

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

## **Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, Humanity and the Power of the Photographic Image**

Bill E. Lawson and Maria Brincker

*It may be said that a picture is a very small thing. This is a great mistake. Man is a picture-making animal, and the only picture-making animal in the world. Pictures do play and have played an important part in the grand drama of civilization. Pictures have a power akin to song. Give me the making of a nation's ballads and I care not who has the making of the laws. The same may be said of pictures.<sup>1</sup> - Frederick Douglass*

### **1. Introduction**

Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, the civil rights advocate and the great rhetorician, has been the focus of much academic research. Only more recently is Douglass work on aesthetics beginning to receive its due,<sup>2</sup> and even then its philosophical scope is rarely appreciated.<sup>3</sup> Douglass' aesthetic interest was notably not so much in art itself, but in understanding aesthetic presentation as an epistemological and psychological aspect of the human condition and thereby as a social and political tool. He was fascinated by the power of images, and took particular interest in the emerging technologies of photography. He often returned to the themes of art, pictures and aesthetic perception in his speeches. He saw himself, also after the end of slavery, as first and foremost a human rights advocate, and he suggests that his work and thoughts as a public intellectual always in some way related to this end.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, his interest in the power of photographic images to impact the human soul was a lifelong concern. His reflections accordingly center on the psychological and political potentials of images and the relationship between art, culture, and human dignity.

In this chapter we discuss Douglass views and practical use of photography and other forms of imagery, and tease out his view about their transformational potential particularly in respect to combating racist attitudes. We propose that his views and actions suggest that he intuitively if not explicitly anticipated many later philosophical, pragmatist and ecological insights regarding the generative habits of mind and affordance perception<sup>5</sup>: I.e. that we perceive the world through our values and habitual ways of engaging with it and thus that our perception is active and creative, not passive and objective. Our understanding of the world is simultaneously shaped by and shaping our perceptions. Douglass saw that in a racist and bigoted society this means that change through facts and rational arguments will be hard. A distorted lens

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Collection of Funds: An Address Delivered in Washington, DC on April 11 1873," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol.4, One (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 355-360

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the following scholars who have discussed Douglass writings on photography: Celeste Bernier, Sarah Blackwood, John Stauffer, Donna Wells, Marcus Woods, and Zoe Trodd.

<sup>3</sup> Roderick M. Stewart, "The Claims of Frederick Douglass Philosophically Considered," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Douglass and Henry Louis Gates, "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself," in *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and times of Frederick Douglass*, pg. 939.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. philosophers within the European phenomenological tradition such Husserl, Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, American Pragmatists like James and Dewey, later philosophers like Langer and Sontag, psychologists like Gibson etc.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

distorts - and accordingly re-produces and perceives its own distortion. His interest in aesthetics is intimately connected to this conundrum of knowledge and change, perception and action. To some extent precisely due to his understanding of how stereotypical categories and dominant relations work on our minds, he sees a radical transformational potential in certain art and imagery. We see in his work a profound understanding of the value-laden and action-oriented nature of perception and what we today call the perception of affordances (that is, what our environment permits/invites us to do). Douglass is particularly interested in the social environment and the social affordances of how we perceive other humans, and he thinks that photographs can impact on the human intellect in a transformative manner. In terms of the very process of aesthetic perception his views interestingly cohere and supplement a recent theory about the conditions and consequences of being an aesthetic beholder. The main idea being that artworks typically invite an asymmetric engagement where one can behold them without being the object of reciprocal attention. This might allow for a kind of vulnerability and openness that holds transformational potentials not typically available in more strategic and goal-directed modes of perception. As mentioned, Douglass main interest is in social change and specifically in combating racist social structures and negative stereotypes of black people. He is fascinated by the potential of photography in particular as a means of correcting fallacious stereotypes, as it allows a more direct and less distorted image of the individuality and multidimensionality of black people.

We end with a discussion of how, given this interpretation of aesthetic perception, we can understand the specific imagery used by Douglass himself. How he tried to use aesthetic modes to subvert and change the racist habitus in the individual and collective mind of his society. We suggest that Frederick Douglass, the human rights activist, had a sophisticated philosophy of aesthetics, mind, epistemology and particularly of the transformative and political power of images. His works in many ways anticipate and sometimes go beyond later scholars in these and other fields such as psychology & critical theory. Overall, we propose that our world could benefit from revisiting Douglass' art and thought.

## 2. Discovering the power of images

Art, and images in particular, was for Douglass, both an aesthetic and political medium. His understanding of art as a powerful tool for change was arguably awoken by his reading of the *Columbian Orator*, a widely used text in American schoolrooms in the early 1800s. It was used to teach reading, writing, and speaking skills. Douglass, in his own writings, draws our attention to the *Orator*, and how the political selections influenced him. But the *Orator* also included prose, verse, and plays, and thus showed Douglass the aesthetic power of the written and spoken word as well as the importance of how those words are presented.<sup>6</sup> As Donna Wells aptly notes: "In the section titled "General Directions for Speaking," guidelines are provided that direct the speaker on using body language, facial expression and hand gestures to convey a point, depending upon the tone of the discourse."<sup>7</sup> Douglass might here have

---

<sup>6</sup> Historian David Blight speculates: "Douglass may also have been captivated by other selections he neglected to mention in the various recreations of his youth." Blight, David (1998-02-01). *The Columbian Orator* (Kindle Locations 344-348). NYU Press reference. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Wells, "Pictures and Progress: Frederick Douglass and the Beginning of an African American Aesthetics in Photography" this volume

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

learned that speaking is also an artform. He certainly came to understand the intimate connection between the art of presentation and the reactions and images that words could evoke in the minds of people.

Douglass writes in *Pictures & Progress* that "poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers-and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements."<sup>8</sup> As a public intellectual Douglass used the written and spoken word to challenge negative images of black people, and became as such himself a performance artist.<sup>9</sup> While much could be said about Douglass the performance artist, what we are investigating in this paper is his broader interest in the creation and power of images, particularly concrete visual objects, like photographs and paintings. It is their status as works of art that can be used to promote moral and social attitudes that interest us. We find him speaking explicitly of this power of art to influence morality in *Lectures on Pictures* where he writes:

As to the moral and social influence of pictures, it would hardly be extravagant to say of it, what Moore has said of ballads, give me the making of a nation's ballads and I care not who has the making of its laws. The picture and the ballad are alike, if not equally social forces-the one reaching and swaying the heart by the eye, and the other by the ear. As an instrument of wit, of biting satire, the picture is admitted to be unrivalled. It strikes human nature on the weakest of all its many weak sides, and upon the instant, makes the hit palpable to all beholders. The dullest vision can see and comprehend at a glance the full effect of a point which may have taken the wit and skill of the artist many hours and days.<sup>10</sup>

Douglass was concerned with the manner in which art impacted the emotional, spiritual and intellectual faculties of humans. Art, for him, had the potential to touch and transform us at our deepest and most human level.

### 3. Pictures as central to our humanity and our ability to improve

It is worth highlighting that Douglass took the very ability to create and enjoy images as one of the defining features of our humanity, an ability that set us apart from all other animals. He writes "...man is everywhere a picture making animal, and the only picture making animal in the world."<sup>11</sup> He thus argues that only humans are capable of making and being impacted by pictures. Not only do we create pictures, our minds are repositories of pictures.<sup>12</sup> This, he writes, "bears additional emphasis," because the question is, what it is about picture-making and picture perception that is so special. Here Douglass hypothesize that pictures allow us to externalize our inners:

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

---

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, "Pictures and Progress," John Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*, pg. 171.

