

The World Before Us: Blackness, Narration, and Photography

By

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## Curriculum Vitae

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## Introduction

Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists... could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, *Slavery is damnable!*  
– Harriet Jacobs

I have no heart to repeat each separate transaction, in which I was a victim of [Covey's] violence and brutality. Such a narration would fill a volume much larger than the present one. I aim only to give the reader a truthful impression of my slave life, without unnecessarily affecting him with harrowing details.  
– Frederick Douglass

It is such a complicated thing, for justice, like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is universal agreement of the principle, but the application brings on the fight.... No, actual justice is somewhere away off. We only see its flickering image here.... Take, for instance, the matter of conquest.  
– Zora Neale Hurston

I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in every thing, in every surface, in every face.... It was humbling to be forced to realise that the light fell down from heaven, on everything, on everybody, and that the light was always changing.  
– James Baldwin

“The World Before Us: Blackness, Narration, and Photography” explores the relationship between narrative and photographic expression in African American literature. Whereas literary critics have typically studied African American writers’ engagement with photography through the works of twentieth century writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, and visual studies scholars have generally focused on the historical circumstances and themes that inform black photographers’ work, “The World Before Us” studies how African American writers have explored connections between textual and visual representation since as early as photography’s inception as a medium in the mid-nineteenth century. By studying black writers’ inquiries into the ways that knowledge—of ourselves, of others, and of the world—arises from the material circumstances of our lives, “The World Before Us” elucidates a robust critique, implicit in their

work, of the ostensibly natural correspondence between testimony, perception, and aesthetic form.

The question at the heart of this project asks how African American writers' strategies of representing subjectivity and the experience of blackness have developed alongside the maturation of the medium of photography. My observation of these parallel trajectories is meant to impose a frame and an orientation, rather than to suggest a historically determinate relation at work. Though I am interested throughout the project in the coincident concerns that I illuminate between the writers and texts I examine and the properties of visibility I discuss, each chapter is more intent on exploring what resonates between the forms, concepts, and materials under consideration than asserting a causal link between them. At times, I pay close attention to the formal similarities shared by disparate objects (e.g. Douglass's autobiographies and Marey and Muybridge's photographic arrays), and at others I place greater emphasis on the theoretical stakes they have in common (e.g. Hurston, Walker, Barthes, and Hartman's fixation on the archival trace). Indeed, to ask after the first principle that I study (i.e. the function of abstraction in Jacobs's autobiography and in the camera obscura), I compare two methods of representation, rather than two texts, or two technologies. Insofar as narration and photography are means to an end, I find their most important characteristic to be the way they enable us to produce meaning. I focus on this property throughout "The World Before Us" by rethinking the unassuming capacity of narrative and photographic expression to manifest form itself. Given the challenge of stating or seeing clearly the principles organizing narration and photography—as constative expressive forms themselves—I have chosen to investigate either medium vis-à-vis the other to understand how they circumscribe our interpretive efforts. In light of this strategy, another way of describing

the inquiry animating my project would be to ask the twofold question: how does one give rise to a hermeneutic question; and of what consequence is this endeavor to black subjects?

In “The World Before Us,” I argue that blackness, narration, and photography are each organized by the matter of mediation, and that African American writers have demonstrated as much since the reputed invention of photography. Photography’s reputation as a medium capable of representing the world with utter fidelity has motivated generations of scholars to theorize the impact of cameras and photographs on how we remember, understand, and envision the world.<sup>1</sup> If Kaja Silverman is right to suggest that “we have grown accustomed to thinking of the camera as an aggressive device: an instrument for shooting, capturing, and representing the world,” then my aim in this project has been to interpolate the medium capaciously by turning from the act of making photographs, to cameras and their mechanical function, to photographic images themselves.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, by photography I mean all of the things that the medium involves (i.e. the photographers, their cameras, and the pictures they produce) and all of its immaterial elements as well (e.g. the methods of production, and the sensibilities those methods produce). Discerning the contour of photography to determine what defines the medium means deciding what the medium is as often as it comes down to judging what photography is not. My approach to this dilemma has been deeply informed by Geoffrey Batchen’s provocative upheaval of the storied invention of photography. Given that photography “was described by at least twenty different persons residing in seven countries between about 1790 and 1839,” when Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot, the supposed inventors of the medium (based in France and

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<sup>1</sup> See Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu, eds. *Feeling Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), Jasmine Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visibility in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), Gary Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015): 1.

England, respectively) made their independent discoveries, Batchen's suggestion that "the desire to photograph" rather than photographers or photographs themselves motivates my interest in the concepts that photography seems to underwrite (e.g. evidence, memory, presence, perspective).<sup>3</sup> Batchen's skepticism towards the unitary history of photography complements Jonathan Crary's important critique of the apparently continuous trajectory of technological evolution, particularly as visual apparatuses are concerned. Crary's investigation of how the very "problems of vision" that imaging technologies have historically seemed to solve "fundamentally [involve] questions about the body and the operation of social power" brought the camera obscura's disruption of the ostensible ocular correspondence between subject and object into sharp focus for me.<sup>4</sup> A third, orienting theoretical perspective to mention here was undoubtedly Ariella Azoulay's insistence that despite its "identification with the photographer, as his or her property, and as the point of origin of the discussion of photography.... Photography is an event."<sup>5</sup> Seeing photographs as markers of, in, and about time, becomes easier if we appreciate the event of photography, in addition to the advent of the medium.

Whereas recent scholarship on the role of photography in African American literary and visual culture has consisted largely either of documenting the interest black writers showed in the medium as a metaphor, or of demonstrating their uses of photography's oppositional potential to critique and dismantle racist systems of oppression, I am proposing a more fundamental analysis of our orientation towards the medium itself.<sup>6</sup> "The World Before Us" aligns questions of racial

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997): 180, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York: Verso, 2012): 23, 26.

<sup>6</sup> I begrudge neither of these groups of scholars; their work in fact helps us to understand how invested we are in understanding photography as both a medium unto itself and as a metalanguage of expression. The body of scholarship that regards photography as a material resource for black writers negotiating a visual economy includes Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), Marcy Dinius, *The*

subject formation with scholarship on the material grounds of photography (e.g. its chemical properties, its relation to sight and to light, its analogical mode of recording, etc.), and narrative techniques of aestheticizing subjectivity—e.g. first-person narration, signifyin’, metaphor, etc.). Together, these lines of inquiry promise to hone our understanding of how photography becomes freighted with semantic weight. The relation of photographic forms to literary ones has long been presented as a series of oppositions between their mimetic capacities, a configuration designed to compare the efficacy of either rhetorical mode of signification.<sup>7</sup> Portraits and first- or third-person narratives, for instance, are commonly understood to represent the individual, and typically elicit scrutiny as to how well either mode of representation articulates the interior experience of the subject.<sup>8</sup> That values of clarity, fidelity, and objectivity often serve as normative criteria for such studies, over and above decades-old deconstructive critiques of supposedly exhaustive semantic systems, speaks to a persistent understanding of what photographs are, how they work, and specifically how their operation articulates with literary expression.

The final analytical coordinate of my project follows the resonant implications of slavery and photography. From the historical coincidence of photography’s diffuse inception and chattel slavery’s protracted demise, to the discursive echoes of capture, exposure, and release, to the

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*Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), and Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Another vital camp of studies that center photography’s oppositional viability for black expressive culture more broadly include monographs like Deborah Willis’ infamous *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), and Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See Stuart Burrows, *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography, 1839-1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth Century Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

ethical imperative of representation, and the philosophical antipodes of presence and absence, “The World Before Us” posits that narrative and photographic expression thoroughly suffuse our understanding of history. And for black subjects in particular, Saidiya Hartman reminds us, how we reflect on the legacy of slavery is a matter of pernicious and portentous perspective.<sup>9</sup> The concept of perception pervades this project, as a principle of spatial distribution (chapter one), a trope of introspection (chapter two), and a fulcrum of recognition for the other (chapter three). In addition to its rhetorical permutations though, perspective functions as an overarching heuristic as well. Insofar as photographs ostensibly represent the past, the perspectives they provide must be thoughtfully taken into consideration when called upon to do certain kinds of explanatory or testimonial work. Tina Campt and Jennifer Tucker have eloquently articulated the recursive logic of this limitation to photographic truth by noting the way in which “questions about photography are, at their base also questions about what constitutes an adequate historical reckoning with the photographic image: Which contexts are taken as salient and which are not[?]”<sup>10</sup> Besides the photograph’s withholding of any narrative logic per se, Krista Thompson has situated our belief in photography as a link to the past within a wider set of theoretical concerns by highlighting the ways in which photography compounds and creates aporia within slavery’s history. Thompson captures the difficulty of this desire perceptively: “the very compulsion to mine the photographic archive for representation traces of slavery may leave certain expectations about the evidentiary nature of photography intact.” Indeed, Thompson goes on to proscribe a persuasive guard against this sort of overreliance by suggesting that “absences in the photographic record [of slavery] should be viewed not as a lack for which compensation is necessary, but as an intrinsic part of,

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<sup>9</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Tina Campt and Jennifer Tucker, “Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 7.

and even representation of the history of slavery and post-emancipation.”<sup>11</sup> “The World Before Us” proceeds with these incisive critiques of photography’s promised fidelity in mind, to seek out those ways that black writers have recognized such limitations and thought in spite of them. As Leigh Raiford reminds us after all, however illusory its claim to the world and to ourselves may be, “the photograph also occasions an opportunity for anti-racist critique, an opportunity to enter a historical discourse that, as [it] attests, has attempted to eviscerate black humanity, to silence it.”<sup>12</sup>

\*

Throughout the following chapters, I develop a method of reading texts alongside aspects of the medium of photography. I demonstrate that rather than comparing certain texts to certain photographs, we can discover a better basis for understanding the nature of interpretation if we attend to the rhetorical and practical ways that narrative and photographic objects produce meaning. To this end, each of my chapters situates a text or set of texts in relation to a mode of photographic representation, as opposed to various photographs themselves.

My first chapter considers Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the camera obscura, a visual apparatus integral to the discovery of photography. I argue that the garret where Jacobs hides for seven years during her escape from slavery bears an important resemblance to the camera obscura insofar as either space serves as a site in which the sensory capacity for sight is distinguished from the representation of seeing itself. I regard this process—of giving visual experience material or literary form—as a form of abstraction in order to analyze Jacobs’s complex rendering of vision in her narrative. At stake in my comparison of the various

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<sup>11</sup> Krista Thompson, “The Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies,” *Representations* 113, Winter (2011): 63.

<sup>12</sup> Leigh Raiford, “Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 129.

ways that Jacobs aestheticizes her senses—of what it means to see, to perceive, and to represent visual experience through language—, is the realization of a fundamental hermeneutic problem of how to study disparate media in light of one another. By revisiting the most conspicuous sites of vision and power in *Incidents*, to examine how she dramatizes her achievements of agency, sight, and selfhood, I show how Jacobs articulates a critique of visibility to one of racialized and sexualized dynamics of power. I find that Jacobs's account of her formation as a fugitive subject helps to ground my project's effort to elucidating the terms by which black subjects mediate between literary and visual strategies of representing themselves, others, and the world.

My second chapter regards Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies as an exercise in serial production—i.e. a series of successive iterations of Douglass's life story—and studies their differences alongside the late nineteenth century photography experiments designed by Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Marey and Muybridge's examinations of bodies in motion led either photographer to develop various technologies and methodologies capable of analyzing movement. Their discoveries have contributed to a reevaluation of the aesthetic values of seriality, representation, continuity, and idiosyncrasy that I argue also characterize Douglass's oeuvre. Running through Marey, Muybridge, and Douglass's work, I maintain, is an abiding investment in finding ways to represent subject(s) in motion and over time. My method in this chapter involves considering the changes Douglass makes to various nodal points in his life alongside one another, in order to understand how the play of continuity and difference augment our intellection of Douglass's subjectivity. Whereas my reading of Jacobs involves considering how her use of a pseudonym recalls the camera obscura's projection of images in its chamber, my analysis of Douglass's autobiographies illustrates how the latitude for critical self-study that he achieves pushes us to reconsider photographic portraiture.

My third chapter extends the concerns of my second to consider the intersection between portraiture, memory, and interpretation in Zora Neale Hurston's recently published *Barracoon*. I examine how the narrative structure of Hurston's conversations with Cudjoe Lewis, the supposed last living survivor of the Middle Passage, informs the way we understand Lewis's experiences of enslavement and liberation. Whereas Hurston works to minimize her role in bringing Lewis's experiences to print, I argue that her interpretive glosses, in fact, generate *Barracoon*'s most central and productive tensions. By regularly calling readers' attentions to the distinctive cultural markers that distinguish Lewis as a formerly enslaved African man, Hurston's eye for nuanced cultural differences belies the twinned impulses toward documentation and translation that run through her project. By attending to structures of dialogue and exchange in *Barracoon*, alongside readings of Hurston's photographs of Lewis, I uncover patterns of return, remembrance, and refusal that expose many of the deepest logics of transparency and veracity by which we make sense of narrative representations of the slave past. These patterns become particularly resonant in this closing chapter as I situate Hurston's work within a series of concatenated circles of literary and theoretical reception which, I argue, have long informed how we understand the ethics of aesthetic interpretation. Within these circles are important linkages tying Hurston to her most famous interlocutor, Alice Walker, and also a less familiar counterpart, Roland Barthes. As the chapter's conclusion demonstrates, the concern for veracity, recovery, and representation that makes photography such a rich heuristic with which to study African American literature has to do with the yet obscure significance of the legacy of slavery.

In a brief coda to the project, I turn to James Baldwin's introduction to the third volume of the *Black Photographer's Annual*, published in 1976, to highlight inference as a hermeneutic mode made particularly powerful by photography's powers to abstract, metaphorize, and change

the ways that we see the world. I examine Baldwin's engagement of the Kamoinge Workshop's photography and the aesthetic questions posed by their images to suggest how his narrative prose might open up an interval capacious enough to convey, at once, both transcendent truths and subjective points of view.

## Chapter One

### What is There

In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north?<sup>13</sup>

— Harriet Jacobs

#### I

This chapter considers how the African American literary tradition relates to the medium of photography by examining the rhetoric of visibility in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. *Incidents* endures as a cornerstone of African American literary studies for two reasons: first, as one of just several slave narratives authored by a woman, *Incidents* provides a unique insight into how gender informed practices of domination within slavery; second, Jacobs's account of her escape from bondage innovates many of the formal features that distinguish the slave narrative as a genre. These aspects of Jacobs's narrative, its formal innovation and unique critical purchase on the existential conditions of enslavement, make it an invaluable resource for understanding how black subjects have interpreted the nature of subjectivity and its aesthetic representation. Few narratives of slavery engage issues of textuality and personhood, in terms as thoroughly visual as *Incidents*. In Jacobs's text, visibility does not name a neutral field of sensory information, but rather identifies a dimension of everyday lived experience that is fraught with incidents of racialized and gendered violence. Visibility emerges throughout *Incidents* as a volatile domain in which the capacity to see and to be seen intimately determines one's survival. Scholars interested in narrative delineations of gendered dynamics of

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<sup>13</sup> Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster, editors, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 28.

power have studied the ways in which sight and vision conduce to surveillance and sexual exploitation in Jacobs's narrative. Though critical attention to visuality's representation in *Incidents* has typically focused on the tactics of evasion and subversion Jacobs uses to resist sexual violence and escape bondage however, this chapter argues that Jacobs's narrative posits a more complex relationship between agency and visuality. By examining how *Incidents* reformulates what it means to intervene in the field of visual experience, this chapter puts forward new coordinates by which we might reconsider the relationship between African American literature and photography.

The field of visuality is complexly rendered in *Incidents*, comprising of different modes of seeing and being seen that produce various kinds of knowledge and give form to the narrative. Dr. Flint derives his authority as master from his ability to constantly surveil his plantation, for example—a visual practice that finds pernicious expression in the sexual interest he takes in Brent<sup>14</sup>. Flint's lustful gaze exacerbates the verbal abuses he visits upon Brent. By keeping his eye on Brent, Flint exploits the visual field to facilitate the various methods of intimidation, manipulation, and punishment at his disposal. Vision is central to this violence. As Jacobs' narrative makes clear however, vision is more than just a conduit of patriarchal power. When she climbs into the garret and bores her loophole through its front wall, Brent not only drops out of sight, but begins her own campaign of counter surveillance, turning the tables on a regime of visuality that has long been leveraged against her. By elaborating the means by which Brent evades Flint's detection for years, *Incidents* demonstrates that just as slaveowners' supervision constitute one visual tradition, the modes of dissemblance and evasion practiced by the enslaved

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<sup>14</sup> I refer to Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent variously, but not interchangeably throughout this chapter to illustrate the significant role of pseudonymy in *Incidents*, an aspect of the text's representation of individual experience and perspective that I elaborate on later in my argument.

comprise another. Eluding sight and manipulating vision are as central to Jacobs' narrative as seeing itself.

*Incidents* articulates a theory of visibility that reorganizes the terms with which we think the link between African American literature and photography. Appreciating this theory means reading the rhetorical manifestation of visibility in Jacobs's text both closely and capaciously. Though Dr. Flint's gaze and Linda Brent's covert surveillance exemplify two important types of looking in *Incidents*, other, less explicit visual cues throughout the text demonstrate Jacobs's keen awareness of the relation between verbal representation, visual experience, and epistemological truth. Sight finds varied expression in the narrative, assuming simpler, more straightforward forms at times—as when Brent describes the death of her first mistress: “As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in the heart that she might live!”—, and more sophisticated intimations of visual encounters at others—as when Brent relates that “in complexion [her] parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were [thus] termed mulattoes.”<sup>15</sup> Expressions of memory occasion yet a different valence of sight—as when Brent describes “look[ing] back on the happy days” before her mistress's passing—, and examples of keen apperception prompt Brent to recall how her grandmother “saw through [the] hypocrisy” of Flint's pledge not to put her up for auction.<sup>16</sup> Particularly complex moments in the narrative come when visual cues mix with rhetorical expressions to form rich idiomatic expressions, as when Brent reflects on what use the enslaved have for God's word:

My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents* 11, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

In an explicit sense, Brent's juxtaposition of the constative "but I was her slave," with the disingenuously suppositional "and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor," figures a canny critique of her mistress's moral failure to love others, as Christianity directs. In a subtler sense however, the visual cue of recognition in this passage evokes a more abstract practice of reciprocity, premised the capacity to regard others as individuals worthy of recognition. Lastly, Brent's desire to "blot out" her mistress's offense from her memory reiterates an intuitive sense of memories that likens them—as experiences we can "look back on," but never return to—to graphic objects—e.g. texts or photographs—because of the way their self-evident signification ironically implies malleability while also eliding the means of their production. To understand the relationship *Incidents* bears to early photography we must first realize that Brent rarely engages in ekphrastic representations of visual experience; and then we must read closely the more complex configurations of narrative form and visuality that do come together in the text to produce what we might recognize as intuitive forms of visual knowledge.

This complexity comes across in *Incidents*' first sentence when Linda Brent describes for her reader the peculiar deracination that being born into bondage brings about. Brent begins the narrative, "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away." This sentence is striking for several reasons, the first of which consists in the way that Brent syntactically juxtaposes the legislative principle of *partus sequitur ventrum* with her description of a happy childhood. The concision of Brent's opening line asks readers simultaneously to understand enslavement as so absolute a condition as to resemble a fact like birth, and also to conceive of a life lived in ignorance of a predicament so dire. Brent's sentence is also curiously unclear. Does Brent mean that she lived the first six years of her childhood unaware of the institution of slavery itself, or of her own status as an enslaved individual within

slaveholding society? If Brent means that she remained ignorant of slavery itself, then questions arise as to how a condition so fundamental could evade even a child's perception? If however, Brent means that she only learned of her own enslavement after six years had passed by, then her claim prompts different sorts of questions about the nature of indeterminacy in a regime as ostensibly rigid as slavery. Running through these questions and their possible answers is a problem of perception that sets Brent's subjective experience against the objective truth of the world around her. Brent's first sentence demonstrates narrative's capacity to communicate incommensurate truths without reconciling them. By mediating between her own lived experience and those conceptual truths that govern the world around her, Brent opens *Incidents* on a provocatively existential note, provoking readers to reflect critically on how it is we come to know the world in which we live.

The salience of Jacobs' narrative to conversations about the ways that African American writers have engaged visual culture has been well-sighted by several scholars in recent years. Shawn Michelle Smith has been an important advocate of moving "the discussion of race and the visual beyond an assessment of representations to consider questions about looking and the ways in which looking produces racialized *viewers*, not simply racialized objects of view."<sup>18</sup> Early in the narrative, we learn of Flint's foiled attempt to "dispose of [Brent's grandmother] at a private sale"—foiled, Brent explains, because her grandmother "saw through his hypocrisy," and exposed his scheme before it could be executed.<sup>19</sup> If this sense of sight satisfies Smith's interest in racialized subjects rebuking attempts to objectify them—in this instance by hiding them from

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, Shawn Michelle. "Guest Editor's Introduction: Visual Culture and Race." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014. 2. See also Gates Jr., Henry Louis. "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations* vol. 24, 1988; and Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, 14.

sight—, Brent offers an even shrewder example later on in another condemnation of slavery’s hypocrisy:

I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father’s more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure. Her father, half frantic with rage, sought to revenge himself on the offending black man; but his daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers, and sent him out of the state.<sup>20</sup>

The practice of looking is kaleidoscopic in this passage, as Brent avers the complex refractions of both word and deed, for both seeing subjects and those seen, black as well as white. Oversight as a conduit of sexual exploitation; sight as intention; foresight as a reflex borne of common sense—crucially, these various connotations all conduce to Brent’s individual perspective. “I can testify,” Brent asserts, “from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks.”<sup>21</sup> Smith’s encouragement to diversify our queries of visibility compels us to analyze texts like *Incidents* for the ways they exceed those descriptions of “being seen as a racialized position and [of] representations as the site[s] where subjectivities are shaped” that we might expect.<sup>22</sup> Tarrying with the recurrence of this language in *Incidents* is as much about demonstrating the text’s sensitivity to registers of visibility premised on abstract signification as it is about intimating the value of realizing a comparable understanding of photography.

In bringing questions of African American literary study to bear on theorizations of visual culture we gain a more nuanced view of the African American literary tradition’s aesthetic development. A dividend of this effort is the revision of what Sarah Blackwood has described as

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, “Guest Editor’s Introduction.” 3.

the “still suggestive critical narrative about the absence of black perspectives and participation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual culture.”<sup>23</sup> Often framed as efforts to recover the perspectives of African American writers and artists lost to whitewashed media histories, or cast as attempts to center African American creative production within in new histories of black aesthetic development, such narratives as Blackwood describes have flourished in recent years, while a sense of skepticism towards media itself has not.<sup>24</sup> The dearth of critical considerations of what constitutes media as ubiquitous and apparently transparent as photography and narrative texts—over and above conversations about the materials produced through engagements with such media— has reduced critical discourse around visibility to a narrow conception of the visual as, in Blackwood’s terms, an “either wholly foreclosing or potentially liberating.... set of static images, rather than the active negotiated process that we find in texts written by African Americans” from at least the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>25</sup> The challenges of using specific photographs to understand the medium of photography overall become more evident after Blackwood’s words of caution. Lena Hill’s insightful readings of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs’ orientation to photography exemplify the obstinate complexity of this problem. “Writers such as Douglass and Jacobs quickly grasped the significance of a technology perfectly aligned with their narrative endeavors,” Hill contends, suggesting that “with the invention of the daguerreotype, ex-slave authors discovered a visual analogue for portraying the truth of their words and the morality of their work.”<sup>26</sup> In arguments like Hill’s, photographs neatly dovetail

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<sup>23</sup> Blackwood, Sarah. “Making Good Use of Our Eyes”: Nineteenth-Century African Americans Write Visual Culture.” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, vol. 39, no. 2. 2014. 43.

<sup>24</sup> See Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. Duke University Press, 2015; Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visibility in the Early Nineteenth Century*. NYU Press, 2015; Crawford, Margo. *Blackness Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First Century Aesthetics*. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Blackwood. “Making Good Use of Our Eyes.” 45.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, Lena. *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*. Cambridge, 2014. 44.

with narratives because of their purportedly shared dispositions to the truth. And Hill is far from alone in this opinion. Laura Wexler belies a similar conviction when she suggests that Douglass “believed that the formerly enslaved could reverse the social death that defined slavery” through photography, “by creating a positive image of the social life of freedom and proving that African American consciousness had been there all along.”<sup>27</sup> What these approaches evince, above and beyond their investments in categories of utility and truth, is the particular exigency of critically evaluating the terms of our inquiry as they pertain to African American representations of subjectivity. Absent such critical reflection, normative alignments of narrative and photographic representation with truth and identity come to define the ways we interpret African American aesthetic practice. Asking how we might understand photography otherwise, by regarding the medium as more than the photographic materials with which it is typically equated, can shed light on those likenesses shared by narrative and photography that make their association seem logical in the first place.

