Negro” that Douglass was able to achieve over half a century, through his manipulation of his own image by means of the technological wonders of nineteenth-century plate photography.¹⁷

17. “The old indecent nonsense about the nature of the negro” (Emerson, “An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson [New Haven, Conn., 1995], p. 29; hereafter abbreviated “A”).



FIGURE 2. Unknown artist, *Frederick Douglass*, February 21, 1895 (deathbed photograph). Cabinet Card. National Park Service, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

Douglass was acutely aware that *images* matter, especially when one's rhetorical strategy had been fashioned around the trope of chiasmus, the reversal of the black slave object into the black sentient citizen subject. Until mirrors were inserted in the camera's mechanism, even photographs saw the image they were filming as the camera obscura. (As Ellen Driscoll has demonstrated, Douglass's fellow slave Harriet Jacobs also understood all too keenly the workings of the camera obscura. The images projected through a single pinhole of light during Jacobs's seven-year self-imposed captivity in a dark garret in her grandmother's house would have been displayed upside down on the far wall opposite the pinhole.)¹⁸

Perhaps more than any other former slave who wrote about his or her transformation from enslavement to citizenship, Douglass seems to have understood that the war against slavery and the obliteration and reconstitution of one's black subjectivity assumed many shapes and forms more subtle than armed combat and the passage and enforcement of laws—so

18. See Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston, 1861), p. 175. The artist Ellen Driscoll reproduced Jacobs's garret as a work of installation art, *The Loophole of Retreat*. The small hole that Jacobs had made in her garret in order to see her children became in Driscoll's rendering a camera obscura, emitting light that projected an inverted image on the wall opposite the pinhole; see Ellen Driscoll, "The Loophole of Retreat," www.ellendriscoll.net/ins_loophole.htm

many of these operating in the realm of the symbolic and the cultural imaginary. And the battlefield on which he could serve as captain, without peer, was that of the representation through photography of a construct that Ralph Waldo Emerson had named “the anti-slave” (“A,” p. 31).

Though I was pleased to learn from Len Gougeon and Stauffer that Emerson and Douglass had met each other at least twice, I had absolutely no doubt that Douglass had carefully devoured Emerson’s remarkable speech, delivered in Concord on 1 August 1844, “Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” in which he tells us what he means by “the anti-slave.” (See the second epigraph of this essay.) I had become convinced of the direct relationship between that text and Douglass’s first slave narrative, published just one year later, through close textual analysis alone. The formal signifying relationship, the call and response, between the two texts seemed palpably obvious to me. So imagine my delight when Gougeon told me that Douglass not only read Emerson’s speech, he actually heard Emerson deliver it, sat on the stage at the event while doing so, and spoke himself on the same day at the same event, following lunch.¹⁹

As the first draft of his speech that day makes clear, Emerson clearly had Douglass in mind when he conceived of the “anti-slave” and the crucial importance of black agency and the concept of a genuine emancipation of an enslaved self, as he included Douglass’s name along with that of the hero of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture. In his final version, however, Emerson deleted Douglass’s name, perhaps because he knew Douglass would be sitting on the stage and might be embarrassed, but more likely because he knew that, as Douglass widely broadcast in his abolitionist speeches himself, he was not of “pure blood.” Douglass’s hecklers would use this fact to question Douglass’s use of himself as proof of black-white intellectual equality, which is probably the reason that Douglass transformed his father from a white man to possibly being a “nearly white” mulatto between his first and his second autobiographies. (Paradoxically, Emerson’s antislave would erase racial difference—“Here is the anti-slave: here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance” [“A,” p. 31]—but a racially-mixed man, specifically Douglass, not of “pure blood,” couldn’t claim that role.)²⁰ For a black man to signify on the world’s stage as “the anti-slave,” Emerson seems to insist, he would have to be “pure” in order to demonstrate the inherent capacities of the African people. I turned to a critic of Emerson, David Bromwich, for a possible explanation of Emerson’s motivation for this, and this is what he said: “My

19. See Gougeon, “Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave,” *The New England Quarterly* 85 (Dec. 2012): 622–3.

20. Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 329.

guess is that he wanted 'pure blood' for the sake of a pure scientific proof that genius (the genius of leadership and, in the case of Douglass, of language, too) can come from a black man, with absolute assurance that it wasn't white admixture that supplied the spark. Does this reveal Emerson's sincere belief, or was it tactical—something he thought he should say because his audience needed to hear it? It's impossible to be sure. On the basis of the rest of Emerson, I would guess: he didn't distrust the pseudo-biology *enough* to think he could afford to omit the pedantic qualification."²¹ I would agree.

(Gougeon, by the way, traces several direct links between Emerson and Douglass, the latter younger by fifteen years, including the remarkable fact that Douglass actually "transcribed that portion of *The Liberator's* description of Emerson's second emancipation address"—Emerson would deliver four of these between 1844 and 1849—and boldly wrote to Emerson asking for a complimentary copy of his *Representative Men*, which was published in 1850 though delivered as lectures in 1845 and 1846.)²²

It is difficult for me to imagine a single text, except for perhaps the Bible, that so obviously influenced the shape of Douglass's thinking and the forms that his thinking would assume, especially in photographs of himself, than this incredible speech that Emerson delivered in 1844, the year before Douglass finally sat down and wrote his first slave narrative. Given the rhetorical structure of his *Narrative*, the effect on Douglass seems to have been electric: "The First of August marks the entrance of a new element into modern politics, namely, the civilization of the negro. A man is added to the human family. Not the least affecting part of this history of abolition, is, the annihilation of the old indecent nonsense about the nature of the negro" ("A," p. 29). This "old indecent nonsense," of course, was the astonishingly ridiculous idea that the Negro was a beast, an animal, closer on the great chain of being to an ape than to a European human. Lest his point be lost on his antislavery audience gathered in Concord that day on the tenth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, Emerson, for good measure, cites William Wilberforce saying, in 1791, that "we have obtained for these poor creatures the recognition of their human nature, which, for a time, was most shamefully denied them" (quoted in "A," p. 29).

