

Abstract for “On White Eyes”

“On White Eyes” explores two moments in American history when societal events collided with new modes of visual representation in ways that forced white Americans to pay more attention to their conceptions of race. The lectures that Frederick Douglass gave during the Civil War years on the connection between race relations in the United States and the invention of photography serve as a key text through which this essay explores the issue of whiteness and the image. By first illustrating Douglass’s profound visual legacy that has up until very recently gone unnoticed and then unpacking the complexities between race and photography in Douglass’s lectures, we find that for Douglass race relations in the United States could not be untangled from its relationship with photography and “picture-making” more broadly.

From these lectures, “On White Eyes” turns to contemporary issues of race in the United States, focusing on the video of George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police officers on May 25th, 2020. I explore how the rise of bystander digital videos has significant parallels to the intersection between race and image that Douglass believed the photograph possessed for white Americans during the second half of the 19th century. Using Douglass’s lectures as a guide, I highlight the ways white people’s reactions to the George Floyd video corroborate Douglass’s claims that racism cannot and should not be separated from white people’s relationships with visual representations. Through the use of primary and secondary sources from the disciplines of history, literary criticism, media studies, and critical race theory, “On White Eyes” argues that the history of visual representation must be seen as an *active production* of race, not just a medium that captures and reflects it.

Genesis of “On White Eyes”

In the summer of 2020, I did a MAP with Professor Steve Andrews in the English Department. My research paper, “Picture This: Visualizing American Literature” explored the impact that the invention of photography had on the writing of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Douglass. In preparing to present this paper at the National Council of Undergraduate Research, I became interested in Frederick Douglass’s writings on photography and their potential connections to present issues regarding race in the United States. Using some of the sources from “Picture This: Visualizing American Literature” as a starting block, I began writing “On White Eyes.”

On White Eyes

By Avery Lewis

Introduction

When John Ashbery gazed at Parmigianino's painted portrait in his poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," he wrote that the soul is "unable to advance much farther / Than your look as it intercepts the picture." The connection between the gazer and the subject of a picture in Ashbery's poem therefore becomes a relational issue: how do visual representations of reality influence the construction of our identities and therefore the construction of our social world? How do we identify with images—of ourselves and others—or discredit them? Just as a reflection cannot be separated from what it reflects, the ambivalence we feel towards images—whether it be anxiety or adoration, lust or revulsion, identification or othering—cannot be separated from those same feelings we harbor towards other people. By exploring moments in American history when white people's relationship with race has collided with their relationship with different modes of visual representation, I hope to shed some new light on how race should be understood from a white perspective.

Though America is my focus, the way ambivalence over images maps itself onto societal issues extends much further than the United States. One only needs to look towards France to see a similar struggle: the murder of the Samuel Paty, a French middle-school teacher who was beheaded by an Islamist terrorist for showing his class *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad last October, is a particularly alarming example of conflicting views of images being at the heart of social strife.¹ As is the case with the killings that have occurred over

¹ The political violence that continues to unfold in France over the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons has fascinating and important parallels to race relation in the United States. Issues regarding freedom of expression, Laïcité, and

the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, contemporary conflict over pictures often relate to a long history of societal ambivalence toward images. This fear that is at once both universal and produced from specific cultural practices is what Levi-Strauss would have called a *scandal*: something that transcends the nature/culture opposition (Derrida 1209). Scandal is also an apt word to describe the relationship white people have towards race and images—visual representation can have the power to scandalize race in the eyes of white America, a power no one understood more than Frederick Douglass.