The lack of photographs in *Incidents* has not stopped several scholars from recognizing other links running between the text and the medium of photography. In recent years, these approaches have been most insightful when they understand photography as a medium defined less by visual media, but by the discursive practices through which people understand and participate in it as well. If photography presents any difficult problems, one of them certainly comes from the task of trying to critically evaluate a medium of perception. If this seems an inexorably reflexive problem, this too is a difficulty photography poses: its capacity to render transparent those attributes by which we take it to be a self-evident, natural way of the world that

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<sup>27</sup> Wexler, Laura. “A More Perfect Likeness: Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation.” *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, Shawn Michelle Smith and Maurice O. Wallace, editors, Duke University Press, 2012, 19.

when exposed to light, the proper coincidences of chemically-treated materials react to form an image, which we call a photograph. True though this may be, what goes unarticulated in such axiomatic renditions of the photographic process is the means by which photography comes to enjoy an identification with human perception as such. While the dissociation of photography's constituent signifiatory processes—deferral, metonymy, parenthesis, recognition, etc.—will be taken up in later chapters, the work of the chapter at hand is precisely to recognize the collusion of these interpretive activities for what they are—i.e., a remarkably subtle cooperation of various and disparate modes of understanding—, and to propose a compelling vantage point from we might more clearly perceive this truth. The radical insight that can result from realizing a change in perspective is perhaps the most valuable lesson to learn from Jacobs' narrative.

Given *Incidents'* attention to visibility, perspective, representation, and agency, but its lack of photographic material, those scholars who have charted the most compelling path forward for thinking critically about how photography and Jacobs' text implicate one another include Sarah Blackwood and Michael Chaney, who have both pointed to the camera obscura as a visual apparatus with significant import for discussions of visibility and Jacobs' narrative. Bringing the camera obscura and the garret together to bear the connections Blackwood and Chaney draw between the camera obscura's form and Jacobs' garret provide a productive foundation on which to build a more comprehensive appreciation of what we take photography to be beyond photographs themselves. Examining Blackwood and Chaney's analyses of the camera obscura and the garret closely however, we can realize important limits to the analogies we might make between the functions of either apparatus. While I argue that the garret is indeed a visual apparatus, I also maintain that its differences from actual camera obscura are significant and illuminative to the discussion of narrative's imbrication with photography.

Premised on the fact that light passing through an aperture into a darkened space will project an image of the outside world onto the space's interior surfaces, the camera obscura has facilitated inquiries into the behavior of light and the principles of optics since antiquity. The image projected within a camera obscura appears as a reversal of whatever the aperture is facing, such that up and down, left and right are inverted. As a product of the light admitted through the camera's aperture, the projected image changes as the conditions of the chamber itself changes. As the light grows weaker or stronger, the aperture smaller or wider, and the interior surfaces closer or further away from the opening, the image's shapes and colors become fainter or bolder, less distinct or more proximate to the appearance of the visible world outside. The camera obscura demonstrates a relation between light and the physical world that confuses terms of representation, materiality, and agency. In the camera, objects appear without material form, images project in accordance with the properties of light rather than any mechanical means of projection, and correspondences of proportion, distance, and perspective are preserved and presented with ostensible fidelity to the natural world regardless of the presence of spectators. These autonomous qualities shroud the camera obscura in the enigma of natural phenomena even as they underscore its utility as a research apparatus and demonstrate its potential as a heuristic for considering the nexus of empirical knowledge, hermeneutic activity, and lived experience.

Brent's description of the garret suggests a formal resemblance to the camera obscura's physical form insofar as both spaces are characterized by the important relationship of their enclosure and their aperture. Brent notes that in the garret "there was no admission for either light or air," that "the air was stifling; the darkness total." Brent observes that after her first night in the garret, she knew morning had come "only by the noises [she] heard; for in [her] small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light." Brent's description

of garret's absolute confinement accentuates her desire to transcend it. She laments the sound of her children playing below, writing, "How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look upon their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep. This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light." The promise of light carries with it several prospects for Brent: fresh air, illumination, and most importantly, the possibility of seeing the outside world. She rejoices when she discovers a stray gimlet in the garret, reasoning, "Now I will have some light. Now I will see my children." To this end, Brent uses the gimlet to bore a hole through the garret wall facing the street, narrating her effort with acute detail: "I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad." Light, sight, and the knowledge of how to facilitate each come together in Brent's manipulation of the garret's space. Brent's reasoning about the likelihood of her children playing nearby, her intuitive sense of where and how to bore her peephole in order to gain perspective on the street below without betraying her hiding place finds expression in the aperture she crafts. On its most basic level, as an opening onto, into, and out of Brent's confinement, the aperture transforms the garret from a closed space into an open one.<sup>28</sup>

In *Fugitive Vision*, Chaney argues that by "tracing the way ex-slaves negotiate authority through multimedia representations... the interface of visual and verbal texts produces a space of hybridity," akin to the garret. Rather than regarding such hybrid spaces as "abstraction[s]," however, Chaney attends to the "material incarnations of such spaces," which he suggests "become staging areas for reconceptualizing the complex ways that slave and ex-slave authors represent themselves into being." In Chaney's view, the garret's evocation of the camera obscura

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<sup>28</sup> Jacobs, 92.

exemplifies Jacobs' attempt to write back against the visual aspects of her enslavement. As Chaney understands it, the camera obscura, "similar to the panorama, allowed the observer to visually master perceived phenomena... in a way that de-emphasized the observer's bodily interaction with the external world." According to Chaney, rather than assuming "the god-like vision idealized in the camera obscura," in the garret, Jacobs foregrounds the "particularity of her immured bodily experience and militates against the aftereffect of racial gazing that makes the black woman a paradoxical site for the reproduction of whiteness." Chaney presents the camera obscura as a tool of representation and uses the apparatus to signify the paternalistic regulation of sight that Jacobs' narrative works to revise. His attention to the correspondence of sight and power in the narrative notwithstanding, Chaney's comparison of the garret to the camera obscura is too narrow a rendering, portraying either as essentially equivalent utilitarian and unilateral technologies of sight, agency, and control. To lie within the garret as Jacobs does, or to stand within the camera obscura as spectators of antiquity did, Chaney suggests, is to occupy a privileged place of sight synonymous with the recovery of individual sovereignty.

Chaney is not alone in emphasizing the camera obscura's role in regulating vision when it comes to sussing out *Incidents'* critique of visibility. Other scholars including Katherine McKittrick, Janet Neary, and Sarah Blackwood have taken up the camera obscura in their examinations of how Jacobs uses the garret to interrupt and elude Flint's gaze.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Chaney cites the camera obscura as a figure of idealized visibility and the mastery of perception, Blackwood argues that Jacobs "evokes pre-photographic ways of seeing in order to signify on

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<sup>29</sup> Gates Jr., Henry Louis. "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 42, Autumn, 2015. Katherine McKittrick mentions Ellen Driscoll's installation, which Janet Neary examines at length in her work, Neary, Janet. *Fugitive Testimony; On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives*. Fordham University Press, 2017. McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Duke University Press, 2006. Others, as well, find much critical purchase in the term "gaze."

the imaginative limitations placed on the author of slave narratives by the age of photography's emphasis on 'true tales of slavery.'"30 Blackwood's analysis complicates Chaney's reading by rejecting his rendition of the camera as wholly given over the regulation of vision and the consolidation of objectivity. In her estimation, the camera obscura actually exemplifies certain principles of abstraction that produce profound problems of interpretation. Blackwood aligns Brent's description of the garret with the camera obscura's abstracting function by likening various acts of looking to emissions of light: "Flint's words enter the dark room of [Brent's] mind through the small aperture of the ear, Blackwood explains and become projected upon this interior surface as images." The transformation of Flint's words to images in Brent's mind, according to Blackwood, demonstrates the sort of abstraction at work in *Incidents*. Blackwood elaborates this metaphorical equation of the garret as camera obscura as Linda Brent by suggesting that just as "Flint once colonized the aperture opening onto the dark room of Brent's mind," Brent's discovery of the gimlet allows her to "create her own aperture through which rays of light will enter." As Blackwood sees it, "the darkened garret and the darkened mind are simultaneously illuminated by Brent's action." Mind, body, space, and action are brought together in Blackwood's argument to underscore the ways in which African American antebellum writers critically incorporated photographic principles into their work.

By metaphorizing the embodied dimension of visual experience through the garret space, Jacobs at once underscores her vulnerability and at the same time articulates her methods of resisting the encroachments of paternalism and of recuperating her individual agency. Within the broader effort to understand African American writers' engagement with antebellum visual culture and early photography, Blackwood's discussion of the camera obscura refines our sense

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30 Blackwood, Sarah. "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology." *American Literature*, Vol. 81, no. 1, 2009. 96.

of how intertwined technologies and techniques of photographic and narrative representation were in the mid-nineteenth century. Blackwood's insight into the interplay between interiority, subjectivity, and agency at work in Jacobs' text notwithstanding however, the parallel she draws between the camera obscura's physical form and its metaphorical incarnation as Brent's mind leaves something to be desired. Whereas Chaney conflates the camera obscura with discourses of objective perspective and regulated vision that make black bodies like Jacobs' unintelligible or invisible altogether, Blackwood collapses the difference between the camera and the seeing subject. In Blackwood's view, the camera obscura's chamber becomes Brent's mind, its aperture her eye, and its images her thoughts. Such analogies falter when Blackwood suggests that Brent overcomes Flint's obstruction of one aperture by boring another. The camera obscura is a challenging heuristic for thinking through visual representation, in this case precisely because one does not look *through* the camera's aperture to see its image. Rather, the camera's primary function depends on the spectator's position within its apparatus, away from its aperture, to observe its images of the outside world projected within. The extent to which such geometric peculiarities matter when considering the camera's function alongside Brent's occupation of the garret has to do with how agency, vision, and representation are understood to implicate one another in Jacobs' narrative.

As Jacobs makes clear, over and above Blackwood's description, the perspective afforded by the loophole is circumscribed by the garret's physical limitations. Directly after describing the loophole's design, Brent explains that rather than her children, "the first person [she] saw in the street was Dr. Flint."<sup>31</sup> This passing remark highlights a simple yet fundamental fact of the garret: its immobility. Though Brent regularly describes the debilitating ways that the

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<sup>31</sup> Brent, 93.

garret restricts her movement, the unchanging position of the garret itself—and by extension, the fixed perspective of its loophole—receives little attention from either Brent or critics of Jacobs’ text. Nevertheless, the garret’s position on her grandmother’s property and the loophole’s view of the street below both determine Brent’s ability to survey the world around her in important ways. Critics have generally discussed the garret in terms of how it augments Brent’s visual experience of the world by allowing her to see without being seen. The garret’s “unfixed and liminal” space is “constantly shifting [and] yet utterly confined,” according to Molly Ball, and typically figures in criticism as an expression of both the extension and supersession of visual perception in Jacobs’ narrative.<sup>32</sup> Katherine McKittrick similarly underscores the epistemic stakes of Jacobs’ endeavors in the garret, arguing that “geography is transformed by Jacobs/Brent into a useable and paradoxical space,” allowing Brent to “explore the possibilities in the existing landscape.” In McKittrick’s view, rather than signifying a space beyond slavery’s limits, the garret too is an extension of slavery’s geography, such that Brent’s challenge consists of trying to envision liberation “while painfully protected deep within the crevices of power.”<sup>33</sup> As a liminal space, a privileged point of view, or a gap in the structures of power she aims to delimit, elude, and dismantle, the garret and its loophole typically figure in critical conversations as physical expressions and metaphorical expressions of Brent’s agency. Though these accounts point to some of the ways Brent uses the garret to overcome her circumstances, they also obscure

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<sup>32</sup> Ball, Molly. “On Making the Present Past: Nongenerational Temporality in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, Vol. 62, no. 3, 2016, 430.

<sup>33</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds*. xxviii, 40, 44. McKittrick goes on to explain how the garret as a site of resistance presents alternative conceptions of agency in the contemporary: “Indeed, metaphors like the margin are repetitively and sporadically called on to name difference: the margin is emptied out, placeless, just theory, just language, and seemingly the *only* black feminist geography available in wider social theories.” (57) Jacobs’ writing counters such arrangements, McKittrick argues, by reorganizing the relationship of margin and center. McKittrick explains that by writing from “the last place they thought of,” (Jacobs 93) well within the ambit of Dr. Flint’s authority and yet under his nose, Jacobs demonstrates an importantly “different sense of place... cast as a politicized location—peripheral standpoints, special vantage points, margins—through which the violence, the bodily histories, and the limitations of traditional geographic arrangements are mapped.” (62)

our understanding of how the garret's detrimental conditions actually circumscribe Brent's experience and her perspective on the world. Insofar as the garret and its loophole comprise a visual apparatus that is both produced by and productive of various types of knowledge, its narrative depiction is at once a matter of visual representation and of representing visibility.

Brent's reports from the garret articulate a tension between the surveillance its loophole affords her and the deleterious effects its confines have on her body. Brent describes her condition as "a little improved" with the addition of the loophole, but in the same paragraph explains that "for weeks [she] was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle's point, that pierced through [her] skin, and produced an intolerable burning." "The heat of my den was intense," she continues, "for nothing but thin shingles protected me from the scorching summer's sun." Brent suggests that the price of the garret's concealment is paradoxically its exposure to the elements: "Autumn came, with a pleasant abatement of heat... But when winter came, the cold penetrated through the thin shingle roof, and I was dreadfully chilled." The pains of this confinement are shot through with Brent's descriptions of seeing her loved ones and watching the events of the world surrounding her grandmother's home. In spite of the garret's incredible heat, Brent insists, "I had my consolations. Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear their talk." Seeing Dr. Flint depart for New York one day, Brent remarks, "It was a satisfaction to have miles of land and water between us.... My little den seemed less dreary than it had done." By alternating her descriptions of what she can see through her loophole and the injuries she suffers while in hiding, Brent tightly imbricates the prospect of sight with the suffering she endures. Vision and vulnerability are rendered inseparable in her account of the garret, such that even the disorienting effect of its isolation is expressed in peculiarly ocular terms. Brent recalls "those long, gloomy days with no

object for my eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy my mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future! I was thankful when there came a day sufficiently mild for me to wrap myself up and sit at the loophole to watch the passers by.”<sup>34</sup> Here, Brent broaches an integral yet seldom considered aspect of the garret—the fact that the fixed perspective of its loophole directly determines her field of vision. Blackwood recognizes this obstinate detail of the garret, but attributes Brent’s lamentation to “the time *before* she set gimlet to wood,” contrasting the way that while “lying in the dark, Brent’s mind reflects darkness,” whereas “‘peeping’ out the aperture, it is pleasantly illuminated.”<sup>35</sup> Chaney casts the garret’s limitations in terms that similarly oppose light and sight to darkness and the inability to see, arguing that “Jacobs’ twinned thematics of visuality and embodiment... result from [her] appropriative re-domestications of technologies of seeing.”<sup>36</sup> As alert as critics like Blackwood and Chaney are to the ways that the garret’s physical conditions determine Brent’s perception of the world, their readings reiterate a conception of the garret as a space of negation, making it difficult to conceive of how the garret itself—precisely because of the myriad ways that it circumscribes Brent’s agency—functions as a site of sight’s production.

## II

As the most conspicuous visual element in *Incidents*, Brent’s “loophole of retreat” has remained a focal point for critics interested in how Jacobs relates visuality to agency. The loophole transforms the garret from a dark and airless space into a place of outlook and insight. By looking out from the refuge of her hiding place, Brent discovers that she can observe the

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<sup>34</sup> Jacobs, 93-94.

<sup>35</sup> Blackwood, “Fugitive Obscura” 117. My emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Chaney, Michael. *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative*. Indiana University Press, 2009. 148.

activities of people around her grandmother's home. Though her primary interest in this change of circumstance is the prospect of seeing her children, the more immediate concerns Brent must address come from the harsh conditions of the garret. One way that critics have parsed this tension in Jacobs' narrative, between the capacity to see and the circumscription of sight, has involved reading *Incidents* as an account of Brent recouping a measure of agency by literally envisioning the means of her own liberation, despite her dire circumstances. Maria Holmgren Troy has recently contrasted the confines of the garret with the openness of Brent's grandmother's home, to consider how Jacobs asserts that the "contradictions of slavery... generate a 'dismal hole,' a 'dungeon,' in the middle of domestic comfort."<sup>37</sup> Robert S. Levine has characterized the garret's enclosed isolation similarly, aligning Jacobs' struggle with "the Thoreauvian tradition of pursuing spiritual regeneration in one place," and identifying *Incidents* with the "Franklinian tradition of American revolutionary autobiography.... In [her] decision to fight back against Dr. Flint"<sup>38</sup> Focused less on the architectural and ideological features of Brent's confinement, and more on how the garret facilitates a particular type of seeing, Sally Gomaa has considered the way Brent watches Flint exhaust himself pursuing her, arguing that "rather than becoming the object of voyeurism, [she] turns the voyeuristic gaze against itself"— "In this 'good' place of concealment," Gomaa suggests, "Jacobs turns herself from spectacle to spectator."<sup>39</sup> In line with Gomaa's view, Simone Browne sees Brent's spying as a tactic of counter surveillance in its own right, and stresses that the subversive potential of the knowledge

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<sup>37</sup> Troy, Maria Holmgren. "Chronotopes in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *African American Review*, Vol. 49, no. 1, 2016. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Levine, Robert S. "The Slave Narrative and the Revolutionary Tradition of American Autobiography." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 110.

<sup>39</sup> Gomaa, Sally. "Writing to 'Virtuous' and 'Gentle' Readers: The Problem of Pain in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* and Harriet Wilson's *Sketches*." *African American Review*, Vol. 43, no. 2-3, 2009. 376.

Brent gains while hidden in the garret derives particularly from her concealment.<sup>40</sup> While readings like these illuminate important connections between sight and agency as they converge with one another within the garret, they also perpetuate conceptions of visibility that regard agency as a function of vision.

Jacobs scholarship has long rendered her narrative's representation of the visual dynamics of power and privation in agonistic and binary terms. Michelle Burnham emphasizes the definition of a "loophole" as a "'narrow vertical opening, usually widening inwards, cut in a wall or other defence, to allow the passage of missiles,'" arguing that "battle imagery perfectly describes the saga of Jacobs' defense of her body against strategic attacks on it by Dr. Flint." Burnham takes the garret to be "simultaneously defensive and offensive," insofar as Brent manages to deploy "from that space the kind of 'male' power that one would ordinarily associate with the 'passage of missiles.'" <sup>41</sup> Brent's proactive tactics in the garret lead Burnham to suggest that Brent "is able to reverse the master-slave power relation and to assume a kind of male power only" by ultimately "relocating agency in the juncture between the structure and the subject, in sites that elude the gaze not because they are outside the structure... but because they are so clearly and centrally a part of it." <sup>42</sup> Burnham's reading of how Brent uses the garret to both literally see and literarily represent the systems of oppression sustaining slavery makes for a strong rejoinder to William L. Andrews' claim that "there is no more stifling and oppressive 'imagery of entrapment,' 'enclosure,' and 'powerlessness' than that which appears in the middle

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<sup>40</sup> Browne terms Jacobs' practices "dark sousveillance," explaining that as "way[s] of knowing," such forms of resistance speak "not only to observing those in authority (the slave patroller or the plantation overseer, for instance) but also to the keen and experiential insight of plantation surveillance in order to resist it." Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press, 2015. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Burnham, Michelle. "Loopholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in Foucault." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*. Vol. 49, no. 2, 1993. 57. "Missiles" here is an allusion to the letters Brent addresses to Flint from the garret to disorient and manipulate him.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 59, 64.

chapters of Jacobs' autobiography."<sup>43</sup> Distinguishing Jacobs' portrayal of the garret from other "nineteenth century women writers' 'anxieties about space,'" which Andrews is keen to liken to *Incidents*, Burnham's insistence on the "fissure" Brent occupies between the structures of slave society firmly situates *Incidents* in an African American literary tradition concerned with the aesthetic representation of racial injustice and violence.<sup>44</sup> As Rafia Zafar has observed, Jacobs' narrative bears out the conventional wisdom in many ways, that "to be a slave was... to engage in oppositional acts," a conviction that has animated most literary scholarship on slave narratives for the last forty years.<sup>45</sup>

More recently, another vein of scholarship on agency, narratives of slavery, and Jacobs' text in particular, has critiqued dichotomous conceptions of agency. Rather than conceiving of agency as something akin to a material resource, to be won and wielded by the oppressed or the oppressor, many scholars have for the last thirty years stressed the more ambiguous and dubious aspects of agency. Concerned as well with understanding the garret's peculiar place in the narrative and its broader theoretical significance, Samira Kawash notes the way that Brent's "safety in the loophole is predicated on her exclusion from the social," such that "the condition of her security is simultaneously the absolute deprivation of freedom." Counter to Burnham, Kawash insists that "the unsustainability of [Brent's] paradoxical circumstance marks the limits of a reading that would interpret her efforts to deflect Flint's attention as a reversal in the power relations between Flint and herself."<sup>46</sup> In line with Kawash, Jacobs' text treats agency as a capacity to act in and upon the world that is both situated within and articulated in relation to

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<sup>43</sup> Andrews, William L. *To Tell A Free Story*. The University of Illinois Press, 1986. 258.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*; Burnham, 64.

<sup>45</sup> Zafar, Rafia. "Introduction: Over-exposed, Under-exposed: Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, Rafia Zafar and Deborah M. Garfield, editors, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Kawash, Samira. *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature*. Stanford University Press, 1997. 77.

circumstances that cannot be overcome simply by delineating them. As Kawash makes clear, Jacobs does not merely gain or regain her agency once she climbs into the garret, slips out of sight, and returns Flint's unwelcome gaze—rather, Brent's account of her struggle to see and to be seen complicates the link between her agency and her freedom, and throws the act of narration into sharper relief. As Ashraf Rushdy has observed, the differences between the lived experience and the narrative expression of agency and freedom have endured as central elements of the African American literary tradition, and continue to motivate authors “of Neo-slave narratives [wishing] to return to the literary form in which African American subjects... first expressed their political subjectivity.”<sup>47</sup>

Katherine McKittrick extends Kawash's concern for the ways that *Incidents* distinguishes agency from freedom by locating Jacobs' narrative in a genealogy of black feminist theorizations of power. Though McKittrick routes her analysis of black women's writing through geographic terms, to illustrate first that “practices of subjugation are... spatial acts,” and second that “black women think, write, and negotiate their surroundings [in ways that] are intermingled with place-based critiques, or, respatializations,” her reading of Brent's garret helps to reconcile countervailing conceptions of the garret as a space of both confinement and liberation.<sup>48</sup> According to McKittrick, when Brent bores her loophole through the garret's wall, the space is “transformed... into a usable and paradoxical space... situated in and amongst the violent geographies of slavery” from which Brent finds she can “articulate her lived experiences and emancipatory desires, without losing sight of the dehumanizing forces of slavery.”<sup>49</sup>

McKittrick's reading of the garret as extensive with, rather than excluded from, the terrain of

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<sup>47</sup> Rushdy, Ashraf D. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>48</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds*. 2006. xix.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. xxviii, 41.

slavery, underscores its paradoxical function in Jacobs' narrative: as both a place of confinement and a means of escape, the garret is a complex site of production—of perception, witness, and testimony. Indeed, McKittrick's examination of how Brent transforms the garret into a space of articulation, compellingly suggests that the very capacity for narration can be traced to Jacobs' captivity in the garret. For McKittrick, capacity and captivity converge in the way Brent uses the enclosure of the garret to her advantage, not simply to hide from sight, but to stealthily study the world around her and disclose slavery's myriad violences. McKittrick's critique of the agency Brent finds in the garret cuts across conversations about the degree to which Brent casts off or reverses the authority Flint holds over her. Brent's description of her survival within the garret at once demonstrates the importance of studying agency in relation to the context from which it arises, and also illuminates the ways in which agential power regularly emerges from ordinary engagements with the world. This chapter contributes to scholarship on the nature of agency in *Incidents* by studying Brent's narrative representation of the garret as both a location and figure for the radical synthesis of vision and power.

### III

The garret's function as a visual apparatus becomes more apparent when considered alongside two other hiding places Brent turns to after fleeing Flint's farmhouse. Brent spends time in the attic of a family friend and then a swamp three miles from town before returning to her grandmother's home, and in both spaces she comes to appreciate aspects of sight and concealment that complicate the ostensible link between merely evading Flint's detection and actually executing her escape. Brent becomes acutely aware of how these spaces variously facilitate or impede her capacity to observe the world around her, as the attic and the swamp

respectively afford her either a generous view of the outside while hidden in an uncertain hideaway, or absolute concealment at the expense of vision itself. The knowledge of how to use the garret as a tool for surveillance emerges from Brent's experience of comporting herself to either of these initial places of refuge. Moreover, Brent's description of how the conditions of the attic and the swamp work against her efforts to orient herself prefigure the garret's inimical environment. In these spaces, Brent's narration, her physical capacity to mobilize towards freedom, and her existential sense of precarity and liberation coincide in ways that demonstrate the peculiar importance of visibility in *Incidents*.