But then he makes his grand point, the point that would so inform Douglass's sense of himself, his public image, and the relation between representations of his self and the political goals he wished to effect: nature, he writes, "will only save what is worth saving; and it saves not by compas-

21. David Bromwich, email to author, 18 Mar. 2015.

22. Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism," p. 639.

sion, but by power. It appoints no police to guard the lion, but his teeth and claws; no fort or city for the bird, but his wings; no rescue for flies and mites, but their spawning numbers, which no ravages can overcome. It deals with men after the same manner" ("A," p. 31).

And how is that?

If they are rude and foolish, down they must go. When at last in a race, a new principle appears, an idea;—*that* conserves it; ideas only save races. If the black man is feeble, and not important to the existing races not on a parity with the best race, the black man must serve, and be exterminated. But if the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization, for the sake of that element, no wrong, nor strength, nor circumstance, can hurt him: he will survive and play his part. ["A," p. 31]

In other words, black people have no choice but to achieve their subjectivity *by themselves*, by fashioning a self through writing, by writing themselves into the discourse of being, as Douglass would do just a year later in his *Narrative*, but also by *representing* that self, as Emerson expressed it in the climax of his speech, "in their own form" ("A," p. 32):

The intellect,—that is miraculous! Who has it, has the talisman: his skin and bones, though they were the color of night, are transparent, and the everlasting stars shine through, with attractive beams. . . . I say to you, you must save yourself, black or white, man or woman; other help is none. I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery that the black race can contend with the white; that, in the great anthem which we call history, a piece of many parts and vast compass, after playing a long time a very low and subdued accompaniment, they perceive the time arrived when they can strike in with effect, and take a master's part in the music. ["A," p. 31]

"Now," Emerson concludes with what must have struck Douglass as a call to arms, "let them emerge, clothed and in their own form" ("A," p. 32).

"He only who is able to stand alone," Emerson would write in 1854, "is qualified for society."²³ As he put this in his poem, "Freedom," that same year:

And, when it lists him, waken can
Brute or savage into man.²⁴

23. Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law," *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, p. 83.

24. Emerson, "Freedom," *Emerson: Poems*, ed. Peter Washington (New York, 2004), p. 84.

Just a year later, Douglass would write, in his revised account of his road from slavery to freedom, that “a man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot honor a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise” (*MB*, pp. 246–7).²⁵ But this begs the question: how does one broadcast those signs of power, the force of irresistible, inimitable subjectivity? How does one represent a group while at the same time charting the uniqueness of one’s self, again, in one’s “own form”?

Douglass would, of course, speak, then write, himself into the republic of American letters, during the unfolding of what literary scholars today call the *American Renaissance*, a curious term in retrospect, for the literature that emerged during one of the most politically active and contentious movements in American history, the antislavery movement, centered in and around Boston (where William Lloyd Garrison had founded *The Liberator* in 1831). Both the literary movement and the antislavery movement reached their zeniths in the 1850s. Though there are many personal and textual links between the two, Douglass and Emerson most certainly constitute one such direct bridge between them, though linking these movements seems to have made scholars of literary history uncomfortable.

Douglass would take Emerson’s call for the black representative man to emerge in his “own form,” the challenge set for him by his friend, Smith, that he be “a *Representative American man*,” one step further: by embracing the new technology of photography and repeatedly using that technology to fashion and refashion an image of a physical self, elegantly clothed in his own unique genetic embodiment of that *sui generis* American ethnic self linked, inextricably and inevitably connected, to both black and white: “the mulatto.” Black, yes, but white as well. Black-*ish*. Both and neither, as Charles Chesnutt put it.²⁶ Was that a disadvantage, this *sui generis* status of Douglass’s? Hardly. As Emerson put it, “The possibility of interpretation lies in the identity of the observer with the observed.”²⁷ And in Douglass’s

25. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, pp. 246–7.

26. See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 15–16; Charles W. Chesnutt, “Self-Made Men,” “What Is a White Man,” and “The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time,” *Essays and Speeches*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. et al. (Stanford, Calif., 1999), pp. 33–40, 68–74, 121–36; and Douglass, “The Future of the Colored Race,” *The North American Review* 142 (May 1886): 437–40.

27. Emerson, “Uses of Great Men,” *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (1850; Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 7; hereafter abbreviated “U.”

case, his hermeneutical circles were interlocking sets, separate but coinciding, one black, one white. And he stood at the center of the gray area of mixed-race overlap.

While it is true that “men resemble their contemporaries even more than their progenitors,” Emerson says, nonetheless, “he is great who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others” (“U,” pp. 15, 5). Though Douglass was hardly alone by midcentury as a “mixed-race” American, as he was fond of pointing out in his indictments of the sexual abuse and rape black women slaves suffered at the hands of their masters, and although other black abolitionists, such as Douglass’s rival, William Wells Brown, were also the offspring of white fathers, he more than any other of his contemporaries managed to fashion a self that seemed qualitatively unique, embodying Emerson’s dictum that “he only who is able to stand alone, is qualified for society.” And Douglass used the photographs of himself precisely for this purpose, I think, to *demonstrate visually* that, as related to his peers, the slaves, for whose freedom he so passionately fought, and as related to the New England intelligentsia as he was striving to be, in the end, he was peerless. In response to Smith’s point, in his introduction to Douglass’s second book, that “the style of a man *is* the man,” Douglass sought to embody his “style” uniquely in his spoken and written words, of course, but also in exceptionally attractive and compelling visual forms, forms that this collection reveals evolved incrementally over time.²⁸ Never in the period in American history between 1841 and his death in 1895 was Douglass not concerned about crafting his visual image.