<sup>9</sup> See also John Stauffer, "Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom," *Raritan* 25, no. 1 (2014): p 115.

<sup>10</sup> Douglass, "Lectures on Pictures," John Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*, pg. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Douglass, "Pictures and Progress," p.167.

<sup>12</sup> If we grant Douglass this link between images and humanity, then we can see how he as a performer and creator of images in sense made a de facto refutation of the many racist arguments that blacks are somehow not fully human. See n35.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

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.<sup>13</sup>

This idea of picture making as an externalization, which allows for juxtaposition in the perception is very interesting. Words, objects and images exist outside the mind and again shape the pictures in the mind. These mental pictures not only help us make our way in the world but also help to shape our understanding of the world.<sup>14</sup> This he specifies also has to do with how art and images allow for a process of criticism and hence transformation and progress. We shall return to this in the following. Douglass explains that this externalization can work for both transformation of self and other:

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. But self-criticism, out of which comes the highest attainments of human excellence, arises out of the power we possess of making ourselves objective to ourselves-[we] can see our interior selves as distinct personalities, as though looking in a glass. Men drunk have been heard addressing themselves-as if speaking to a second person-exposing their faults and exhorting themselves to a higher and better life.<sup>15</sup>

The further question here is how to understand this vulnerable openness to self-criticism and transformation – why do we not change similarly when we engage in dialog or are met with a logical argument or a demand? Are these modes of perception not also somehow an externalization? Douglass often repeats that pictures can touch us in the deepest parts of our soul suggesting by implication that other forms of perception are different. But how does this soul touching work?

#### **4. Aesthetics stance and the asymmetry of beholder and beheld**

We propose a way to read Douglass's work on images that draws on a recent embodied and ecological proposal about aesthetic perception, referred to in the following as the "Aesthetic Stance theory."<sup>16</sup> This theory, we suggest, along with its concepts of aesthetic and social affordances, can help us understand Douglass' views about images as well as his own particular use of photography and literary imagery. A brief overview of the key concepts will be given in this section.

Most theories of aesthetic perception and appreciation focus on the nature of the artwork or aesthetic object and/or the particularly aesthetic emotions or judgments that the perception gives rise to. One can call these respectively input-focused (object of perception) and output-focused (emotions, judgments) accounts. Following the aesthetic stance theory we focus instead on what is special about the overall dynamic process of aesthetic perception and read Douglass thoughts on the powers of imagery through

---

<sup>13</sup> Douglass, "Lectures on Pictures," John Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*, pg. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Douglass here anticipates many of Langer's ideas about the non-discursive reifying form and rationality of images. Susanne Langer (1942) *Philosophy in a new key – a study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Harvard University Press. See also n20.

<sup>15</sup> Douglass, *Pictures & Progress*, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Brincker, "The Aesthetic Stance: On the Condition & Consequence of Becoming a Beholder," in *Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind: Beyond Art Theory and the Cartesian Mind-body Dichotomy* (2012),

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

this lens. The core question is if images are special because they allow for a special kind of engagement and learning that many other kinds of perception and interaction do not.

It is worth stressing, as we shall discuss the photographic medium, that the human eye and visual perception are not camera-like.<sup>17</sup> The account we propose follows the currently empirically reinvigorated traditions of pragmatists like James and Dewey and ecologists like von Uexkull, James & Eleanor Gibson etc.<sup>18</sup> and insists that visual perceptions are not passive imprints but rather that all perception is active. First, we are active agents as we perceive, and our sense organs are always in motion, from the micro-saccades of our eyes to the tilted head and searching fingers. Secondly, the object of perception is not given and predefined but brought into focus by our experienced sensorimotor systems. Human beings are neither empty nor aimless vessels, rather we categorize our perception through our experiences, knowledge, and memories. Our perception is always situated and pragmatically rooted in our goals, capabilities, ideas and values. This notion that we always come to the perception with presuppositions, desires and fears etc. is running through many of Douglass' essays as we shall show in the following. He explicitly talks about how certain "theories" of the mind works both in our artistic creations and in our perceptions of these. In *Age of Pictures* he writes "it is man's relation to the objects about him that clothes them with all the interest they possess."<sup>19</sup> One can say that our perception is practically attuned, and that we always perceive what kinds of actions, interactions and engagements that a given situation or environment invites or allows us to do. Gibson calls this the "affordances" of things, people and situations. He writes:

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.<sup>20</sup>

As highlighted by Gibson, his notion of affordances refers to a practical complementarity between a person and their environment. We can add that to be able to *perceive* an affordance there needs to be some kind of habituation and generalized experiential history that allows the person to recognize the action possibility afforded. In contemporary neuroscience of perception these habits of mind are often referred to as "priors."<sup>21</sup> Note that categorization into "kinds" or "types" of events, things or persons can have a strong influence on affordance perception, as it works as a powerful principle by which we generalize possible interactions from one case to another.<sup>22</sup> In our cultural worlds we also perceive *social affordances*, that is, the kind of interactions that other people afford us. A stretched-out hand by a newly

<sup>17</sup> <http://techin.oureverydaylife.com/differences-between-human-eye-camera-lens-1186.html>

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Dewey, John. "The reflex arc concept in psychology." *Psychological review* 3, no. 4 (1896): 357, Gibson, James. "J.(1977). The theory of affordances." *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: Toward an ecological psychology*: 67-82. and Langer (note 12).

<sup>19</sup> Douglass, "Age of Pictures," John Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*, pg. 152.

<sup>20</sup> Gibson, p. 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'priors' comes from Bayesian modeling, and refers to the aspect of past experience in our predictive expectations, and it is then modeled how these priors both inform current perceptions but also are updated by these.

<sup>22</sup> See here the parallel to Langer's view: "The eye and the ear must have their logic – their "categories of understanding"... An object is not a datum, but a form construed by the sensitive and intelligent organ, a form which is at once an experienced individual thing and a symbol for the concept of it, for *this sort of thing*." (n 12), chapter 4, p. 89.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

encountered person for example is typically perceived as affording a handshake. However, perceptions of race, gender, class, ability etc. can have very strong influences on perceived affordances and accordingly on ensuing judgments and interactions. This notion of social affordance perception will be very important for our interpretation of Douglass's view of stereotypes and the notion that there can be a racist "theory" in the minds of artist and perceivers.

But first we need to consider the general question about artworks, performances and images. Can it help us to analyze these in term of affordances? Are there specific kinds of *aesthetic affordances* and if so what is it that they afford? The proposal of the aesthetic stance theory is that a core feature of aesthetic perception is an asymmetry between a beholder and something beheld (typically an artwork). Further, this asymmetry relies on situated conditions where the beholder is not being reciprocally perceived, addressed or interacted with by the beheld. I.e. you can attend to a painting, drawing, photograph, or even a theater play, spoken word or musical performance as a beholder, without that artwork or performer attending to you in a similar way, or at all. In terms of affordances, the idea is that the representational picture, screen or stage, and other typical media of presenting art provide concrete relational conditions that are particularly suited for allowing the perceiver to "become a beholder". The key factor is that the beholder is not demanded to reciprocally react, and thus that the presentation affords a sort of *non-action*. The theory is that this lack of typical action demand allows the perceiver to engage in a different and perhaps deeper and more receptive kind of perception. This mode of perception thus allows one to listen, to channel, to be a beholder who takes in and plays along with what is being beheld. Kant suggests that art allowed for a special kind of "free play of the imagination,"<sup>23</sup> and Douglass also repeatedly suggests that aesthetic forms of perception, imagery and music can reach the deepest aspects of our spirituality. These claims are now to some extent something that we can both explain and empirically test.<sup>24</sup>

As we have already seen Douglass adds to his thoughts on the power of images a quite specific theory also about how we via images can externalize our inner ideas, hopes assumptions. He sees imagery as crucial to our very humanity and our ability to improve and change, not just because of the role of the beholder as we have talked about here, but also do to the kind of content that can be beheld, the kind of affordances that can be perceived.