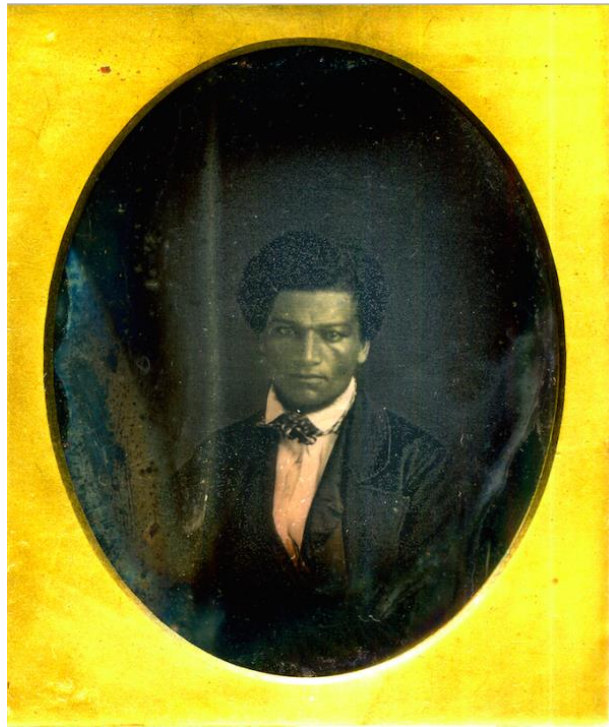


Figure 1. First known photograph of Douglass, daguerreotype, ca. 1841, Collection of Greg French

Picturing Frederick Douglass

“But life presents us with many puzzles, as well as contrasts in equalities and contradictions, and perhaps none has more

aniconism have all collided in volatile and contradictory ways that beg questions over the legal, political, and social constitutions of French culture.

perplexed the thoughtful man than the fact that men can resemble each other so closely and yet differ from each other so widely.”

—Frederick Douglass, “Age of Pictures”

One collision between image and race occurs when photography was introduced into American society. Though the photograph made its first appearance in America in 1839 by way of the daguerreotype, this essay contends that photography did not become fully American until 1841, when the first known photograph of Frederick Douglass was taken. This daguerreotype (see fig. 1), with the handsome face emerging from a dark, oily background and possessing a grace and defiance that would remain in the 167 photographs that followed over the course of Douglass's life, marks the beginning of the most influential visual legacy in American history. A yellow rectangular frame, looking like old parchment paper, encompasses the dark, pensive picture itself, accentuating the contrast between shadow and light. The daguerreotype shows Douglass at 23, just one year older than I am, three years after he gained his freedom, four years before he published the *Narrative of the of Frederick Douglass*, and almost exactly at the time that he becomes a paid lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society (Stauffer 12:48-13:30). It was not until nearly 175 years later that Frederick Douglass was recognized as the most photographed American in the 19th century and the significance of his visual legacy was thus fully brought to light. How and why Douglass's relationship with photography went for so long unnoticed are important questions, but this essay is concerned about why Douglass was obsessed with photography in the first place and what it can tell us about the present moment the United States finds itself in.

Despite the astounding fact that Douglass sat for 168 separate portraits, perhaps the most significant and surprising aspect of Douglass's visual legacy comes from four lectures on

photography and “picture-making” Douglass penned during the Civil War years, three of which are included in Part IV of *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century’s Most Photographed American*, the latter two lectures having never been published before.² The lectures contain three-dimensions of significant intersections: first, two mediums of communication (text and image) intersect together as Douglass is writing and speaking about photography and picture-making more broadly. Second, we have a Black man and former slave speaking to a white audience—a white audience who had specifically come to hear Douglass speak about abolition—who now found themselves listening to Douglass speak to them first and foremost about their relationship with images. And third, the lectures find themselves at a moment of profound technological and social change. Chief among these technological changes was photography, and as Frederick Douglass scholars Maurice Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith concisely put it, with the invention of the photograph “a phenomenologically photographic species of vision was materialized and the foundations of our modern structure of perception were irrevocably constituted” (2).

The profundity of Douglass’s lectures lies not just in what he is saying but also in that he chose to connect photography so explicitly with race relations in the United States at a time when the country was at war over slavery. For Douglass, it seemed that race and our relationship with photography, and “picture-making” more broadly, were inextricable from each other. Douglass’s beliefs about the merits of photography can be broken down into four related but distinct categories: the photograph as a democratic art; the photograph as an objective way of

² Over the last ten years, there has been a rise in scholarship regarding Frederick Douglass’s visual legacy, most notably *Picture Frederick Douglass*. In this book, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier lay out Douglass’s visual legacy in four parts: 60 of the 168 photographs of Douglass, images of Douglass during his lifetime that were not based on photographs, his photographic legacy that has grown since his death to the present day, and lastly, Douglass’s writings on photography.

representing a person free from caricature or distortion by the artist; the photograph's ability to highlight "the essential humanity of its subjects" through portraits; and the photograph's power to eradicate the sins of society (Stauffer et al. xi-xv).

