



Frederick Douglass: Visibility of a visionary

Ariadna Alvarado

Abstract

Historically, tools of ocularity have enabled the racialization of marginalized individuals through invisibility. During the antebellum period, these tools were coopted to naturalize discriminatory beliefs without agency from the photographed subjects. Douglass' portrait, taken by Samuel Miller, showcases the subversiveness of his use of the daguerreotype to uncover race relations in antebellum America. Douglass knowingly sat for the photograph as an effort to move away from the visual scrutiny Black individuals faced; Douglass' efforts are exemplified in the more than 160 pictures he sat for throughout his lifetime. The picture in possession by the Art Institute of Chicago showcases Douglass' agency and right to see and look back. A picture that redefined Blackness by breaking through the racial categories that visually maintained white supremacy as hegemonic.

This artifact also symbolizes the overwhelming number of African American contributions to visual culture that, unfortunately, remain overlooked by scholars. Whether as sitters, daguerreotypists, gallery owners, and more, visual culture was profoundly impacted by Black Americans during the 19th century. For instance, Ball, a Daguerrean gallery owner and a daguerreotypist, was featured in Frederick Douglass' paper, highlighting the importance of self-representation and self-possession. Moreover, the mystification of pictures that uncovered race relations in America is disputed; to regard photography that depicts oppression as artistry is contentious. However, in this analysis, I propose a way to highlight the visualization of invisible gazes that have taken away the right to look back.

Keywords

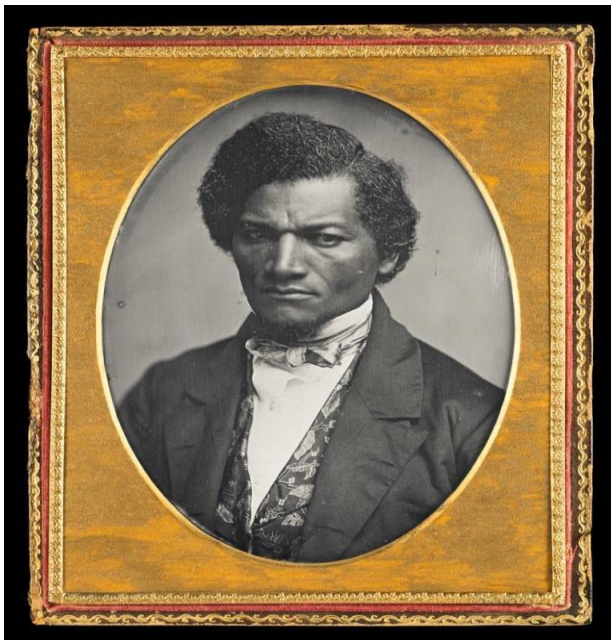
Frederick Douglass, visual culture, race, daguerreotype, portrait photography, antebellum era



The artifact analyzed in this essay (Figure 1) is a daguerreotype with a portrait of Frederick Douglass produced approximately around 1847-1852. The portrait was captured by Samuel J. Miller, a daguerreotypist who owned a studio in Ohio, a center of abolitionism before the American Civil War. The photograph showcases a black-and-white picture surrounded by a copper-plated frame, which is allegedly the original work. As Westerbeck (1999) mentions, Miller's daguerreotype came in a case: "the plate in its preserver, the back of the case, and the cover all fit each other snugly, and on the inside of the cover embossed on the velvet lining is 'Samuel J. Miller, Akron, O'" (p. 152). This artifact became crucial for the abolitionist movement as it was for developing daguerreotype portraiture and its exhibition.

Figure 1

A copper-plated daguerreotype of Fredrick Douglas.



Note. (Samuel Miller, 1847).

In fact, it is significant that of the more than 160 portraits that Frederick Douglass sat for (as the most photographed person in the 19th century), this portrait is one of the two whose producer was recognized¹. As Westerbeck (1999) remarks, “only one besides the Art Institute's has had its daguerreotypist identified” (p. 148). The complications tracing the ownership of the portraits of Douglass, however, might just have asserted his reputation and respect. As a “self-made man” (Douglass, 1872), the portrait was also an opportunity to “self-possess” (Westerbeck, 1999, p. 158) and be recognized by others. Precisely, in Daguerrean galleries, where the abolitionist movement was propelled and uncovered the cultural mores that indicated who was a worthy subject to *look at*, a fact which Frederick Douglass did not ignore.