### **5. Imagery objectifying the subjective - a powerful tool for good of for ill**

The inner generative powers of the subject, which are based in habits and anchoring priors, are to a large extent unknown to us as agents. We are not - as the computational metaphors of the mind misleads us into thinking – self-transparent.<sup>25</sup> We know ourselves through our actions and memories of actions.<sup>26</sup>

Douglass' idea, introduced above, of externalization and objectification of the subjective through

---

<sup>23</sup> Kant also suggested that there was a certain distance and disinterestedness in aesthetic perception. Note that on aesthetic stance theory this is not an emotional distance or a general disinterestedness but only a dis-interestedness into of immediate executive and strategic action response.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Vessel, Starr & Rubin (2012) The brain on art: intense aesthetic experience activates the default network, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, Vol.6, Article 66.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson talks about the "focal disappearance" of the body. Mark Johnson (2008). *The meaning of the body: Aesthetics of human understanding*. University of Chicago Press. pp.3-7. See also n26.

<sup>26</sup> One could suggest that our thoughts simply are the ability to navigate spaces that where once outside but have now been internalized (Brincker 2014).

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

imagery, can now be understood as a way to behold that, which is typically producing and thus hidden in our actions. We can now see actual and ideal selves, and this for Douglass means that we can improve and judge ourselves. But as we know all too well in our current world of braggadocios spin and self-branding, self-criticism can be dangerous as it leaves us vulnerable of attack. However given the beholder-beheld asymmetry, aesthetic perception seems to provide a sort of safe space, where we are not being watched and not called upon to react. It gives us room (and privacy) to engage in self-transformation. Douglass's theory is even more specific here:

Could the joy imparted by the contemplation of pictures be analyzed, it would be found to consist mainly in [the] self tenfold much, a gratification of the innate desire for self-knowledge with which every human soul is more or less largely endowed. Art is a special revelation of the higher powers of the human soul. There is in the contemplation of it *an unconscious comparison constantly going on in the mind*, of the pure forms of beauty and excellence, which are without to those which are within, and native to the human heart.

It is a process of soul-awakening self-revelation, a species of new birth, *for a new life springs up in the soul with every new discovered agency*, by which the soul is brought into a more intimate knowledge of its own Divine powers and perfections, and is lifted to a higher level of wisdom, goodness and joy.<sup>27</sup>

It is thus not just that we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable and better listen to that which is perceived, but that we can compare ourselves to our ideals and hopes – to our projections of who we want to be. This is important. First, this idea fits with the notion of how our actions and perception are driven by experience-based habits. Douglass writes that there is an “unconscious comparison constantly going on in the mind.” This can in contemporary terms be seen as one process by which our habitual ‘priors’ are being updated.<sup>28</sup> Note that aesthetic perception might allow for this kind of objectification and recognitions of self through simply the absence of the need to respond to the other. When face-to-face we often put a lot of attention towards predictively judging and responding, towards an agenda, towards steering where we are headed and evaluating if things are turning sour etc. When side-by-side or not engaged in practical tasks with strategic goals we are not “put on the spot”. We can allow ourselves to neither predict nor counter, but to let down our guard and feel through what is presented, and how it might or might not resonate with our broader and often unconscious tastes and affects. We suggest that this receptivity of beholding is key to the power of imagery.

Further, Douglass stresses the role of ideals of beauty, excellence and perfection. We want to be viewed by both self and others as good, as pleasing, as excellent. But this is not all, we also take pleasure in seeing and improving our own relational powers. Above Douglass points to our discovery of new aspects of our own agency and “divine powers.” This is crucial for curiosity, imagination and affordance learning. We learn new possibilities of not only who we are, but also the possibilities of what we can do in various situations, i.e. of how we can transform the world.

---

<sup>27</sup> Douglass, *Pictures & Progress*, p. 169, our italics.

<sup>28</sup> Shaun Gallagher has made the distinction between a “body schema” – pretty close to the generative habitual priors describe here, and “body image” as various aspect of how we know and represent ourselves (Gallagher 2005. *How the body shapes the mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press). Given this division one might characterize Douglass as suggesting that images can help us know our own otherwise unconscious body schemas. See also n23.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

We can, however, also in perception in general, and via images in particular, learn unpleasant things about ourselves, about how we are perceived by others, and actions that we might want to do but which are not afforded to us. We can become aware of stereotypes and discriminatory social affordances. We have so far talked about aesthetic perception on a single perceiver basis and not about how the objectification that happens in images also means that the inner habits of some become imposed on the souls of others. Douglass as we have seen suggests that images can be a transformative power for good – but is well aware of the oppressive potentials of images as well. He writes:

This picture-making faculty is flung out into the world like all others, capable of being harnessed to the car of truth or error: It is a vast power to whatever cause it is coupled. For the habit we adopt, the master we obey, in making our subjective nature objective, giving it form, color, space, action and utterance, is the one important thing to ourselves and our surroundings. It will either lift us to the highest heaven or sink us to the lowest depths, for good and evil know no limits.<sup>29</sup>

Imagery and its aesthetic perception is not enough to guarantee positive change – it is rather “a vast power to whatever cause it is coupled.” And once again Douglass has a profound understanding of the effect on the habituations of our minds, and how these will replay themselves in future perceptions and interactions. He continues: “Once fully started in the direction of evil, man runs with ever increasing speed, a child in the darkness, frightened onward by the distant echoes of his own footfalls.” This echo phenomenon is also in contemporary psychology called “confirmation bias.” We see what we expect and we like what we know. This can be understood at a purely pragmatic affordance level: We see what our habits recognize, what we know what to do with. At a low-level of biology one can say that our senses have evolved and adapted to detect that which we can act on.<sup>30</sup> However, when we have to deal with our heterogeneous and yet co-constructed social and cultural world problems arise, as there is often a tension between habitual facts and ideals. And the passions are often on the side of habit. Humans will fight violently to keep their habitual ways of life, and to maintain or create the physical and social affordances environments that supports these.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is not just that the social world is not as it “should be” but that our preferences diverge. Further there is the epistemic issue that we experience the world through our own perspectival affordances and often overlook – and deny - the tensions and harms that others face. Positions of privilege precisely make this invisibility stronger, where as marginalization lays it bare.<sup>32</sup>

## 6. Imagery and racist stereotypes

Douglass thus saw art and images as particularly human and inherently powerful – but also as a tool that could be used for either good or evil. Precisely for those reasons he also insisted that it had to be the “right” kind of pictures. One feature that Douglass repeatedly highlights is that art should represent the world unfiltered and presented as it is. He suggests that we are drawn to the real essence of objects as

---

<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *Pictures & Progress*, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> This is a crucial notion in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and in the tradition of semiotics coming from the neo-Kantian evolutionary biologist Jacob von Uexküll.