What Douglass was doing, however, when he laid out these basic beliefs about the photograph is as complex as it is subtle. The most obvious reason is that Douglass wanted to affirm his white audience's views of photography as a symbol for progress and then connect that symbol with claims for abolition and equality. It is easy to stop here, as much of the scholarship around Douglass has, but we should be careful not to read Douglass only at face-value.³ Instead, we should read Douglass's lectures the way we see him looking at us in his portraits: a combination of wrath with a well-disguised irony lurking below it. Douglass is not just affirming his white listeners' beliefs about photography and then connecting them to abolition, he is doing this while also rebuking them for the contradictions present in their views of race and photography.⁴ In referring to the photograph, Jonathan Crary has written that "in the nineteenth century, for the first time, observable proof became needed in order to demonstrate that happiness and equality had in fact been attained" (11). Douglass both affirms this statement while simultaneously pointing out that for African Americans, needing observable proof to achieve happiness and equality had been a requirement from the start, a requirement that had been held from them by the racist notions of who counted as a human. Douglass is careful, however, not to confront the hypocrisies of his audience directly and risk alienating them;

³ Along with the authors of *Picturing Fredrick Douglass*, Wallace and Smith in *Pictures of Progress* and Smith individually in his book *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* all frame Douglass as blindly naive to the ways photography could be manipulated by each claiming Douglass's love of the objectivity of the photograph as a central element of his relationship with photography (Introduction, xii, Introduction 8, Introduction 12).

⁴ We can see this most clearly when Douglass wrote "it is said that the best gifts are the most abused, this among the rest. Conscience itself is misdirected: shocked at the delightful sounds, beautiful colors and graceful movements—but sleeps at ease amid the ten thousand agonies of war and slavery" (qtd. Stauffer et. al 123).

instead, he both affirms and subverts his white listeners' views on images and race. This tendency for ironic reversal is outlined by Gary S. Selby in his analysis of a speech Douglass gave in 1881 commemorating John Brown in which Douglass subtly criticized white people's indifference to Black suffering by comparing it to their outrage over John Brown's raid of Harpers Ferry. In a similar vein, Douglass's lectures show the hypocrisy of the photograph standing as a symbol of objective truth and progress when African Americans were still enslaved, while still arguing that the photograph can and should be used as an emancipatory device. For Douglass, pointing out and taking part in contradiction seems to be the point and the power of progress.⁵

One may have wondered why so far this essay has referred to Douglass's lectures as on both photography and "picture-making." The latter term is necessary because the content of Douglass's lectures have in fact very little to do with photography. They *begin* with the photograph, but in each lecture, Douglass quickly transitions to our relationship with images more broadly. Almost more important than photography for Douglass is what he calls "thought pictures." Douglass describes these "thought pictures" as "the outstanding headlands of the meandering shores of life, and are points to steer by on the broad sea of thought and experience. They body forth in living forms and colors the ever-varying lights and shadows of the soul" (qtd. Stauffer et al. 121). It is no coincidence that following his introduction of the importance of mental images, Douglass makes the claim that "it is worthy to remark to begin with that of all the animal world man alone has a passion for pictures. . . . The power to make and to appreciate pictures belongs to man exclusively" (qtd. Stauffer et al. 121). Douglass did not only want to

⁵ There are also significant parallels here to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g) that he explores in *The Signifying Monkey: A theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Gates's theory corroborates Selby's argument that many of the speeches Douglass gives to white audiences would have contained a rhetoric that was occurring at a level which his white listeners would not have likely realized.

show the contradiction's present in white northerners' views of photography and any ambivalence they might have held regarding the abolition of slavery, he also saw the present moment as an opportunity to speak to white people about their relationship with images more broadly because he knew that who speaks for images holds the power in society. This merging of image and race allowed Douglass to frame the need for abolition for his white audience through a completely new lens, one that he hoped would get his listeners to see things in a new way. Douglass's lectures, like a pen or a paintbrush crossing past the shape in the coloring book that asks us to stay in within the line, instead finds itself in the margin of something new, a margin that was touched again in the spring of 2020.