Light and sight are closely associated with knowledge as early in the narrative as Brent's account of fleeing Flint's home under the cover of night. Brent describes her flight from the Flint household in precise and portentous terms: "I felt my way down into the parlor, and looked out of the window. The night was so intensely dark that I could see nothing. I raised the window very softly and jumped out." As a point she can reach only by feel, and a threshold beyond which she cannot see, the window Brent turns to ironically withholds any promise of a world beyond her present circumstances. Instead, the window presents a barrier to Brent's freedom, such that her decision to leap blindly into the blank nothing of the night emphasizes both the desperation of her situation and demonstrates her capacity to transcend the ostensible limits of her captivity. Once outside, Brent recounts, "the darkness bewildered me," but "I groped my way to the road, and rushed towards the town with almost lightning speed." The absence of light hardly impedes Brent during her escape; she goes "forth into the darkness and rain," stopping only once she reaches the relative safety of a friend's house. The markers of visual experience that punctuate Brent's disappearance invoke visibility in various ways, as when Brent arrives at her grandmother's home but "dare[s] not see her," lest her grandmother's anxieties "unnerve" her

during her escape. At the house that night, Brent remarks that she “feared the sight of her children would be too much for [her] full heart; but [she] could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look.” The sight of others, and the thought of being seen, influence Brent from the beginning of her escape, either bolstering or mitigating her resolve to follow through with her plan. Brent even instructs Sally, a woman living in her grandmother’s home, to hide what few belongings remain in the house, “for I knew Mr. Flint and the constable would be there early to search my room.” The theory of visuality that *Incidents* articulates includes more than just empirical acts of seeing and being seen: as the sensory capacity to orient oneself, or as a conceptual basis for recognizing our relations to others, or as a means of forensic inquiry, sight finds diverse expression early on in Brent’s narration of her experience.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas Brent’s initial escape emphasizes the value of vision by realizing connections between the absence of sight, light, and knowledge, her initial hiding places reconfigure these links in ways that compel her to negotiate the field of visuality differently. Brent gives few details about her first hideaway, a friend’s home, but she does emphasize its inadequate protection by describing a moment when she flees the house and hides in a thicket because her pursuers are nearby. Hidden, but unable to determine her fate, Brent “remain[s] in an agony of fear for two hours” until something poisonous bites her leg. “In my fright, I struck a blow which loosened its hold, but I could not tell whether I had killed it; it was so dark, I could not see what it was; I only knew it was something cold and slimy.”<sup>51</sup> Once again, Brent acts to preserve her bodily well-being despite being unable to see, and once again, the precarity of her situation is predicated upon her inability to see either within or beyond the confines of her refuge. By the she

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<sup>50</sup> Jacobs, 78-79.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

makes it to her second hiding place, the attic of an unnamed family acquaintance, Brent's representation of concealment has been laden with language of anxiety, ignorance, and terror.

Brent's characterization of the dark thicket and the stormy night obscuring her flight from Flint's household resonate with earlier passages in the text that emphasize the ambivalent nature of concealment. Relating the plight of an enslaved man who failed to secure freedom for his children, Brent recalls that the father "concealed them in the woods for some days; but they were discovered and taken," and the family was destroyed by being separated and sold into more desolate circumstances (44). As Brent explains, in this instance, being found carries exponential penalties for attempting to hide oneself away in the first place—making the project of concealment all the more dangerous. Brent also complicates the notion of what it means to be seen however, by describing her own counterintuitive practices of staying visible. "By managing to keep within sight of people, as much as possible, during the day time," she explains, "I... succeeded in eluding my master" (29). Brent earnestly remains within the sight of others so as to avoid being cornered by Flint, a tactic that incites the incredulity of her mistress and renders Brent "an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred" (30). Brent becomes "an object of [Mrs. Flint's] especial care" when she orders Brent to sleep in a room adjoining her own rather than in Flint's own bedroom, as ordered; an arrangement Brent finds preferable, if differently distressing, as Mrs. Flint "spent many a sleepless night to watch over" her (31). Brent's conspicuous place in the Flint household facilitates her punishment. Brent, and her description of the vice-like scrutiny of Dr. and Mrs. Flint underscores the precarity of her status as an object of interest. As Brent illustrates however, the strategies of surveillance and concealment available to her are highly variable, and not as neatly counterpoised to one another as intuition might suggest. Indeed the decision to flee, to hide, or to persevere, and the methods

of doing either successfully, seem to be as fraught with risk as they are with the promise of freedom.

Brent begins to redefine her relation to the field of visibility during her refuge in the attic of her grandmother's acquaintance, a slave-owning woman in town whose sympathy for Brent's predicament prompts her to shelter Brent "for a time," until a passage north can be secured. The attic is important in Brent's narrative of escape for several reasons largely having to do with what the space affords her in the way of concealment that her previous strategies of negotiating the sight of others could not. From its peripheral attributes, like being "a small room over her [hostess's] own sleeping apartment"—a detail that recalls Brent's earlier distress at the thought of having to sleep so proximate to white power—to its most basic function of keeping Brent out of sight, the attic's physical space grounds an array of the narrative's concerns with proximity, precarity, and the promise of escape. The very utility of the attic space depends on its place in the household as a "room to store away things that are out of use," a nod towards the narrative's overarching dramatization of excerpting oneself from slave labor. Brent learns immediately however, of the space's contingencies, those parameters within which she must conduct herself in order to remain hidden. Her hostess informs Brent that though the room remains locked, and her "girls are not accustomed to be sent to it... they will not suspect any thing unless they hear some noise" (81). As with the trunk she empties at her grandmother's to prevent her pursuers from learning that she has not, in fact, yet fled north, Brent again realizes the close association between evasion and detection when she enters the attic. Noises from within and without the attic come to plague her during her stay, comprising both a margin of error Brent must abide in order to remain undetected, and an important sort of counterbalance to the power and agency she finds in visibility.

Despite these strictures, Brent finds the attic to be a vast improvement over her friend's home. Her first day begins with an inversion of her plunge from the Flint home into the darkness of night and uncertainty. "Morning came and filled my cell with light," Brent explains; "I thanked the heavenly Father for this safe retreat" (82). The certainties of a new beginning, an enclosed retreat, and a unprecedented sense of security all outweigh Brent's acknowledgement of her confinement within a cell. Along with the light and the safety of her new hiding place, Brent also finds "a pile of feather beds" in the attic—a physical improvement to the rainy roads and cramped confines she has suffered thus far in the narrative (82). The attic's relative comforts shape Brent's early understanding of how space and visibility relate to one another, and inform her emergent understanding of how to leverage sight to her advantage.

Brent discovers she can use attic's feather beds, for instance, to augment the room's most consequential convenience: its window. "On top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and command a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office. Anxious as I was, I felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him. Thus far I had outwitted him, and I triumphed over it" (82). The implications of this discovery reverberate throughout the text, as the ability to watch others without being seen is precisely what makes Brent's use of the garret later in the narrative so striking. In particular, Brent's realization that Flint's movements can be monitored in this way is pivotal to the tactics she employs from this point on both to continue evading him, and to manipulate his actions. Brent discovers a measure of agency when she climbs into the attic vantage point with its "command[ing]" view, and the "triumph" she feels is poised over both her former master and the slave-holding society she has begun to free herself from (82). Unlike Flint's window, Brent can see through the window in the attic. Rather than a barrier withholding any promise of a world beyond her state of bondage, the attic window literally provides Brent

with the means of envisioning her escape. As well, the relation of window above and street below reiterates an earlier scene in which Brent and her lover stop to speak near the Flint household: "Looking up, I saw my master watching us from his window. I hurried home, trembling with fear.... A shower of oaths and imprecations followed" (37). The attic window reverses this power dynamic by emphasizing the correspondence between the onlooking subject and the studied object. In either situation, the window's apparently ordinary function as an opening out onto to world also lends insight into otherwise imperceptible social configurations. The challenge of finding ways to manipulate and thus render the surrounding world intelligible prompts Brent to ask her readers rhetorically, "Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it." Citing her use of the window, Brent reasons that cunning "is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants" (82).

In spite of what the attic window affords, Brent is careful to contextualize the window within the space of the attic itself which she in turn situates within the broader context of her hostess's slave-holding household. As with her previous hideaways, precarity and proximity circumscribe the security and advantages Brent experiences in the attic. For example, when Brent learns that Flint has told her grandmother that he knows her whereabouts, Brent realizes that her uncertainty as to whether his assertion is true or not demands that she abandon her refuge. Brent is spirited away, at the word of a lie, to lie in a gap between the floorboards of the kitchen. Relegated from the lofty, apparent safety of the attic, Brent finds herself not only interred beneath the operations of the household, but also utterly at the mercy of her friend Betty who literally stands watch over Brent's body. "In my shallow bed I had but just room enough to bring my hands to my face to keep the dust out of my eyes," Brent remarks, underscoring the

deprivation of her sight and orientation in the kitchen's hideaway (84). Even after this fright, Brent's time the attic is constantly burdened by the threat of exposure and capture, precisely because of her limited ability to apprehend events beyond its walls.<sup>52</sup> Sounds, absent any discernable cause, are the most frequent perpetrators of Brent's anxiety in the attic. Brent recalls hearing Flint's voice one day:

I looked round in terror. There was no way of escape.... After a while I heard approaching footsteps; the key was turned in my door. I braced myself against the wall to keep from falling. I ventured to look up and there stood my benefactress alone. I was too much overcome to speak, and sunk down upon the floor. (84)

The concise yet tensile terms with which she describes this moment—looking round to no avail, bracing to keep from falling, striving to raise her gaze—conveys the dread Brent feels at the anticipation of being caught. This dread comes to a head when someone tries to enter the attic one morning, sending Brent into a deductive panic:

I was much startled by hearing somebody trying to get into my room. Several keys were tried, but none fitted. I instantly conjectured it was one of the housemaids; and I concluded she must either have heard some noise in the room, or have noticed the entrance of Betty. (89)

These incidents impress upon Brent the fact that her agential capacity is bounded by the vulnerability of the attic. Indeed, apprehension itself becomes Brent's primary concern in the attic as the disparity of her sensory faculties—her elevated, concealed sight versus her inability

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<sup>52</sup> Brent is entombed beneath the kitchen a second time during her stay here, after the arrest and imprisonment of her brother reinvigorates the search for her. She remains under Betty's watch for several days this time, making interesting note of the way Betty "walked back and forth, [and] in the performance of her culinary duties, she talked apparently to herself, but with the intention that [Brent] should hear what was going on." Brent recalls, "They searched the house I was in. I heard their steps and their voices" (89). Of interest in this passage is the indirect way Brent catalogs the various tactics of deception and diversion that constitute slave resistance. Also premised on sight—that of Betty's supervision and oversight, in this case—, Brent's dependence on Betty corroborates arguments that Valerie Smith and others have made which highlight the unique ways in which Jacobs' narrative foregrounds the collective efforts and gendered patterns of labor that make enslavement and escape possible. See Smith, Valerie. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Harvard University Press, 1991. (Brent explains that "at night, when all were asleep, Betty came to release me from my place of confinement. The fright I had undergone, the constrained posture, and the dampness of the ground, made me ill for several days," a precursor of the punishment to come in the garret (89).)

to make clear sense of the sounds she hears beyond the attic's walls—compels her to reconsider the relationship between the observable world and her capacity to act in and upon it.

Too few critics have given these scenes the consideration they deserve for the way they prefigure Brent's later use of the garret. In one of the few extended treatments of Brent's experience in the attic, Fred Moten has illuminated some of the epistemological implications of Brent's trajectory from thicket, to attic, to plenum. For Moten, Brent's early, haphazard days of fugitivity arise from the "interdicted agency of the interval, the interred, the incident," which characterize the in-between places she passes through.<sup>53</sup> Following Moten, Brent's leap from Flint's window into the absolute darkness of the night, "against action and self-certainty," demonstrates a peculiarly orthogonal excursion from the domestic order of slave society.<sup>54</sup> By locating this break later in the narrative than Brent's everyday resistance to Flint's constant persecution, and yet earlier than her occupation of the garret, Moten deviates from conventional interpretations of agency in *Incidents*. What Moten terms Brent's "*anagential movement*," is indeed useful for tracing how she "disowns or unowns knowledge (of slavery, of desire) in the name of another, inappropriate knowledge, a knowledge of the inappropriable."<sup>55</sup> Knowledge and apprehension, sovereignty and appropriation become unprecedentedly confused in the attic, and manifest in peculiarly visual ways when the "forms of [Brent's] two children" "appear" before her one evening.<sup>56</sup>

The sight of her children in the attic marks one of the most peculiar events in Brent's narrative because of the way their appearance disrupts the logic of representation and testimony

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<sup>53</sup> Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003. 68.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Jacobs, 87.

that govern her account up to this point. The children appear suddenly and subtly by way of digression when Brent interrupts her recollection of her brother's arrest to address her reader directly: "And now I will tell you something that happened to me; though you will, perhaps, think it illustrates the superstition of slaves."<sup>57</sup> Brent goes on to describe how one night, while listening to music coming from below her window and thinking of her children, "a streak of moonlight was on the floor before [her], and in the midst of it appeared the forms of [her] two children. They vanished," Brent explains, "but I had seen them distinctly." Brent's description of this event is striking not simply because of the way it taxes the imagination—as do most details of slavery's violence and terror—, but because of the way her acknowledgement of this particular incident risks throwing the entire narrative's credibility into question. More precisely, by interrupting her own narrative with such a conspicuous synthesis of the supernatural and the sentimental, Brent draws attention to the contrived nature of narrative expression itself.<sup>58</sup> As Moten observes, gestures of self-implication that threaten to disrupt the apparent neutrality of narrative progress (by invoking the subjective, the partial, and the improbable, as Brent's does) prompt readers to consider "what it is to be thrown into the story of another's development... as both an interruption of it and as its condition of possibility; and to have that irruption be understood as both an ordering and a disordering movement?"<sup>59</sup> Supernatural and sentimental, the appearance of Brent's children is also spectral and spectacular, provoking a peculiar response from her in narrative hindsight. Though she mentions hearing music and thinking of her children just before their forms appear, Brent does not mention what, if anything, she does in their

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Rafia Zafar's *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, particularly Jacqueline Goldsby's entry, "'I Disguised My Hand': Writing Versions of the Truth in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and John Jacobs's 'A True Tale of Slavery'" speaks extensively to Jacobs' negotiation of the generic qualities of the slave narrative.

<sup>59</sup> Moten, 68.

presence; only what the sight of them does to her. She only notes that “it made a strong impression on [her] mind,” and in an apparent abdication of her authority as narrator, curiously claims that she “know[s] not how to account for it.”<sup>60</sup> In lieu of any such accounting, Brent merely cites the capricious nature of visual experience, suggesting that “some will call it a dream, others a vision.”<sup>61</sup>

Sight becomes deranged in the attic, compelling Brent to pursue more habitable hiding spaces. Brent leaves the relative safety of the attic for that of the garret, but must spend an evening hiding in the swamp three miles outside of town. Though Brent’s description of the swamp is brief, it belies the changing relationship between light, sight, and knowledge surrounding her escape. Light and knowledge are inverted during Brent’s short time in the swamp from the way they were in the thicket, such that whereas the thicket was characterized by darkness and marked by the mysterious poisonous bite she suffered, in the swamp Brent finds that “as the light increased, [she] saw snake after snake crawling round.”<sup>62</sup> If Brent’s ability to watch Flint in the street from her perch in the attic promised a “command” over her situation, the thick foliage surrounding the swamp utterly deprives her of any similar vantage point. She notes that “the bamboos were so high and so thick that it was impossible to see beyond a very short distance.”<sup>63</sup> What exacerbates Brent’s anxieties about this location however have less to do with her inability to anticipate her impending capture, and more to do with the swamp’s hostile environment. “Covered with hundreds of mosquitos,” Brent explains that “in an hour’s time they had so poisoned my flesh that I was a pitiful sight to behold.”<sup>64</sup> In the swamp, as in the attic,

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<sup>60</sup> Jacobs, 87.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Brent's sense of sight—or more importantly, her capacity to visually orient herself in the world—must vie with other senses which make it difficult for her to act. After just an evening, the “wretched night... the heat of the swamp, the mosquitos, and the constant terror of snakes, had brought on a burning fever.”<sup>65</sup> So incapacitated, in the midst of the bamboo and the briers of the swamp, Brent finds her situation both physically and strategically untenable. Though the swamp may be significantly more secure, Brent's diminished ability to work towards her freedom demands she strike out for the garret.

Brent's experience in the attic and the swamp contextualizes her use of the garret as a visual apparatus. In each of these hiding places, Brent learns to articulate and negotiate connections between sight and the physical world by recognizing her capacity to use visual information strategically. What McKittrick calls Brent's “new kind of spatial positioning... deep within the crevices of power,” in the garret, finds precedent in the insufficient retreats that Brent initially tries.<sup>66</sup> Reading Brent's description of these experiences closely reveals the peripatetic nature of her escape, deepening the sense she relates of needing to constantly envision more efficacious means of self-liberation.<sup>67</sup> At stake in this interval between bondage and freedom, as McKittrick observes, is a more robust understanding of the grounds from which various strategies of resistance arise, and the means by which they respond to their respective contexts. Brent's augmented perspective in the garret is not without precedent, as her description of the attic window demonstrates. Nor does Brent's occupation of the garret denote an escape in and of itself from the terrain of slavery, given the regular attention she plays to the physical debilitations

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> McKittrick, 44.

<sup>67</sup> Both Valerie Smith and Daphne Brooks note that Brent's escape is marked by her stasis, rather than her onward, unmitigated progress north. This underscores some of the text's formal and thematic features, of staying put, resting, recuperating, etc. It also foreshadows Ellison's much later formulation of retreat in *Invisible Man*. See Brooks, *The Great Escapes: Four Slave Narratives*. Sterling Publishing, 2007.

brought on by fugitivity. As Moten and McKittrick describe them, the interstitial spaces Brent lives in before entering the garret constitute their own peculiar intervals in her narrative, pushing her to think beyond the physical and psychic limits of their confines. Reconceiving of marginalized points of departure as more than mere “site[s] of dispossession,” as McKittrick suggests, promises to revitalize our understanding of what it means to countenance and engage the world from the inside out.<sup>68</sup>

What has come together by the time Brent enters the garret is no less than a retheorization of what it means to be a seeing subject.

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<sup>68</sup> McKittrick, 58

## Chapter Two

### Once, Again, At All

The reader has but to repeat, in his own mind... the scene in the woods... to have a true idea of my bitter experience there, during the first period of the breaking process through which Mr. Covey carried me. I have no heart to repeat each separate transaction, in which I was a victim of his violence and brutality.<sup>69</sup>

– Frederick Douglass

I have no learned theory of art to present, no rules of wise criticism to explain or enforce, no great pictures to admire, no distinguished artists, ancient or modern, to commend. I bring to the work before me only the eye and thought of a lay man.<sup>70</sup>

– Frederick Douglass

## I

This chapter considers how Douglass develops his narrative techniques of representing subjectivity across his autobiographies by studying his texts in relation to two late-nineteenth century photographic experiments organized around the challenge of picturing bodies in motion. I argue that, as differing iterations of relatively consistent subject matter, the phrases, scenes, and descriptions that recur throughout Douglass's autobiographies exemplify a representational logic characteristic of both narrative and photographic expression. This logic promises to present and secure a subject by rendering their presence objectively—i.e. as an object, either of scrutiny or concern—, even as it simultaneously imputes to that subject a dynamic vitality that necessarily exceeds finite representation. While repetition itself—by which I simply mean the recurrence of various but precise anecdotes across Douglass's different narratives—may be an unremarkable

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<sup>69</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Library of America, 1994, 270.

<sup>70</sup> Douglass, Frederick, "Pictures and Progress," in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*. Penguin Books, 2016, 351.

feature of successive retellings of a life story, here I propose that studying the narrative function of iteration offers perhaps the most illuminating perspective from which to appreciate Douglass's relationship to photography. By understanding the autobiographical enterprise as a creative effort to commit the constituent events of a life into narrative form, we can recognize Douglass's progressively longer and increasingly comprehensive attempts to do so as examples of narrative representation peculiarly premised on repetition and iteration. At stake in my reorientation from reading any one of his autobiographies on their own, to considering what meaning they achieve when read together, is a renewed sense not only of Douglass's particular generic commitments, but of the more profound aesthetic and ontological principles photography and African American literature share as well.

Studying iteration in Douglass's autobiographies alongside the roughly contemporaneous photographic experiments that I discuss below is also about finding a new way of thinking about the common ground that narrative and photographic forms share. Iteration as an aesthetic phenomenon—rather than either a narrative technique or a technique of narrative analysis—becomes particularly evident through photography's abstraction of visual experience.<sup>71</sup> Whereas most scholarship on Douglass and photography attends to his lectures on the topic and to his photographic archive to historicize his prolific exploration of its possibilities, my own focus on how the iterative logic of photography refigures aesthetic problems of how parts relate to wholes sends my inquiry in a very different direction.<sup>72</sup> To date, scholarship in the field has been limited by its commitment to the daguerreotype as a heuristic for understanding how subjects are formed

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<sup>71</sup> See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1937), or Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (The MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> I discuss Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. later in the chapter as scholars who focus on the history behind the photographs.

through the use of technologies of reproduction.<sup>73</sup> With Douglass in particular, scholars have been encouraged by the daguerreotypes' *unique* mode of representation to discuss expressions of subjectivity almost exclusively in terms of democracy and truth—values which, in turn, come to overdetermine our understanding of the medium.<sup>74</sup> My turn to the experiments of Muybridge and Marey responds to this overdetermination by considering how their use of iteration evinces the recursive way that photographs produce the very truths they are taken to reveal.

Despite the varying length and formal complexity of Douglass's autobiographies, their conformity to a largely consistent arrangement of pivotal moments in his life lends them a sense of coherence, if not contiguity. Even as he occasionally alludes to and cites his earlier texts in his later works, Douglass makes no attempt to explicitly conjoin his autobiographies one to another. The narratives' sense of continuity instead comes from how regularly they observe the familiar plot points that chart Douglass's development from an enslaved child into a free adult. From his fight with Covey, to his quest for literacy, to the other myriad brutalities of his youth, not only do the representative points of Douglass's story identify his narrative as his own—they also serve to articulate his subjectivity as one defined by the capacity to bear witness, and to do so as an iterative practice.<sup>75</sup> By examining those features that make Douglass's narratives both alike and different from one another, we see how the tensions born of repetition and difference produce

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<sup>73</sup> See Alan Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs: Images as History* (Hill and Wang, 1989), or Shawn Michelle Smith's *Photography and the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> For more on the peculiar materiality of daguerreotypes, see Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs*; Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory and the Black Body* (University of Michigan Press, 2010)

<sup>75</sup> The capacity to extrapolate a greater, more generic form from Douglass's descriptions of his own experience of bondage—against which other slave narratives might be compared, and in which a more complete picture of the conditions of slavery might be achieved—has proven to be an elemental force of African American literary criticism for the last fifty years. See Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives* (Oxford University Press, 1999) for more on the paradigmatic influence slave narratives have had on literary scholarship since the mid-twentieth century. See Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" (in *Small Axe*, vol. 26, no. 12, 2008) for a sense of the field's enduring faith in complete pictures and hermeneutics of recovery, in spite of its inherent suspicion of the archive's purported objectivity and disinterestedness.

meaningful discrepancies that, in turn, inform the ways we read and interpret his theorization of subject formation.

For Douglass, the sovereignty of the subject is fundamentally premised on the ability to not only perceive the world—as appearances can indeed be deceiving—but to employ the principles of its operation as well. This relation of appearance to perception, or of aesthetic representation more broadly, is an old one for African American literary studies, but a young one for Douglass scholarship.<sup>76</sup> Lena Hill’s argument that black antebellum writers “found purchase [in a] visual veracity that insist[ed] on their role as moral arbiters having little in common with the ridiculous servants and entertainers so often portrayed in high and popular art,” advances a claim similar to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s seminal thesis that Douglass was “the most representative colored man in the United States both because he represented black people most eloquently and elegantly, and because he was the race’s great opportunity to re-present itself in the court of racist public opinion.”<sup>77</sup> Photographic reproduction, political representation, and liberal subjectivity become more tightly imbricated concepts in most studies of African American aesthetics and antebellum visual culture, through arguments like Gates’s, which claims that “black Americans sought to re-present their public selves in order to reconstruct their public, reproducible images.”<sup>78</sup> Whatever this schematization offers in the way of theorizing the emancipatory potential Douglass and other nineteenth century writers saw in photographic

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<sup>76</sup> See Taylor, Paul C. *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2016, 6. I later distinguish between the intuitive aesthetic theory Jacobs recognizes in her narrative, which I discuss in the previous chapter, and the kind of analysis that Muybridge and Marey achieve, which I examine in this chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Hill, Lena. *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 53-54. Gates Jr., Henry Louis. “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” *Representations* vol. 24, 1988, pp. 129-155, 129.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 129. My project’s examination of how the subject is produced by the aesthetic principles underlying photography and narrative representation follows after important critiques from Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford University Press, 1997), and Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), of the constitution of the liberal subject.

technologies, it also obscures the important if implicit critique of the apparently natural correspondence between sight, sovereignty, and certitude running through much of their work. My interest in how the logic of iteration works throughout Douglass's visual and autobiographical oeuvres follows after Sarah Blackwood's incisive suggestion that Douglass and other African American writers "argued for a visual literacy that denied the indexical power of white visual practices while embracing the power of the image to make injustice visible."<sup>79</sup> Here I show how the study of repeated forms exposes ostensible truths for the synthetic products of attention, scrutiny, and discernment that they are, rather than the self-evident features of the world they seem to be.