<sup>31</sup> “Conscience itself is often misdirected-shocked at delightful sounds, beautiful colors, and graceful movements, yet smiles at persecution, sleeps amid the agonies of war and slavery, hangs a witch, burns an heretic, and drenches a continent in blood!” Douglass, *Pictures & Progress*, p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind; the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

depicted in artworks. However, he is also acutely aware that the truth is not singular, and further that the "true" in the sense of the existing social reality can be "wrong" in a moral sense. Douglass writes: "It is perhaps fortunate that truth is too large to be described by one man. It belongs, like the earth, to all the Earth's inhabitants. The possessions of one are often too distant, and too obscure, to be seen and appreciated by another."<sup>33</sup> Thus Douglass views on truth and authenticity are complicated terrain. Perhaps a way of understanding Douglass is that truth even if perspectival and partial can serve as an undeniable corrective when presented in contrast to false or biased or otherwise misleading representations. His reflections on the representation of black bodies during chattel slavery attest to this point.

American slavery gave rise to cruel art works. Images and paintings that represented the slave or any black person were usually distorted or made to resemble apes. White artists did everything it seemed to demean the social status and humanity of Blacks. Douglass realized that as long as whites controlled both black bodies and the representation of those bodies, black humanity would be denied. Thus, while Douglass fought to end slavery, he also comprehended the need to control and put on display images of black people that captured their humanity. He was particularly leery of white artists' representation of Blacks:

Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. *Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy.* We have heard many white persons say, that 'Negroes look all alike,' and that they could not distinguish between the old and the young. They associate with the Negro face, high cheekbones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating foreheads. *This theory impressed strongly upon the mind of an artist exercises a powerful influence over his pencil,* and very naturally leads him to distort and exaggerate those peculiarities, even when they scarcely exist in the original.<sup>34</sup>

At least two key ideas are expressed by Douglass in this passage: 1) That there is something like a generative "theory" in the mind of the artist which has been "impressed strongly upon the mind", and that this "exercises a powerful influence over his pencil". 2) That Blacks in a racist society will be both represented and seen through a narrow theory of "the other", a "white gaze," where the images of blacks are both systematically distorted and made general and impersonal such that all "look alike" and there is little difference between "old and young". The first point, about the theory as a "prior", a habit of mind, a sort of culturally self-fulfilling prophecy of perception, we have discussed already in the previous section. Now Douglass adds how this works with racist stereotypes in portraiture, how when our imagery and cultural artifacts are left to a certain group to control it will be their image, their priors – however distorted - that will be impressed on the minds of us all.

This second point has to do with the particular distortion that blacks are victims of. Douglass here describes how A) blacks are victims of an extremely narrow and de-personalized "one size fits all" image 'prior' and B) that it is a systematically distorting stereotype – which highlights that which is distinctive of what we might call "the racial other" as a type or category seen from the perspective of the white gaze.

---

<sup>33</sup> Douglass, "Age of Pictures," p.148.

<sup>34</sup> Excerpt from an article by Douglass published in the April 7, 1849 edition of his newspaper *The North Star* (our Italics).

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

In other passages he add details of how C) this stereotype is negative, and representing blacks as sub-human and inferior in various quite systemic ways. Here is a passage from Douglass's speech "The claims of the negro – ethnologically considered":

The European face is drawn in harmony with the highest ideas of beauty, dignity and intellect. Features regular and brow after the Websterian mold. The negro, on the other hand, appears with features distorted, lips exaggerated, forehead depressed—and the whole expression of the countenance made to harmonize with the popular idea of negro imbecility and degradation. I have seen many pictures of negroes and Europeans, in phrenological and ethnological works; and all, or nearly all...have been more or less open to this objection. I think I have never seen a single picture in an American work, designed to give an idea of the mental endowments of the negro, which did any thing like justice to the subject; nay, that was not infamously distorted.<sup>35</sup>

We shall in the following return to all these *three* aspects of the pictorial stereotypes of blacks.

### 7. Transformation & the "right" kind of pictures

It seems that Douglass suggestion is that to transform this racist "theory" we need to create – and thus impress upon the mind - a different kind of imagery that somehow can bypass the theory of the white/racist artist and get to the specificity of the individual. It is on this background we might understand his fascination with photography. But before turning to photography it bears highlighting that Douglass of course was painstakingly aware of not only of the negative attitudes towards blacks but also the amount of intellectual labor that went into maintaining these white supremacist attitudes. Douglass thus often engaged in explicit arguments to show the fallacious nature of these prevailing attitudes.<sup>36</sup> Donna Wells writes: "Stereotyping, racial injustice, slavery, and progress were major themes in much of Frederick Douglass's writings. Throughout his life, Douglass would challenge popular notions of African American inferiority, painstakingly researching the subject matter before presenting his argument."<sup>37</sup> He took on the so-called science of craniologists, Egyptologists, physicians and a host of other ethnologists of his day who all argued for the inferiority and often even non-humanity of blacks. The content of Douglass arguments refuting this sort of white supremacist evidence is very important. He clearly saw how the negative attitudes about black people were propped up with inconsistent arguments and pseudo-science about the mental and moral worth of persons with dark skin. It was an intellectual and moral battle over the humanity of black people, particularly slaves. Further he realized that he had to confront and refute three differing but interrelated kinds of argumentative attacks: The political, the philosophical, and the aesthetic. The political arguments questioned the legal and social standing of black people; the philosophical questioned the humanity of black people, while the aesthetic questioned the social standing and beauty of black bodies. All of these arguments had one aim: To conclude that black people were not fully human and deserved no rights and privileges as United States citizens.

---

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered, Address Delivered at Western Reserve College," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), pg. 290.

<sup>36</sup> Roderick M. Stewart, "The Claims of Frederick Douglass Philosophically Considered," Douglass illustrates his philosophical acumen as he deconstructs the logic of arguments meant to show the inferiority of black people..

<sup>37</sup> Donna Wells, this volume

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

Our main focus here is the question of what the aesthetic forms can add to the methods of proof, logic and rational argument.<sup>38</sup> What is it that Douglass thinks that images and photography in particular can do to shake the deep-seated dehumanizing and oppressive stereotypes of Blacks? Douglass thought that bad visual representation disrupted the understanding in the same manner that bad rhetorical arguments did and that black people were victims of both. These negative images not only attacked the humanity of black people, but also positioned blacks as inferior within the arena of humanity. We can call these negative images racist pictorial arguments. Such pictorial arguments are paintings or photographs that visually support the conclusion that black people, particularly Black Americans, are not human or not fully human, or distorted humans. As the rhetorical arguments, the negative pictorial representations also had to be countered. Speaking in 1854 Douglass says:

If the very best type of the European is always presented, I insist that justice, in all such works, demands that the very best type of the negro should also be taken. The importance of this criticism may not be apparent to all;—to the black man it is very apparent. He sees the injustice, and writhes under its sting.<sup>39</sup>

Thus we see that Douglass use of images is political, strategic and future-oriented. Given our story of affordances it is not just that images touch and changes us at the depth of our souls but that this transformation is generative. It changes how we produce action. The person that is represented as inferior will be treated as inferior. The social affordance types produced by demeaning racial imagery determine actions. This is why black people literally “writhes under its sting”.