“Men have a pictorial or representative quality,” Emerson would also write in that same pivotal essay, “Uses of Great Men,” the introduction to his *Representative Men*, “and serve us in the intellect. . . . Men are also representative; first, of things, and secondly, of ideas.” Which things? Which ideas? “Each man is, by secret liking, connected with some district of nature whose agent and interpreter he is” (“U,” p. 6). For Douglass, without a doubt, that “district of nature” was the antislave. But he was also revealing what we might think of, after Emerson, as the secret nature of the Negro: “He is not only representative but participant. Like can only be known by like. The reason he knows about them, is that he is of them: he has just come out of nature, or from being a part of that thing . . . , and he can variously publish their virtues, because they compose him.” Ultimately, even for the historically silenced and unrepresentable, Emerson argues (in the case I am making, through this, the antislave), “unpublished nature will have its whole secret told” (“U,” p. 7).

28. McCune Smith, “Introduction,” p. xxix.

So what “things” and “ideas” was Douglass trying to “represent,” and, just as importantly by contrast, what was he trying, through his many photographs, *not to represent*? First and foremost, without a doubt, looking through the many photographs of Douglass, one can almost hear Emerson’s description of “the hero of the day”: “The people cannot see him enough. They delight in a man. Here is a head and a trunk! What a front; what eyes; Atlantean shoulders; and the whole carriage heroic, with equal inward force to guide the great machine!” When Emerson asks “what indemnification is one great man for populations of pygmies!” and then tells us that “we balance one man with his opposite, and the health of the state depends on the see-saw,” we can begin to understand what he might think of as the larger rhetorical strategy of the text of Douglass’s photographs of himself. But even more importantly, the representative man “is an exhibition in some quarter of new possibilities” (“U,” pp. 9, 15, 16, 19).

What “new possibilities”? Douglass, through these images of himself, is attempting both to *display and displace*: he is seeking at once to show in two dimensions the contours of the antislave, “God’s image in ebony,” as the abolitionists like to say, who in essence and in *possibility* fundamentally, by definition, shares the blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of every other white human being.²⁹ Even as late as 1854, Douglass could point to claims that the Negro was really not a human being, as he did in his Case Western commencement address “The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered,” citing a recent editorial in the *Richmond Examiner*. Douglass used these photographs to mark both the differences *and* the resemblances of black people to the larger human community. But he also was displaying, *prima facie*, the inextricable social *and* biological connection between the slave and his master, between bondsman and lord, between black and white. That was his first and most subtle intention.³⁰

Even more directly, however, Douglass was intent on the use of this visual image to *erase* the astonishingly large storehouse of racist stereotypes that had been accumulated in the American archive of antiblack imagery, the bank of simian and other animal-like caricatures meant to undermine the Negro’s claim of a common humanity, and therefore the rights to freedom and citizenship and economic opportunity (figs. 3–7).

29. See *God’s Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, Etc.*, ed. H. G. Adams (London, 1854).

30. See Douglass, “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” *Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. Blassingame et al., 5 vols., in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. Blassingame et al. (New Haven, Conn., 1979–): 2:497–525.



FIGURE 3. Unknown artist, *Jim Crow*, c. 1830. Etching and ink. Library of Congress.

Douglass, as we shall see, does not distinguish, when he writes of pictures, among photographs, paintings, chromolithographs, or others. While Douglass elsewhere, of course, condemns racist caricatures of

