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Reading Through Pictures: Using Archival Images to Teach Slave Narrative

Abstract: This essay discusses an approach to teaching slave narrative that utilizes archival images. It argues that incorporating such materials in the classroom not only helps students grasp the complexities of racial representation in 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th}-century literature and today, but also improves their close reading skills. The article begins by laying out the rationale for using archival images in a survey of American literature from beginnings to 1865. Then, the article describes a lesson plan that asks students to analyze text and image together to deepen their understanding of Phillis Wheatley's 1773 poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Finally, the piece discusses an assignment in which students find and analyze an archival image that relates to one of the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century slave narratives assigned later in the semester.

In my survey course, "American Literature: Beginnings to 1865," I find that students sometimes have trouble engaging with slave narratives. Specifically, students struggle to see these texts as "literary." For instance, instead of approaching Harriet Jacobs's \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} (1861) or Frederick Douglass's \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave} (1845) as complex compositions that elicit a range of interpretations, they understand them as simple records of historical fact. From this perspective, such texts are not subject to analytical scrutiny; students assume these narratives cannot yield much (if any) meaning beyond the literal events they recount. In a similar vein, students sometimes express a sense that these texts serve no particular aesthetic purpose, either on the syllabus or in literary history more broadly. These attitudes can reflect more deep-seated skepticism about the value of discussing slavery at all. "We know that slavery happened," some students insist, "so why do we have to keep talking about it?" In such questions, I hear a tacit claim that there is little more one could possibly say or know about slavery, and that the topic has little relevance today.

I use archival images to shake students out of this sense of complacency and to reinvigorate their reading practices. As students analyze archival images in relation to texts,
they practice noticing a works' salient details and using these to build an argument.¹ Careful attention to such details prods students to question if any text is ever simply a record of what happened. They begin to see that, like photographs and portraits, autobiographical writings are consciously composed, with certain elements foregrounded and others occluded. Learning to see the craft in texts and images helps students see that slave narratives are not just statements of fact, but complex works that push back on stereotyped representations of blackness. Even as these texts testify to the need to end racial oppression, they do not simply repeat this point. Instead, they grapple with questions about how to responsibly represent that oppression. In grappling with such questions, these texts speak to our own moment, in which when, where, and how racial oppression should be addressed is very much at issue.

This connection to the present speaks to a second goal in using archival images: I seek to make students more informed interlocutors in contemporary conversations about race. While debates over Hollywood whitewashing, protests against police violence, and the like can seem solely like products of contemporary culture, contests over racial representation have a much longer history. Exposure to archival materials helps students realize this by contextualizing current debates and clarifying their stakes. This, in turn, helps me meet one more pedagogical goal: altering how students understand the methods and uses of literary study. As students become more aware of the materials—visual or otherwise—that circulated alongside historical texts, they can deploy close reading not only to understand a single text, but also to grasp that text's relationship to a broader cultural context or social problem. Seeing the discipline as concerned with longstanding, consequential problems helps students recognize that they can turn the critical faculties they hone in class to analyze present-day cultural production.

In what follows, I articulate my process for getting students to confront the artfulness of various slave narratives—a confrontation that asks them to think more deeply about the stakes of racial representation, and requires them to analyze how the details of any artistic work contribute to the piece's overall meaning. After discussing how former slaves and present-day scholars have framed the importance of images, I describe a lesson plan and an

¹ We practice these same skills on texts throughout the term, of course, but students often seem less intimidated by analyzing visual works, so this exercise tends to get a lot of mileage.
assignment, both of which ask students to read a given slave narrative in relation to archival images.

**Critical Takes on Racial Iconography in U.S. Culture**

My interest in using visual materials to teach slave narrative springs from the texts themselves. The authors of the slave narratives I assign in my survey course recognized images' power to shape popular understandings of race. For instance, Frederick Douglass's passion for photography is well documented. As the authors of *Picturing Frederick Douglass* observe, Douglass "defined himself as a free man and citizen as much through his portraits as his words" (xi). This is apparent not only in his status as "the most photographed American of the nineteenth century" (he sat for and circulated an incredible number of portraits), but also in his writing on visual images (ix). In these writings—comprised mainly of four lectures on photography—Douglass explores the social and political power of visual images, linking making art to making positive social change.

Harriet Jacobs's interest in images is less prominent in the historical record, yet a growing body of scholarship attests to her engagement with visual culture. In this vein, a short but telling moment in Jacobs's 1861 narrative suggests that she, like Douglass, understood how important visual representations could be in the fight for racial equality. After escaping bondage in North Carolina, Jacobs's first stop was Philadelphia. Her stay in Philadelphia was brief, but her narrative nonetheless recounts a visit to an artist's studio in that city. The woman with whom Jacobs was lodging had commissioned portraits of her children, and she took Jacobs to see these. Jacobs records her experience, saying: "I had never seen any paintings of colored people before, and they seemed to me beautiful" (162). The fact that Jacobs, years later, recalls and records this experience is striking. Although her...
seven-year confinement to a coffin-like garret is only days behind her at this point in the text, the narrative shows that the sight of black subjects depicted in portraiture nonetheless merits mention. This anecdote's inclusion underscores the importance of representations that counter marginalized subjects' denigration and erasure. The anecdote also suggests the need to place both texts and images in a larger cultural context, particularly when racial representation is at issue. After all, Jacobs mentions these images in her text not because they are the first depictions of African Americans she has seen, but rather because they utilize a specific genre: painted portraiture. The beauty she remarks on in these paintings may reflect the fact that portraiture, as a genre, is associated with depicting the humanity and uniqueness of individual subjects—the genre implicitly confers respect on its subjects. These portraits are likely remarkable to Jacobs because they defy the precedent, set in 19th-century visual culture, of denying black subjects' humanity.