Considering the subtle differences in the way Douglass narrates an instance of misapprehension in his second and third autobiographies respectively, the peculiarly narrative capacity of iteration becomes apparent. Early on in *My Bondage*, as he recollects the harrowing journey through the woods that would bring him from his grandmother's home to Lloyd's plantation, Douglass recalls a profound discovery about how sight relates to knowledge:

Several old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for wild beasts. I could see their legs, eyes, and ears, or I could see something like eyes, legs, and ears, till I got close enough to them to see that the eyes were knots, washed white with rain, and the legs were broken limbs, and the ears, only ears owing to the point from which they were seen. Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance. (*MB* 148)

Despite the apparent banality of Douglass's observation that things viewed from one point often appear differently when viewed from another, his description of how our knowledge of the world is just as likely to be made sharper as it is to be usurped by visual experience, itself promises insight. In this passage we see two types of iteration at work: the first in the way that Douglass

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<sup>79</sup> Blackwood, Sarah. "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology." *American Literature*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2009, 94.

looks over his environment several times, from distinct angles, like a series of double takes; and the second in the way that the successive, superseding clauses of the passage work to replicate Douglass's emergent sense of the world that lies before him. While the progression from "I could see," to "or I could see something like," to "till I got close enough to them to see that," certainly elaborates sight as a capacity of discernment and legibility, also of note is the way that the knowledge that sight produces actually yields to further scrutiny as the passage goes on.<sup>80</sup> If Douglass's pat conclusion to this anecdote belies the event's true significance, comparing this passage with his representation of the same moment in *Life and Times* proves illuminating. As Douglass writes in his third narrative:

Several old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for enormous animals. I could plainly see their legs, eyes, ears, and teeth, till I got close enough to see that the eyes were knots, washed white with rain, and the legs were broken limbs, and the ears and teeth only such because of the point from which they were seen. (*LT* 480)

We can recognize the latter passage's concision immediately. The iterative syntax of Douglass's apprehension in *My Bondage* is reduced to a more symmetrical form in *Life and Times* by way of Douglass's "plainly... till" construction.<sup>81</sup> This small change clarifies the aesthetic peculiarity of the iterative logic at work in the first passage by demonstrating the way in which, despite its rhetorical utility as a method of representing the process of apprehension—as it does in the first passage—, iteration is not necessarily about either economy or clarity. What the latter passage sacrifices in fact, by collapsing Douglass's longer expression of disorientation into a more succinct statement about event and causation, might be recognized as a keener sense of the incident's lasting impression. Indeed, the most evident difference between these passages is the way that Douglass's distillation of the lesson he learned from this incident in the first text is

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<sup>80</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Library of America, 1994, 148.

<sup>81</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Library of America, 1994, 480.

absorbed into the latter's last sentence. "Only such because" does substantive if subtle work in the latter passage, at once taking the place of the former's "owing to," and also incorporating Douglass's earlier insight about perspective and conjecture into a broader, less edifying summary of events.<sup>82</sup> The distinctions that emerge through this brief comparison evince iteration's capacity to show progression from an original to a final form. It also makes legible the discrepancies between the forms that shape our experience of change over time.

If Douglass is investigating the development of his own subjectivity, Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, working in the United States and France respectively, used photography in similar ways to investigate the movement of bodies through space and time. The experiments they designed radically repurposed the fundamental premises of photography. Muybridge and Marey found that the photograph's combination of abstraction and fidelity enabled them to arrest movement and in arresting it analyze it.<sup>83</sup> This analytic process was an interpretive one, and indeed, Muybridge and Marey came to their respective discoveries in independent and very different ways. Whereas Muybridge's work made it possible to reconstitute a body's movement through the sequencing of successive photographs, Marey's methods allowed the entirety of a body's motion to be captured in a single frame.<sup>84</sup>

In their pursuit of the kind of insight that photographs produce only when considered together—and not at all when studied individually—Muybridge and Marey alight on the iterative

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; *My Bondage*. 148.

<sup>83</sup> Histories of Muybridge's work are numerous. I draw on several to elucidate this brief overview of his work, including: Sarah Gordon, *Indecent Exposures: Eadweard Muybridge's Animal Locomotion Nudes* (Yale University Press, 2015); Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Duke University Press, 2013); Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (Penguin Books, 2004); Phillip Prodger, *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Phil Hill, *Eadweard Muybridge (55 Series)* (Phaidon Press, 2001).

<sup>84</sup> See Marta Braun on Marey, *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). Shawn Michelle Smith on Muybridge, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Duke University Press, 2013).

nature of photographic truth. Premised as they are on disaggregating and reconstituting appearances into and from their constituent parts, Muybridge and Marey's work offers a new and productive way of considering the aesthetic questions that Douglass's narratives provoke about iteration, visibility, and subjective experience. Insofar as Douglass's autobiographies offer a treatise on how black subjects come into being, Muybridge and Marey's investigations into how meaning coheres through discrepant processes of reading and mediation sharpens our inquiry into Douglass's narrative representations of the subject.

## II

That photography had the power not just to represent the world with fidelity, but to show us things that we ourselves could not see, was central to the appeal of Muybridge's early experiments. Beyond this appeal however, the philosophical problems of perception revealed by Muybridge's work were also resolved in powerful if subtle ways through his restoration of our intuitive sense of motion. Alone, photographs of galloping horses were subject to the paradoxical notion that photographs capture movement without moving themselves—to image the horse at any point in its run said nothing about its movement; only its form at a given point in time. By assembling the discrete frames of the horse's gallop into an aesthetic whole however, Muybridge found that the impression of continuity across frames could insinuate motion quite powerfully. This insight into the medium's speculative potential carried through to Muybridge's subsequent photographic studies of movement, collected in his 1887 publication, *Animal Locomotion*.

The essential aesthetic gestures of analysis and assembly that characterized Muybridge's first major study of motion became more powerful and refined in *Animal Locomotion*. Over the course of this second project, Muybridge photographed humans as well as animals as they

performed a panoply of actions ranging from athletic maneuvers to quotidian tasks. As with the horses, Muybridge used arrays of multiple cameras to capture successive moments throughout the duration of a given action. Building on the method used in *Horse in Motion* however, in *Animal Locomotion* Muybridge used multiple camera arrays during each action to photograph his subjects from alternative perspectives. The result, as shown below, was a more robust depiction of a subject's movement through space than the *Horse in Motion*'s solely perpendicular vantage could suggest.<sup>85</sup>

Muybridge found that the eidetic power of individual photographs—their incredible capacity to testify to the appearance and existence of people, places, and things—was curiously amplified by arranging them into groups.<sup>86</sup> What from one point of view seemed an inexhaustible capacity to record the world, from another vantage revealed an important limit to the medium's expressive potential. Alone, an image of a horse with each of its feet suspended in the air fell far short of the critique of perception Muybridge managed to articulate in the *Horse in Motion* study. Placing that individual image alongside others depicting the horse's legs in various and apparently sequential stages of motion however, gave Muybridge the power to manipulate a new economy of expression. Manifesting motion, Muybridge discovered, was about intentionally minding the gaps between photographs that would otherwise individuate them. The fact that the negative spaces delineating sequence also gave an impression of motion ultimately revealed the experience of continuity to be a function of perception: an artifact of the way we see the world. Even as the spaces distinguishing one photograph from the next facilitate our ability to read and

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<sup>85</sup> See figs. 2.2-2.5

<sup>86</sup> Note that this is not merely a matter of juxtaposition—the pairing or even grouping of photographs had long been recognized as effective ways to augment their representational capacities. The stereoscope for instance set two nearly identical photographs side by side to exploit the limits of human depth perception and thereby enhance the phenomenal quality of the images. Alternatively, collections of photographic material—portraits, landscapes, still-life pictures—could collectively chart or convey various subjects. See Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (NYU Press, 2015).

comprehend the motions they depict, the gaps also belie Muybridge's interpretations of the events in question. Recognizing the interpretive steps, reminds us that Muybridge's project is as material as it is visual—that the very elisions that validate and sustain its illusions rely on a syllogistic correspondence between these negative spaces and the time that supposedly elapses between takes. *Horse in Motion* and *Animal Locomotion* together reveal a horizon beyond a single photograph's ability to image a moment in time. If in Muybridge we see the subject realized through assemblage and iteration, in Marey's works we find a method of acknowledging the subject's being in time that is quite literally seamless.

Marey delved deeper than Muybridge did into the premises of indexicality and objectivity that characterized photography. Trained as a physiologist, Marey came to photography by way of his research into cardiology. Marey recognized, as Muybridge did with the galloping strides of his horses, that studying the flow of blood through the body presented problems of perception as well as observation, due to the phenomenal quality of his object of study—the pulse.<sup>87</sup> Though it could readily be felt, the pulse could not straightforwardly be seen; it could easily be determined, but only indirectly represented through abstract notation. Methods of measuring the pulse by feel lacked fidelity, frustrated as they were by the intermediate boundaries of skin and the contradictory beatings of hearts between bodies. Long before he considered visual methods of study, Marey designed devices meant to transcribe the pulse with as little input from the external world—and therefore as much fidelity to the original signal itself—as possible. He discovered that by attaching a writing instrument to a pressure plate sensitive enough to register the tremors

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<sup>87</sup> The following are sources I rely on for historical accounts and explications of Marey's work: Francois Dagognet's *Étienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (Zone Books, 1992); Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); Josh Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images: The Photography of Bertillon, Galton, and Marey* (Penn State University Press, 2012); Sam Rohdie, *Montage* (Manchester University Press, 2006).

of blood moving through veins, the heart could effectively be made to inscribe itself. What this strategy afforded in terms of exponentially increasing the amount and quality of the data collected, paled in comparison, as far as Marey was considered, to the analyst's newfound ability to step away from the data collection process entirely. As imperfect as even this device was, given its abiding material mediation of the body's natural functions, Marey saw promise in its reversal of the dynamic of observation: the phenomenon under consideration could now be studied without either interruption or input from the observer. Underlying the pursuit of precision that ultimately led Marey to consider photography as an aide to study, were values of fidelity and immediacy that would eventually characterize his interest in the idiosyncratic forms of iterative movements.

By rigging a camera's shutter to fire at regular intervals, Marey was able to simultaneously remove his own discretion from the imaging process and also expose a single piece of film to successive exposures. This method allowed Marey to record his subjects as they moved, unencumbered, for the entire duration of a given movement. The resulting photograph could thereby present a subject at several, successive moments in time, and several progressive points in space. By turning the photograph's promise of indexicality—its unique and irreproachable recognition of the subject—back on itself, Marey threw the once imperceptible complexities of movement into sharp relief. Motions like walking and flight that might ordinarily seem fluid or continuous were revealed through the abstraction of photographic form to consist already of iterative and discrete movements—before and apart from Marey's interpretive intervention. A constant gait could be rendered as the sequences by which our muscles push off of and pull on one another as we move. A bird's wings could be clearly seen and closely studied, mid-flight, to appreciate the counter-intuitive interplay of extension and contraction that eluded

natural observation. As the circulation of blood generated a pulse that could be made to speak for the heart, Marey discovered that the intermediate forms assumed by bodies in motion could describe the movements of those bodies themselves. At stake in this revelation, was the possibility of eliding the body from its own representation completely, so totally abstracting the subject's self-expression as to keep only its nodal points of articulation.

### III

The insights into motion and imaging that Marey and Muybridge made in their experiments shed light on how we conventionally think of Douglass's interest in photography as a means of self-representation. Douglass was deeply intrigued by the medium from its earliest days, and sat for dozens of formal portraits throughout his life, leaving behind an extensive visual archive. Taken as an aesthetic whole unto itself, comprised of dozens of images of Douglass, this archive exposes several fundamental ways that photography complicates the representation of subjectivity. As Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, and Zoe Trodd demonstrate in their recent volume *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, the consolidation of a legacy like Douglass's provokes important questions about the very constitution of the black subject, even as it evidences the subject in question. In *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, Bernier Stauffer, and Trodd bring together 160 "separate photographs of Douglass, as defined by *distinct poses* rather than multiple copies of the same negative," in order to discern an historical trajectory underlying the various portraits and photographs Douglass produced during his life.<sup>88</sup> Explaining that Douglass saw photography as a "great *democratic* art, capable of "echo[ing] the freedom articulated in the nation's founding document," Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd present Douglass's

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<sup>88</sup> Bernier, Celeste-Marie, John Stauffer, and Zoe Trodd. "Introduction." *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, edited by Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, and Zoe Trodd, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015, New York, pp. ix

investment in the medium as a sign of a deeper commitment to self-representation as a political project.<sup>89</sup> What intrigues me about the editors' effort to index this assemblage of photographs to Douglass's political maturation is the way that the sheer size and variability of his visual archive underwrites their claim that photography allowed Douglass to "articulate his vision... of radical democracy."<sup>90</sup> As the editors maintain, Douglass's "awareness of the possibilities of imagery to shape public opinion, coupled with his ability to control and circulate his own image," aided him in navigating "a battle between racist stereotypes and dignified self-possession."<sup>91</sup> Examining how Bernier, Stauffer, Trodd, and others have interpreted the heterogeneity of Douglass's visual archive underscores the importance of difference and discernment in studying how photography mediates subjective experience.

The aesthetic problem that emerges through Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd's discussion of Douglass's images arises from the paradoxical way that taken together, his portraits purportedly render an image of the individual more faithful than any other from the nineteenth century—even as the resulting image of his unparalleled aesthetic expression can only be made legible through the interpretive analysis that would break this archival whole down into its constituent parts. Though the effort to align Douglass's robust photographic legacy with his tremendous political career compels *Picturing Douglass's* editors to stress the totality of the record assembled in their volume, the coherence of their image of Douglass depends on how they differentiate each of his individual photographs from one another. The narrative aims of the editors become clear as their supposition that Douglass's photographs comprise a "kind of visual autobiography" leads them to teleological interpretive ends, positing his earliest portraits as depictions of Douglass

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., x-xi.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., xxviii

“exploring this new medium, searching for an appropriate pose or ‘visual voice.’”<sup>92</sup> Douglass’s “mastery of the art of the photographic subject is revealed,” the editors claim, in the coincidence of distinctions in his posture with biographical details from his life. Citing his development “as a freedom fighter, steely visionary, wise prophet, and elder statesman,” for instance, Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd note that whereas “[b]efore the war, Douglass’s fists are sometimes clenched, as though in the act of fighting,” “[a]fter Emancipation, the fist unclenches and the arms unfold.”<sup>93</sup> In another instance, whereas before the war Douglass often makes direct eye contact, staring challengingly back at the viewer,” the editors point out that “[a]fter Emancipation, he tends to use a classic statesmanlike three-quarter pose.”<sup>94</sup> “[T]he most notable visual marker of Douglass’s continual evolution,” however, and perhaps the most curious to garner the editors’ attention, “is his facial hair”—a detail that elicits the remark that Douglass’s “beard and hair gradually lengthened and whitened until his death in 1895.”<sup>95</sup> If scrupulous attention produces ample insight, this would seem to prove particularly true where photographic evidence is concerned. The suggestion that Douglass’s appearance “evolves” over time—from a more tentative or reserved stance into a more liberal and secure posture, in accordance with his transition from bonded chattel to free person—perpetuates a pervasive logic through which the incommensurate parts of Douglass’s photographic legacy are subordinated to a larger narrative whole.

Zoe Trodd’s treatment of Douglass’s portraiture demonstrates a primary consequence of reducing the phenomenon of photographic representation to the straightforward, transparent, and finite transmission of information from subject to camera or from photograph to viewer. Trodd’s

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., xxiii-xxiv

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., xxv-xxvi

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., xxvi

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

descriptions of Douglass's photographs as his "visual argument for equality" vie with her claims that his "portraits make him as unavailable as possible."<sup>96</sup> The agency that Trodd strives to locate in Douglass's portraits leads to the paradoxical claim that Douglass appears at once, "more dignified, represented, recognized and *seen*... than any of the ordinary white citizens who embraced photographic portraits as a way to express and establish middle-class identity," while also "offer[ing] the viewer no clues, symbolic objects or accessible messages to help 'read' him."

<sup>97</sup> This discrepancy, between the Douglass who Trodd maintains "experimented with angles, adjust[ed] his clothing and tried out varied gestures" "from the moment that the faster and more affordable [cartes-de-visite] process made multiple shots... feasible," and the Douglass who managed to remain "inaccessible, hidden in plain sight" even in his portraits, speaks to the complexity of what Trodd vaguely describes as Douglass's unique "ability as a photographic subject."<sup>98</sup> That Trodd understands Douglass's photographic subjectivity to be defined by the agential "ability" to at once expertly negotiate the medium's most technical aspects while also transcending those same material limitations, suggests an abiding faith in photography's promise to preserve a physical trace of agency itself.

Douglass's early embrace of the medium and his keen awareness of its potential to radically reshape our faculties of perception are often presumed to find expression in the details that make his portraits so distinctive. A closed fist, a furrowed brow, a torso turned away; the very fact of these details—and the way that they distinguish one photograph from the next while simultaneously reaffirming that the subject before our eyes is indeed Douglass himself—reifies a

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<sup>96</sup> Trodd, "The Abolitionist and the Camera: Frederick Douglass's Photographic Half-Century." *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass 1818-2018*, edited Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson, Liverpool University Press, pp. 59, 61.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 65, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 66, 63, 66.

logic of transparency that guides our attention to the ways these photographs vary, and which encourages us to recognize their differences as intentional, purposive signs of Douglass's subjective aesthetic vision. If the search for peculiarly visual manifestations of Douglass's agency often trades on the many ways that photography's indexicality complicates the meaning of "representation," then distinguishing between the sense in which Douglass "represents" himself through photographs—as an author might through writing—, and the sense in which photographs represent Douglass—irrespective of his own intentions—will help to clarify our understanding of the link between photography's evident objectivity and its capacity to represent subjectivity. To date, scholars of Douglass's visual legacy have generally overlooked this dynamic, choosing instead to regard photography as a transparent, unmediated mode of signification in their effort to underscore Douglass's own fascination with the medium's potential to commit to posterity irrefutable proof of the liberated self.

Laura Wexler makes a similar effort to substantiate the subtle process involved in parsing subjectivity in photographs by theorizing what she terms the "Revenant." As a term intended to reject the notion of immediate, self-evident, and most importantly, finite photographic meaning, the Revenant finds purchase in the way it recognizes the iterative development of photographic meaning over time and through repeated engagement. As Wexler defines it:

The *Revenant* is an effect of 'liveness' produced over time. It requires images that repeat, or return, and to which we may also return multiple times to try to comprehend the intentions of their makers and what has happened to the fulfillment of their aims. The *Revenant* belongs as much to the future as to the past, as we project persistence of the liveliness that it inserts into the historical record. And thus it is in part a political concept, the appropriation and resignification of a scientific technology to serve the ends of freedom. (33)<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Wexler, Laura. "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation." *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, edited by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 33.

The Revenant usefully privileges the idiosyncratic character of our aesthetic experience of photographs by acknowledging that photographic meaning is as much about what we bring to the archive as that which his portraits disclose to us. Wexler locates photography's political capacity "not [in] a single photographic image but [in] images in sets and strings."<sup>100</sup> The Revenant reorganizes the terms by which we recognize photographic subjectivity in two ways: first, by contending that in addition to singular, more purposive demonstrations of the individual, photographic expressions of subjectivity may also be elaborated over time, through successive iterations; and second, by identifying the viewer's own interested scrutiny as an integral part of producing the very subjectivities we look for when we turn and return to the photographic. By emphasizing the recursive and processual formation of photographic subjectivities, the Revenant demonstrates how our constitution as viewing subjects is circumscribed by the aesthetic paradigms we mean to question.

Wexler notes however, that Douglass not only perceived this problem, but actually seized on its aesthetic implications. According to Wexler, given that the "objectification of photography doubled back against his previous '*lack of a political right to be a subject,*'" Douglass found "[m]aking another thing out of the making of a thing exposed the entire reifying process."<sup>101</sup> And so we find that Wexler's heuristic reiterates the familiar intersection of photography's fidelity and a liberal subject defined entirely by ability—to manipulate media, to define itself, to commit itself to posterity. Though the Revenant's evocation of the recursion of photographic interpretation is provocative, Wexler's focus on liveliness and the recovery of the subject's intention perpetuates the notion of a vitality capable of transcending the materiality of photographs themselves.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 31.

Douglass's death disrupts this dynamic. As Fionnghuala Sweeney has eloquently argued, the seldom-discussed photograph taken of Douglass's body shortly following his death serves as an important albeit rare reminder that the relationship between photographs and the subjects they represent is, in the end, mutually constitutive. What Douglass's death portrait impresses on viewers so efficiently, Sweeney suggests, is the irreproachable proposition that "it is no longer Douglass harnessing the 'vast power' of the image, or coupling it to his cause," but "the image-making [that instead] claims sovereignty over the body in the absence of the sovereign subject himself."<sup>102</sup>

Douglass is represented quite differently here—lying in state, his face upturned, perpendicularly away from the camera—than he was in life. In death we find the uniquely tautological and self-evident truth of photographic representation laid bare. The death portrait collapses the various connotations we typically associate with a photograph's representation—its indexicality, the political metonymy of its image, its mere visual statement—by dissociating Douglass's likeness from Douglass himself. By representing Douglass and his absence simultaneously, the portrait exposes the limits of interpreting photographs exclusively through terms of liberal subjectivity and agential will.

Questions of how we look at photographs, what we expect them to disclose, and what meaning comes from our engagements with them emerge as a series of queries defined more by interpretive possibilities than prescribed transcription. Rather than regarding subjectivity as a known quantity simply transmitted from Douglass, through the camera, and onto the page, Sweeney pushes us to relocate the photographic subject's point of articulation to the relationship

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<sup>102</sup> Sweeney, Fionnghuala. "Last Objects: Death, Autobiography and the Final Imprint." *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass 1818-2018*. Eds. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson. pp. 143-166. 159.

between viewer and photograph—rather than between the camera and sitter. Insisting on the one-sidedness of our interpretive engagement with photographs, Sweeney submits that “[a]lthough the photographic image provides visual coherence to the imaginary subject, it cannot empower [its] gaze or allow the subject [read: sitter] of the image any access to the real that lies beneath.”<sup>103</sup> As Douglass’s death portrait powerfully suggests, whatever vitality we find in photographs might best be understood not to inhere in a photograph’s graphical details, but rather to arise through our own always already interested interpretive labor.

Though Sweeney and Wexler both affirm the dialectical nature of photographic meaning, the death portrait’s foreclosure of subjectivity would seem to signal an ultimate boundary to our interpretive abilities. The portrait frustrates the intuitive logics that typically render photographic subjectivity legible by bringing the presence of Douglass’s absence—e.g. the image’s distinction between Douglass’s corpse, his expired subjectivity, and his iconic profile—together with the absence of his presence—e.g. the image’s multiple senses of lack: either of Douglass’s regard to the camera, for the other, or of himself. For these reasons, the death portrait seems to stand apart from the rest of Douglass’s photographic archive, and not simply because it depicts his lifeless body. If death and its depiction do indeed throw the entire photographic enterprise into crisis however, then what is it about Douglass’s likeness in particular that throws the medium’s significatory potential into such jeopardy? Sweeney answers this not by invoking the authority of Douglass’s biography, but by engaging it dialectically, through this photograph. As Sweeney observes of the portrait:

That the dead body was once the site of slavery and that the project of picture-making as a means of, amongst other things, countering racial propaganda... was so important to Douglass in his lifetime inevitably positions these images in complicated relation to those which seek more overtly to overcome slavery’s death-bearing effects. This is because they represent a material fact of history

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 147.

rather than a radical instance of its emancipatory logic; because the image is the object of its maker and not of an artistic collaboration between maker and subject; because there is no seeing or seen subject whose scopic address marks the point of encounter with the object world and in so doing confirms its own irreducible nature. (160)<sup>104</sup>

In this passage, Sweeney displaces the sovereignty of the subject by enumerating what the death portrait does *not* depict, and instead offering an index of the various expectations that Douglass's familiar visage elicits from viewers. Together these unfulfilled expectations implicate the viewer in the dynamic production of a photographic truth premised on something other than transparent immediacy or self-evident meaning. By highlighting how the contexts we understand to precede the portrait shape its reception—e.g. “*That the dead body was once...* and *that the project of picture-making was so important to Douglass in his lifetime*”—, Sweeney levels an incisive skepticism at the liberating potential of interpretation. Recalling the photograph's formal and fundamental disjuncture, between viewing and viewed subjects, Sweeney finds that without the “possibility of dialectical counter by the lost subject who is also the subject of loss,” “the image-making process embeds a relation of absolute power antithetical to Douglass's democratic conventions.”<sup>105</sup> The pessimism of such a view notwithstanding, Sweeney's focus on the medium's more intractable material qualities usefully complicates conventional logics that have generally confined studies of blackness and photography to expressions of always-already-coherent political subjectivities. As Sweeney indicates, the death portrait demonstrates how we might regard photographs less as realizations of some fixed or final truth, and more as material instantiations of the occasion for interpretation.