White artists, as Douglass noted, put these negative conclusions forth in their caricature of black people. Douglass therefore saw both the power of having black artists produce the images of black people and the power of those images. White artists rarely took black people as artistic subjects seriously. As Celeste Bernier notes in her discussion of Douglass:

Warring against a white racist notion that one size, shape and form fits all regarding black humanity, Douglass’s visual aesthetic took at its starting point the formal, political and ideological importance of representing Black subjects as psychologically complex individuals rather than as generic types, flattened icons or caricatured non-entities. At the heart of Douglass’s theory of portraiture was his conviction that all likenesses of African American subjects, enslaved and free, must do justice to “the face of the fugitive slave” by conveying the “inner” via the “outer man” and thereby work with emotional depth rather than physical surface in order to extrapolate *a full gamut of lived realities otherwise annihilated out of existence*.<sup>40</sup>

We shall return to this key issue of how what we could call positive pictorial arguments would show the complex individuality of black people - with the “full gamut of lived realities.” This is precisely what is

---

<sup>38</sup> Note that Douglass’ form of logical argumentation often includes clearly performative aspects. As in his commencement speech “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered.” at Case Western where he points to the irony of the invited speaker having to justify their own humanity. It thus becomes a sort of performative *reductio ad absurdum* of the claim that blacks are sub-human.

<sup>39</sup> Douglass, *The Claims*, 1854, p. 290.

<sup>40</sup> Celeste Bernier, *A Visual Call to Arms against the “Caricature [sic] of My Own Face:” From Fugitive Slave to Fugitive Image in Frederick Douglass’s Theory of Portraiture*. *Journal of American Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 2, May 2015, pp. 323-357.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

“annihilated out of existence” by the demeaning but also narrow “all blacks look a like” caricaturing representation.<sup>41</sup>

## 8. Objects versus agents of change: transforming the distorting lens

Douglass’s writings can be seen as refutation of all sorts of arguments of black inferiority. However in his aesthetic work he also takes on many of the more subtle oppressive social and political dynamics that are so important in our current world.

The humanly co-created social environment can maintain and induce the negative reaction of many white people to black people. As philosopher Rita Nolan notes, “It is unproblematic that some things are socially contingent phenomena: They would not exist or would not be the kinds of things that they are, but for the fact that there are certain types of interpersonal relations.”<sup>42</sup> The *de facto* and *de jure* racist laws and racist social practices form an important part of the interpersonal and interracial relations in the United States. Frederick Douglass understood this very well. He argued that the social environment produced attitudes that hindered the full acceptance of black people.<sup>43</sup> This had to be changed. However, he also understood that non-ideal subversive practices might be needed. Importantly, the very social and political policies and practices impeding the ability of black people to improve their situation, or to be seen as full members of the political order, also works to make the viewing of a black person in a positive light difficult.

An example of the complexity of change can be seen in Douglass opposition to minstrel shows. He was vehemently opposed, particularly to those in which whites donned blackface.<sup>44</sup> In 1848, he called white minstrels “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.” In seeming tension with this view, a year later Douglass gives his approval to a black minstrel troupe, Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders.<sup>45</sup> The question is what drove Douglass to this apparent about-face. In his own words: “It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race.”<sup>46</sup> Douglass thus suggests that the very fact of black people performing on stage – as art, as something worthy of beholding – is a positive event with the potential of ameliorating prejudice. He was quick to note that the performance would have been better if the Serenaders had not exaggerated the exaggerations of our

---

<sup>41</sup> Douglass would give credit to those whites that represented the black man as a human being. For example, he applauded white US artist, Louis Prang’s print of African American senator, Hiram Revels, as a talisman against white racist discrimination by ensuring that, “Whatever may be the prejudices of those who may look upon it, they will be compelled to admit that the Mississippi Senator is a man, and one who will easily pass for a man among men.” Douglass, “Letter to Louis Prang,” 1870. Rpt. Katherine Morris McClinton, *The Chromolithographs of Louis Prang*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1973: 37

<sup>42</sup> Rita Nolan, *Cognitive Practices: Human Language and Human Knowledge* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 151

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor, “The Color Line,” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), pp. 648-656.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005)

<sup>45</sup> “Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture*, 2009, section goes here, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/>.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The North Star*, 29 June, 1849, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/miar03at.html>

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

enemies and presented the colored man as is. He, as always, was concerned with negative bodily representations of black performers as they presented the *race* to the world. Douglass reasoned that all art forms evoked images in the minds of the perceivers of the work of art. He wanted the images of Blacks to be positive and pondered the relationship between racism, art, representation, and political and social status.<sup>47</sup> In this case, given the pervasive structural conditions in the US with both prevailing extremely negative images of the blacks and a shortage of opportunities to show a positive image, he must have weighed that simply being on stage was a net positive.

Another complex case for Douglass was the use of various pictures to document the wounds of scarring from whiplashes on the backs of many slaves. Frederick Douglass, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, comments on slave overseers that could without mercy whip their slaves. He writes that the overseer's moral character was written on the "living parchment" of the backs of their slaves.<sup>48</sup> The floggings were a testament to the slaveholder's belief that the slave was less than human. The scars were a physical manifestation of the cruelty of slavery and slaveholders. The welts on the backs of slaves were also the



creation and as such "the artwork" of the slaveholder. Photographs and prints of the slave's scourged back, were circulated on both sides of the Atlantic. Abolitionists saw the propaganda value of these and used images of the slave's scarification as a way to attest to the brutality of slavery.<sup>49</sup> Douglass realized that the "artwork" represented more than physical brutality. He understood that the slave's mutilated body was a representation of his or her status in the slave community and, indeed, within the United States. The slave's body became a representational work of art, but what exactly did it represent? The slave's disfigured body was a revealing representation of the humanity denied Blacks. Thus as a mere negative, it did little to reinstate that

humanity and could as such be used also in some ways to keep status quo. It might show other blacks a rebellious honor, but was mostly used – by white abolitionists - to present blacks as victims, or – by white supremacists - to habituate people to seeing the black body in an inferior and "thing like" position.

Douglass admits to showing the "living parchment" of his own body. In *Life and Times*, he writes: "I was called upon to expose even my stripes, and with many misgivings obeyed the summons ..."<sup>50</sup> He, of course, was not happy about showing his scars, but it reinforced his understanding of the power of bodily representation as a form of moral suasion.<sup>51</sup> However he also saw the need to represent black people as agents and individuals not just as victims or bodily "evidence" of wrongdoing. Forms of imagery were needed that positioned the black individual as the full member of society that they deserved to be. Stauffer

<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg, Cory '12 (2013) "Ole' Zip Coon is a Mighty Learned Scholar: Blackface Minstrelsy as Reflection and Foundation of American Popular Culture," *The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*: Vol. 3, Article 6. Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gcjcwe/vol3/iss1/6>

<sup>48</sup> Frederick Douglass and Bill E. Lawson, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), pg. 201.