The Present Crisis: The video of George Floyd's murder

“Oh how we [white] Americans gnash our teeth in bitter anger when we discover that the riveting truth that also played like a Sunday matinee was actually just a Sunday matinee.”

—David Shields, *Reality Hunger*

The video of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, in tandem with the upheaval of the pandemic and the storming of the Capitol that occurred less than eight months later, has put the United States into a moment of chaos similar to when Frederick Douglass was giving his lectures. With the protests that arose after the murder of George Floyd, most major news sources began publishing articles wondering about white Americans' views of race in the wake of such objective evidence of police brutality towards Black Americans. On June 28th, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article titled “‘Something is not right.’ George Floyd protests push white Americans to think about their privilege,” in which they profiled Mike Sexton, a Republican who lives in an affluent suburb of Fort Worth, Texas. Sexton's voice is described as full of rage when

he says that George Floyd was ““basically lynched.”” Sexton goes on to point out that ““for us, we wouldn’t have understood were it not for the video. Now, we’re listening’ (Beason).”

Sexton unknowingly has gotten at the heart of understanding white people’s reactions to the George Floyd video. First, we may ask ourselves, what exactly *is* this video? Though multiple recordings have been combined together to give a full picture of the arrest, struggle, and murder of George Floyd, it was a video taken by high schooler Darnella Frazier that is what Sexton is undoubtedly referring to, for it was this video that showed Officer Chauvin’s knee on George Floyd’s neck. Bystander digital videos have quickly become one of the most important and influential uses of technology in the United States. As Jordana George, Thomas George, and Rene Moquin point out in their article “I Can’t Breathe: How Digital Video Becomes an Emancipatory Technology,” amateur video recording as evidence of injustice and as a way to elicit social activism has been increasing ever since the video taken in 1991 of Rodney King being beaten by police. The writers go on to point out that “images have a greater impact than text or audio alone and the picture sticks with the viewer for longer periods of time” (6370). As other scholarship on video activism corroborates, bystander videos offer a more democratic and truthful form of communication and representation—something which helps cut through the biases and cynicism that many hold regarding the images and information given to them by media and news sources.⁶

Douglass saw the photograph, specifically the photographic portrait, as an opportunity to establish the humanity of Black people in the eyes of white Americans through its perceived ability to bring out “the essential humanity of its subjects” (Stauffer et al. xiv). Bystander videos

⁶ For more on video activism, please refer to the work of Tina Askanus, William A Gamson et al., and Yetgin et al in the works cited.

have typically worked towards the same end but through an opposite means: For Floyd, his humanity was only given to him by having it taken from him; the calls for justice and equality came from the mouths of many white Americans only after watching Floyd's murder. Though differing vastly in *how* they depict Black people, bystander videos have taken a place in today's America that is similar to the way photography, specifically portraits, were seen by Douglass in the mid 19th century—the opportunity for a perceived unmediated representation of reality has enormous power over social attitudes.

In the news articles that came out about white American's coming to terms with the reality of police brutality and racism more broadly, there is an underlying question that is hinted at but never posed directly: Why did white Americans need 8 minutes and 46 seconds of video showing a Black man being choked to death to begin to believe claims of police brutality toward Black people? Though there is scholarship that begins to provide answers, I would like to offer another response: Because white people have not yet come to terms with what Frederick Douglass was asking of them so long ago. In white Americans' examination of race, the mediums of representation that play such a huge role in forming our understanding of reality must be included in this examination. This is not just referring to whether one watches Fox News or MSNBC or about understanding the ways social media companies cater content to affirm our world view. And this is not just a Baudrillardian argument where reality and our representations of reality have collapsed into one another due to the workings of modernity. Even calling photography and bystander video "visual representations" is to sell them short. The history of visual representation belongs to our history of race in America, it was influenced by it and in turn influences how we perceive and understand it. To take it a step further, a video like the one of

George Floyd is in itself an *active production* of race; the very way it slices through bias and denial produces acts of renegotiation of white consciousness, not just captures and reflects it.