#### IV

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 159

Like Muybridge and Marey, Douglass recognized in the dialectical nature of photographic representation an opportunity to make and remake oneself that came, not from the photograph's revelation of the truth, but rather from its ability to posit truth anew:

It is the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life, the ideal contrasted with the real, which makes criticism possible. 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. ("Pictures and Progress," 356-357)<sup>106</sup>

If the indexicality of photographs put their claims beyond reproach, their iterative nature—i.e., the way that the photograph's material acknowledgement of the wider world beyond its frame—placed an important check on the truths they could propose.

Douglass's iterations on witnessing Aunt Hester's sexual assault serves as an example of how discrepancies between his texts signify in meaningful ways. In the *Narrative*, the depravity of the incident impresses itself upon Douglass: "I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition," he writes, insisting, "I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing."<sup>107</sup> The repetition Douglass uses to emphasize the gravity of this scene also introduces what follows as a seminal experience in his life. "It was the blood-stained gate," Douglass infamously recalls; "the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass."<sup>108</sup> By figuring Aunt Hester's rape as the threshold beyond which his ignorance of slavery gives way to a deeper understanding of his own precarity, Douglass underscores the integral role that witnessing plays in the structural predation slavery provokes. Douglass strives to convey the existential nature of this crisis, bounded as it is on one side by imminent threats of violence, and on the other by the limited options to either withstand or

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<sup>106</sup> Douglass, Frederick. "Pictures and Progress." *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, Penguin Classics, 355.

<sup>107</sup> Douglass, *Narrative*, 18.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

merely bear witness to that violence. But as his lamentation at the opening of this scene—"I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it"— suggests, Douglass finds that the situation before him is also, crucially, an epistemological and aesthetic crisis.<sup>109</sup> "It was the first in a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant," he explains: "I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in the closet... I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen any thing like it before."<sup>110</sup> Douglass concludes the *Narrative*'s first chapter by linking sight to knowledge in an expression of his profound failure as a child to continue to bear witness, and as an adult, to find the words capable of faithfully rendering this seminal moment in his life. This inaugural violence is an acute inflection point in the *Narrative*: Douglass is led to understand his own lack of agency by observing the same in another.

The same scene appears quite differently in *My Bondage* however, in ways that point to a more complex aesthetic imperative than mere revision would suggest. Whereas in the *Narrative*, Douglass claims to have "often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine," in the 1855 narrative he is more careful to situate Aunt Hester's punishment within the wider apparatus of power and domination proper to the system of slavery.<sup>111</sup> "The reader will have noticed that, in enumerating the names of the slaves who lived with my old master, *Esther*, is mentioned," Douglass remarks, circumspectly identifying Esther as one among many held in bondage.<sup>112</sup> The spectacular violence that erupts into Douglass's life in his first narrative, is reduced by narrative schematization to a banal fact of life in his second. In *My Bondage*, Douglass prefaces his description of Aunt Hester's torture by soberly explaining

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 18, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>112</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, 175.

that “the circumstances which I am about to narrate... are not singular nor isolated in slave life, but are common in every slaveholding community in which I have lived. They are incidental to the relation of master and slave, and exist in all sections of slaveholding countries.”<sup>113</sup> The loss of words Douglass feels in the face of this abuse in the *Narrative* is replaced in *My Bondage* by an effusion of feeling: “From my heart I pitied her, and—child though I was—the outrage kindled in me a feeling far from peaceful; but I was hushed, terrified, stunned, and could do nothing, and the fate of Esther might be mine next.”<sup>114</sup> Though Douglass still manages to convey the traumatic impression left behind by this act of witnessing, the distance he registers between himself and the events at hand is striking for its narrative detachment. “The whole scene, with all its attendants, was revolting and shocking to the last degree,” Douglass writes—largely in keeping with the sense of shock expressed in the 1845 text—before adding, “and when the motives of this brutal castigation are considered, language has no power to convey a just sense of its awful criminality.”<sup>115</sup> Just what this discrepancy between texts brings into view is an important matter of interpretation, rather than a clear cut case of Douglass’s maturation as a writer, abolitionist, or theorist of the experience of slavery. In Douglass’s narratives, insofar as either of his accounts of Aunt Hester’s abuse refers to and represents the same event, we can understand them each to be iterations of that event. Iterations manifest both difference and continuity through repetition by alluding to a contiguous world in which the events they represent transpire. As an act or object of representation that we recognize as part of some larger whole by way of its similarities to *and* its differences from other iterations of that same, larger

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 177.

whole, the iteration offers us insight into the aesthetic significance of repetition that studies of revision in Douglass have not fully appreciated.<sup>116</sup>

Considering how scholars have attended to Douglass's successive accounts of his mother's visits to see him on Colonel Lloyd's plantation brings the unique value of iteration, over revision, into clearer view. In the *Narrative*, Douglass's portrayal of his mother is sparse; less about her, or their relationship, and more about how the conditions endemic to slavery preclude such a bond from ever flourishing. Due to the twelve miles between them, Douglass explains, his mother visited so rarely that he "never saw [her] more than four or five times in [his] life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night."<sup>117</sup> If the first narrative presents the mother's absence, it is important to note that Douglass's description is not devoid of meaning or expression, but rather insistent on the particular form of intimacy borne of such strain. Though he "do[es] not recollect of ever seeing [his] mother by the light of day," Douglass is careful to note that "she was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone."<sup>118</sup> The memory of Douglass's mother in the *Narrative* would seem to be defined by absence and negation. Indeed, as Douglass himself opines: "never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have

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<sup>116</sup> Robert Levine submits that "revision, rather than completion was among Douglass's highest values as an autobiographer" (3). Regarding the successive texts as "one large autobiographical project," in order to "recover what actually happened in Douglass's life," Levine betrays a common investment in the notion of an intact, unified historical referent lying beneath Douglass's separate narratives, waiting to be recovered (3-4). The inclination to smooth over the features that distinguish one narrative from the next, and thereby achieve a more whole, more true picture is appreciable, if only for how central it reveals coherence and clarity to be to so many modes of empirical study. The pursuit of clarity can easily give way to teleological imperatives however, which often attenuates theoretical inquiry, as when Levine's speculation as to the impetus behind Douglass's commitment to autobiography approaches hagiography: "More than any other of his other autobiographies," Levine finds, "*Life and Times* is haunted by Douglass's vision of impending death and driven by his desire to create the figure of 'Douglass' that he wants to bequeath to posterity." (302) Levine, Robert S. *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Douglass, *Narrative*, 16.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

probably felt at the death of a stranger.”<sup>119</sup> The palpable sense of foreclosure running through this scene in the *Narrative* makes Douglass’s descriptions of his mother in *My Bondage* all the more striking for how vividly they render her brief presence in his life.

Douglass presents memory as the site of a peculiar aesthetic tension in *My Bondage*, by prefacing his memories of his mother with a confession of ignorance that also lays claim to a privileged kind of insight. “My knowledge of my mother is very scanty, but very distinct,” Douglass explains, emphasizing at once both the paucity of his knowledge and its sufficiency.<sup>120</sup> The conviction implicit in this apparently paradoxical claim—that singular memories often leave lasting impressions—is reiterated consistently throughout Douglass’s descriptions of his mother, and in terms that explicitly evoke photographic representation. “Her personal appearance and bearing are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory,” Douglass insists at one point; and at another, that “the side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life without feeling her presence; but the image is mute, and I have no striking words of her’s treasured up.”<sup>121</sup> By returning to and lamenting her absence in *My Bondage* and *Life and Times*, Douglass effectively re-presents his mother’s presence in his life, restoring her forgotten legacy, and reinvesting her memory with new meaning.<sup>122</sup> We can recognize Douglass’s effort to recover his mother from the opacity of language and the transience of memory as a problem common to both narrative and photographic representation. Douglass returns to his mother’s memory through narrative in order to produce objective views of his subjective experience of her presence. With each iteration we see Douglass working, through the similarities and the differences between texts, to theorize black subjectivity as the product of incremental progress

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>120</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, 151.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 152, 155.

<sup>122</sup> Note the repetition of these passages in *Life and Times*.

and contingent relationality. The idea that we are formed by the ways that others and our experiences impress themselves on us is articulated most cogently in the following extended account Douglass relates of his mother's protection. In *My Bondage*, Douglass's recollection of his early days at Colonel Lloyd's plantation includes and centers on his mother's intercession between himself and Aunt Katy, an enslaved woman whose authority over the kitchen he has recently transgressed. Douglass's mother comes to his rescue just as he submits to Aunt Katy's punishment:

Just as I began to help myself to my very dry meal, in came my dear mother. And now, dear reader, a scene occurred which was altogether worth beholding, and to me it was instructive as well as interesting. The friendless and hungry boy, in his extremest need—and when he did not dare to look for succor—found himself in the strong, protecting arms of a mother; a mother who was at the moment (being endowed with high powers of manner as well as matter) more than a match for all his enemies. I shall never forget the indescribable expression of her countenance, when I told her that I had had no food since morning; and that Aunt Katy said she 'meant to starve the life out of me.' There was pity in her glance at me, and a fiery indignation at Aunt Katy at the same time; and while she took the corn from me, and gave me a large ginger cake, in its stead, she read Aunt Katy a lecture which she never forgot. My mother threatened her with complaining to old master in my behalf; for the latter, though harsh and cruel himself, at times, did not sanction the meanness, injustice, partiality, and oppressions enacted by Aunt Katy in the kitchen. That night I learned the fact, that I was not only a child, but *somebody's* child. The 'sweet cake' my mother gave me was in the shape of a heart, with a rich, dark ring glazed upon the edge of it. I was victorious, and well off for the moment; prouder, on my mother's knee, than a king upon his throne. (*MB*, author's emphasis, 154-155)

This account elaborates on what scant mention Douglass's mother receives in the *Narrative* by figuring her as returned, empowered, and triumphant in her rebuke of the dehumanizing effects that would diminish her son. Though this change certainly constitutes revision in one sense, there is another sense in which what Douglass effects here counts as re-envisioning a signal moment in his life. As a second take, a rethinking, a re-presentation, Douglass exploits the generic limits of

the slave narrative—to present the truth of the past—to make memory malleable enough for the retrieval of new insights from past experiences. In his third narrative, Douglass writes:

“The scene which followed is beyond my power to describe. The friendless and hungry boy, in his extremest need, found himself in the strong, protecting arms of his mother. I have before spoken of my mother’s dignified and impressive manner. I shall never forget the indescribable expression of her countenance when I told her that Aunt Katy had said she would starve the life out of me. There was deep and tender pity in her glance at me, and, at the same moment, a fiery indignation at Aunt Katy, and while she took the corn from me, and gave in its stead a large ginger-cake, she read Aunt Katy a lecture which was never forgotten. That night I learned as I had never learned before, that I was not only a child, but somebody’s child. I was grander upon my mothers’ knee than a kind upon his throne” (*LT*, 484)

As in the woods, Douglass’s third iteration of this point of his narrative differs in striking, subtle, and idiosyncratic ways. As well, those likenesses that the passages from either of the latter texts do share signify in ways that are too provocative to ignore. Douglass acknowledges this dynamic himself in the latter narrative by calling attention to his reiteration of his mother’s dignity and presence. The interplay of difference and likeness that arises between these texts does its own signifiatory work as readers are left to deliberate and parse the space between experience and representation: which is, at root, an aesthetic question. Juxtaposed, we can easily recognize the syntactic economy of the latter passage—its incorporation of Douglass’s mother’s gift into the recollection of her excoriation of Aunt Katy, for instance.<sup>123</sup> The details of the gift are pared away and the resulting adulation Douglass remembers takes pride of place, concluding the scene. In this sense, what we might take to be the point of this memory—a portentous trial and an early triumph—is made subordinate to a larger, more cohesive arc of Douglass’s development.

What we can also think of as falling out of the later text however, and just after Douglass remarks on its lasting memory no less, is the content of his mother’s censure. In *My Bondage*,

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<sup>123</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 484.

Douglass's recapitulation of the lecture his mother gives Aunt Katy sketches, in brief, the very dynamic of relationality and devolution of power that informs the entire structure of authority in which he finds himself. That the weight of this lesson leads directly to Douglass's realization of his own provenance cannot be understated—in either text, the knowledge that he is *somebody's* grounds Douglass's identity, impressing on him a sense of who he is by clarifying who he is in relation to. Though the ethic of this relational orientation suffuses each of Douglass's narratives, its point and manner of articulation in the second and third narratives, in these acts of reflection, rebuke, and revisionary rectitude critically resituates his origin in fundamental ways. Absence and negation are no longer the only characteristics defining Douglass's early life in his second and third narratives. Indeed, as his poetic attention to the ginger-cake—and to its *appearance*, in particular—suggests, Douglass's scanty but distinct memory of his mother persuades him from a young age that the impressions of others are to be found wherever we look in the world.

## V

The worldliness of these technologies—the way in which their efficacy corresponded directly to the physical conditions of the very world they rendered intelligible, traversable, and navigable—was what captivated Douglass and carried over to inform his thinking about photographic representation. “Morse has brought the ends of the earth together and Daguerre has made it a picture gallery,” Douglass proclaims, signaling at once the two senses in which photography is essentially of the world.<sup>124</sup> If photographic representation can be said to augment the ways we negotiate and perceive the world around us, Douglass is eager to remind his audience that the

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<sup>124</sup> Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” pp. 349. Here, in addition to his fascination with the technology of photography, Douglass belies a partiality to the singular male figure back of such innovations. What seems most important to me here is not the fact that Morse, Daguerre, and Douglass are all male, but that taken together their example reinforces a principle of technological historiography organized around paternal lineage.

photographs that effect such representation are themselves, nevertheless, also of the world.

Douglass's nod to the abundance of photographs— "[w]e have pictures, true pictures, of every object which can interest us," he remarks—highlights the second aspect of their worldliness: the way in which their colloquial mode of representation has so rapidly become synonymous with quotidian experience.<sup>125</sup> Though "[s]team has shortened the distance across the ocean," Douglass argues, "a voyage is unnecessary to look at Europe.... You have but to cross the parlor to see... all the wonders of European architecture, which by the way is about all that the traveler sees abroad that he could not see at home."<sup>126</sup> Running parallel here, are the twinned implications that photographic reproduction threatens the value of unique or original experience on the one hand, while introducing fundamentally new ways of experiencing the world on the other. Douglass perceived both promise and peril in this dynamic, but no more than any other technological innovation. "This picture-making faculty is flung out into the world like all others," he reasons, "capable of being harnessed to the car of truth and error: It is a vast power to whatever it is coupled."<sup>127</sup>

More than either promise or peril, Douglass saw sheer possibility in photography's worldliness—"sheer," because of the medium's radical objectivity, and "possibility" for the way it seemed to Douglass to transcend the foreclosure of any given political will. And while scholars have generally read this sense of transcendence in Douglass's photography lectures as a refusal of contemporary ethnographic efforts to corroborate theories of African-descended peoples' racial inferiority with the supposed objectivity of photography, such constructions tend to fall short of the more robust aesthetic theory Douglass avers in his lectures. <sup>128</sup>The racist antebellum

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 349-350.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>128</sup> Dinius, Marcy. *The Camera and the Press*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, pp. 205-206.

visual culture against which scholars typically leverage Douglass's photographic thought finds its most explicit expression in Louis Agassiz's [year] portraits of enslaved men and women in [place]. Designed to corroborate slavery's supremacist ideologies by way of photography's indexicality, Agassiz's portraits serve as poignant foils to the emancipatory aspirations of Douglass's lectures. These images' portrayals of black men and women consigned to the exploitative gaze of Agassiz and his benefactors and impressed into the consolidation of their own dehumanization would seem to implicate Agassiz's photographs and photographic representation more broadly within a larger framework of racist visibility, and indeed this is the very fissure that critics have worked to bridge by returning to Douglass's abiding faith in the emancipatory capacity of photography.<sup>129</sup> The apparent devastation of human spirit in these photographs, contrasted with Douglass's own extensive corpus of daguerreotype portraits, has led some scholars to recognize in his photographic vision a conviction that "if his audiences look[ed] at his or any other African American's image and reflect[ed] on its likeness to their own, the daguerreotype [would] show them the reality of blacks' humanity and awaken them to their own."<sup>130</sup> The advantage of this conception of photographic representation comes from the way it manages to route the medium's democratic and emancipatory potential not through the essential truth of photographic materials, but rather through the hermeneutic process brought about by engaging with photographs themselves. However slight, distinctions, and the differences they make are at the heart of Douglass's theory of pictures. "It is the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life, the ideal contrasted with the real, which makes criticism possible," Douglass insists. "Where there is no criticism there is no progress," he argues, "for the

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<sup>129</sup> See Gates's "Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black" for more on visual discourse and stereotypes. See also Gates's chapters on binary opposition and the language of the self in *Figures in Black* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>130</sup> Dinius, *The Camera and the Press*. pp. 205-206. Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd, "Introduction" pp. xvi.

want of progress is not felt where such want is not made *visible* by criticism.”<sup>131</sup> As a medium of dynamic representation, Douglass maintains, photography gives both rise and form to the very means by which the authority of its own fidelity can most effectively be challenged. This recursive character of the knowledge photography produces is both what Douglass strives to articulate in his lectures and also marks where he and others alert to photographs’ near-self-perpetuating logic diverge from conventional understandings of the medium.

We can perceive the stakes of this discussion in the fact that Douglass’s acknowledgement of photographic representation’s paradoxically unreliable objectivity (or intrinsic transience) does not dissuade him from making photographs central to his aesthetic theory. On the contrary, by reasoning that “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,” Douglass doubles down to recognize photographic truth, fugitive and infinite though it may be, as fundamentally akin to truth as such.<sup>132</sup> And, given that “[n]o one truth stands alone,” and that, “[a]ny one truth leads to the boundless realms of all truth,” Douglass finds that it is “by means of pictures [themselves, that] we may be led to the contemplation of great truths.”<sup>133</sup> For Douglass, the complexity of photographic expression lay in the undeniable purchase photographs have on the world, in the fact that however false their claims, photographs’ indexicality inevitably affirms something irrefutable about existence and the human condition. Sarah Blackwood’s insight, that a keen “75ensitive[ity] to the dynamic between the truthful and deceptive qualities of the photograph” prompted Douglass and other antebellum African American writers to seek out “a visual literacy that denied the indexical power of white visual practices while embracing the

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<sup>131</sup> My emphasis. Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” pp. 356-357.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 347.

power of the image to make injustice visible,” points toward how we might more productively incorporate the complexity of Douglass’s aesthetic theory into an analysis of his narrative oeuvre.<sup>134</sup> That Douglass’s theory of photography takes photographs to be sites of and occasions for the activity of interpretation, rather than closed texts always already inscribed with their own self-evident meaning however, complicates questions of how the medium represents subjectivity in general.

The distinction Douglass sees, between what photographs are and what we make them out to be, informs his understanding of what purchase a medium as paradoxically mimetic and indexical, veridical and interpretive, as photography might have on processes of subject formation. “Man... is a many-sided being,” Douglass opines—and the discrepant logics of photographic representation would seem to speak to that side “wherein illusions take the form of solid reality and shadows get themselves recognized as substance: the side which is better pleased with feeling than reason... with things as they seem, than things as they are, with contemplation rather than action.”<sup>135</sup> The binaristic and evocative nature of this assertion notwithstanding, Douglass’s confirmation of photography’s affective, virtual, and contingent registers resonates deeply with the ways that many scholars read black subjectivity in his work. As Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd have it, Douglass “rejected fixed social stations and rigid hierarchies [and] repudiate[d] the idea of a fixed self. He imagined the self as continually evolving, in a state of constant flux, which exploded the very foundations of both slavery and racism.”<sup>136</sup> Gates has similarly suggested that Douglass, “through image of himself after image of himself,” sought to illustrate, “that the Negro, the slave, was as variable as any human being

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<sup>134</sup> Blackwood, Sarah. “Fugitive Obscura.” *American Literature*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2009, pp. 95, 94.

<sup>135</sup> Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” pp. 351.

<sup>136</sup> Bernier, Stauffer, and Trodd, “Introduction” pp. xvi.

could be, not just in comparison to white people, but even more importantly among and *within* themselves.”<sup>137</sup> The interest that Douglass and these critics share in the connection between photographic reproduction and repetition is instructive for the way it posits a subject constituted by variability, development, and irresolution. “Even ‘the representative colored man in the United States’ *presented* a range of selves over time,” Gates points out, insisting on the centrality of such difference to Douglass’s strategy of self-presentation.<sup>138</sup> “As any biographer of Douglass knows,” Gates notes, “there was not *a* Frederick Douglass; there were many Douglasses... Not only did the black object actually, all along, embody subjectivity, but this subjectivity evolved and mutated over time.”<sup>139</sup> Given the subject’s perpetual flux, many-sidedness, and dynamism, the value of photography would seem to lie not in its capacity to capture, preserve, or define the subject, but rather in the aesthetic possibilities opened up by iteration itself.

The iterative nature of photographic expression fascinated Douglass even as it remained just beyond the limits of his lecture’s scope. Running through the prospects of either proliferating the means of photographic representation, or of countering the falsehoods of white supremacist ideology with images of positive exempla, the possibility of utterance, of saying anything at all, finds an unprecedented expression in photography. The paradox born of photographic indexicality—the truth of a photograph—and photographic discourse—the truths that a photograph cannot help but corroborate—all but escaped Douglass; indeed, his aesthetic theory revolves around this very problem, of how photographs can at once be of the world and also exceed it. Blackwood offers one of the few compelling explanations of how this problem informed Douglass’s own narrative techniques and those of other antebellum African American

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<sup>137</sup> Gates, “Frederick Douglass’s Camera Obscura,” pp. 37.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

writers: “The mimetic function of the slave narrative was, like the photograph, both foreclosing and liberating,” Blackwood maintains, arguing that these writers appreciated the fact that “it was liberating to speak the truth, to show slavery as it was, even while this truth could never really be accurately captured within the frame of any narrative or photograph.”<sup>140</sup> For Douglass, the worldliness of photographs laid bare the conceptual artificiality of frames as such, exposing them to be little more than a means of countenancing the limits of human perception and aesthetic expression.

The faculty of distinction—a corollary of the difference brought about by iteration—, facilitated by the frame, anchors Douglass’s theorization of how individuals come to understand their place in the world through images. “For man, and for man alone,” Douglass writes, “all nature is richly studded with the material of art. Not only the outside world, but the inside soul may be described as a picture gallery, a magnificent panorama in which things of time and things of eternity are silently portrayed.”<sup>141</sup> Here, the twinned capacity to see the world in pictures and to recognize pictures in the world is used to define the category of the human. The ability to discern, to distinguish, to analyze the world around oneself, in turn, Douglass suggests, sets humans apart from nature by propagating a sense of interiority in contrast to an external world. Ironically, in framing this phenomenon of individuation as both a picture gallery and a panorama, Douglass betrays his own superseding interest in stressing the harmonious aspects of his theory, over and above considerations of medium specificity. Douglass’s metaphor for the interior subject (at once a picture gallery, a panorama, and the world itself) seems to turn in on itself in the end, to become all-encompassing in its effort to realize a fuller, more complete self-apprehension. Even time is flattened out in this configuration of the self, as the recursion of

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<sup>140</sup> Blackwood, Sarah. “Fugitive Obscura,” pp. 96.

<sup>141</sup> Douglass, “Pictures and Progress” pp. 352.

representation that Douglass takes to be characteristic of subjectivity incorporates both the finitude and the infinity of the material world.

Douglass recognized in iteration, and in the repetition it implies, the potential to reflect on and revise that which might otherwise remain singularly as is. For Douglass, the inexhaustible fidelity of photographic representation meant that the value of iteration went well beyond the prospects either of collecting pictures of others or of reasserting one's own subjectivity through successive self-portraits. If Douglass's own visual archive indeed belies a conception of photographic self-representation organized around "possession and recognition as systems of accumulation," as Ginger Hill has persuasively argued, his interest in "Pictures and Progress" remains fixed on the critical discernment he thought photography cultivated in daily life.<sup>142</sup> While individuals could certainly find in photography an unprecedented way to document and declare as 'representative' whichever of their attributes they could capture visually, The novel kind of scrutiny that photography encouraged convinced Douglass that photographs bore more profound implications than their mere physical circulation let on. Douglass suggested that the ostensible social economy of photographs—in which individuals evidently gained knowledge of themselves, others, and the world around them through the production, exchange, and suppression of photographs—was itself but an expression of a deeper, ineluctable sense of the world and how it presents itself to us. "We can criticize the characters and actions of men about us because we can see them outside of ourselves, and compare them one with another," Douglass writes, averring the basic social principles characteristic of social interaction.<sup>143</sup> "But self-criticism," he continues, alluding here to the type of self-knowledge that photography allegedly

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<sup>142</sup> Hill, Ginger, "'Rightly Viewed': Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures." *Pictures and Progress*, edited by Shawn Michelle Smith and Maurice O. Wallace, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 49.