The photographer's intention is commonly considered when assessing the purpose of a picture. Nonetheless, in a medium (such as the daguerreotype) where the subjects were considered agents of the gaze, “there was very little a daguerreotypist could do to alter the basic facts of the sitter's looks and attitude” (Westerbeck, 1999, p. 154). Plus, the fact that the photographs produced by the daguerreotype were, essentially, inalterable (unlike paintings, for instance) also provided a more accurate representation and preservation of subjects over time. That is to say, the possibility of later changing the depiction of the subject was impossible.

The latter implied a particular vulnerability from the sitter, as not only would their picture be cemented into history as it was, but also with an awareness of the public visibility of their picture. Westerbeck (1999) hypothesizes that daguerreotypes' galleries were the beginning of mass media. (p. 157). As he further explains, most Daguerrean establishments had a common practice of having Daguerrean galleries which the public attended to “see and be seen” (Westerbeck, 1999, p. 151),

¹“Researchers have found at least 160 photographs of Douglass, who praised the medium of photography for enabling him to counter the racial caricatures so frequent in artistic representation of black people at the time” (Gathwright, 2015, para.2).

implying that the subject knew that their portraits would most likely end up as a public display eventually. Thus, Douglass then knew that his public perception depended upon this. This knowledge pushed him to be the embodiment of his cause.

It could be theorized that visibility was a double-edged sword. For some, to be seen during the postbellum period was an act of resistance, notably against the strong anti-abolitionist sentiments that drove Douglass to self-exile. However, for others, being visible translated into social prestige. For instance, the Daguerrean galleries which allowed visitors to be seen and to see. As articulated by Westerbeck (1999), “these places were fashionable in the way a trendy art gallery might be today” (p. 151). Daguerrean galleries imply a relation to the Foucauldian *panopticon*, a “machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad” (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 76). I contend that the surveillance aspect granted these galleries their status and a disciplinary “white gaze,” which I will explore later.

To be constantly observed by an invisible disciplinary power might drive subjects to internalize the “observing gaze” and attempt to put up a facade. Foucault (1975) conveys this through this quote:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 76).

It is precisely this same dynamic of power which provided Douglass with a desire to be visible in Daguerrean galleries. The latter showcased local clientele or famous figures (Westerbeck, 1999, p. 151). However, the invisibility of African American citizens in public galleries proved that not everyone ought to be seen. According to Blight (1990), the erasure and exclusion of Black sitters, daguerreotypists, and gallery owners were representative of their “moral, social and political

death.” (p. 306). This notion is all encapsulated in what Blight (1990) coined as the “white mind” (p. 306), an indicator of the invisibility of Black people according to the gaze of white individuals.

Despite efforts to erase history, black sitters, daguerreotypists, and gallery owners were vital to the development of 19th-century visual culture. Thus, in instances in which individuals like Ball, a renowned black daguerreotypist and gallery owner, were successful, it was critical to recognize it. Frederick Douglass (1854) featured a review of Gleason's pictorial in his periodical:

Mr. Ball takes them [portraits] with an accuracy and a softness of expression unsurpassed by any establishment of the Union. His spacious saloons show how widespread is his reputation, and how successfully he has worked himself into popular favor (as cited in *Daguerreian Gallery of the West*, pg. 1).

Paradoxically, however, Ball’s *Daguerrean Gallery of the West* designated one of the four rooms to an exhibition of baby photos (Library of Congress, 1854); this example conjures two issues, one concerning the purpose of these photos at the intended time of exhibition, and the abovementioned disciplinary “white gaze.” According to Smith (1999), tracing the trajectory of babies and children through pictures came to signify a “racist fantasy” of eugenicist pseudoscientists (as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 359). Additionally, the continuous collection of pictures documenting children’s growth created meticulously crafted classifications that drew on distinctions that defined “whiteness.” By erasing the whole process and justifying the practice as scientific, tracing family lineage became a legitimate way to invisibilize whiteness (Smith, 1999, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 369) and champion white supremacy.

Douglass’ purpose was disruptive to the portrayal of Black people, and he acknowledged it: “Douglass had deliberately planned to connect the progressive nature of photographic technology—praising ‘the multitude, variety, perfection and cheapness of its pictures’—with the progressive nature of the Civil War” (Blackwood, 2009, p. 94). As stated in this quote, not only

did Douglass strategically choose the daguerreotype as it would democratize visibility, but also because it provided fewer distortions than a painting would provide. As Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841) states, "the artist stands aside and lets you paint yourself" (as cited in Westerbeck, 1999, p. 154).