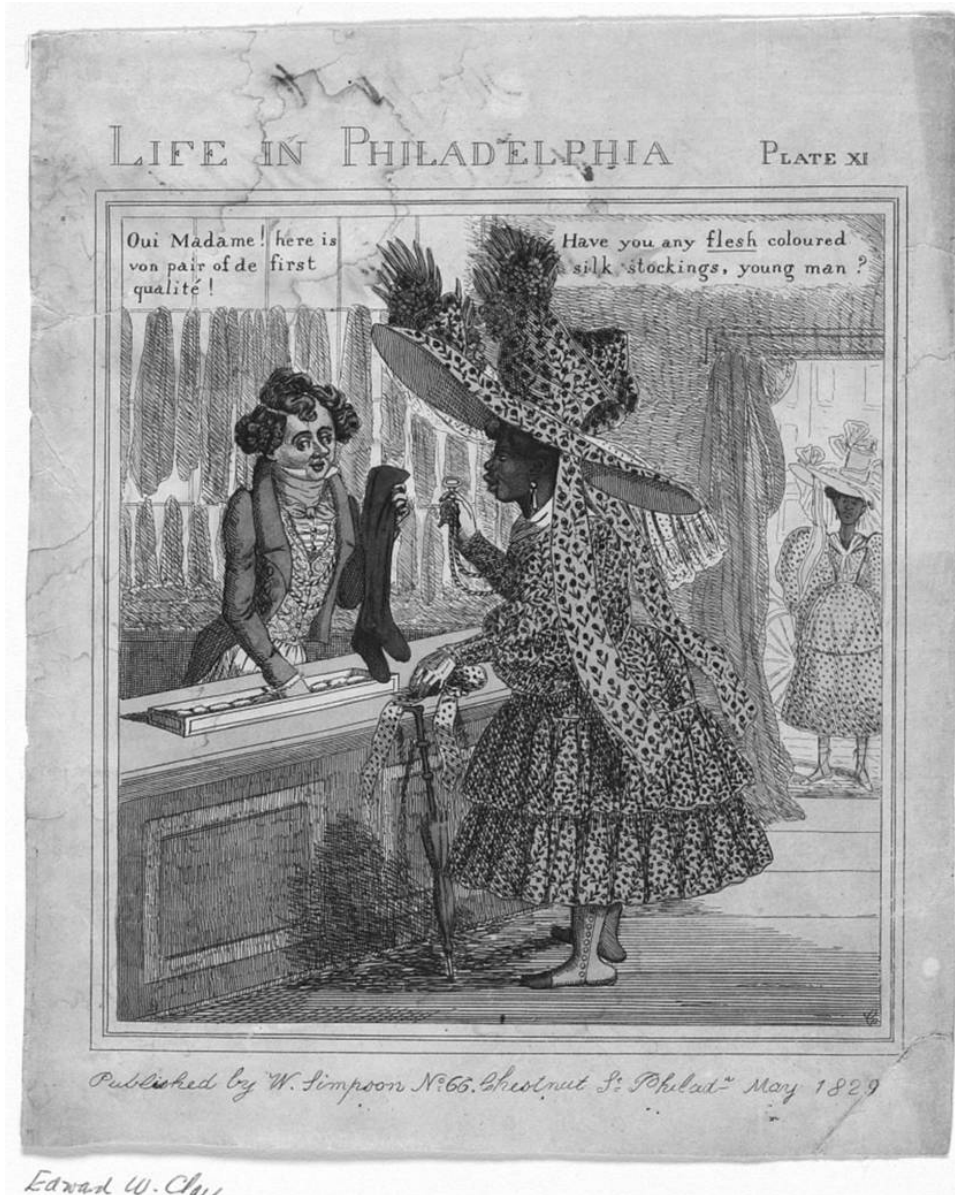


FIGURE 4. Plate XI. Edward Williams Clay, *Life in Philadelphia*, 1829. Library of Congress.

black people—most notably in his essay “A Tribute for the Negro,” published in his newspaper *The North Star* in 1849—he doesn’t do so in this essay, or in his other three essays on photography.³¹ Nor does he seem aware that *all* picture making most certainly is *not* the greatest evi-

31. See Douglass, review of *A Tribute for the Negro*, by Wilson Armistead, *The North Star*, 7 Apr. 1849. For other examples of Douglass attacking racist caricatures, see Douglass, “Which Greeley Are We Voting For? An Address Delivered in Richmond Virginia on 24 July 1872,” *Series One*, 4:303 and letter to Louis Prang, 14 June 1870, in Katharine Morrison McClinton, *The Chromolithographs of Louis Prang* (New York, 1973), p. 37.

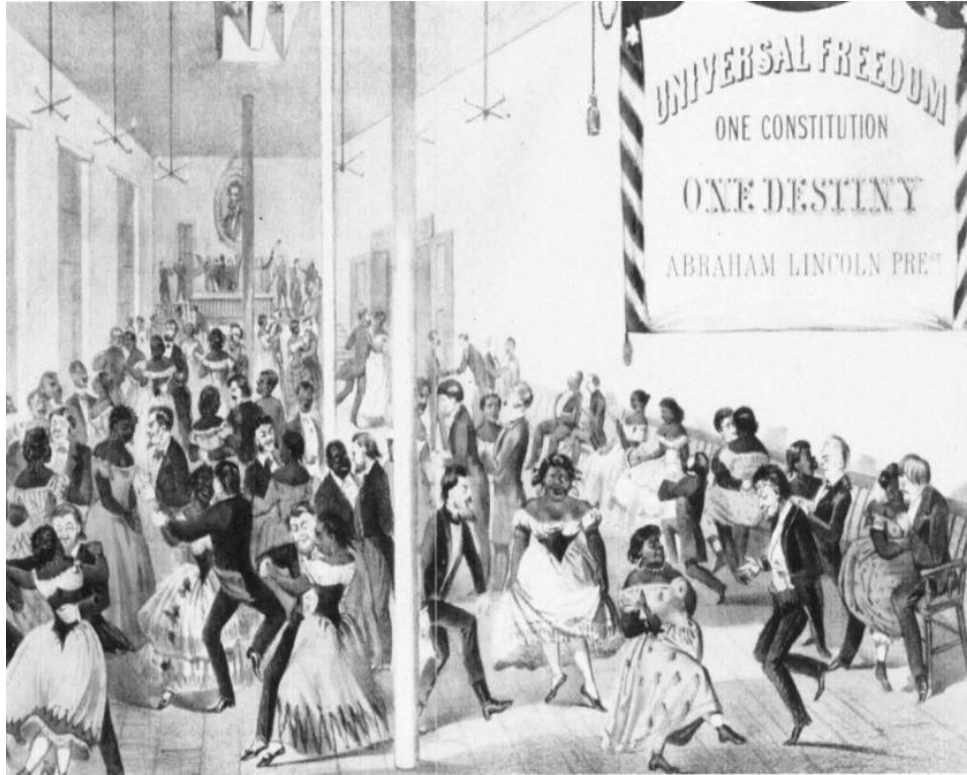


FIGURE 5. Unknown artist, *Political Caricature No. 4, The Miscegenation Ball*, 1864. Lithograph on wove paper. Library of Congress.

dence of humanity or genius. Some pictures, such as these, are simply vile and degrading, both to the people they represent and of the people who make them. As W. J. T. Mitchell said to me recently, “When it comes to racial stereotyping, photography is a very inefficient way of producing ‘Sambo’ images and other caricatures. With photography, the caricature resides in the eye of the (racist) beholder, not in the image created by drawing, painting or even sculpture, unless it is staged for the camera as caricature.”³²