<sup>143</sup> Douglass, "Pictures and Progress," pp. 357.

produces, “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.”<sup>144</sup> The function of repetition plays a vital role here, as Douglass draws a distinction between a general regard of others and a regard peculiarly of oneself. In his effort to articulate the inextricable link between criticism and comparison on the one hand, and difference and identity on the other, Douglass lauds photographic reproduction not for its capacity to ensure the subject before others’ scrutiny, but rather for its power to provide the subject with an image of themselves of such fidelity as to provoke self-reflection. Faced with this kind of self-representation, Douglass argues, the photographic subject would find their gaze-upon-the-world turned back upon themselves, and thereby come to see themselves as they are seen in the world.

As “unalloyed creations of imagination, conscious of no contradiction, no deception,” photographs remain “solid and flinty realities of the soul” in Douglass’s imagination: “Granite and iron are not more real supports to things material than are those to the subtle architecture of the mind.”<sup>145</sup> Insisting on the complex and nuanced ways that photographs signify would seem to do little to preclude conceptions of photographic meaning like Douglass’s from making recourse to metaphors of built environments, physical structures, and material constraints. Douglass’s allusion to the architecture of the soul here however, is importantly *not* about reaffirming conventional notions of extant psychic spaces within the individual. Instead, by yoking the inscrutable configuration of the mind together with the photograph’s apparently indiscriminate mode of representation, Douglass lights upon a novel way of understanding how photographs simultaneously produce and withhold meaning. The refusal to prioritize our subjective engagement with photographs over the empirical indexicality of their material form leads

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 354.

Douglass to identify photography's revelatory power less with the ability to disclose some final, superlative truth, and more with the possibilities afforded by iteration, of trying, now and again, to say something true at all.

## Chapter Three

### As It Were

After seventy-five years, [Lewis] still had that tragic sense of loss. That yearning for blood and cultural ties. That sense of mutilation. It gave me something to feel about.<sup>146</sup>

- Zora Neale Hurston

... in photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past.<sup>147</sup>

- Roland Barthes

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?<sup>148</sup>

- Saidiya Hartman

## I

This chapter considers how history and identity disclose themselves through modes of narrative and photographic representation by investigating the function of portraiture in Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*. I argue that the profile Hurston develops over the course of *Barracoon* articulates a theory of what it means to come to terms with the past. As a recapitulation of Hurston's engagement with one of the last living survivors of the Middle Passage, *Barracoon* gathers together a diverse range of aesthetic tactics meant to recover, preserve, and represent Lewis's account of his life. Unlike the challenge of authoring or revising one's own life story, *Barracoon* foregrounds the task of committing someone else's experiences to narrative form. By dramatizing her efforts to do so, Hurston pushes at the generic

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<sup>146</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks On a Road*, (New York: Library of America, 1995), 711.

<sup>147</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 76.

<sup>148</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, 26 no. 2 (2008), 3.

boundaries that would categorize *Barracoön* exclusively as either an ethnographic project, or a slave narrative.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, the text's participation in either of these traditions raises questions of form, ethicality, and objectivity that encourage us to elaborate our interpretive approaches to aesthetic engagements with the legacy of slavery. Hurston raises many of these questions herself during her conversations with Lewis as she asks him about his past, and explains her motivations for doing so to the reader. These insights into Hurston's motivations formally complement the paratextual materials that introduce and append *Barracoön*, giving the project an impression of transparency. Indeed, it is by way of its appeals to transparency that *Barracoön* becomes legible not only as an endeavor to restore an absent chapter of history to widespread intellection, but to do so in a manner that seems accountable and straightforward as well. As they define Hurston's authorial role within the text, these avowed commitments to accountability, straightforwardness, and transparency also point to the creative pressures surrounding *Barracoön*'s production, by reminding readers of Hurston's intermediary position between Lewis and those eager to receive his story.<sup>150</sup> I pay close attention to these associations, between Hurston and Lewis, and between Hurston and her professional interlocutors, in order to illustrate how the promise of arriving at the truth of slavery's traumatic past rests on a contradictory premise of immediacy.

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<sup>149</sup> David Kadlec and Sonia Posmentier have both investigated how Hurston's participation in the Works Progress Administration challenged the presumptive objectivity of the program's collection of folk ways. See David Kadlec, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Folk," *Modernism/modernity* 7.3 (2000), and Sonia Posmentier, "Lyric Reading in the Black Ethnographic Archive," *American Literary History* 30.1 (2018).

<sup>150</sup> Hurston's interviews with Lewis were of great interest to Alain Locke as he worked to compile *The New Negro*. As well, Hurston collaborated with Hughes for some time on ways to appropriate and adapt material collected from her interviews with Lewis for a planned dramatic production. And, of course, Charlotte Osgood Mason's patronage of Hurston's ethnographic work has been of storied interest to Hurston biographers and scholars of the Harlem Renaissance for some time. For more these relationships and on *Barracoön*'s stymied path to publication, see Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), Deborah G. Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007), and Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoön: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* edited by Deborah Plant (New York: Amistad, 2018).

Immediacy proves a compelling organizing principle for projects committed to historical investigation, or to the formal recognition of forgotten or unacknowledged subjects. Particularly as it connotes clarity, primacy, and urgency, immediacy often signals the diminishment of that which distances the past from the present, the unknown from the familiar, and others from the self. If we consider how these connotations of immediacy are closely associated with equations of transparency and the truth—e.g., that which is transparent is true; truth is reached by way of clarification—we begin to see how conceptions of objectivity insinuate aesthetic forms. Hurston scholarship has generally worked within the boundaries of this expressive economy. Beneath the aegis of recovering black folkloric practices from intellectual paradigms that would subordinate them to ostensibly Western logics of white supremacy, Hurston's oeuvre is typically regarded as an exemplar of black cultural preservation. Recent critical attention to Hurston's ethnography has elaborated this dynamic however, by increasingly exploring alternative ways of evaluating the various modes of knowledge production Hurston surveys throughout her work.<sup>151</sup> As I show here, *Barracoön* marks an important limit case for scholars interested in Hurston's understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, history, and identity, due in large part to the narrative strategies she devises to present Lewis's life story. Through *Barracoön*, Hurston recognizes and challenges the transparency-truth logic of objective inquiry, thereby rethinking the self-evident value of immediacy. By focusing on how Hurston embraces mediation as an inevitable aspect of negotiating the heterogeneity of black diasporic life, we gain a better sense of how *Barracoön* reinterprets the specter of slavery.

This tension, between apparent immediacy and the mediation of appearances, makes the challenge of representing slavery's history as much a problem of interpretation as it is of

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<sup>151</sup> I discuss some of this scholarship further below, when I turn to Autumn Womack and Daphne Brooks's studies of Hurston's ethnography.

chronicling the past. *Barracoön* works at each of these levels, as Hurston simultaneously profiles Lewis, documents her own ethnographic process, and dramatizes her encounter with diasporic difference. This chapter examines how the synthesis of these narrative practices resembles the work of photographic portraiture and further elucidates the medium of photography. The eidetic nature of photographs, which grounds their evidentiary status and underwrites their truth value, also defines their rhetorical operation. If in one sense, the photograph's iterative character—its capacity to inscribe a visual field at a given point in time with irreproachable fidelity—conduces to the subject's self-articulation over time, the event of photographic portraiture also marks a limit to the medium's powers of representation. Whereas abstraction helps to name the way that photography challenges the notion of identity—by reproducing the world through difference and mediation—, and iteration avers the implication put forward by each and every photograph—that other photographs (abstractions) of the represented world must be (or have been) possible—the problem of how individual photographs make meaning remains before us. On the one hand, the analogical relation that photography maintains with the physical world has long assured us of the intuition that what photographs show, has been—and in turn, this indexicality has endowed photography with an enduring aura of historicity.<sup>152</sup> On the other hand, however, the material basis of their historical character—i.e., that photographic images are, fundamentally, recordings—lies at odds with our conviction that photographs, in and of themselves, do signify in excess of the worlds they represent. If we recognize this conundrum as an expression the dyadic way in which photographs serve, at once, as both repositories of meaning and spurs

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<sup>152</sup> The “aura” of artworks, as Walter Benjamin has famously theorized it, in brief, names the value of authenticity that art objects bear by virtue of their uniqueness. Photography's capacity to reproduce its recordings—to make images from images (i.e. photographic positives from photographic negatives)—disrupts the logic of direct correspondence undergirding artistic uniqueness and precipitates the waning of the aura of artworks. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 221.

toward further thinking, we arrive at the question of how it is that the photographic portrait manifests its subject?

A portrait of Lewis, taken by Hurston, appends the main text of *Barracoona*. One caption, printed below the original picture, reads “Kazoola—Last of the slaves run thru the blockade from Africa—Landed in Mobile Alabama, August 1859,” and a second, printed in the 2018 text below the image’s reproduction reads: “Cudjo Lewis (Oluale Kossola), in front of his home in Africatown (Plateau), Alabama, circa 1928. To have his photograph taken, Kossola dressed in his best suit and removed his shoes: ‘I want to look lak I in affica, ‘cause dat where I want to be.’”<sup>153</sup> To say little of the image’s composition itself, the photograph’s placement in the text belies the complex of aesthetic issues that Hurston broaches throughout this project. The two captions effect a tautology that essentially compounds the photograph’s own eidetic declarations: this is Cudjo Lewis; here was Cudjo Lewis. That these reiterative statements follow Hurston’s narrative exposition of her interview with Lewis, and that the larger aesthetic whole—including captions, image, and text—is itself ensconced within an explanatory apparatus comprised of introductions, forewords, prefaces, appendices, and endnotes—each celebrating *Barracoona*’s excavation from the obscurity of the archive—makes Hurston’s text an ideal heuristic for reflecting critically on mediation and photographic portraiture. The cross section of this layered presentation of Lewis’s life exposes the logic of explication that motivates *Barracoona*’s narrative and which has shaped its critical reception. This logic maintains that the truth of Lewis’s experience is brought to light progressively through the imbricated forms of mediation that comprise *Barracoona*. Though this dynamic may seem to devalue the image, by regarding Lewis’s portrait as an obscure artefact in need of narrative clarification, I argue that *Barracoona*’s

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<sup>153</sup> Hurston, *Barracoona* 113.

organizing logic of explication actually enshrines the photograph as history incarnate. Lewis's portrait at once presents and represents him, to a series of attendant audiences and discourses that would see both him and his story stand in for the traumatic lacunae of slavery's lost history. Privileging Lewis's portrait as the veridical telos of *Barracoon*'s narrative trajectory obscures the ways in which the photograph signifies in relation to—rather than in service of—the text.

Rather than reading Lewis's portrait as either a diminished corroboration of the narrative that precedes it, or as an elevated, irreducible datum of truth, I examine how Hurston leverages narrative and photography against one another as she retheorizes the subject's relation to history. Hurston's asides to the reader, in which she acknowledges the various negotiations that make her engagements with Lewis possible, challenge the presumptive authority of her text. By reminding readers that our access to the past invariably involves processes of reading and writing, Hurston identifies the immediacy and transparency that many regard as *Barracoon*'s signal contributions, as mere functions of the promise of ethnographic portraiture. Hurston builds this promise—of clarity and comprehension—into *Barracoon*'s intercalated form: as a narrative about collecting narratives of slavery, *Barracoon*'s heuristic capacity is implicated within its own production of knowledge. Hurston insists on the contingencies that surround what she learns from Lewis—e.g. the motivations behind their encounters, the meanings of terms lost in translation, the gaps in his memory, and her own prying and plying for more information. These contingencies constellate a critique of the function of portraiture itself. By eschewing the portrait's tautological mode of presentation, Hurston chooses instead to structure her profile of Lewis around the anecdotes, digressions, and parables that shape their conversations. Hurston's preference for these indirect and partial forms of communication, in lieu of self-evident facts and figures, indicates a deeper, often overlooked sensibility at the heart of her work. This sensibility underlies even the positivist

claims of *Barracoön*'s photographs, which aver the success of Hurston's efforts to render Lewis as both her object of study and as a subject of history. Taken together, *Barracoön*, its discovery, and the discovery that it depicts, suggest that our knowledge of others is fundamentally based on opacity, and that the form of communication proper to that knowledge is disclosure.

*Barracoön*'s chapters loosely correspond to Hurston's successive visits to Lewis's home in Africatown, Alabama, where she talks with him about his memories of childhood, slavery, and life after Emancipation. Offering neither precise recapitulations nor entirely poetic renditions of their discussions, Hurston's narration shifts registers throughout the text, from plainly expository exchanges between Lewis and herself, to more introspective meditations on Lewis's composure, habits, and colloquialisms. Though its chapters preserve the chronological order of their interactions—beginning with Hurston's initial probing about Lewis's past, and proceeding to a more incisive inspection of his daily life—, *Barracoön*'s chapters are irregularly numbered, and arbitrary in their topics of focus. The first chapter, for instance, which details Hurston's first conversation with Lewis, is followed by a chapter titled "The King Arrives," in which Lewis describes the customs of his homeland—a recollection that extends throughout the following three chapters, until the final four relate Lewis's experiences of "Slavery," "Marriage," and the American legal system. *Barracoön* thus fulfills a series of formal and intuitive narrative trajectories, by tracking the development of Hurston and Lewis's relationship, by tracing the arc of Lewis's experiences from childhood to his present situation, and by relating one of Hurston's earliest forays into the ethnographic practice that would find fuller expression in her later works.

Lewis' descriptions of mourning and displacement, along with his expressions of contentment and abiding faith in the Lord also challenge intuitions around narrative resolution however, making for a complexly rendered portrait of the black diasporic subject. And indeed,

this is how Lewis sees and presents himself: as an subject deeply rooted in the African diaspora. Referring to Lewis as a “singular man,” Hurston notes early on Lewis’ metaphoric description of himself as “the tree of two woods, literally, [as] two trees that have grown together. One part *ukum* (mahogany) and one part *upar* (ebony).” Hurston explains that by this Lewis “means to say, ‘Partly a free man, partly free.’ The only man on earth,” she continues, “who has in his heart the memory of his African home; the horrors of a slave raid; the barracoon; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has sixty-seven years of freedom in a foreign land behind him.” The existential tone of Hurston’s commentary here is less formally striking than the obliqueness with which she explains Lewis’s explanation of himself. Not only does this ostensible clarification interrupt an instance of Lewis’ self-representation—e.g. Hurston’s subtle note about what it is Lewis *means* to say—; in doing so, Hurston suggests that opacity is fundamental to Lewis’s story. Hurston attributes this opacity to the singularity of Lewis’ identity and to the idiosyncrasy of his lived experience, collapsing the litany of violations and losses he describes by means of semicolons and definite articles into the space of just several lines. Whereas Lewis’s own self-description suggests a coming together of twoness, Hurston perceives a chain of dislocating experiences and lingering traumas fracturing Lewis’s sense of freedom.<sup>154</sup>

As integral as difference and division may be as analytic terms in the study of the black Atlantic, I argue that *Barracoon* demonstrates the importance of interlocution and interpretation to black diasporic subjectivity. Whether we hear Du Bois’s metaphor of double-consciousness—that “one ever feels [one’s] two-ness”<sup>155</sup>—in Lewis’s description of two woods growing together; or recall Claude McKay’s allusions to the “ancient, silted channels” of races and nations when Hurston describes slavers smuggling Lewis and others up the Spanish and

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>155</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (Bedford: St. Martin’s Press, 1997): 8

Alabama rivers, past blockades and into the heart of the slaveholding south;<sup>156</sup> or see what we believe Lewis must have seen when looking out from the barracoons of Benin, in the photograph of the “Door of No Return,” which is included in the 2018 text and depicts a series of doorframes receding into darkness before opening onto the waters of the Atlantic—wherever our minds go as we read Hurston’s text, we invariably find ourselves parsing the concatenations of diaspora. And as *Barracoon* makes clear, this interpretive process relies on forms of exchange; on appraising a narrative structure built from the idiosyncrasies of an individual life; on making sense of seems a sense-less chronicle of violence, separation, exploitation, and exile. These hermeneutic concerns notwithstanding, critical attention surrounding *Barracoon*’s belated publication has tended to distinguish Hurston’s role as ethnographer from her roles as author of and interlocutor within the text. Critics’ assertions of *Barracoon*’s literary significance generally perpetuate a peculiar, if familiar, predisposition to narrative representations of slavery. In conflating and privileging truth and testimony over ambivalence and the open-ended task of interpretation, such stances obscure the re-visionary potential of Hurston’s text.

Given its nearly century long dormancy, the popular reception that *Barracoon* has received since its publication is understandable. Hurston’s work has been praised in critical and popular venues as a laudatory, visionary, and perhaps most importantly, expedient example of African American cultural preservation.<sup>157</sup> At its most abstract, this acclaim treats *Barracoon* as a transcendent allegory: “here we have the story of Cudjo Lewis to remind us of what happens when we lose sight of our humanity,” reads one review, while another commends the text’s

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<sup>156</sup> Claude McKay. *Home to Harlem* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1928): 154

<sup>157</sup> “Cudjo’s Descendants” by Nick Tabor, to *Vulture*’s 2018 profile of *Barracoon*, “The Last Slave” details the intergenerational weight of poverty that Lewis’s family has suffered. The article also draws interesting parallels between Lewis and his descendent Mr. Lumbers who, like Lewis, also works at his local church. “The Last Slave” also details Mr. Lumbers’s community’s efforts to resist the deleterious effects that large corporations have had on the residents of his town. Mr. Lumbers, like Lewis, also has six children. See Nick Tabor et al. “The Last Slave,” *Vulture*, April 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/zora-neale-hurston-barracoon-excerpt.html>

“first-hand account” for “bring[ing] into light not only the realities of slavery in the Americas, but also the complex dynamics of the Atlantic slave trade on American soil.”<sup>158</sup> For such critics, the considerable space that Hurston devotes to framing Lewis’s anecdotes with her own views and explanations—her participation and presence in the narrative—allegedly fails to “alter the book’s contribution to the scholarship of the Atlantic slave trade and African American history.”<sup>159</sup> The value of *Barracoon* in and of itself, as an expression of black life, would seem to flatten the text, reducing it to what we know it represents, what it evidences. Such didacticism makes it difficult to understand *Barracoon* as anything other than a record of Lewis’s life. Some have recognized this apparent exclusivity as a purposive feature of the text, noting that “Hurston herself is present only at the edges of the narrative,” and commending her “unerring instinct of when to push Lewis—and when to slip away and leave him to his memories.”<sup>160</sup> Though its formal features elicit scrutiny, in critics’ eyes, *Barracoon* seems to be free of the inscrutabilities that typically define narrative texts. Instead of its own internal complexity, *Barracoon* generally appeals for the ways it corroborates the histories that precede and contextualize it. As some have argued, *Barracoon*’s aesthetic potential is entirely circumscribed by its evidentiary function: “*Barracoon* bears Mason’s indelible mark,” Rebecca Panovka argues, referring to the pernicious influence Charlotte Osgood Mason had on Hurston’s early career, “It was written on [Mason’s] schedule, under her pressure, and with her money.”<sup>161</sup> The critical consensus around *Barracoon* stresses the text’s explanatory value at the expense of a thoroughgoing consideration of how the

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<sup>158</sup> Alexandra Alter, “A Work by Zora Neale Hurston Will Finally Be Published,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/books/zora-neale-hurston-new-book.html>

<sup>159</sup> Ana Lucia Araujo, “Zora Neale Hurston and a Former Slave from Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 60.2 (2019): 298.

<sup>160</sup> Parul Sehgal, “‘Barracoon’ and ‘Slave Old Man’ Approach the Trauma of Slavery With Care and Kinship,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/books/review-slave-old-man-patrick-chamoiseau-barracoon-zora-neale-hurston.html>

<sup>161</sup> Rebecca Panovka, “A Different Backstory for Zora Neale Hurston’s ‘Barracoon,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 7, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/different-backstory-for-zora-neale-hurstons-barracoon/>

narrative itself interrogates the grounds of heuristic thinking. This bias relegates Hurston's part in *Barracoön*'s production to that of an archeologist—excavating the truth of Lewis's experience that predates their encounter—rather than appreciating the extent to which her narrative recounts the production of new knowledge.

Despite this general inclination to identify *Barracoön*'s literary significance with its most superficial features, several scholars have enumerated the epistemological stakes of Hurston's project. Focusing on its "anthropological contours," Nicholas Rinehart approaches *Barracoön* as an "exploration of the social encounter fundamental to ethnographic fieldwork." Rinehart's push to consider the ways that Hurston "frames the production of anthropological knowledge as an ongoing, relational process," aligns with my view that *Barracoön* is as defined by its disciplinary aspirations as it is by its eccentricities. As Rinehart suggests, the variety of techniques Hurston uses to produce *Barracoön* range much further than critics tend to appreciate. Rinehart points to the "transcription of Lewis's expressive physical gestures... [as] gestural and embodied mode[s] of folk expression" to demonstrate how Hurston's concerns range in *Barracoön*, beyond merely recording knowledge, to question how we come to knowledge of the world around us in the first place.<sup>162</sup> Autumn Womack has also recognized this critical aspect of *Barracoön*, and highlighted the way in which Hurston's investment in the question of history transforms the narrative from a passive project of "documentation, preservation, historical accuracy, or recovery," into an active "search for an expressive practice that can communicate the afterlife of slavery." Womack goes further than most critics in determining *Barracoön*'s theoretical heft, by distilling a contradiction at the center of the text: "*Barracoön* [at once] invites us to hold and possess a piece of the past," Womack observes, and yet we "can never actually hold a past that is still ongoing, that has yet to

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<sup>162</sup> Nicholas T. Rinehart, "Zora Neale Hurston in the Making," *Public Books*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.publicbooks.org/zora-neale-hurston-in-the-making/>.

come to an end.”<sup>163</sup> This contradiction captures the limits of what *Barracoön* can accomplish as a material record—of Hurston’s labors, of Lewis’s life—and simultaneously conveys how the text articulates its critique of heuristic limits themselves. As Womack suggests, *Barracoön*’s promise to “capture a complete document of black life” has distracted many from the more enduring, and more elusive question motivating Hurston’s narrative: “How do you produce evidence of black life without reducing black folk to inanimate facts and data?”<sup>164</sup>

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We find three invitations to think about the function of interpretation in the documents that introduce *Barracoön*. In her foreword, Alice Walker describes the narrative as Hurston’s “maestrapiece” — “maestrapiece” being “that feminine perspective or part of the structure... without which,” Walker explains, “the entire edifice is a lie.”<sup>165</sup> In her introduction, Deborah Plant lauds Hurston for composing the “invaluable historical document” that *Barracoön* is, without “imposing herself in the narrative.”<sup>166</sup> And in her own introduction to the text, Hurston herself makes the intriguing claim that through *Barracoön*, Lewis has “been permitted to tell his story in his own way without the intrusion of interpretation.”<sup>167</sup> What are we to make of the push in these prefatory remarks to at once identify *Barracoön* as a restorative project of investigative revelation, while also eliding Hurston’s authorial role in the text’s production?

Through their descriptions of *Barracoön*’s provenance and significance, Walker, Plant, and Hurston illustrate an important tension between the text’s preservation of Lewis’ life story

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<sup>163</sup> Autumn Womack, “Contraband Flesh: On Zora Neale Hurston’s *Barracoön*,” May 7, 2018, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/05/07/contraband-flesh-on-zora-neale-hurstons-barracoön/>.

<sup>164</sup> Autumn Womack, “Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination: ‘The Brown Bag of Miscellany’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Practice of Overexposure,” *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (2015): 115.

<sup>165</sup> Alice Walker, “Those Who Love Us Never Leave Us Alone with Our Grief: Reading *Barracoön*: The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo,’” in *Barracoön*, ed. Deborah G. Plant (New York: Amistad, 2018), x.

<sup>166</sup> Deborah G. Plant, introduction to *Barracoön*, ed. Deborah G. Plant, (New York: Amistad, 2018), xxii.

<sup>167</sup> Hurston, *Barracoön*, 3.

and the way in which such preservation is carried out. *Barracoön* is introduced as both a made object—like a leger, of lived experiences—and as a found object—like the fossilized remains of a life gone by. As Walker’s claim that the “truth”—“what was real, what actually happened to somebody”—“mattered” to Hurston suggests, narrative’s capacity to preserve and to represent lived experience with fidelity *endures* as a virtue of African American literary scholarship.