Doubting Thomas

"The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures. 'Tis the [white] eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil."

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (2.2)

And here white Americans stand again, at a moment in our country's history where many have been forced to look more closely at themselves in the mirror. As has been noted, many white Americans do seem more willing to listen, perhaps most notably shown in the large number of books on antiracism that were sold after the video of George Floyd's murder surfaced (Rambsy 180). One may compare the present moment white people have found themselves in to the advice W.J.T. Mitchell gives to his readers at the beginning of *Iconology*: "If [this book] contains any insight into real, material pictures, it is the sort that might come to a blind listener, overhearing the conversation of sighted speakers talking about images. My hypothesis is that such a listener might see patterns in these conversations that would be invisible to the sighted participant" (1). It is then as much a process of undoing as it is a progression of anything, as much an attempt by white Americans to unlearn than to learn. Bill Yousman, in his article "Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy" outlines that white consumption of Black art and culture in the 21st century "allows [white Americans] to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in previous eras, but of adoration" (369). We can expand this mix of admiration and ridicule, identification and othering, to not just consumption of Black culture by white Americans but even to those like

Mike Sexton who now want to take an active stance in antiracist protest and activism. Just like Yousman, however, I am not claiming that this means white Americans who felt themselves changed or moved to action after the video of George Floyd are a problem in and of themselves; I am instead proposing that in order to understand the complexities and contradictions present in white people's relationship with race, these complexities and contradictions need to be extended, paralleled, and combined with white people's relationship to different modes of visual representation.

Below is a list of sorts—or perhaps *collage* is a better word to use—that helps to illustrate this intersection between race and image by highlighting moments in which racial identification and differentiation has found itself intertwined with white people's fascination of images. It is also important to note that, curiously, childhood finds its way into each of the intersections between racism and image outlined below. Roland Barthes's writing in *Camera Lucida* about a photograph from childhood is a good place to begin:

I remember keeping for a long time a photograph I had cut out of a magazine—lost subsequently, like everything too carefully put away—which showed a slave market: the slavemaster, in a hat, standing; the slaves in loincloths, sitting. I repeat: a photograph, not a drawing or engraving; for my horror and my fascination as a child came from this: that there was a certainty that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established without method. (Barthes 79-18)

As Laura Wexler had pointed out, the photo of the slave market allows Barthes as a child to play a kind of “*fort-da* game with slavery itself [which] kept a fuller sense of complicity at bay” (32). If we go back another 130 years from Barthes' writing in 1980, we find Louis Agassiz, the

celebrated father of American natural science, who commissioned daguerreotypes to be taken of slaves in 1850 in his attempt to support his polygenesis belief that “the races of mankind had been separately created as distinct and [inherently] unequal species” (Schneider 214). As Suzanne Schneider aptly argues, Agassiz’s desire to have these nude portraits extends much deeper than simply a racist man abusing science and technology to perpetuate an excuse for the enslavement of Black people in the United States and into a pornographic, homoerotic, and fetishistic realm (213). I am curious, however, about how Agassiz’s desire to photograph naked slaves relates Agassiz’s “Parable of the Sunfish” that Ezra Pound claimed “no man is equipped for modern thinking” until he understood. In the parable a student visits Agassiz and asks for some final wisdom before departing. Agassiz shows him a fish and asks him to describe it, to which the student replies that it is “only a sunfish.” Agassiz asks again for a description and keeps asking until the student has a four-page essay on the fish. By this time the fish, Pound notes, is in an “advanced state of decomposition” but at least now “the student knew something about it” (18). Another 100 years earlier than Agassiz’s nude portraits and dead sunfish Edmund Burke publishes *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Though throughout *Enquiry* Burke associates darkness with power, he ensures there is an exception made in the relations between the master and the slave through an anecdote about a young boy who had been blind until an operation removed his cataracts and “was struck with great horror” at the sight of a Black woman (144). Or to fast forward to our present moment in which John Stauffer, the leading scholar on Frederick Douglass’s relationship with photography and one of the authors of *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, told an audience in a lecture that his