Moreover, it allowed him to write his autobiography without compromising authorship; per Westerbeck (1999), it allowed him to self-possess since, until then, he had been someone else's possession (p.158). Despite so, as Douglass (1950) conveyed in this extract, increased agency for subjects of portraits did not render the pictures impartial:

He did not trust them to make images of blacks. 'Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists,' he said. 'It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likeness of black men, without grossly exaggerating their distinctive features'. (as cited in Westerbeck, 1999, p. 155)

As previously mentioned, the distinctiveness and similarity of features between Black people were emphasized through surveillance, upholding the idea that 'all black people looked the same' and the notion of micro-policing whiteness. Smith (1999) mentions how eugenicists also did this: "Galton emphasizes uniformity in the photographic recording, stating that the images should be consistent in size to enable accurate comparisons" (as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 366). The surveillance factor in eugenics imposed an alienating external gaze upon people to scour for similarities or differences, like objects in a laboratory.

The early depiction of people of colour in the antebellum era proves the latter. The reproduction of a "scientific gaze" – one that treated its subjects like a specimen or criminals – justifies Douglass' skepticism towards non-Black daguerreotypists. Such is the case of Agassiz, who attempted to standardize and stereotype the perceptions of Black people; Foucault would argue that uniformization of racial perception through ocular instruments created relations of discipline

and control. In this case, the power relations directed how Black people ought to be gazed upon using visual tools: “use instruments that render visible, record, differentiate and compare: a physics of a relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity in the bodies that can be individualized by these relations (Foucault, 1975, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 78).

Hence, I contend that Douglass’ attempts to break and critique stereotypes of African Americans through daguerreotype photography, as exemplified in the Art Institute picture, was produced to record a historical moment in American history. For historical context, Douglass had just returned from England after having fled from slavery in America and his portrait is said to have been taken a month prior to his speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (Cutter, 2020, p. 17), in which he addresses the marginalization of Black citizens within White American society. Therefore, his expression in his portrait conveys his awareness of the visual power such an artifact can possess and the impact it can have on socio-racial stratification.

Additionally, his careful selection of daguerreotypists suggests that his role as a subject was active rather than passive (Cutter, 2020, p. 16). As a subject, Douglass did not conform to the view of a portraitist, and if we draw back on Douglass’ statements about white daguerreotypists, he claims that “negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists” (Blackwood, 2009, p. 94). Moreover, his posture, pose, and facial expressions in the Art Institute portrait all suggest a particular distaste or anger, implying there are underlying socio racial power relations concerning visual culture and Douglass’ vocation.

According to Tagg (1993), poses aid in denaturalizing iconographic codes of the time (p. 35). Therefore, Miller’s portrait should be examined critically, with special attention to Douglass’ posture. For instance, the angle of Douglass’ body, which creates a three-quarter pose, might suggest a reticence to facing head-on – as if to resist and challenge the visual distortion of

portrayals African American people faced until then. Thus, viewers can hypothesize a tension between the producer and the subject of the picture. This tension is made clear in the shoulder position of Douglass, not facing completely sideways but also not facing upfront and is supported by Tagg's (1993) statement on heads and shoulders as the parts of our bodies which imply truth (p. 35). Another reading could suggest that Miller was not an amateur daguerreotypist as he avoided photographing Douglass with a 'head-on view' and instead opted for a three-quarter pose.

Moreover, Cutter (2020) suggests his clothing choice might underscore "African American civility" (p. 16). The double identity of African Americans, as citizens and as Black individuals, were two clashing identities at the time of production. His expression of disgust, however, was intentional. According to Cutter (2020), the ire on his face was "consciously selected" (p.16); considering this, we can partially assert the intention of the author to use daguerreotype as a medium of resistance to "white racist attempts to commodify and objectify his physicality and the corporeal realities of enslaved and self-emancipated black women, children and men." (Bernier, 2015, p. 324). The Chicago Art Institute (n.d.) recognizes Douglass' intention: "Douglass knew that this picture, one of an astonishing number that he commissioned or posed for, would be seen by ardent supporters of his campaign to end slavery".

The recognition of Douglass' intention leads us to question the degree of naturalness and objectiveness of portraiture. Since poses, whether self-imposed or coerced, mediate pictures, it is challenging to uncover ocular technologies' constructive aspects. Despite this, it is evident through the election of compositional elements, such as specific frames and angles, that photographs are far from depicting reality. Nevertheless, this led Douglass to embody and normalize an authenticity for African American people that popular media did not choose to popularize. A gaze that defied

stereotypes by “looking back” at the camera, injecting the scene with disruptiveness and unnaturalness.