Ultimately however, judging *Barracoön*’s identity to be closer to either a relic or a recording—or between “stone or fancy,” as Walker puts it—seems less urgent to me than asking after what sort of light the text can shed on the nature of interpretation, particularly where African American literary study is concerned.<sup>168</sup>

In her *afterword* to the text, Plant goes to lengths to impress upon readers just how hard it is to trace clear lines between the categories of accuracy, testimony, and truth that *Barracoön* invokes. Plant recapitulates the drama surrounding Hurston’s plagiarism of Emma Roche’s 1914 *Historic Sketches of the South*, and William Stewart’s discovery of the misattribution in 1972. Plant advances an earnest apologia on Hurston’s behalf, countering Robert Hemenway’s 1980 dismissal of *Barracoön* as a professional failure of Hurston’s better judgment. Plant offers more purposive alternatives to the question of why Hurston would pass someone else’s work off as her own, suggesting that the choice to rely on Roche “may have both relieved Hurston of tedium and allowed her a boon of lore for her own purposes.” Or, Plant suggests, Hurston may have been “masking an emotional response” to the trying experience of interviewing Lewis. In either case, Plant argues, “Hurston was not the seasoned social scientist” who would go on to publish her later *Mules and Men*, and *Tell My Horse*. What Hurston’s engagement with Lewis produces—e.g., a greater appreciation for black subject formation, and the capacities of narrative to convey

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<sup>168</sup> Walker, “Reading *Barracoön*,” x

the imbrications of history and identity—is in the end, for Plant, of more importance. As Plant puts it, Hurston was “engaged in the process of actualizing her vision of herself as a social scientist and [as] an artist... determined to present [Lewis’] story in as authentic a manner as possible.”<sup>169</sup>

I find Plant’s defense of Hurston striking for the way that truth, representation, and identity become interwoven with one another. Specifically, what interests me is the way that open questions of interpretation begin to narrow as Hurston’s self-actualization becomes more defined. In spite of their critiques of the austere boundaries endemic to social scientific research, Hurston’s commentators labor to smooth over *Barracoon*’s imprecise edges. Plant delineates this paradox—between regarding *Barracoon* as either the reason for or the result of Hurston’s efforts to countenance slavery’s legacy—in her exculpatory description of Hurston’s ethnographic method. Referring to the gifts that Hurston brings Lewis at the beginning of each of their visits, Plant posits that these “offerings were as much a currency to facilitate their blossoming friendship as a means to encourage [Lewis’] reminiscences.”<sup>170</sup> Though Hurston does regularly bring Lewis gifts of meat and fruit, her own interpretation of the relationship between memory and narrative testimony preclude the explicitly transactional reading that Plant puts forward. As Hurston writes in her own preface:

This is the life story of Cudjo Lewis, as told by himself. It makes no attempt to be a scientific document, but on the whole he is rather accurate. If he is a little hazy as to detail after sixty-seven years, he is certainly pardoned. The quotations from the works of travelers in Dahomey are set down, not to make this appear a thoroughly documented biography, but to emphasize his remarkable memory.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Deborah Plant, afterword to *Barracoon*, ed. Deborah G. Plant, (New York: Amistad, 2018), 123-128.

<sup>170</sup> Plant, “Introduction,” xiv.

<sup>171</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, preface to *Barracoon*, ed. Deborah G. Plant, (New York: Amistad, 2018), 3.

Here, Hurston unequivocally “pardons” Lewis for the gaps in the recollection of the very stories she has been sent to retrieve. Indeed, in coming to collect his story, Hurston excuses Lewis—and herself as well—from the ideals of either perfect recall or exhaustive fidelity. “The thought [behind] this act,” Hurston explains, referring to the avid interest that her wealthy white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason took in Lewis and his story, “was to set down essential truth rather than fact of detail,” which, she cautions, can “so often [be] misleading.”<sup>172</sup> This hard distinction, between essential truth and factual detail, is itself misleading however, as both Plant and Hurston thoroughly scaffold Lewis’s story, throughout *Barracoon*, with extensive historical context at points when his account of events in Africa coincide with information from the historical archive.

## II

I focus so exclusively on Plant’s preoccupation with Hurston’s treatment of history and memory in order to demonstrate some of the ways in which such defensive postures limit our understanding of texts like *Barracoon*. If we return to Hurston’s introduction and look more closely at the way she positions herself as both the author of the text and as Lewis’ interlocutor in the narrative, the function of interpretation in the text becomes clearer. Hurston begins *Barracoon* by summarily casting existing scholarship on the Atlantic slave trade to one side, explaining that in spite of the “great literature grown up about it,” including “innumerable books and papers,” the historical account of slavery remains a diminished archive, comprised as it is of “All these words from the seller, but not one... from the sold.”<sup>173</sup> However early Hurston is in her career, the decision to relegate to one side the studied, academic archive of slavery is a powerful interpretive gesture. Hurston at once defines an epistemological limit, bounding this

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 6

scholarship as “these things already known to me”—and at the same time also recognizes Lewis as a uniquely existential source of knowledge. Indeed, *Barracoön*’s central insight may be the way that it records neither Hurston’s self-realization as a scholar, nor Lewis’ self-expression alone—but the mutual development of these processes, through conversation.

I am inclined to regard *Barracoön* as an example of interlocution, rather than stress its dialogic structure, because of how thoroughly the text concerns itself with conversation. Hurston and Lewis’ exchange is decidedly imprecise. The questions Hurston lists in her introduction for instance, seem crude and evocative—rather than deductive or clarifying: “How does one sleep with such memories beneath the pillow? How does a pagan live with a Christian God? How has the Nigerian ‘heathen’ borne up under the process of civilization?” To be sure, these questions drive to the heart of the existential dimension of Lewis’ story. However, as Hurston suggests, the exemplary form of such insight is the processual back and forth of conversation. As coarse as these questions are, illogical in their premises and uncertain in their aims, the last line of Hurston’s introduction, “I was sent to ask,” is telling.<sup>174</sup> To ask, to tell, to share, to converse, about that which we do not—and indeed cannot—know, *about* that which we cannot know—because we did not experience it, or were not there, or have not cared to inquire—are central and animating aims of this text. And yet, alongside this ethical imperative, we can also appreciate Hurston’s aesthetic commitment to reproducing the opaque nature of conversation. Perhaps what “interlocution” conveys, more than “dialogue,” is the event of interlocutors speaking to, with, or even past one another—in excess of either regular or precise call and response, give and take, or thesis and antithesis.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 16

In declaring her intention to find Lewis and to hear what he has to say, Hurston enters *Barracoon*'s frame as a subject, even as her author-interlocutor role remains ill-defined at the text's edges. Rather than serving as either a transparent, objective, or even disinterested recorder of the history of slavery however, Hurston organizes *Barracoon* around examples of her explicit interest in motivating Lewis to share a story with her that is both robust and well-textured. The beginning of their time together is telling in this respect, as Lewis rebuffs Hurston's initial, probing questions with elaborate provocations of his own. After Hurston prompts Lewis to tell her his life story, for instance, Lewis starts at the beginning, which for him means situating himself within a lineage of his forefathers. Taken unawares, Hurston relates to the reader that "[she] was afraid that [Lewis] might go off on a tangent," so she redirects him: "But... I want to hear about *you* and how *you* lived in Africa," she insists. Where the story of slavery properly begins, it would seem, is less than self-evident. Throughout the narrative, Hurston openly guides the conversation where she *wants* it to go; and while this interested tactic compromises any appeal one might make to *Barracoon*'s *impartiality* as an ethnographic project, such purposeful direction is essential to a black aesthetic inquiry insofar as it reinforces Hurston's critical stance towards objectivity. Lewis's response to Hurston's directives underscores this point: "He gave me a look full of scornful pity and asked, 'Where is de house where de mouse is de leader? In de Affica soil I cain tellee you 'bout de son before I tellee you 'bout de father.'" This rejoinder reframes Hurston and Lewis's conversation in two ways. First, as a point of clarification, Lewis's allegorical mouse indexes his heritage for Hurston, asserting his priority of making himself legible to her by locating himself within a line of his fathers and forefathers. And second, if we read Lewis's response as a way of taking Hurston down a peg, by equating her interruption with the mouse's impropriety, we can appreciate how Lewis reestablishes a sense of equity in

their discussion—if he is to tell his story, Lewis determines that he will begin when and how he sees fit.<sup>175</sup>

*Barracoons* is filled with such moments, in which either Hurston or Lewis' meaning eludes the other. From the arbitrariness of Hurston's gifts, to Lewis' mercurial moods from day to day, the indeterminacy surrounding their conversations complicate their exchanges—rather than overdetermining them as either merely coercive or necessarily useful encounters. And yet, as Hurston's narration—over and also in conversation with Lewis' story—demonstrates, interpretation is an inherently uneven and irregular task. In stark contrast to the formal openings of each chapter—Hurston's arrivals, her gifts, and her patience—*Barracoons*'s chapters often end abruptly, short of tidy conclusions, as in the fifth chapter, after Lewis has finished recounting his violent capture and forced march to the barracoons of Dahomey. As Lewis falls silent, Hurston remarks:

Kossula was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask. He had forgotten that I was there. He was thinking aloud and gazing into the dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate.<sup>176</sup>

This passage is striking, both for the one-sidedness of Hurston's studious presence—a sign of the distance that yet separates her and Lewis—and also for the intrusion of Hurston's interpretive gloss. Her constative exposition here tells us what Lewis, rendered “inarticulate,” does not. Hurston's interpretive imposition makes this scene intelligible by reading it, unapologetically; and her description stresses her being *with* Lewis precisely at the moment when their discussion fails. Hurston's method of interpretation proceeds in spite of—and indeed, in this moment, because of—a breakdown in their conversation.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 20-21

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 49

As an account of searching for the truth of the past through conversation, *Barracoön* is in many ways a meditation on the nature of introspection—a surprising aspect of a text concerned as this one is with dialogue across and in spite of difference. In a register similar to the one that Daphne Brooks makes reader-listeners aware of in Hurston’s sonic archives, *Barracoön* depicts a querying conversation through a narrative of inquiry. Whereas Brooks reminds us that listening to Hurston chronicle folk songs for WPA researchers makes us “privy to a listening to a listening,” I propose that *Barracoön* invites us to interpret an interpretation of an interpretation.<sup>177</sup>

How might we more fully incorporate these dynamics of Hurston and Lewis’s conversations into our reception of *Barracoön*? While I disagree with Plant’s characterization of Hurston’s relationship with Lewis as a “sacred” one, characterized primarily by a process of “unburdening,” in which Hurston “assumes the office of a priest,” I do like her description of Hurston’s “still listening.”<sup>178</sup> Better still, I’m inclined to return to and reconsider Walker’s opening suggestion that Hurston “sits with... Lewis” because the truth “mattered” to her. In this last passage, Hurston does indeed remind us of how closely interpretation, embodiment, and narrative sit together, as she sits with Lewis’s story, and his silence.<sup>179</sup>

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This concatenated, recursive kind of inquiry has surrounded Hurston and her work for decades, as Alice Walker has demonstrated through her own narrative investigations of Hurston’s life and legacy. In “Looking for Zora,” Walker’s recollection of her search for Hurston’s unmarked and forgotten gravesite in Eatonville, Florida, the notion of objective truth

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<sup>177</sup> Daphne Brooks, ““Sister, Can You Line It Out?”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 55, No. 4 (2010): 623.

<sup>178</sup> Plant, “Introduction,” xxiv-xxv.

<sup>179</sup> Walker, “Reading *Barracoön*,” x.

is set against the individual's idiosyncratic pursuit of knowledge. After learning where Hurston was most likely laid to rest, Walker must rely on a map, hastily drawn by an employee of the mortuary responsible for Hurston's burial. Walker's use of the map, and her discovery of Hurston's grave warrants quoting in full:

I expected, from Mrs. Patterson's small drawing, to find a small circle—which would have placed Zora's grave five or ten paces from the road. But the "circle" is over an acre large and looks more like an abandoned field. Tall weeds choke the dirt road and scrape against the sides of the car.... We move slowly, very slowly, our eyes alert, our legs trembly. It is hard to tell where the center of the circle is since the circle is not really round, but more like half of something round.... I look toward the road and notice that there are, indeed, *two* large curving stones, making an entrance and exit to the cemetery. I take my bearings from them and try to navigate to exact center. But the center of anything can be very large, and a grave is not a pinpoint.<sup>180</sup>

In both method and form, Walker's account of searching for Hurston's resting place illustrates a black aesthetic of knowledge production that deftly moves between abstractions of media and the varied intuitions of embodied perception. In both Walker and Hurston, sustained attention and narrative representation work in tandem to evince a refined sense of how a black aesthetic reorients the individual's relationship with the past. As Hurston comes to realize while talking to Lewis, the elaboration of historical narrative is at once a profoundly ethical pursuit—involving a dialectical exchange beyond the self—and also an inherently interpretive task—premised on the ways we variously mediate our encounters with the world.<sup>181</sup>

Just seven years after Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," and four years after "Looking for Zora," Roland Barthes, looking to define the nature of photographic meaning, turns to a photograph of his own late mother, in *her* winter garden. This "Winter Garden"

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<sup>180</sup> Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 104-105.

<sup>181</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 402-409.

photograph signals both a discovery and a revelation for Barthes by confirming for him what he understands as the elusive promise of photography's transcendent truth. Though he does not reproduce the image in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the "Winter Garden" photograph with great care, moving from its material attributes to his own phenomenal realization of its meaning. "The photograph was very old," Barthes writes: "The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print was faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory.... My mother was five at the time... her brother seven." For Barthes, these physical and factual details serve to situate the "Winter Garden" photograph as one among many, and to thereby underscore the significance of the emergence of its uniqueness. "[L]ooking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved," Barthes explains, "I found it." "I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother." By staying with this image of his mother, in and amongst other photographs of her, by studying it, Barthes accomplishes an ambivalent kind of return: he is at once taken back to the moment in which his mother pauses to pose for this photograph, while at the same time, in his moment, the photograph re-presents Barthes's mother to him, as she was, as a child.<sup>182</sup>

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Barthes theorizes the intersection between photographic truth and the limits of language most extensively in *Camera Lucida*, through his descriptions of the studium and the punctum. To rehearse these terms briefly: the studium is Barthes's term for that interest that arises from our mere appreciation of the aesthetic attributes of photographs (i.e., the geometry of their forms, and the values of their tones), and their relation to one another. Barthes is quite straightforward when

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<sup>182</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 67.

it comes the studium. He recognizes it by the studium's "very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste."<sup>183</sup> "It is by studium," Barthes argues, "that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is *culturally*... that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions."<sup>184</sup> By contrast, the punctum proves more difficult for Barthes to define. Barthes initially refers to the punctum and its function obliquely, noting simply that the *punctum* "disturb[s] the *studium*... for *punctum* is also [Latin for] sting, speck, cut, little hole."<sup>185</sup> If the *studium* is represented vaguely as "a kind of general, enthusiastic *commitment*," Barthes is careful to underscore the *punctum* as "that *accident* which pricks me (but also *bruises* me, is poignant[, to me])."<sup>186</sup>

As dissatisfied critics have argued, Barthes's theorization presents a logical "short-circuit" between the studium and punctum, such that photography comes to signify the "transport of the unique sensible quality of the thing or the being photographed to the viewing subject."<sup>187</sup> Given his apparent alignment of the studium with the general appreciation there is to take in a given image, and the punctum with that intrigue that compels us as individuals to stay with an image, it is little surprise that Barthes's recalcitrant account elicits such frustration. The "short-circuit" that Rancière locates in Barthes comprises a problem of fitting together the studium and the punctum. Rancière finds that the punctum, as that which ought to burst in on, arrest, and sharpen our broader aesthetic appreciation, actually "pertains to the same logic as that of the studium," insofar as Barthes's familiarity with the image-examples he uses to make his case fail

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 26, 27, my emphasis.

<sup>187</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2011), 112, 110.

to clearly distinguishing the studium's obliqueness from the punctum's acuteness. Accordingly, Rancière disbelieves Barthes's professed ignorance of "any knowledge, any culture" with regard to Lewis Hine's 1924 "Idiot Children in an Institution" and Alexander Gardner's "Portrait of Lewis Payne." For Rancière, neither of these cases prove Barthes's experience of the punctum's disruption.<sup>188</sup> Rather, Rancière avers, back of what Barthes construes as his disinterested fixation on arbitrary details, is a collapse of an "historical knowledge of the subject represented and the material texture of the photograph."<sup>189</sup> In other words, Rancière accuses Barthes of knowing more than he lets on. The details Barthes attributes to the prick of the punctum would so prick anyone, Rancière argues, because they are objectively captivating details that tie the photographs to their unique historical contexts. Over and against Barthes's suggestion that the punctum disrupts the studium's cultural knowledge, Rancière implores us to understand photographic truth "as [a] tangle between several forms of indeterminacy.... as an effect of the circulation, between the subject, the photographer and us, of the intentional and the unintentional, the known and the unknown, the expressed and the unexpressed, the present and the past."<sup>190</sup>

Scholars interested in the implications that Barthes's theory of photography holds for the study of race have highlighted a strain of racialism underwriting the studium and the punctum. As these critics have shown, Barthes's descriptions of how the punctum disrupts the studium is consistently, if quietly, connected to photographs of black figures. Fred Moten has offered the following incisive counter to Barthes's avowed investment in practicing complete candor when selecting and discussing the photographs he finds most moving: "Blackness is the embodiment of a naïveté that would move Barthes... back before culture to some pure and unalloyed

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

looking,” Moten argues, “[thereby] figuring a simplicity structured by regression, return, and reduction refigured as refinement.”<sup>191</sup> Specifically, Moten is referring here to Barthes’s infamous reference to James Van Der Zee’s “Family Portrait” (1926), which Barthes’s cites as an example of the prick of the punctum. Barthes presents his inexplicable fixation on the woman’s necklace and the more diffuse theme of respectability as a prime example of the studium giving way to the punctum.<sup>192</sup> As Shawn Michelle Smith has indicated however, Barthes’s recollection of Van Der Zee’s portrait is marred by the racialized indifference that the punctum seems likely to perpetuate. Barthes refers to the woman’s necklace as the photograph’s *true* punctum, for instance, insisting that it is “this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) [that he] had seen worn by someone in [his] own family,”<sup>193</sup> when in fact, as Smith notes, the necklaces worn by the women in Van Der Zee’s portrait are actually made of pearls.<sup>194</sup>

That photographs of black subjects should occasion such an ironic myopia in Barthes’s study—that his interest in his own gravitation to certain photographs instead of others *itself* gives way to a culturally biased disregard for the details of the photographs before him—leads Smith to warn us of the punctum’s repressive modality. Left alone, Smith argues, the studium and the punctum preclude any “chance for the represented to stand and meet the gaze of others, and [any] opportunity for another viewer to be authorized.”<sup>195</sup> And just such an injunction would seem to inform Barthes’s discussion of a portrait by Richard Avedon of William Casby, a man born into slavery. “Photography cannot signify... except by assuming a mask,” Barthes claims, referring to Casby’s portrait. “[Here] the essence of slavery is... laid bare: the mask *is* the

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<sup>191</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 203.

<sup>192</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 43, 53.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>194</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 26.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

meaning,” Barthes claims.”<sup>196</sup> As his metaphor of the mask (as self-evident meaning) suggests, Barthes fails to recognize any dynamism in Avedon’s photograph, falling short of what Miriam Thaggert has described as Barthes’s typical insistence on maintaining “a careful balance of obviousness and obtuseness, fact and supposition: what led to this photograph being taken [here], at [this] moment, on [this] day, by this person[?]”<sup>197</sup> As Moten, Smith, and others demonstrate, the possibility of routing racial justice through Barthes’s theory falters on how little his description of the interpretive process promises in the way of emancipatory redress. Thus, the specter of disenfranchisement would seem to haunt *Camera Lucida*’s allusions to blackness.

Holding out hope for a redemptive aspect of photographic truth however, Smith argues that “while the photograph may not be able, without textual interpretation, to tell us much more about the subject it makes visible,” to reliably convey the circumstances surrounding its production, “it undeniably testifies[:] that-has-been.”<sup>198</sup> Indeed, Smith finds that the problem lies with the way that Barthes “collapses William Casby under the sign of the slave, seeing in this portrait not a man who must have lived most of his life as an autonomous subject, but instead ‘the essence of slavery laid bare.’”<sup>199</sup> By pushing us to imagine an emancipatory dimension of the photograph’s evidentiary materiality, Smith proposes an ethical corrective to Barthes’s approach. “Entering into a photograph, one might embrace its subject,” Smith imagines: “allowing oneself to be touched, without demanding reference or representation. One might identify without subsuming or consuming the other.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 34, my emphasis.

<sup>197</sup> Miriam Thaggert, *Images of Black Modernism: Visual and Verbal Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 147.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, 29.

<sup>199</sup> Smith, 28.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 37.

I would argue that these critics' indictments of *Camera Lucida* underestimate the extent to which Barthes's hermeneutic agnosticism helps to discern a black aesthetic practice of thinking history through photography. If we return to Barthes's initial description of the impetus motivating his search for photographic truth, we find a selfish but self-aware commitment to the photographs that he takes up. "What [they produce] in me," Barthes claims, is "something... like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too[:] the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken."<sup>201</sup> The photograph's eidetic capacity to attest to a past state of affairs does not convince Barthes of anything so certain as a sense of justice—even in the case of the Winter Garden photograph. Rather, his assertion that "there is a superimposition... of reality and of the past," aligns photographic meaning much more with confusion and indeterminacy than with clarity or resolution.<sup>202</sup> "The effect... is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, [or] by distance)," he writes, "but to attest that what I see has indeed existed."<sup>203</sup> Thus, the unspeaking voice that Barthes imagines when he looks at the photograph is not the photographic *subject's*, but his own—provoked, somehow, by the enigma of the image.

Barthes's acknowledgement of a restorative power at work in the photographic encounter is where the alignment between *Camera Lucida* and black critical theory focused on narrative, history, and the archive becomes most evident. For Barthes, the subject of return in photography does not involve the return of the photographed subject, but instead refers to the recursive way in which his own thought process returns, again and again, to certain subjects when contemplating photography. Barthes's attention to the tension between his own, affective reaction to

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<sup>201</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 18-19.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 82.

photographs and their indexical, material relationship to the world brings him back to William Casby's portrait later on in *Camera Lucida*, and therefore returns him to the case of Blackness:

The man I see here *has been* a slave: he certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us; and he certifies this not by historical testimony but by a new, somehow experiential order of proof.... 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*.<sup>204</sup>

In light of the photographic trace of slavery, history evaporates. Here, Barthes elaborates on what it means for the photograph's visual claim to lay bare the order of a past world. The experiential order of proof that eschews historical testimony in this passage does not refer to William Casby's actual lived experience—which remains an abstraction; a mask, to Barthes—but to Barthes's own ability *as a viewer* to scrutinize the truth claims of the photograph. As a child, Barthes understands this image “without method” insofar as the photograph authorizes and corroborates its own representation—and it is the *subtlety* of this *fait accompli* that leads Barthes to speak of photographs “certifying” the prior existence of their subjects; instead of resurrecting them from the past. As certificates, photographs attest to the unidirectional passage of time, and eidetically indicate to the viewer that insofar as the visual record can be regarded as true and complete, its claims remain impregnable. Should the notion of exhaustive truth itself fall victim to the “misfortune of language not to be able to authenticate itself,” as Barthes's agnosticism toward the photograph-as-certificate suggests it might, then the question of method and mediation comes back to life.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 80, author's emphasis.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 85.

### III

Towards the end of the titular chapter of *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman makes a compelling claim for recognizing the proximity that links our present moment and the afterlife of slavery:

The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs—an unfinished struggle.<sup>206</sup>

What connects the past and the present in Hartman's view are the terms of a covenant that can only be upheld by revisiting, reconceptualizing, and recasting the premises upon which social interactions are conducted. By articulating the conditions of this ligature in terms of property and debt, Hartman invokes at once the banal travesty of humans treated as disposable cargo, and also the ethical imperative to obligate ourselves towards one another. The finitude that concepts like property and debt connote are contrasted with abolition's asymptotic promise, which, Hartman argues, stands for societal rejuvenation as such. If society is renewed only insofar as we move toward fully realizing abolition, then the irresolution that Hartman identifies in the above passage names a fundamental part of what it means to relate to others in the world. As a debt that can never be repaid, and an inheritance that can never be renounced, the struggle of relation that Hartman theorizes here is particularly useful for my consideration of photography as a mode of engaging with the past. What Hartman describes as the intimacy of this struggle, importantly, is integrally linked to its inevitability and its anteriority. Similarly to how Barthes marvels at the way that photographs inevitably speak of a world that precedes his own act of spectatorship, Hartman focuses on the coincidences between past and present that keep either moment closely

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<sup>206</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 170.

bound to one another. As a function of that catastrophe whose genesis precedes us, the telos of which will never end, intimacy also names the way we are implicated in and by one another in the world. To articulate my point along with Hartman's simply: to be in this world is to be caught in the process of continually remaking the world into which you entered.

Whereas in *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman set out in search of a young girl lost amid the crevices of the archive, in "Venus in Two Acts," she elaborates her theory of return and recovery in several important ways. At root, Hartman's reconsideration of her earlier methodology involves a revaluation of whether it is possible to redress past atrocities by making recourse to the archive. The desire that animates projects of recovery or restitution compounds the problem of the archive's inevitable insufficiency by routing the analyst's pursuit of truth through a site of abstraction premised on the devitalization of lived expressions. Hartman begins "Venus" by acknowledging her own susceptibility to this alluring aspect of the archive: as "an untimely story told by a failed witness," "Venus," in Hartman's view, errs in its perpetuation of the "wild idea that our efforts can return [Venus] to the world."<sup>207</sup> Hartman names the desire to revivify Venus a "romance that exceeds the fictions of history," and distinguishes history as that narrative which "pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror." Her disregard for this difference between the partial and the impartial, "compromise[s] Hartman's] strategy for disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements... which," she recognizes, "enabled [her] to augment and intensify its fictions."<sup>208</sup> On the one hand, Hartman's rethinking of her previous stance involves a straightforward refusal of the archive's apparent transparency. As Hartman argues, "the irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot

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<sup>207</sup> Hartman, "Venus," 2, 14

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 9

know and that will never be recovered.”<sup>209</sup> On the other hand however, Hartman charts a new path beyond the limits and aporia that seem simultaneously to define and compromise the archive’s sovereign authority.