<sup>49</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, "A 'Typical Negro' or a 'Work of Art'? The 'Inner' via the 'Outer Man' in Frederick Douglass's Manuscripts and Daguerreotypes," *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 2 (2012): pg. #.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Douglass and Henry Louis Gates, "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself," in *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and times of Frederick Douglass*, 939.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Bill E. Lawson, "Douglass Among the Romantics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

writes: "Like Dubois, the Douglass of *My Bondage* seeks to become "a co-worker in the kingdom of culture," to dwell above the veil of race and to merge his double self – a black man and an American – "into a better and truer self".<sup>52</sup> Douglass saw art and imagery as a place where he could insist on this position of respect and full agency, humanity and personality. Stauffer writes:

In print, speech and images he sought to fashion himself in a way that would confer upon his persona and his white perceivers the "gift of life," to borrow from Elaine Scarry, which would link them together and dissolve social barriers. The slave, a "thing" acquired life and humanity when it was represented as a performer or an art object.<sup>53</sup>

## 9. The particular value of photography

As we have seen already Douglass sees art and pictures as holding transformative powers in general. However simply as a powerful tool imagery does not guarantee any progress towards social justice. As a matter of fact most depictions of blacks in art as already highlighted were seriously distorted, caricatured and generally demeaning.

Douglass's appreciation of the power of photographs was a natural extension of his understanding of the role of the representation of the body in shaping the views of humans about other humans.<sup>54</sup> For Douglass, photography, as an art form, could present the truth about the humanity of Blacks, which was lacking in the representation of black bodies and faces by white artists. "Douglass believed that true art could break down social barriers. True art, for him, meant accurate and "authentic" representations of blacks, rather than caricatures such as blackface minstrelsy."<sup>55</sup> Accurate and authentic photographs, Douglass reasoned, could serve as a correction of the negative pictorial arguments and advance the appreciation of black humanity, even in the racist culture of the United States. Along with some forms of live performance, photography was not liable to the same problems as for example painting which allows the artist another kind of control of that which is depicted.<sup>56</sup> The distorting lens could to some extent be bypassed in the presentation of the object, and could in that way help correct the distorted lens of the perceiver. In other words, it is not that photography guarantees the full or impartial truth but that it to some extent bypasses specific "filters" that are typically biased. Douglass thus saw photography as an art form that was extremely good as a corrective in an already bigoted world. Partially because of its concreteness and variation: "Pictures of life are about as varied as they are numerous."<sup>57</sup>

But again, even photographs and other forms of "seeing with ones own eyes" are complicated, and can be used to defend the bigoted and dehumanizing status quo. They pick out and represent one truth. In a racist world many truths exist that can be photographed and which do not move us towards social justice. This

---

<sup>52</sup> Stauffer, p 122.

<sup>53</sup> Stauffer, p 115.

<sup>54</sup> Jr. John S. Haller, "Race and the Concept of Progress in Nineteenth Century American Ethnology," *American Anthropologist* 73, no. 3 (1971)

<sup>55</sup> John Stauffer, "Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom," *Raritan* 25, no. 1 (2014): p 115.

<sup>56</sup> Douglass here also anticipates some of Sontag's views: "A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph — any photograph — seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects." Susan Sontag (1977) *On Photography*, Macmillan. p.175.

<sup>57</sup> Douglass, "Age of Pictures," p 147.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

is why Douglass stress the role of the black artist and the black acting subject, as opposed to the black object, in correcting and shaping our collective imagery – and thereby society. Photography is an important vehicle of change precisely because the white artist, white producer etc. can be sidelined. Photography – and his own public appearances for that matter – can be perceived and beheld unmediated. Donna Wells was one of the first to draw our attention to Douglass's use and understanding of the role of photography to combat the these negative presentation of black people. Douglass, as Wells notes, in 1861 makes it clear that for him photographs have a liberating aspect that can be used as a rebuttal to the anti-humanity arguments about black people. She writes:

This lecture and several variations were given throughout the years of the Civil War and was the pinnacle of his argument that *photography documented truth, having the potential to be a formidable social equalizer when juxtaposed next to depictions of racial types and stereotyped drawings by artists and scientists*. Even more important, his is probably the earliest African American voice added to the ongoing discussion about truth and beauty in nature fostered by the birth of the daguerreotype.<sup>58</sup>

Wells here puts her finger on a crucial notion – it is not that individual photographs simply give us the truth or each count equally in our representation of the world. It is rather that they can serve to correct the stereotypes already there. In other words it is their role in changing the existing presuppositions or “priors”.

Thus we can sum up here that photography can serve as a corrector of misleading imagery, it can present evidence of humanity, worth and concrete individuality. But it can also be used for bigoted evidence. Truth and accuracy are complicated things. Further, as we have seen the notion of accuracy does not exhorts Douglass fascination with photography or his interests in art and images and their transformational power. It is also about hope and inspiration, of seeing what could be, about ideals and perfections – and a higher kind of being. Lastly, Douglass was well aware of this as well as the contextual nature of how images are both represented and received. He writes:

Success is the admired standard of American greatness, and it is marvelous to observe how readily it also becomes the standard of manly beauty. There is marked improvements in the features of the successful man, and a corresponding deterioration in those of the unsuccessful. Our military heroes look better even in pictures after winning an important battle than after loosing one. The picture do not change, but we look at them through favorable or unfavorable prevailing public opinion.<sup>59</sup>

This contextuality and reliance on prior opinion, suggests that photos no matter how truthful, can always only be one ingredient among many in the process of social change.<sup>60</sup> With this in mind we now turn to the concrete ways in which Douglass, as both artist and aesthetic subject, sought to use imagery.

## 10. Douglass own imagery and artistry

---

<sup>58</sup> Wells, this volume, our italics.

<sup>59</sup> *Pictures and Progress*, 1861

<sup>60</sup> Note that the context generally shapes the affordances perceived – and that this is a key factor in our perception of art and in taking an aesthetic stance in general. I.e. seeing Douglass photograph in a museum as opposed to in a newspaper changes the kind of beholding that is likely to ensue. Prior knowledge about the artist and/or content – as in the case of the battle victory described by Douglass – also interacts with the overall affordances of the image.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

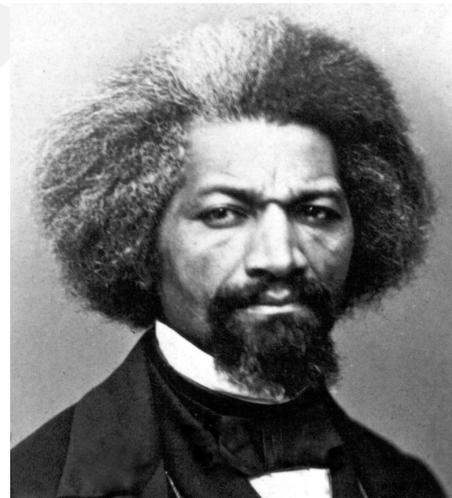
Douglass is one of the most photographed people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is now time to analyze the images that he posed for, and approved off, and thus was the subject rather than the object of. He clearly put thought into the photographs he sat for, and the imagery he thus created of himself. He was performing an artwork, and paid attention to the minute details of how his pictures came across and thus the kind of impact it could have on its beholder. In other words, the concrete social affordances of the specifics of the imagery.