However, it will not surprise us to learn that some would attempt to use the newly popular medium of photography to serve their racist vision. Among the most notable examples are the images of our Harvard progenitor, Louis Agassiz, who sought, unsuccessfully, to use photographs of dignified yet “unadulterated” South Carolina slaves to represent the large mass of the Negro people—images at the opposite pole of representation of Douglass’s refined middle class parlor images—to serve as prima facie proof of his belief in polygenesis, proof that the African and the European

32. W. J. T. Mitchell, email to author, 13 Mar. 2015.

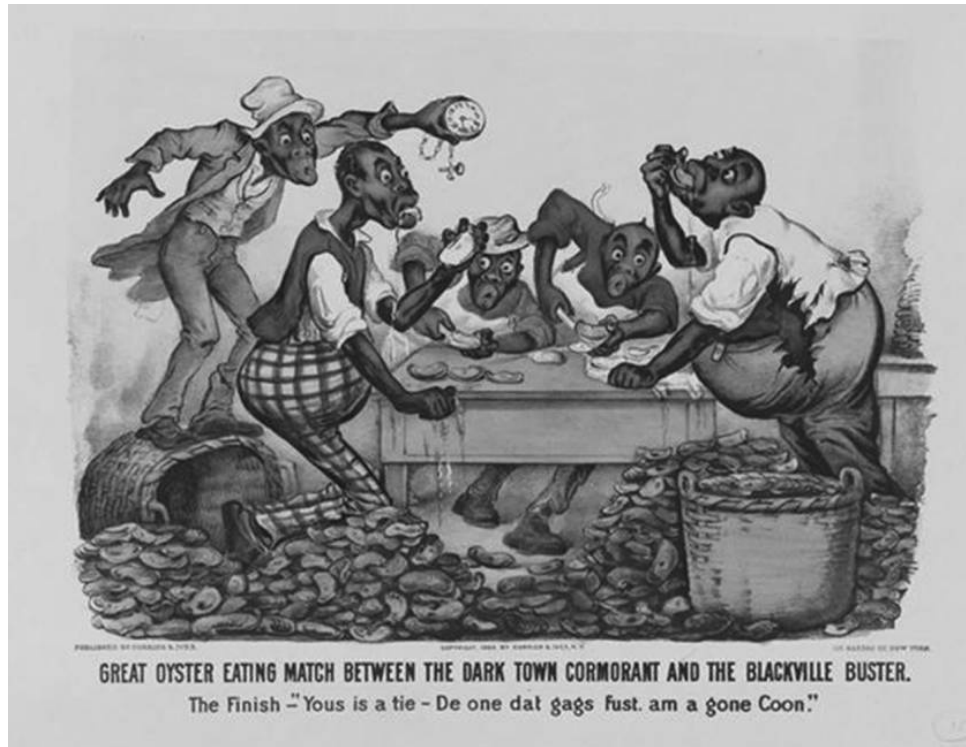


FIGURE 6. Currier and Ives, *Great Oyster Eating Match between the Dark Town Cormorant and the Blackville Buster. The Finish. "You is a tie - De one dat gags fust, am a gone coon,"* 1866. Lithograph. Library of Congress.

could not possibly be members of the same species (figs. 8–12). As several commentators have pointed out, Agassiz's attempt failed; he showed them only once to a group of other scientists and intellectuals, and then never again. Though compelled to strip naked for the photographer, the black "object's" inner subjectivity had deconstructed and derailed a most racist intention.³³ The slave, once again, has performed the chiasmic function, unveiling the wickedness of the so-called master. In the mirror of history, these photographs condemn Agassiz, not the human beings forced to function as photographic representatives either of slaves, or of a sort of tertium quid, a third term between the European and the ape.

Engaging photographic imagery in this war over the representation of

33. See Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), pp. 233–5; M. Susan Barger and William B. White, *The Daguerreotype: Nineteenth-Century Technology and Modern Science* (Baltimore, Md., 1991), pp. 80–81; Yxta Maya Murray, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried: Carrie Mae Weems' Challenge to the Harvard Archive," *Unbound: Harvard Journal of the Legal Left* 8, no. 1 (2013): 2; Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989), pp. 52–60; and Keith F. Davis, *The Origins of American Photography, 1839–1885: From Daguerreotype to Dry-Plate* (Kansas City, Mo., 2007), p. 49.



FIGURE 7. Unknown artist, *The Two Platforms*, 1866. Woodcut with letterpress on wove paper. Library of Congress.

the black subject was a most daunting task. Douglass, of course, in the end, would realize this, as the decade of the 1890s, his final half decade, saw the unprecedented proliferation of “Sambo” imagery, in trade cards and advertisements, made cheap and affordable through the wonders of chromolithography. Ultimately, though, Douglass saw much more clearly than so many of his colleagues that no single text, no single photograph, no single word nor image, could stanch the Niagara flow of stereotypes that American society would call upon to do the symbolic work of a mode of economic neoslavery and legalized Jim Crow segregation long after slavery per se had been abolished. And if these images could not be crushed, they could be countered, and countered with force. More than anything else, *Picturing Frederick Douglass* summons us all to visualize how these “signs of power,” as Douglass called them in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, manifested themselves over a half century in the life of the antislave, Frederick Douglass (*MB*, p. 247).