interest in Frederick Douglass first began when after reading the *Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass* at age 14, he wanted to become Frederick Douglass (Stauffer 1:00:00-1:01:00).⁷

If readers find themselves disoriented after reading through this list that is not concerned with context or clarification and that is neither comprehensive enough nor concise enough to make a concrete claim toward anything, then they have found themselves in the right place. I mean only to put forth a sort of collage of white eyes and powerful minds in the hopes of outlining that some of the most brilliant and thoughtful white people (men) have a relationship with race and images that is, at best, complicated. Though this is not a new point to be making it is still a pertinent one—a reminder that gives clarity to the current moment the United States has found itself in. More specifically, bringing up white people’s conceptions of race through the lens of images helps to give a structure and direction that allows for white people to address their whiteness more clearly. Whether it be a photograph of a lost loved one, a picture of a forgotten moment from childhood, or the images we see in society of those that we have othered, the dueling binaries of adoration and fear, revulsion and attraction, reverence and hatred all exist in our relationship with images. Our relations with race thus parallel, mirror, and intertwine with our relationship with these images and, as Douglass was pointing out to his white audience 160 years ago, we cannot hope to solve one without the other.

There are a few directions to go at this point. One direction would be to take the claims of this essay and connect them to Devon Carbado’s “colorblind intersectionality” that “refers to instances in which whiteness helps to produce and is part of a cognizable social category but is invisible or unarticulated as an intersectional subject position,” which is a compelling leap in the

⁷ In bringing up Stauffer, I do not intend to claim that he should be grouped in with the other white men who have exhibited such explicit racism; I mean only to show that even a scholar on Frederick Douglass can have a complicated relationship with race.

direction of looking more closely at the complexities and nuances that exist in white people's perceptions of race (8-9). I am arguing for a similar approach of rigorous and open-minded explorations and analysis into the ways the history of images, which spans across cultures and throughout history, can be used as a compass and a magnifying glass for white Americans coming to terms with the ways racism has embedded itself onto their reality.

Rather than trying to wade deeper into theoretical understandings of these issues, a second direction would be to advocate for a more applicable approach, one that sees the problem and the solution on fairly simple terms. In "I Can't Breathe: How Digital Video Becomes an Emancipatory Technology," the authors suggest that community centers should start offering training in quick video creation and transmission in spaces most vulnerable to police brutality (6375). I think this is an important step in the right direction, but I also believe it should be expanded out. White people, in their conversations about race, should also be exploring the very lenses through which they conceive of race. More specifically, conversation needs to be centered not just on how things like media and advertising reinforce systems of oppression, but there also needs to be rigorous and thoughtful conversations regarding images that make white people rethink their privilege (such as bystander videos). These conversations need to happen not only because without them bystander videos are at risk of getting abused or respun as somehow fake, but also because, as Douglass saw it, these moments of opportunity, if explored correctly, can open up conversations for the entire way we "make-pictures" and the central place it has in our understanding of humanness.

Conclusion

"With malice toward none."