Wells writes about Douglass self-choreography: "Douglass may have deliberately constructed this image of himself... Always impeccably dressed and well groomed, Douglass appears enraged and glares into the camera with brows crossed and forehead creased with anger."<sup>61</sup>

Douglass always presented himself as perfectly dressed and groomed and thus as a successful member of society. But what is of particular interest is that Douglass did not simply want to be a success story, a role model showing other black people that the world is okay as it is and that they can make it too. He did not simply want to be seen in a positive light. This could have been achieved with a smile and a light-hearted demeanor, and as referenced by Wells, Douglass explicitly expressed his dismay of drawing of him where he was appearing as "good natured, smiling pleasantly at the viewer."<sup>62</sup> Douglass wrote that such imagery "has a much more kindly and amiable expression than is generally thought to characterize the face of a fugitive slave"<sup>63</sup> Douglass when in control of his image, when photographed and not drawn by others, presented himself as stern and serious, sometimes even angry. Wells refers to the passages in the *Columbian Orator* specifically on body language, which she sees a potential inspiration for this characteristic pose:

Anger and resentment contract the forehead, draws the brows together and thrust out the lips . . . So likewise in anger, a certain vehemence and intensesness appears in the eyes, which, for want of proper words to express it by, we endeavor to represent by metaphors taken from fire, the most violent and rapid element; and say in such cases, the eyes sparkle, burn, or are inflamed... The hands should generally be open; but in expressions of compunction and anger, they may be closed.<sup>64</sup>

The question is, what is the social affordance of this kind of body language, and accordingly what are the transformations that Douglass is seeking to impose upon the minds of the viewers? Given his remark about what is fitting for a fugitive slave, one thing this pose does is to show his righteous indignation with the crimes of slavery. A positive demeanor would allow his viewer to forget these injustices, to put them aside and say – as they do – "he is one of the good ones."<sup>65</sup> Further, we



<sup>61</sup> Wells, p. 234

<sup>62</sup> See Zoe Trodd, "The Abolitionist and the Camera: Frederick Douglass's Photographic Half-Century," This volume

<sup>63</sup> Douglass. "A Tribute for the Negro," *The North Star* April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1849, reprinted in Foner, ed., LWFD 1, pp. 379-84. quotation at p. 380.

<sup>64</sup> Wells, p This volume

<sup>65</sup> Much of Phia Slater's work in social psychology is interesting here. Salter & Adams (2016) study the affordances and forward directedness of various cultural "historical memory" creating artifacts used for Black History Month in elementary schools. They found that materials generally stressed diversity and individual accomplishment and that racism and discrimination was rarely stressed particularly in majority white schools,

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

would like to speculate more generally that discontent and any kind of aggression are emotions that black people are not allowed to express. In terms of affordances, anger confronts, accuses and lays a claim on the viewer. Anger does not step down, it is not submissive and it will not be silenced. The anger of the oppressed is always unsettling for the existing power structures, as it suggests that appeasement is past and change is coming. Of course what often ensues is that the privileged attempt to delegitimize the anger. Where women are hysterics, childish victims of their irrational emotions, black people are accused of being beastly, unintelligent, docile etc. Douglass photographs precisely preempts this typical attack and defense of the stereotypes of the status quo. His images are serious, intense, wise and dignified, and about as far away from beastly and blunt as one can get. In terms of affordances, these pictures demand that the viewer sees, not only the humanity, but Douglass' beauty, poise and equal/high social standing. In other words, they demand that the beholder listen to his claims and offer a respectful and dignified response. The pictures also present Douglass as unapologetically black, both in his facial features and his well-groomed big Afro hair. This is important, as he knows that whether he likes it or not, he is "representing the race" in the beholders mind. This is not to say that race is real and that there are categorical visual features but that in a society already divided by race, race is the first thing we see. As Douglass writes: "When I come upon the platform the Negro is very apt to come with me. I cannot forget him: and you would not if I did."<sup>66</sup>

One can take Douglass's imagery as acknowledging that racial categories will be focal in the mind of the perceiver, and instead of merely agonizing over this denial of individuality he precisely uses that categorization to make his individual image have a strong impact on the stereotypes of black people. He thus strategically contributes to a shift in the categorical perception of black people. The existing categorization according to race is systemically denying black full agency and equal standing. One can be tolerated but is not allowed to participate in the "co-creation of culture". We see Douglass photographs, as well as his literary images, as debunking and refusing this exclusion from full citizenship.

Douglass literary portrait of Madison Washington in *The Heroic Slave* is 1) a very clear example of this sort of pictorial counter-argument to stereotypes, and also 2) of the specific transformational power of the aesthetic stance, and why art and images perhaps has a better chance of transforming the lens than more typical rational arguments. He writes:

Madison was of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong. In his movements he seemed to combine, with the strength of the lion, a lion's elasticity. His torn sleeves disclosed arms like polished iron. His face was "black, but comely." His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard under a brow as dark and as glossy as the raven's wing. His whole appearance betokened Herculean strength; yet there was nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect. A child might play in his arms, or dance on his shoulders. A giant's strength but not a giant's heart was in him. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness. But his voice, that unfailling index of the soul, though full and melodious, had that in it which could terrify as well as charm. He was just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,--intelligent and brave. He

---

thus contributing to the (re)-production of white ignorance and denial of past and present discrimination. Phia Salter and Glenn Adams (2016) "On the Intentionality of Cultural Products: Representations of Black History As Psychological Affordances" *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1166.

<sup>66</sup> Douglass, *Pictures and Progress*, p. 163.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute. In a word, he was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy.<sup>67</sup>

Stauffer writes about this description: "Washington is characterized in sublime terms that evoke both terror and joy."<sup>68</sup> However, we argue that the Kantian notion of sublimity is too imprecise to capture the neatly choreographed aesthetic activism of Douglass in this passage. We shall here linger a bit on the exact word images used to show how these each pushes the existing harmful stereotypes that Black people face: Douglass says that Washington's motions are "strong" but "elastic", thus refusing that the black mans strength somehow made him inflexible, crude or inelegant. His face is "black but comely", which insists on bridging the barrier of otherness that impedes interaction. Eyes as "lit with emotion kept guard" under a "dark brow", show that neither beauty nor an alert and receptive mind is reserved for Whites. His "Herculean strength" not "savage" or "forbidding", insists that Blacks do not have to refuse their strength to gain their humanity. "A child might play in his arms" shows him as caretaker and protector. Combining "strength" and "heart" adds moral value such that the courage is heroic righteousness not foolishness. "His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness," again highlights black features as friendly and good. But Douglass in the same breath admonishes not to confuse friendliness with submission: The voice as an "index of soul" is "full and melodious" and could both "terrify" and "charm". Douglass then proceeds to write that Madison Washington was "intelligent and brave. He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute". And lastly, in terms of social affordances, he explicitly tell us what kind of social interaction we would want to have with him: "He was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy".

How can we keep any notion of human excellence and deny it to the man described in this passage? How are you not going to meet and treat Washington with respect? The argument that splits humanity into dominant and inferior cannot proceed in the face of this image. The beholder in the heroic slave is the White man, Listwell, who one could interpret as taking an aesthetic stance as he watches Washington from a far. As Stauffer points out, Listwell is perfectly named as someone who listens well, someone capable of receptivity, of seeing what is actually there and being impacted by it. And in Douglass vision Listwell is precisely dually transformed for life: 1) The crime of slavery and the humanity of Blacks are forever certain in his mind, and 2) the individuality of Washington is imprinted, "daguerreotyped" in his memory.