It comes as a surprise even to many Douglass scholars that the “representative colored man in the United States” not only ensured that he was photographed frequently over the course of his professional life, from 1841 to



FIGURE 8. J. T. Zealy, *Renty*, 1850 (profile). Quarter-plate daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

somewhere between twelve to twenty-four hours after he died, but that he also *theorized* about the nature and function of photography in four lectures on photography and picture making. He did so, of all times, amid the turbulence and turmoil of the Civil War. What is most remarkable about Douglass's theory of pictures, actually a theory of the nature and function of visual art (he fails to distinguish among its types, as I men-

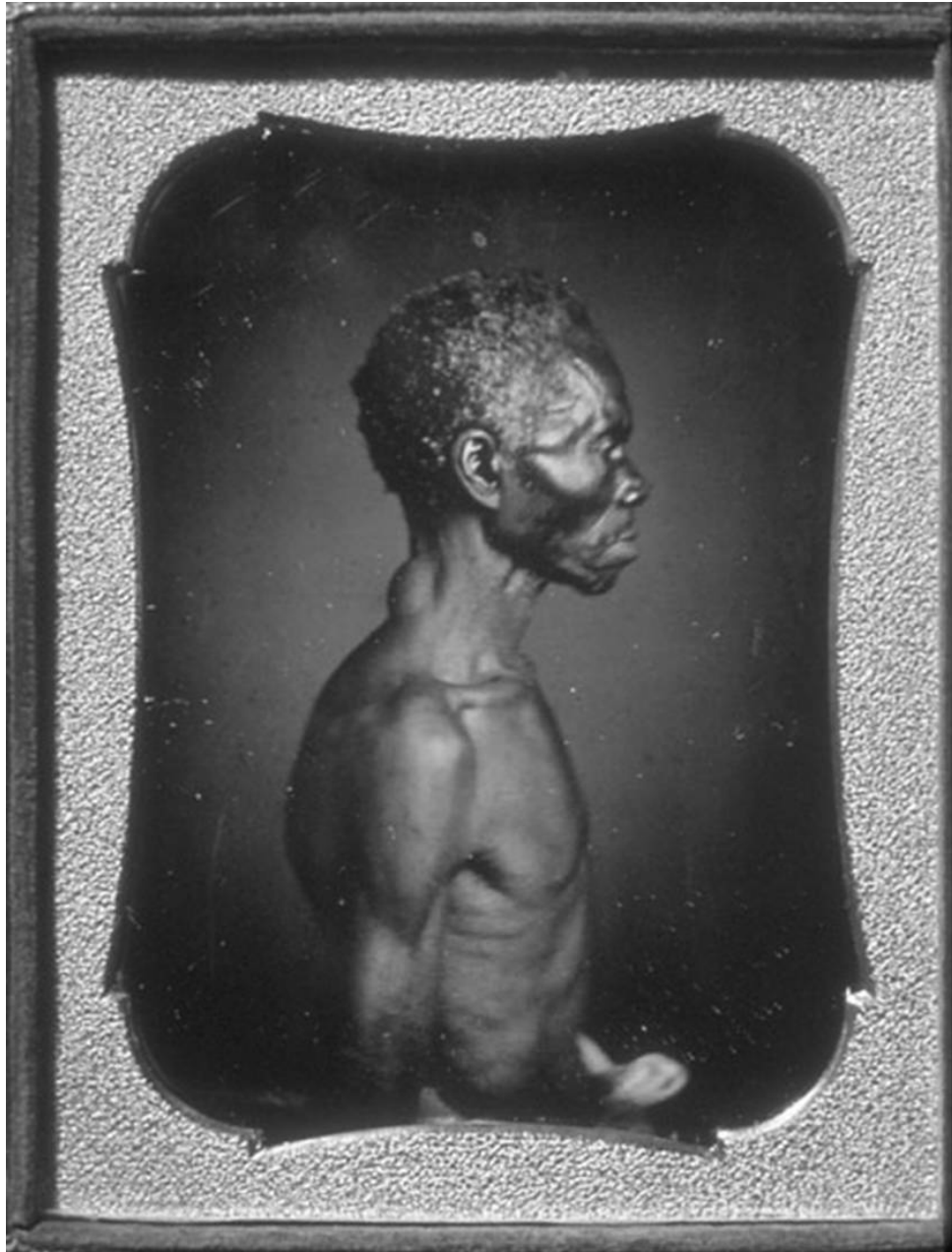


FIGURE 9. Zealy, Renty, 1850 (frontal view). Quarter-plate daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

tioned above) is how inextricably intertwined it is both with his larger political philosophy and with this rhetorical strategy of self-fashioning through the rhetoric(s)—textual and visual—of autobiography.

Douglass tells us right away, in “Pictures and Progress,” which Stauffer says he wrote shortly before Lincoln’s second inaugural address, that fate had given him both a mission and a text with which to embark upon that



FIGURE 10. Zealy, *Delia*, daughter of Renty, 1850. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

mission: “Now the speech I was sent into the world to make was an abolition speech. . . . When I come upon the platform the Negro is very apt to come with me. I cannot forget him: and you would not if I did.”³⁴ “You would not, he is saying, because “the Negro” is written on his face at a time

34. Douglass, “Pictures and Progress,” *Picturing Frederick Douglass*. p. 163; hereafter abbreviated “PP.” Douglass penned four essays on photography, which he delivered as speeches during the Civil