The extent to which Frederick Douglass’ portrait could be considered a work of art is contested. Firstly, the contextuality of how portraits are classified must be considered: the subject of the photograph oftentimes is the factor which determines whether the image is regarded as evidential or auratic, terms coined by Walter Benjamin. Westerbeck (1999) arguments on classification being “equally important in any consideration of the daguerreotype as an art form is acknowledgement of the role that the subject inevitably played” (p. 154) supports a critical approach to African American contributions to visual culture.

Benjamin (1953) defines ‘aura’ as “‘cult value’ (which) haunts the photographic portrait.” (as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 368). In other words, the aura which surrounds a specific artwork is defined by the “beholder’s investment of the image with sentiment.” (Benjamin, 1935, as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 368). Furthermore, images are applicable for evidentiary purposes, such as Galton’s attempt to, as Smith (1999) puts it, “demystify the once sentimental meaning of the individual portrait, reclaiming it for science” (as cited in Schwartz et al., 2019, p. 364). Since we are uncertain of the author’s intention when producing this photograph, we can claim that it is unknown whether the image was auratic or evidential.

Nonetheless, spectators can contend the suggestion that a portrait should be considered an artwork, especially since the Douglass portrait is in possession of The Chicago Art Institute. Westerbeck (1999) disputes this idea by asserting that the “fact that it is now in the possession of an art museum does not make it such” an artwork (p. 153). The reservation to regard portraits as artistry relies on the relationship between the subject and the producer showcasing tension, thus it is challenging to know the authentic sentiment of the beholder. Moreover, the ethics of art

ownership is highly politicized in contemporary Western society as museums come under fire for appropriating cultural artifacts and obtaining them through questionable means. As such, it is crucial to address the efforts of Black gallery owners, portraitists, and subjects in 19th-century visual culture as a way to highlight the visualization of invisible gazes that has permeated visual culture scholars in addressing the importance of African American engagement with visual technology of the 19th century.

In summary, the instability of racial categories was maintained by ocular tools that made pictures appear truthful. In that sense, Black people were marginalized and discriminated against through structures that deprived them of their right to see due to their constant subjection to surveillance. Therefore, Douglass' Chicago Art Institute portrait redefines how Black people were perceived and moves away from visual scrutiny while conveying important social and political messages. Associations of the daguerreotype with truthfulness and accuracy contributed to the redefinition of Blackness which Douglass consciously pursued through the 160 pictures he sat for during his lifetime. The latter showcases the overwhelming contributions of African Americans in visual culture that are, unfortunately, still overlooked by scholars.

References

Art Institute of Chicago. (n.d.). *Frederick Douglass*.

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/145681/frederick-douglass>

Bernier, C.-M. (2015). A visual call to arms against the “caracature [*sic*] of my own face:” from fugitive slave to fugitive image in Frederick Douglass's theory of portraiture. *Journal of American Studies*, 49(2), 323–357. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875815000109>

- Blackwood, S. (2009). Fugitive Obscura: Runaway slave portraiture and early photographic technology. *American Literature*, 81(1), 93–125. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2008-052>
- Blight, D. W. (1990). Up from "Twoness": Frederick Douglass and the meaning of W.E.B. Dubois's concept of double consciousness. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 21(3), 301–320. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras-021-03-02>
- Cutter, M. J. (2020). The fugitive gazes back: The photographic performance work of Frederick Douglass and sojourner truth. *InMedia*, (8.2.). <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.2463>
- Daguerreian Gallery of the West. (1854, May 5). *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. www.loc.gov/item/sn84026366/1854-05-05/ed-1
- Douglass, F. (1872). *Self-made men*. Frederick Douglass Heritage. <http://www.frederick-douglass-heritage.org/self-made-men/>
- Gathright, J. (2015, September 17). Existence as Resistance. *Harvard Magazine*. <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2015/09/black-chronicles-ii-cooper-gallery-photo-exhibit>
- Miller, S. J. (1847). *Frederick Douglass*. [Photograph]. Art Institute Chicago, Chicago, IL, United States. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/145681/frederick-douglass>.
- Schwartz, V. R., Przyblyski, J. M. (Eds.). (2019). *The nineteenth-Century visual culture reader*. Routledge.
- Tagg, J. (1993). *The burden of representation: Essays on photographs and Histories*. University of Minnesota Press.

Westerbeck, C. L. (1999). Frederick Douglass chooses his moment. In Rossen, F. S (Ed.),
African Americans in art: Selections from the Art Institute of Chicago (pp. 145-161). The
Art Institute of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.37862/aaeportal.00008.002>