The genius of Douglass pictorial approach lies in his understanding of how our interactions are rooted in habitual theories of the mind but also of how the pragmatic logic of these habits cross-pollinate on a sub-conscious level. We interact not with pixels but with overall impressions, and these overall impressions are highly contextual and rooted in extra-situational knowledge and experience. This can be terrible when negative "theories" poison people's perceptions of certain groups. However it can also precisely be used to refuse such categories and presuppositions. Subtle tensions within our habitual categorizations can be brought out by conflicting perceived affordances. Scientists study the hierarchical cognitive dynamics of

---

<sup>67</sup> Frederick Douglass, Philip Sheldon Foner, and Yuval Taylor, "The Heroic Slave," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), pg. 222.

<sup>68</sup> Stauffer, p. 119.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

this kind of affordances in e.g. the famous stoop test. Here a subject is presented with color words, such as "red," written in a different font color, say blue, and asked what color the letters of the word are. The fact that it is hard not to read the word "red" shows the strong response affordance of reading words. At a social level we are also disposed, not only as we saw earlier to see the successful as more beautiful, but also to interpret quite specific interaction possibilities. If structural racism systemically positions blacks as inferiors and as "others" then that is going to have a strong influence on the perceptual responses and overall actions of people living in such a society – to some extent even independently on one's own racial identity.

We referenced earlier three interrelated aspects of racist image "priors" that Douglass points to: their A) narrow generality and depersonalization, B) systematic distortion as other and contrast with whites and C) negative and demeaning nature. The point here is that each of these will inform perception and behavior in different ways. If we take as an example the phenomenon Douglass mentions that whites often misjudge the ages of Black people. This could at first be seen as uniquely a product of A) however it typically interacts with B) and C) such that protections and acts of compassion and protections afforded whites of young and old age are too often denied blacks. Here it is not clear what comes first: a general lack of respect and callous non-empathic attitude, the distortion of combined dehumanization and super-humanization or the inability to decipher the particularity of the specific person due to their race. The point is that Douglass method of using the social affordances of images lets us work on all of these simultaneously. Madison Washington affords both respect and compassion. He stands as an individual, yet not an outlier but a representative member of a group.

Another aspect of the interpersonal appeal in Douglass photography is that it brings differences into conversation. In his portraits we so often see Douglass direct his strong gaze right into the eye of the beholder. There is an insistence on the dignity of self and at the same time an appeal for interaction. Mickaella Perina has written about the dangers of the tendency to bifurcate self and other and white/ "western aesthetics" and "non-western aesthetics". She writes:

It is my contention that in today's cosmopolitan, transnational world, race, aesthetics, and otherness must be understood as interconnected. In our global era I see an inflation of otherness, a rise of the quality of being different and excluded from the making of standards, values, and judgments, including aesthetic standards. Ways of establishing a demarcation line between self and other, between ours and theirs may vary, but the tendency to regard the Other as a stranger and his or her culture as fundamentally foreign remains a constant. Furthermore, the tendency to reject otherness by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders, and to refuse to acknowledge ourselves as others, appears invariable.<sup>69</sup>

Perina advises pluralist interactions rather than binary divisions. We see Douglass pictorial arguments as putting forth a similar request.

## 11. Conclusion

---

<sup>69</sup> Mickaella Perina, 2009. Encountering the Other: Aesthetics, Race and Relationality. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (2), p. 1.

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

We have in this chapter tried to present Douglass views about imagery and how it shapes both individual minds and the shared fabric of society. We suggested that his theories show a profound insight into the dynamic workings of racist stereotypes, and how these simultaneously and continuously shape and are shaped by our minds, actions and shared society. Writing in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Douglass work can be seen as anticipating work of many later and current philosophers and psychologists. He writes about how both our perceptions and actions are shaped by our minds habitual "theories" or "priors" as researchers would call these today. Images are interesting to Douglass because of their dual capacity to make these priors visible and also in imprinting such on the minds and thus transforming us in a profound way. We here analyzed his theories of aesthetic perception in relation to a recent theory of aesthetic affordances as inviting an asymmetry between beholder and beheld, and thereby allowing for a kind of plasticity in the mind of the perceiver.

Most importantly, Douglass takes this psychological level theory to the level of co-inhabited and constructed and yet power-skewed cultural societies. As highlighted through out the chapter Douglass main goal was to fight to end slavery and for social justice, human dignity and equal social standing for freed Black Americans. He here understood also the propagandistic role of art and imagery in the life of the political state. Indeed the type of artwork supported by the state showed the nature of the moral character of the state. The enemy in war is often shown to be sub-human, and how individuals and groups were/are portrayed indicate the character of the state's attitude toward the humanity of those persons.

We discussed Douglass multipronged attempts to change the racist pictorial stereotypes of his day. Importantly Douglass acted both as theorist and a performance artist. He theorized and explained the potential of imagery as a powerful tool for creating and maintaining as well as combating discriminatory practices. The latter is harder than the former, and only art that subverts the existing "theory" can serve to transform a bigoted world. Anachronistically we can say that such art works need to change the "priors" and the perceived socially affordances of those targeted with discrimination. We here discussed what Douglass saw as the "right kind" of pictures, and his particular fascination with the new technology of photography. He sees photographs as allowing for an authenticity and truthful representation of the black subject as white artists and their distorted and distorting white gaze to a large extent can be bypassed. Wells notes: "For Douglass, photography was an invention that would provide proof of what African Americans truly look like...a tool that would counter the tendency to portray black people as something less than human and show instead the progress they have made in spite of enslavement and consequent alienation."<sup>70</sup> In this regard, Douglass's also used his own image to help foster a change in how black people were viewed. Thus, Douglass also acted as an artist and an artwork himself, throughout his career creating performances, essays and images aimed at transforming racist minds and societies beholding these. He carried himself as a gentleman but was by no means submissive or apologetic in his struggle. He presented us with an individual, an American, a black man that afforded respect, love, honor, friendship and awe, and yet would not be appeased or allow us to forget the past and present injustices.

---

<sup>70</sup> Wells (This volume)

Lawson, B. E. and Brincker, M. (forthcoming) "Subverting the racist lens: Frederick Douglass, humanity & the power of the photographic Image" in Bernier & Lawson (eds.): *I Am Only the Painter: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass*. Liverpool University Press.

Douglass's art was to make the impossible possible, to play into the broader social habits by which respect, equal treatment and human dignity is afforded – and by way of that very social reception make the humanity and worth of black people already enacted—and thus undeniable.

In *Lectures on pictures* Douglass writes:

Of all things the mental atmosphere surrounding us is most easily moved in this or that direction. The first causes of its oscillations are too often too occult for the most subtle. The influence of pictures upon this all-surrounding and all-powerful thought element may some day furnish a theme for those better able than I to do it justice. It is evident that the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful, though silent, influence upon the sentiment of present and future generations.<sup>71</sup>

We believe he might not be giving himself enough credit here. It seems that he understood the influence of pictures on the mind and the shared "mental atmosphere" better than most both at his time and ours. Douglass pictures and writings are works of poignant political activism just as he intended them to be. As we look at our current American society, it is hard to say whether they have worked—or will work—in a more ultimate sense. This will depend also on the receptivity of the beholders and our shared practices of cultivation of the distorting lens. Douglass himself was well aware that while pictures are important the struggle for human dignity and equality must be fought on multiple fronts.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Douglass, *Lectures on pictures*, p. 130.

<sup>72</sup> Bill E. Lawson, "Memories in Time: From Frederick Douglass to Ferguson and Beyond," *The Critique*, November 06, 2014, section goes here, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.thecritique.com/articles/memories-in-time-from-frederick-douglass-to-ferguson-and-beyond/>.