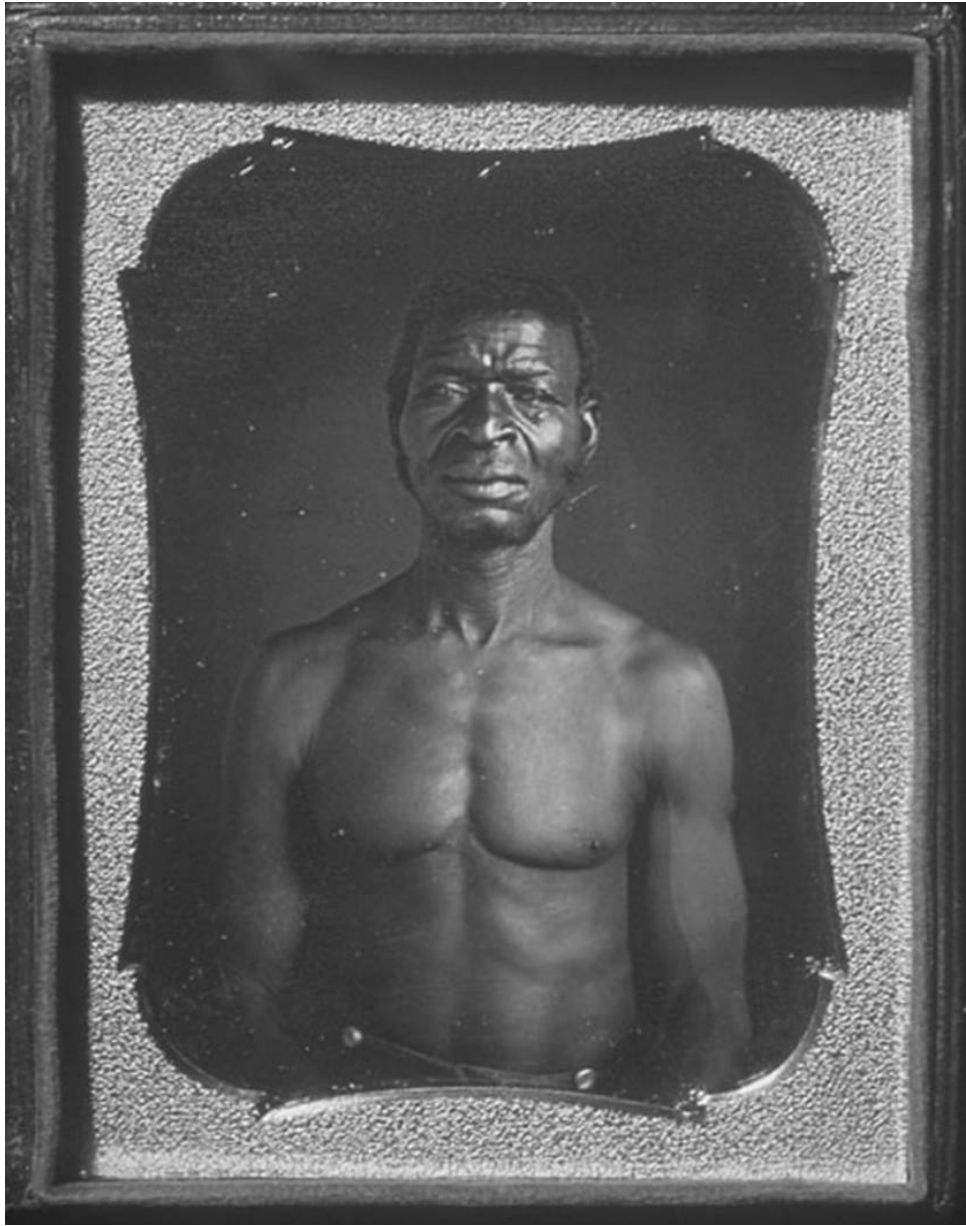


FIGURE 11. Zealy, *Jack*, 1850. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

when the blackness of that face cannot possibly be erased or rendered transparent or invisible. Hence, he is engaged—one might even say he is trapped—in a discursive arena in which even a lecture about something

War. Three of them have never before been published, and two of them, “Age of Pictures” and “Pictures and Progress,” are published for the first time in *Picturing Frederick Douglass*.



FIGURE 12. Zealy, *Drana*, daughter of Jack, 1850. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

seemingly apolitical, something seemingly as far afield from the battles to liberate the black slave as photography and art, in the end must, by definition, be engaged within and through Douglass's state of being as a black man in a white society in which one's blackness signifies negation.

In other words, he says, if "the books that we write and the speeches that we make . . . are . . . but the extensions, amplifications and shadows of ourselves, the peculiar elements of our individual manhood," then, for him, as inescapably representative of the larger black community, these things are also "the peculiar elements" of his *black subjectivity* (rendered

here as “manhood”) as well. “Whatever may be the text,” he says wittily, “man is sure to be the sermon” (“PP,” pp. 163, 166).

So what is Douglass’s “sermon” on the nature of the American Negro, within the context of photography? After lauding the genius of Daguerre for making the earth “a picture gallery,” then insisting that the one thing that incontrovertibly separates man from animal is the visual—“He alone of all the inhabitants of earth has the capacity and passion for pictures”—Douglass reveals the larger subtext for what would be mistaken as a diversion from his text of abolition, as we might think of it (“PP,” pp. 165, 166).

And here’s what he says: “A certain class of ethnologists and archeologists, more numerous in our country a few years ago than now and more numerous now than they ought to be and will be when slavery shall have no further need of them, profess some difficulty in finding a fixed, unvarying, and definite line separating what they are pleased to call the lowest variety of our species, always meaning the Negro, from the highest animal.” The proof that the Negro, too, is oh so human? But Douglass is also pointing to the fascination of visual texts, texts of the world and texts of the self: “To all such scientific cavilers, I commend the fact that man is everywhere a picture-making animal, and the only picture-making animal in the world.” Lest anyone misunderstand the range of peoples Douglass is including under the rubric of “man,” he goes on to say that “[even] the rudest and remotest tribes of men manifest this great human power—and thus vindicate the brotherhood of man,” whereas, pre-Daguerre, the presence and absence of “Reason,” with a capital *R*, manifesting itself through the written word and especially through poetry (as Emerson had pointed out in a passage that Douglass himself quotes in this essay), had stood as the demarcation line between animal and man, African and European. Douglass himself had made this very point just a decade earlier in his “Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered.” But recent scientific discoveries, Douglass says, reveal that both “dogs and elephants are said to possess it.” Now, however, in a post-Daguerre universe, that line is also policed by the capacity for picture making, “picture-appreciating” as he puts it, and, we might add, picture taking (“PP,” pp. 167, 166, 170).