The various forms of exchange that structure Hurston’s visits with Lewis converge in the penultimate chapter of *Barracoon* when Lewis poses for a photograph. At the end of this chapter, Lewis has just finished describing to Hurston how each of his children perished, leaving him and his wife Seely alone in their home. “We so lonesome, but we know we cain gittee back de dead,” Lewis opines, noting that “When de spit goes from de mouf, it doan come back. When de earth eats, it doan give back. So we try to keep one ‘nother comp’ny and be happy.”<sup>210</sup> Lewis’s lament attests to the existential condition of living as a sovereign subject in the world. His insight calls to mind Walker’s insistence on genealogical study, and Barthes’s preoccupation with the photograph’s present perfect mode of expression, and Hartman’s critique of the archive’s irretrievable truth. The inexorable march of time prompts Lewis to engage others, particularly through story-telling, given its capacity to elucidate the world and one’s position in it. This concern with keeping company, and with aesthetic representation, marks Lewis as a quintessentially modern individual—at once bitterly aware of his individuating solitude and also deeply respectful of the power of community to situate the individual within a greater network of relation.

Lewis is well aware of what photographic reproduction introduces to this dynamic. As he explains his interest in his own photograph to Hurston, “‘I’m glad you take my picture. I want see how I look. Once long time ago somebody come take my picture but they never give me one. You give me one.’” Desire, redress, and representation all animate Lewis’s reasoning. Along

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>210</sup> Hurston, *Barracoon*, 88.

with his wish to look upon himself, to hold on to a sense of himself after Hurston leaves, Lewis is also keenly aware of the implications that photography bears for the self-reflective subject. Though a photograph of himself would allow Lewis to see how others see him, I would argue that he is also alert to the malleability of photographic truth. Hurston alludes to Lewis's radical vision of photographic representation when he comes prepared to take his picture having "put on his best suit[,] but removed his shoes." "I want to look lak I in Affica, 'cause dat where I want to be," Lewis explains. As Hurston registers the juxtaposition of Lewis's discrepant sartorial choices, Lewis gives Hurston as lucid an articulation as any of what it means to identify oneself as a diasporic subject. Rather than reading this embodied performance of difference as an expression of dislocation, I would argue that Lewis's decision to photographically represent himself, as he wishes to be seen by others, demonstrates a canny and sophisticated aesthetic sensibility. Lewis does not profess a desire to recover or to preserve some objective truth in this moment, but instead strives to project a desired sense of himself through the medium, for his own future speculation. For her own part, Hurston closes the text's penultimate chapter by noting that Lewis "asked to be photographed in the cemetery among the graves of his family." Hurston's remark thus literally situates Lewis, at the moment of his photographic self-representation, in the company of those who have passed on before him.<sup>211</sup>

*Barracoön* concludes unceremoniously with Hurston's acknowledgement of the limits of what she has left to learn from Lewis. Hurston identifies this limit in two ways. First, by stressing the expiration of her tenure as Lewis's formal, anthropological interlocutor, Hurston summarizes in express terms the conditions of their engagement. Second however, Hurston also suggests that whatever truths lie beyond the limits of conversation may only be speculated about,

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 93.

either for want of the right question, or for the mercurial consent of the subject *in* question: “I had spent two months with [Lewis]... trying to find the answers to my questions,” she concedes. “Sometimes we just ate. Sometimes we just talked. At other times neither was possible, [and] he just chased me away.... He couldn’t be bothered.... But on the whole, he was glad to see me, and we became warm friends.”<sup>212</sup> At times, Hurston writes, it seemed the “present was too *urgent* to let the past *intrude*.” At others, she reports that Lewis “is full of trembling awe before the altar of the past.” To the extent that these two observations intimate different orientations toward history, they do belie a common investment in conceiving of the past and the present as distinct temporal frames. Whereas the first suggests that Lewis sometimes refuses to countenance the past, the latter posits that Lewis is rendered inoperative by the thought of history.<sup>213</sup> I view Hurston’s shifting on this issue less as an equivocation, and more as an expression of the more profound ethical value of interlocution itself, and as a black aesthetic strategy of accommodating the various ways we mediate our encounters with the world.

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 94.

## Coda

A great writer operates as an unimpeachable witness to one's own experience; and one of the reasons that great writers are so rare... is that almost no one wishes to have his experience corroborated. I suppose that one of the reasons for this is that one's actual experience cannot but assault one's self-image, one's aspirations and one's safety. <sup>214</sup>

— James Baldwin

"For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have." <sup>215</sup>

— James Baldwin

"I suspect, though I certainly cannot prove it, that every life moves full circle—toward revelation: You begin to see, and even rejoice to see, what you always saw." <sup>216</sup>

— James Baldwin

In his introduction to the third volume of *The Black Photographers Annual*, a portfolio published in 1976 by the New York-based Kamoinge Group, James Baldwin weaves through an assemblage of more than forty photographers' contributions as he considers what the collection offers to readers. Baldwin's survey of the portfolio introduces the photographs through a double act of acknowledgement and absolution: though he references the photographers and their work with specificity and close attention, Baldwin moves from one example to the next inconsistently, discussing the formal compositions of some images and focusing on certain, foregrounded tropes in others. Baldwin's peripatetic pivoting from one image to the next, and his itinerant traversal of

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<sup>214</sup> James Baldwin, "This Nettle, Danger..." in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 687.

<sup>215</sup> James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal" in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 706.

<sup>216</sup> James Baldwin, "Every Good-bye Ain't Gone" in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 778.

their formal, thematic, and tropological features make it difficult to understand what, if anything, besides Baldwin's own capricious interest, ties the Kamoinge photographs together. The closest Baldwin comes to articulating a rationale, either for the portfolio's organization or for his own involvement in its production, is a mention of his "writing this at the very beginning of the Bi-Centennial Year."<sup>217</sup> Baldwin points to this historical coincidence less to emphasize the timeliness of his writing than to make a point about historical coincidences themselves, and photography's capacity to illuminate their significance. "I have no real interest in America's birthday," Baldwin intones, explaining that "Americans have, themselves, made the date irrelevant precisely by their avoidance of the testimonies here recorded, and by their inability to face the truth concerning themselves and that history which has made, and makes, the lives of all black and non-white people so dangerous and so hard."<sup>218</sup> In Baldwin's view, *The Black Photographers Annual* ferries the freight of history along in its photographs, past Americans unable to take stock of the world as it passes before them.

Baldwin invokes many of photography's most familiar characteristics as he admonishes Americans their enfeebled sense of history. The medium's alignment with history and truth—its indexical, veridical properties—informs Baldwin's understanding of photography as an mode of expression in general, and as a means of testimony in particular. For Baldwin, "testimony" works to ground the *Annual*'s miscellany. "This book is a testimony," Baldwin writes at the opening of his introduction; "I am tempted to call it a testimony service—and, like all truthful witnessing, it is beautiful and frightening, devastating and ennobling."<sup>219</sup> If, in one sense, this description likens the *Annual*'s composite form to a congregation, and the volume's many authors to a

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<sup>217</sup> James Baldwin, introduction to *The Black Photographers Annual* vol. 3 (New York: Black Photographers Annual Inc., 1976), 7.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

multitude of worshippers testifying to their shared faith, a second sense of Baldwin's metaphor recognizes the experience of engaging the *Annual's* photographs as integral to the book's expressive function as well. By folding the Kamoinge photographs' affective charge into his articulation of the truths that they disseminate, Baldwin incorporates the images into an aesthetic theory that understands photography as a means of mediating the truth of the world around us—and not as truth itself. As Baldwin demonstrates through his meandering introduction, by alluding to, digressing from, and dwelling on various images and the connotations they evoke, our capacity to recognize the world through photographic abstractions holds the medium's eidetic power in check. Photographs may indeed represent the world by recording its physical features with utter fidelity; but, as Baldwin suggests, whatever truths photographs disclose are contingent upon our ability to recognize—or testify to—them. For Baldwin, the Kamoinge photographs' revelatory potential is not materially inscribed in the photographs themselves, but instead comprises of the exegetical insight that they make possible.

As for the photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop themselves, photographic truth was a matter of hegemony. If the group's more express, pragmatic purpose was to redress the de facto exclusion of black photographers from mainstream publications and fine art galleries, by forming a venue in which members could critically evaluate their work in the company of other artists, in a less precise sense, Kamoinge also cultivated new aesthetic sensibilities about the possibilities of photographic representation. The Workshop's name, infamously derived from a Gikuyu word meaning "a group of people acting and working together," is echoed by its members' reflections on the group's shared ambition: "We had to do more than just take pictures, criticize the pictures and have shows," Jimmie Monnas insists, "We had to take young people and show them that there's a big world out here junior, and a camera can bring you much closer to it." For Monnas,

photography's capacity to aestheticize the world and to render its political formations intelligible are one in the same. The ends of Kamoinge's enterprise are decidedly more abstract in Shawn Walker's view: "The nationalist [was] more about the politics," Walker opines; "we were more about the culture. We were more about the visualness of black people." This capacious sense of purpose, combined with the conviction of its values, characterizes the Kamoinge Workshop's legacy as an important photographic front of the Black Arts Movement. Indeed, as Lou Draper, one of the group's founding members insists, "When you talk about the Kamoinge Workshop, you have to talk about it in two phases: ... the actual workshop, the functioning, the day to day operation, and... the spirit that was generated by that formative period. And that I think will continue with us."<sup>220</sup> This spirit has shaped studies of Kamoinge, which generally agree with Draper's claim that the group was "dedicated to speak of our lives as only we can," and "to create the kind of images of our communities that spoke of the truth we'd witnessed and that countered the untruth we'd all seen in mainline publications."<sup>221</sup> The same alignment of photography, truthful expression, and bearing witness that defines Kamoinge's mission in Draper's view, and the value of the *Annual* in Baldwin's estimation, also informs the consensus that the Kamoinge photographers' efforts to "make visible the multiple experiences of Black peoples in the African Diaspora" by "pictur[ing] Black people more fully and positively than they previously had been" was largely successful.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Louis Draper, "Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop," Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, September 20, 2019, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbvooh9\\_5-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbvooh9_5-o)

<sup>221</sup> "VMFA to Exhibit Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop," Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, December 16, 2019, <https://www.vmfa.museum/pressroom/news/vmfa-exhibit-working-together-louis-draper-kamoinge-workshop/>

<sup>222</sup> Carla Williams, "Naked, Neutered, or Noble: The Black Female Body in America and the Problem of Photographic History," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 192.

If the positivism implicit in these appraisals of Kamoinge's work is evident in the formal eclecticism of the *Annual*'s composition, how the volume functions as a text to achieve its ends is less clear. Comprised of forty-seven images with credits detailing the photographers and their locations, and five portfolios made up of interviews with individual photographers and selections of their work, the *Annual* gives less of a sense of how to read it than it does material to be read. The photographs in the *Annual* range formally and generically, from portraits to landscapes, and from snapshots taken on the street, to documentary studies of light and form. Many of the images depict individuals or groups, some show buildings or objects, and yet others seem to present only places, locations, points in space. Though the heterogeneity of the *Annual* can plausibly be read as a robust "reinvigorat[ion of] the spirit of community solidarity that had flourished in Harlem" during the fifties and sixties, Erina Duganne has more compellingly described its diverse images as "more than... transparent instruments of social activism and reform." Duganne stresses the importance of reckoning with the heuristic density of photographs, particularly insofar as "photographic representations of race have been understood, lived, and negotiated in relation to the multifaceted identities of their photographers, subjects, and viewers and the complexities of their social as well as private interactions in the world."<sup>223</sup> For Duganne, the ground broken by Kamoinge's members marks a rich site for further inquiry into how photographers themselves—as opposed to either their photographs or their wider, viewing publics—understood and chose to exercise their influence over the discursive spheres in which they lived and labored. This gesture of goodwill notwithstanding however, some have reminded us that the same lability that allows photographs to cut through the din of other media also compromises the coherence and integrity of their messages. As Sampsell-Williams has suggested, "no matter how complex an image may

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<sup>223</sup> Erina Duganne, *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 14, 9.

have been in conception and execution... editorial restatement in cropping, captioning, and layout can easily shoehorn it into a new document that negates both original narrative and intent.”<sup>224</sup> Indeed, Kamoinge’s own *raison d’être* and critical ethos seeks to anticipate and preclude such misappropriations of photography’s potential. As Ovie Carter explains to Joe Walker during an interview included in the *Annual*, for many, the “strong creative impulse” that distinguishes good photographers compels them to ask, “why take a picture? Who will see the picture? How will they react? What are you really trying to say by capturing that particular moment of action or truth?”<sup>225</sup> Here, Carter describes the motivations behind photographs and the ends to which they are put as a unity of purpose and signification. We can thus see that even when conceived of as a spur toward skepticism—about the way we see the world, or about the way the world sees us—, for many, photography emerges as pure inquiry and insight, leaving the function of interpretation yet elusive.

Despite the presumptive transparency of photographic truth, we can glimpse the interval of interpretation by studying the ordinary language that we use to bridge the gap between what we see when we look at photographs and the work that we take photographs to do. Nell Draper occupies this interval as she reflects on a portrait made by her brother: “[Louis’s] main joy came from capturing the character of everyday people through his photography,” she remarks, averring the metaphoric capacity of photographs to arrest and distill the identities of their subjects. Draper continues:

And I just love looking at her expression because its left up to the viewer to make a decision on, what is she thinking? What’s in her mind? You can see a little

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<sup>224</sup> Kate Sampsell-Willman, “Retreat from Racial Essentialism: Reading the Photographer as Text,” *Reviews in American History*, 41, no. 2 (2013), 327. See also Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>225</sup> Ovie Carter and Joe Walker, *The Black Photographers Annual*, 93.

anxiety there, a little fear, a little apprehension, just—I just love the expressions on people’s faces. You saw the character in them.<sup>226</sup>

Another integral member of Kamoinge, Ming Smith, also illuminates the interval as she claims that “Kamoinge first introduced photography to [her] as an art form.” “That’s all I needed,” Smith insists, “just to know that there was a language, that there was a world...”<sup>227</sup> Smith’s words echo Monnas’s allusions to a wider world, waiting to be photographed, and resonate with Draper’s imagining of the world conveyed by her brother’s photograph. Whether or not Smith, Monnas, and Draper share Carter and Duganne’s conviction that photographic truth issues forth from the photographer as the author of photographic meaning, their descriptions of photography as a mediating force between individuals and the world highlights the hermeneutic stakes of the medium. Nell Draper outlines these stakes in her reading of her brother’s portrait by forgoing an articulation of the truth that his photograph necessarily conveys, to instead enumerate what truths the image suggests may obtain. As she voices her intuitions, Draper recognizes their provisional character, acknowledging their contingent validity. To the questions she raises, which both seek out and find meaning in the image, Draper provides suppositions, which may or may not prove to be the case. These superimpositions are imbricated in Draper’s reading, overlapping one another in the absence of any final adjudication. Indeed, Draper precludes the idea of a definite answer to her questions by qualifying her inquiry itself as an expression “just [of] love.” The same sense of love that motivates Draper to wax poetic of the photograph also interrupts the chain of apposition that unfurls through her reflection. What Draper demonstrates, both by asserting her authority as

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<sup>226</sup> Nell Draper, “Photographer Louis Draper,” Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, May 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0baGVGCcx8>

<sup>227</sup> Ming Smith, “Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop,” Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, September 20, 2019, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbvooh9\\_5-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbvooh9_5-o)

a viewer and by leaving unfinished the unending task of interpretation, is the radical openness of photographic truth and the insurgent authority of the viewing subject.

The pride of place that Draper assigns to the viewer exposes the contrast that some use to differentiate photographic genres of abstraction and realism as a battle of attrition. In his *Annual* portfolio interview, Roy DeCarava, arguably Kamoinge's most famous member, explains why the distinction between abstraction and realism so thoroughly determines photography's potential for racial self-determination. "To the degree that there is a Black identity and a Black consciousness, then this is reflected in whatever a person does," DeCarava argues, belying the essentialist ethos that characterized much of the Black Arts Movement's pursuit of an aesthetically coherent racial identity. DeCarava's conviction that "Black people tend to be more realistic about life and don't have the same kind of illusions as other people," leads Walker to report that DeCarava felt "that most Black art deals with the human condition of Black people and refrains from abstraction."<sup>228</sup> For DeCarava, endorsing this binary helped to orient Kamoinge's mission of using photography to counteract the atomization of black communities. "Everywhere you go you see things that are technically or visually exciting," DeCarava reasons, pointing to the aesthetic rub of the problem, "but they have absolutely no human relationship in terms of the lives that people live."<sup>229</sup> DeCarava stakes his own photographic project squarely on the possibility of limning this vitality: "My work deals with relationships between people. It deals with love and an acceptance of life." And yet, despite his interest in his subjects' liveliness, and his reiteration of Draper's proclaimed love for the photographed other, DeCarava remains confident that his noble intentions safeguard the integrity of the truths his photographs convey.

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<sup>228</sup> Roy DeCarava and Joe Walker, *The Black Photographer's Annual*, 63.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 64.

“In my work there’s no guile,” DeCarava maintains: “There’s no attempt to fool anybody.”<sup>230</sup> In DeCarava’s estimation, as in Carter’s formulation, photography serves as both revelatory method and revealed truth—even when mobilized to obscure and countermand the truth. Though Draper, Monnas, and Smith do not deny photography’s ability to advance or to amplify untruths, they do regard the medium as a medium: and as a function of mediation and interpretation, photographic truth is necessarily circumscribed by the material conditions of its emergence. For Monnas and Smith, this intermediary function likens photography to language, and indicates how making and looking at photographs brings us closer to the world. And as Draper suggests, even as the truths posited by photographic images bring viewers closer together with the world, photographs betray the limits of their own authority by interpolating us into the indeterminate play of interpretation.

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Baldwin turns headlong into the interval of interpretation that photography opened up by photography as he insinuates a connection between the individuals pictured in two photographs, one by N. Keith Hale, and one by Arza Barnett. Baldwin’s reading of these pictures resembles Draper’s method of discerning photographic truth by enumerating the many possible truths to which a given photograph testifies. Like Draper, Baldwin speaks freely of Hale and Barnett’s photographs, inferring an array of possible truths from what he sees framed in the images. Where Baldwin’s reading differs from Draper’s however, is the extent to which Baldwin explores the viability of a suppositional mode of reading photographs. If Draper’s “just love” of photographs pushes her so far as to spell out their connotations, but no further, Baldwin betrays a fascination with the synecdochic profundity that photographic representation seems capable of sustaining. In his own words, we can observe how Baldwin embraces the authority that Draper claims for the

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 65.

individual viewer, and how he leverages this authority in his search for whatever insight the photographs have to offer. As Baldwin writes:

What is N. Keith Hale's cigar-chomping boy looking at, for example, and was that white handkerchief, tied so defiantly and definitively around his head—like the insignia of some unprecedented pirate—ever used to dry his tears? It seems unlikely, anyway, that the handkerchief will ever, in future, be used for such a purpose, though it may grow scarlet, one bright American morning, with his blood. We already know it; now, he knows it. He may be the son of Barnett's woman, caught in a guillotine-like blade of light, coming from the prison, where she has been to visit him, or on her way to the grave-yard, where she has buried him. Or, perhaps, she is merely coming to or from work, and the boy is thinking about slavery.<sup>231</sup>

Baldwin inhabits the interval of interpretation in this passage by traversing the several levels of abstraction that these photographs make available. Moving from one feature to the next, Baldwin notices—and, in noticing, incorporates into his prosaic consideration of these images—details of Hale and Barnett's photographs that suggest a continuity running between them: a world shared in common. The salience of this insinuation—the force with which the photographs suggest that their subjects do, in fact, relate to each other as Baldwin describes—underwrites Baldwin's claim that the photographs collected in the *Annual* amount to a testimony. Per Baldwin's exegeses, these photographs bear witness to the world not by catching systemic forces of oppression and violence in the act, but by corroborating his suppositions that such forces have indeed shaped the world represented in their frames. Put differently, I see a theorization of photographic truth articulated in Baldwin's treatments of these images that shifts focus away from photography's most ostensible characteristic of mechanical reproducibility, and towards its precipitation of hermeneutic activity.

If Baldwin's reading of Hale and Barnett's photographs seems remarkable, at first glance, for the fluidity with which Baldwin entangles their meanings, a closer inspection helps to recognize

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<sup>231</sup> Baldwin, *The Black Photographers Annual*, 7.

it for the complex collage of inferences it actually is. Disarticulating the constitutive claims that structure Baldwin's exposition reveals the intricate operations by which photographic meaning comes into being. At one level, these photographs present Baldwin with certain subjects that we too, as viewers, might recognize as integral formal features: a boy, a cigar, and a handkerchief in Hale's image, and in Barnett's, a woman, shadows, and the "blade of light" illuminating her. To the extent that these are objective features of these images—as opposed to generic qualities, or material attributes, for instance—, they differ in kind from the connections that Baldwin draws between them. That the boy is "chomping" the cigar in his mouth; that the handkerchief across his forehead is "white"—these inferences, though mundane and apparently inconsequential, are essential to supporting the further suppositions Baldwin makes about how the figures in either picture relate to one another. That the woman is the boy's mother; that she has been to visit him; that he has been imprisoned; that she is returning from work, or going to visit his grave; that slavery is on his mind—these extensions of his more superficial inferences, though provisional, serve to advance Baldwin's point about the world that these images suggest (or testify) exists. At the furthest remove from what we, as viewers, might recognize as the images' indexical features, are the tears, and the blood, and the prison, and the graveyard that Baldwin incorporates into his description of what these photographs communicate. That there are no tears, or blood, or prisons, or graveyards evident in these pictures sums up both the challenge and the claim that Baldwin puts to conventional theories of photographic representation. Baldwin's gloss asks the important if implicit question: what defines a photograph if not its objective recording of the empirical play of light? Perhaps, as Baldwin's reading suggests, photography's ontological premise is but a part of the production of photographic truth?<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

An overarching feature of Baldwin's introduction that characterizes his prose, rather than the photographs themselves, is the way in which Baldwin manages to exercise his authority as a viewer while simultaneously negotiating the increasing contingency of his suppositions. Baldwin embraces the ad hoc constitution of his readings by incorporating rhetorical qualifications of his own claims into the introduction's structure. From the "for example" Baldwin uses to identify Hale's photograph as exemplary of the situation at hand, to the mechanisms that serve to hedge the plausibility of his inferences even as he builds on them—e.g. "it seems unlikely"; "in the future"; "though it may"—, to the way that "or, perhaps... merely" undercuts the purchase of the entire reading by acknowledging its provisional validity, the introduction's rhetorical structure aspires to two contradictory goals: to articulate, at once, both a possible truth and the limits of that truth's possibility. Baldwin achieves this feat of prolepsis—which Draper stops short of, by simply alluding to, rather than making the decision that is the viewer's to make—by ceding the ground of certitude that photographic representation promises to clear. By portending the boy's death—the truth of his mortality—Baldwin matches the photograph's deferral of the inevitable—its diffusion of any claims made upon it—with an equally elusive rhetoric: "we already know it; now, he knows it." The imbrication of these claims recalls the catalogue of emotions Draper sees in her brother's portrait. Unlike Draper, however, Baldwin completes the loop of signification that links him to the photographed subject. By leveraging the capacity of language to temporize the image's own suspension of time, Baldwin reveals the dilemma of photographic truth: though we cannot know what Hale's boy is thinking, or whether Barnett's woman is coming or going, with a certainty commensurate to the photograph's indexical testimony, the photograph's claim to the world itself relies upon our corroboration of its representation.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

The circumlocution of this corroborative process also characterizes much of Baldwin's writing, which is what makes his digressive mode of reasoning helpful for illuminating the links between photography and blackness. I have worked to illustrate how photographic representation produces meaning through various forms of sublimation—abstraction, iteration, disclosure, and as Baldwin demonstrates, supposition. The order that narrative form imposes upon the world, by positing causal connections between events and their outcomes, or by distinguishing constitutive elements of our daily lives from the continuity of our quotidian experience, corresponds to the subtle yet effective manifestation of photographic truth. To the extent that the emergent veracity of photographs encourages us to regard their claims as truthful—by attesting to the empirical, as such—, even as their stillness and monocular perspective prescribes any appeals levied against them, photography monopolizes its mode of representation in much the same way that narration does. The hermeticism of photography and narration has led me to consider how either mode can elucidate the workings of the other—in Baldwin's work, as in the texts by Jacobs, Douglass, and Hurston, I have found this intersection to be most commonly expressed by the sort of implicature that I have referred to as photography's worldliness. Photography and narration both implicate us as they mediate and make sense of the world—and as black subjects, interpolated into the world by way of myriad individuating forces, recognizing how race participates in such mediation is of necessary value.