

MAURICE O. WALLACE and SHAWN MICHELLE SMITH, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 400 pp.

To scholars considering Afro-Pessimism as seriously as Sebastian Weier recently proposed in *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, a collection of essays titled *Pictures and Progress* will seem surprising.¹ Editors Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith announce their volume as an exploration of the ways “African Americans adopted and utilized photography in all its cultural forms to represent a new people, a new period, and new modes of black thought” (9–10). Instead of focusing on “structural white enslavism” (Weier 430), *Pictures and Progress* reminds its readers of the liberating potential of nineteenth-century photography. Its authors study a medium that produced authority, individuality, and micro-narratives of citizenship. Eleven substantial essays examine African American visual culture, cultural history, and literature. In between, four highly useful mini-chapters (“snapshots”) focus on the lives and oeuvres of early black photographers Augustus Washington, Thomas Askew, A. P. Bedou, and J. P. Ball. Wallace and Smith’s compelling introduction argues that the camera “helped to define the ethos of the era as well as direct the path of African American advancement” (15).

Following Frederick Douglass’s explicitly optimistic thoughts on pictorial practices, the editors and most of their contributors imagine a “much more autonomous African American viewer” than the one Du Bois’s theories of “double consciousness” imply. They outline consumers “seeking progress and improvement through a study of the self objectified as image” (8). Laura Wexler, for instance, concentrates on Douglass’s performances in his photographic portraits. She reads this “string of images” as expressions of Douglass’s determination to “insert himself” into the nation’s future (37). Ginger Hill explores Douglass’s theories of selfhood and the camera. In her essay, Douglass’s writings appear as “struggles with representation” (72) and as attempts to establish “iconicity [...] in the face of the tragic” (71).

¹ Sebastian Weier, “Consider Afro-Pessimism.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 59:3 (2014): 419–433.

Building on this foundation, the collected essays examine key literary and photographic texts of the African American nineteenth century. Augusta Rohrbach contributes a piece on Sojourner Truth’s negotiations with “shadow and substance.” Michael Chaney discusses Linda Brent’s “camera tactics.” These, Chaney finds, operate in a field where “the camera and the mulatta come together to form a composite machine for sustaining power relations through acts of seeing and being seen” (128). Along similar lines, Gabrielle Forman speculates on “mulatta genealogies” in the framework of slavery, freedom, and photographic culture. Smith discusses DuBois’s photographs for the 1900 Paris World’s Fair; she finds images “denaturalizing the assumed privilege of whiteness” (292) and “pushing subjectivity past the color line” (293). Wallace contributes a fascinating essay on photographs of African American soldiers, arguing that “the first possibility of an imagined national black manhood was constructed by the technological and commercial means of Civil War photography” (251). Nonetheless, wartime pictures of chain gangs contrasted the group portraits of “U.S. Colored Troops.” Wallace thus finds evidence of an early “mass criminalization of black men” (260).

Readings as ambivalent as Wallace’s seem to challenge the optimistic premise of *Pictures and Progress*. The editors clarify, however, that their insistence on “progress” accelerated by photographic practices should be seen as a heuristic move. For quite some time now, scholars of early photography have revealed the dehumanizing, racist potential of the camera and the processes of image circulation helping to establish pseudo-scientific racial difference and photographic systems of control. As the authors argue, “something vital has been overlooked in the effort to delineate photography’s repressive function” (4). Students of nineteenth-century photography may be extremely familiar with “dehumanizing” images (4). Yet we still know very little, Wallace and Smith state, “about early African American photographers and the African American men and women who commissioned daguerreotype, tintype, carte de visite, and cabinet card portraits, collected stereocards, or made their own tourist snapshots and assembled them in albums” (4). To “recover” these practices seems just as important as exploring racist visual culture (4). Here the editors follow Deborah Willis,

the pioneer of African American photography history.²

Pictures and Progress does not, however, ignore the camera's participation in the racist cultural and political power structures of nineteenth-century America. Nine of the infamous J.T. Zealy slave photographs appear on the pages of this collection. Produced for Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz, the portraits were photographed in antebellum South Carolina. The volume's reproductions include the immediate context of these likenesses. We see casings aiming to provide a sense of luxury. We see Zealy's company logo matching its elegance with the salon setting of the photographs themselves. The slaves' nude bodies displayed in these images appear in stark contrast to the decorative setting, framing, and, in a larger sense, to middle-class whiteness never exposing its own corporeality.

Suzanne Schneider's exploration of Zealy's series calls for a new reading that doesn't merely point out the "debasement" they symbolize. Schneider suggests reading them as pornographic images, claiming that in this particular subgenre the spectator "equally becomes a subject for sexual scrutiny" (238). This, Schneider posits, might save the enslaved subjects as they appear in the historical archives: "Exposing *all* bodies (our own included) as marked (if only by the taint of desire), perhaps the body of the Other will cease to be the quintessential victim, the *ur-mark* of the vicissitudes of visibility" (238; emphasis Schneider).

Schneider's essay seems fresh and lively, though it takes some, maybe too much suspension of disbelief to think that sexualized slave portraits would lead to a more balanced relationship between sitters and viewers. One of Schneider's implicit points is more convincing: that the history of photography may need more subjective criticism. The images presented here confront historians, critics,

and curators with slaves, citizens, and slaves who became citizens yet were not treated as such. On the one hand, African American selfhood was constantly challenged. On the other hand, black photographers did their very best to stress their subjects' individuality. It would seem odd to respond to these charged self-representations in bland and self-effacing prose.

The strongest essay in this collection could be seen as a model for such a learned, yet idiosyncratic response to the dramas of selfhood the photographic archive reveals. Cheryl Finley's piece "No More Auction Block For Me!" takes its readers to the heart of the photographic experience. Finley scrutinizes a nineteenth-century album catalogued under "Lot 118. [Blacks]. Tintypes." A photography appraiser and consultant at a New York gallery, she examines the volume of African American portraiture that is up for sale. This is a poignant, intensely physical process, and she cannot help but connect this particular auction to nineteenth-century slave auctions. One powerful photograph of a young woman startles her. She starts weaving fictional stories around the portrait, reading the album as a coherent narrative rather than a collection. To give away more would spoil the reading experience of Finley's remarkable blend of photography theory, hyper-detailed material culture studies, and autobiographically informed cultural criticism.

Naturally not all pieces in this collection take such risky gambles. The volume balances originality and scholarly substance. In this fashion, *Pictures and Progress* moves photography criticism and history away from the protocols of suspicion and toward the nuanced exploration of the material, its contexts, and the ideas of humanity that vernacular images propel.

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² See: Deborah Willis, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994); Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2000).