So what might all of this have to do with slavery, abolition, the Civil War? Douglass, in a rhetorical turn that is partly self-serving, tells us that we have been summoned for a revelation, a revelation about the role of reform and the reformer in the hierarchy of the most sublime of human endeavors. Douglass begins this rhetorical sleight of hand by repeating his point that picture making and picture appreciating are at the apex of the arts, “the most important line of distinction between [man] and all others,” on his way to making the case for the relation between the visual and

the verbal, the fact that an image, a face, as it were, presupposes a voice ("PP," p. 170).

"To the flinty-hearted materialists," he argues, "pictures like flowers have no voice and impart no joy." Not only is this untrue, he insists, but this, the most sublime of all human faculties—the ability to objectify the self—unites the political reformer, in this case the antislave abolitionist, with both the poet *and* the prophet:

The process by which man is able to posit his own subjective nature outside of himself, giving it form, color, space, and all the attributes of distinct personality, so that it becomes the subject of distinct observation and contemplation, is at [the] bottom of all effort and the germinating principles of all reform and all progress. But for this, the history of the beast of the field would be the history of man. It is the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life, the ideal contrasted with the real, which makes criticism possible.

And what is the function of criticism? "Where there is no criticism there is no progress, for the want of progress is not felt where such want is not made visible by criticism. It is by looking upon this picture and upon that which enables us to point out the defects of the one and the perfections of the other" ("PP," p. 170).

And who within society is ideally suited to play this role; who are the philosopher kings of criticism? Why, poets and prophets, of course, but also a third group: *reformers!* And why? Because "Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction" ("PP," p. 171). Like poets and prophets, reformers strip away illusion, revealing the true nature of things, in the same way that Douglass used chiasmic reversals of binary oppositions to unmask the deep structure of the perverted world that the planters had made, a world in which master was really the slave, the civilized really the cannibal, the so-called human being really the savage, and the benighted slave really the best hope for the future of American civilization because she stood as the unassailable bulwark of Christian forbearance and forgiveness. The slave kept the faith; the fate of the culture was in her hands, not in the hands of her sadistic, licentious, hypocritical master. Criticism, for the slave and for the reformer, was a tool employed to unveil. And this is so because criticism is the deconstructive unmasking of illusion, "the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life," he says, and only "picture-makers" have this blessed capacity ("PP," p. 170).

"This ability," Douglass concludes with a flourish, that poets, prophets,

and reformers share, “is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.” What Louis Daguerre has done with modern technology, in other words, is precisely what the most sublime among us can do through second-order reflection, through critical consciousness: “We [reformers] can criticize the characters and actions of men about us because we can see them outside of ourselves,” just as we can when viewing a photograph of ourselves, “and [can] compare them one with another. But self-criticism, out of which comes the highest attainments of human excellence, arises out of the power we possess of making ourselves objective to ourselves—[we] can see our interior selves as distinct personalities, as though looking in a glass.” Just like a photograph, the critical thinker, in Douglass’s case, the reformer, makes “our subjective nature objective, giving it form” (“PP,” p. 171).

I find this one of the most remarkable statements in the entire canon of Douglass’s speeches, essays, and books. Not only does it anticipate Du Bois’s famous definition, just eight years after Douglass had passed, of the Negro’s “double-consciousness,” but it attests that for Douglass, at least, double-consciousness is the hallmark of genius, the sign of a depth of insight deeper than that of one’s fellows, the characteristic that black people by their very situation may share the sublime perspective of the privileged few.³⁵ And Daguerre’s genius is that he rendered in two dimensions, in tangible form, this wondrous process of visualizing ourselves *doing* an action and reflecting upon it as we do it, rendering the subjective “objective,” giving it form.

Finally, Douglass explains that his other motivation for embracing this new technology with such alacrity, on behalf of the Negro, as representative Negro, as the antislave, is to counter the racist stereotypes, “the already-read text” of the debased,³⁶ subhuman Negro fabricated and so profusely distributed by the slave power, by supplanting those images—“wherein illusions that take the form of solid reality and shadows get themselves recognized as substance”—with a proliferation of anticaricatures (“PP,” p. 166). No wonder Douglass emerges as the most frequently photographed American in the nineteenth century. He was a reformer on a

35. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, 1903), p. 3.

36. Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore, 1980), p. 3. Julia Faisst, “Degrees of Exposure: Fredrick Douglass, Daguerreotypes, and Representations of Freedom,” *Emancipation: Photography, Race, and Modern American Literature* (Heidelberg, 2012), pp. 31–61. For another approach to Douglass and photography, see Sarah Lewis, *Black Sea, Black Atlantic: Frederick Douglass and the “Thought Pictures” of the Caucasus* (forthcoming).

mission; he seized upon those long-exposure glimpses of black and majestic human forms, miraculously generated by the chiasmic magic of Daguerre's camera obscura, to fabricate—to *picture*—the very images through which, at long last, the Negro as antislave could emerge and then progress, “clothed and in their own form.”