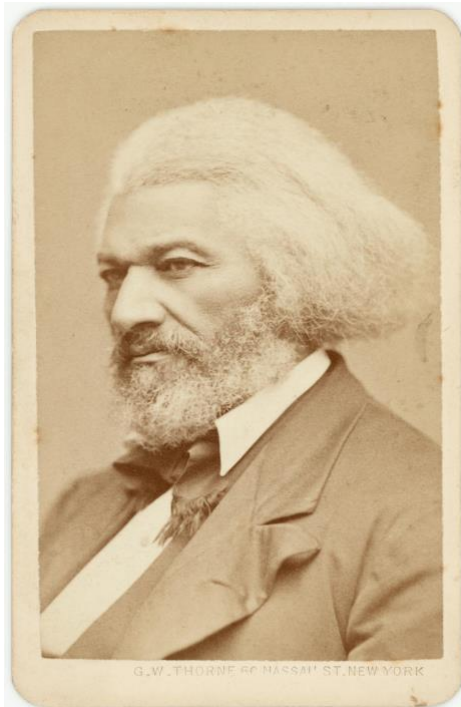
—Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address

As noted in the previous section, each of the white men above bring up childhood in their writings on image and race. Although Douglass's lectures differ from each other as Douglass revised his thoughts after each speech he gave, an image he calls forth of a child remains in each of his lectures. I quote it in full below:

On the hillside, in the valley, under the grateful shades of solitary oaks and elms, the boy of ten, all forgetful of time or place, calls to books or to boyish sports, looks up with silence and awe to the blue overhanging firmament, and views with dreamy wonder it's ever-drifting drapery; tracing in the clouds and in their ever changing forms and colors the outlines of towns and cities, great ships and hostile armies of men, of horses, solemn temples, and the Great Spirit of all: Break in if you please upon the prayers of monks or nuns, but I pray you, do not disturb the divine meditations of that little child. He is unfolding to himself the divinest of all human faculties, for such is the picture-making faculty of man. (qtd Stauffer et al. 124)

Whether there is irony in this verbal image presented to an audience of whom was a majority white by a Black man who spent his childhood a slave is up for the reader to decide. For listeners of the time, however, maybe they would have gone home to look at their own portraits, but before they did so, perhaps they stopped to stare at Douglass a little bit more closely before departing. Despite his way with words, there is a great silence to Douglass, particularly present in the original photos taken in 1841. In *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, we see Douglass staring back at us, growing older and more familiar with each picture, and yet the resounding silence of his portraits increases as we look, asking us to gaze more closely into the face we see. The face

now has become part of the public consciousness, and just as murals of Douglass can be found on walls all over the world, the face of George Floyd has also found its way onto walls across countries. The image of injustice needs words to speak for it, just as Douglass's portraits needed his lectures, both proclaiming nothing if not to ask us to not stop looking, to not stop listening.



Portrait of Douglass. George Kendell Warren, 1876, National Portrait Gallery

Coda

“I’d rather die than listen to you.”

—Kendrick Lamar, Pulitzer Prize winner

After writing this essay, I’d like it to be true that upon attending Douglass’s lectures on pictures, his audience went home and looked at their portraits, fell to their knees, and swore to rid themselves of their prejudice. I’d like to think rage still wells up in Mike Sexton’s voice when (if) he speaks of George Floyd almost a year later. I’d also like to believe that if one looks for

long enough at a photo, it will speak to them or, at the very least, it will force prejudice to be driven back upon itself. I would like these things to be true, but they likely aren't. The truth is that most people don't really care, at least not in that way. As some scholars have begrudgingly noted, Douglass's lectures on photography were likely met with confusion rather than enlightenment: white people could barely wrap their mind around what was going on around them much less tie it to a theoretical understanding of images, and the same likely goes for white America today. To quote Ashbery once more:

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,

Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,

Has no secret, is small, and it fits

Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.

True enough. And yet, we go on; distracted from distraction by distraction, momentarily pulled from our little hollow only to return to moments of inattentive apathy. Maybe that's the point: a moment of attention is all the calls for racial justice might get from most white Americans. But if that's all that will be given, the rest can be taken. That this sentiment contradicts the essay that preceded is, I believe, a fitting way to end an essay on the idea of white eyes and Black lives, which has in itself become a contradiction. Though America should not give up trying to find coherence and peace in the image of race, perhaps we also need to accept a new perspective. Perhaps we should read the lectures, and therefore we should read Douglass, as an act of *taking*, not giving. Douglass took his humanness back by speaking for his portraits, just as he took his freedom. Once we look at things in this way, whether or not white people can see what's in front of them will continue to mean less and less.

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