

Picturing Frederick Douglass:an Illustrated Biography Of The Nineteenth Century\'s Most Photographed American

Leigh Fought

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Fought, Leigh (2016) "Picturing Frederick Douglass:an Illustrated Biography Of The Nineteenth Century\'s Most Photographed American," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.27

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/22>

Review

Fought, Leigh

Fall 2016

Stauffer, John; Trodd, Zoe and Bernier, Celeste-Marie. *Picturing Frederick Douglass:An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century\'s Most Photographed American*. Liveright, \$49.95 ISBN 9780871404688

A Life in Images: The Many Faces of Frederick Douglass

Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass sat for a portrait nearly every year of his life from 1841 until his death in 1895. Although this frequency does not necessarily prove the headline-ready subtitle of *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*, it grants such a claim credence. By combing archives throughout the United States, finding 160 distinct images and evidence of the existence of others, editors John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier demonstrate Douglass's enduring fascination with the photographic reproduction of the human form. In this volume, they have included not only a catalog of all of these photographs, but Douglass's four speeches on photography, a scholarly introduction, two photo essays of artwork based on Douglass portraits, an Afterword by Henry Louis Gates, and an Epilogue by Douglass descendant Kenneth Morris, Jr.

In our era of Facebook, Instagram, and Photoshop, viewers expect manipulation and have become cynical about images in all senses of the word. In the nineteenth century, however, photography offered a shocking, lifelike glimpse into the faces of distant family, celebrities, and one's own self. Given other modes of representation at the time, photography seemed to be the most trustworthy. Indeed, the first photographic process, the daguerreotype, can still astonish with its fine reproduction of texture and dimension, giving the impression that the subject sits just beyond the glass. The method became widely available when studios began opening throughout the United States in 1839, only a year after Douglass had escaped from slavery, and photography flourished in parallel to and as part of Douglass's career as an activist.

Douglass had criticized his earliest abolitionist allies for using his body and biography as the text for their exegesis, resenting their desire to interpret his experience. Like later scholars, he understood image as text and the power of image to influence thought. For that reason, he detested non-photographic renderings of himself, and fought endlessly with his publishers over his frontispiece portraits and the illustrations included in his final autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882). He resisted well-meaning but still prejudiced efforts to Anglicize his features or soften his expressions. Some of these depictions appear in “Part II: Contemporary Artwork,” and they suggest that the earlier artists had a difficult time creating an accurate portrait while those creating racist caricatures had possibly never seen him. Later cartoons and illustrations testify to the widespread distribution of his photos in their resemblance, but do not possess the same drama that the photos themselves convey.

Photography, like autobiography, allowed Douglass a modicum of control in the depiction of his person and, by extension, the bodies of all African Americans. The most beautiful, important, and widely circulated of these appear in “Part I: The Photographs,” the centerpiece of *Picturing Frederick Douglass*. These exquisitely rendered plates collectively act as a flipbook animating the abolitionist as he ages from a haunted youth through his middle years as a fiery activist to his disappointed and then contented twilight years and, finally, on his deathbed. Some of the earliest, in which he does not address the camera, suggest that he saw himself as the object of observation, holding himself as an exemplar of refined and intelligent manhood. As the 1850s progressed, however, he returned to his initial instinct to fix his gaze on his audience, meeting them as equals. Later, he tended toward a three-quarters pose, always wearing an expression as if looking to the future with determination. Even when he does not stare down his audience, his intent visage admits few other responses than the respect he commands. The editors also point to features that indicate he consulted advice books on posing, such as holding his hand in a fist, and argue that he collaborated with photographers to produce the most compelling results. Readers can evaluate the editors’ analysis in “Part V: *Catalogue Raisonné*,” which includes all of the 160 images of Douglass, single portraits as well as groups and what later generations would call snapshots. Some of the photos in this section lack the immediacy of those in the first and support the editors’ assertions that he worked with the photographers to find the best representation.

The editors' shortcomings, however, lie in the limits of the context that they provide for these portraits. An introduction should prepare the readers for the images that follow, offering information not readily observable or knowable from what readers see on the page. While the editors do well when addressing Douglass's essays and the history of the craft of photography, their interpretation of the images themselves lacks historical nuance. They make many features seem unique to Douglass, such as the absence of props or backdrops and his clothing and fashion choice, and they do not address the other work of photographers when available nor specific popular depictions of African Americans to which Douglass responds. The portraits of black Congressmen and senators during Reconstruction, for instance, resemble those of Douglass in the same period, indicating either that he influenced those men in their self-representation or more likely, that they fit into the style of the studio they visited. If Douglass collaborated with photographers to create a particular image or style, then investigation into the other work of those photographers, where available, might offer more evidence for the editors' assertions. Furthermore, Douglass was hardly unique in dressing well for the camera, as the editors' leave their audience to infer, and their description of him as a fashion trend-setter not only lacks citation but also does not engage with scholarship on African American clothing and such issues as the charged subject of hair. What, too, to make of later shots of Douglass from behind, when he otherwise seemed so intent on presenting his visage to the public? As a result, Douglass seems to exist in isolation when, as the editors themselves point out, he actually engaged in a visual conversation with popular culture, artists, political ideologies, and scientific theories.

In the latter category, the editors miss their greatest opportunity to explore the political import of Douglass's portraits. While Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Epilogue addresses some of the introduction's flaws in describing popular caricatures of African Americans, the editors miss important visual points that Douglass made and that reinforce the words of his essays, especially in their failure to address the contemporary fields of science. Theories emerging from phrenology, physiognomy, and ethnology gave intellectual gravity to racist ideologies, which Douglass himself countered in his writings on photography and elsewhere. Louis Agassiz's 1850 series of daguerreotypes of slave and the illustrations from Josiah Nott and George Robins Gibbons' 1854 *The Types of Mankind*, both appeared at a time when Douglass had begun to frequent photography studios. His presentation of himself as well-dressed and

aggressively confronting the viewer, particularly in a daguerreotype made around 1850, stands in stark opposition to Agassiz's naked and coerced African subjects. Two profile portraits, taken sometime between 1850 and 1855, refute the ape-like drawings of Africans in the work of Nott and Gibbons. A later profile in a fur hat seems to address Elizabeth Cady Stanton's depiction of him, written during their clash over the wording of the 15th Amendment, as the wolfish villain of a fairy tale. Thus, while the editors argue much about Douglass and photographs, they do not make the historical connections that would illuminate Douglass's ideas and their own assertions.

The most complex interpretation, in fact, comes from the one contributor to the volume who is neither a historian nor literary scholar. The editors have included "Part III: The Photographic Legacy" to testify to the endurance of Douglass's image, but it pales in comparison to the personal story of Kenneth Morris, Jr., the descendant of Douglass through his son and grandson, Charles and Joseph Douglass. The image of so famous an ancestor hung over Douglass's descendants both figuratively and literally, contributing to the suicide of Morris's grandfather but also leading Morris to work against modern-day slavery. His essay testifies to the success of Douglass's photographic venture. While the editors have fallen short in key points of historical interpretation, in assembling this volume they have offered both an extensive archive and allowed Douglass to fix his gaze across time and challenge his viewers to continue the ongoing process of liberation.

Leigh Fought is an Assistant Professor of History at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York. Her next book Women in the World of Frederick Douglass will be published by Oxford University Press in April 2017. She was an associate editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers: Correspondence, 1842-1852, volume 1, and is the author of Southern Womanhood and Slavery: a Biography of Louisa S. McCord and Mystic, Connecticut: From Pequot Village to Tourist Town.