While Jacobs's take on these portraits is largely positive, this example is not meant to suggest that there are just "good" images and "bad" images when it comes to representing race. Many images occupy an ambivalent space between these poles. For instance, imagery designed to foment opposition to slavery often presents black subjects primarily as suffering bodies—passive objects who exist for others' purposes, rather than agential subjects in their own right. Such imagery may have been crafted with abolitionist intent, but it nonetheless reinforces hierarchical race relations. Indeed, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten have all traced how visual displays of black bodies have been used to confirm the power, wholeness, and humanity of presumptively white viewers. Michael Chaney draws on these scholars' work in his 2008 book, *Fugitive Vision*, which argues that much antebellum iconography depicting enslaved people casts them as static entities locked in a condition of perpetual non-personhood. And yet, Chaney contends, juxtaposing text and image can create new ways of seeing race (10). By toggling between written and visual modes, enslaved and fugitive subjects could put off declaring a fixed identity while nonetheless proclaiming their subjectivity. "[T]hrough multimedia representations," Chaney writes, formerly enslaved subjects could claim modes of being that eluded the status of commodity, fugitive, or victim (13).
Deploying Images in the Classroom

In my survey class, I do my best to follow Chaney’s lead and get students to consider how text and image have worked together to document slavery's horrors without fixing black subjects in a position of unchanging victimhood. To this end, I introduce Phillis Wheatley's poetry by using various prefatory materials from her single published volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Specifically, we examine two items that precede the poems that make up this volume: the frontispiece and the attestation. The frontispiece is a portrait of Wheatley (fig. 1), while the attestation is a document, signed by eighteen Bostonian men, which states that the African woman pictured in the frontispiece had been judged capable of authoring the poems found later in the volume (fig. 2).
Although we get to these materials fairly quickly, I start off class by projecting Wheatley's short, eight-line poem. I ask students what it is about and what patterns they notice. Usually, students are quick to note the religious imagery that permeates the poem, and the fact that it deals with race and slavery, despite never directly referencing bondage. We then move into a brief, contextualizing lecture that builds on students' observations—we cover Wheatley's enslavement, her religious commitments, then turn to the tradition of using

Figure 2 Phillis Wheatley, as illustrated by Scipio Moorhead in the Frontispiece to her book Poems on Various Subjects.

Figure 1 Attestation that Wheatley's poems were written by her.
prefaces to "authorize" publications by women and/or people of color. This last point leads us to the attestation. I pass out copies of this document and give students time to examine its language. Then I ask students to consider the following questions: does the document authorize or undermine the poetry that follows? In other words, does it lead a reader to believe she is about to encounter skillful poetry, or trite, hackneyed rhymes? Might it do both?

Students tend to be divided on these questions at first. While some dwell on the fact that this supposedly "authorizing" document refers to Wheatley as "an uncultivated Barbarian," others emphasize that, for an audience of 18th-century Anglo readers in England and the Americas, the attestation would have made Wheatley more credible. Rather than pushing the class to accept one side or the other, I have students carry this debate forward as we turn to the frontispiece, interrogating whether it presents Wheatley as a skilled author or a derivative hack.

To give students a point of reference for analyzing Wheatley's frontispiece, I ask them to compare it to the image of Thomas Jefferson that appears as the frontispiece to the third edition of Notes on the State of Virginia (fig. 3).3

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3 I use this image as a point of comparison in part because it gives students an example of conventional frontispiece portraiture from Wheatley's era. I also use it, however, because, prior to class, students read the section of Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) in which Jefferson maligns Wheatley (and comments on the supposed disabilities of all people of African heritage). He states: "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet" (Heath Anthology 1096). Reading Jefferson alongside Wheatley gives students a more concrete awareness of the kinds of prejudice that Wheatley and others faced; it also offers a more fleshed-out sense of her social position and how well known she was. Students can bring all this to bear when comparing the two images.
Students comment on points of contrast, often noting the difference in the two subjects' gazes. Jefferson looks straight out, gazing confidently at the viewer, while Wheatley looks upward, as if lost in thought or consulting some one above her. Students debate the meaning of this—some read this upward gaze as a sign of self-doubt, while others argue that it portrays her as a thoughtful person, and perhaps as a writer inspired from above. This, in turn, sparks more
debate—if she is inspired, does that diminish the sense that she is talented in and of herself? Students have similar debates about the contrasting composition of the two images. While Jefferson is depicted from the shoulders up, we see more of Wheatley's body. Moreover, she is presented at work, seated at a writing desk with quill in hand. While some students see this as a reflection of the fact that her body—female and racialized—defines her social status, others observe that showing her in the act of writing is, in fact, empowering.4

It should be apparent that students often disagree about whether the frontispiece works more to authorize or undermine Wheatley's work. Still, whichever function they see predominating, they generally recognize that the image is multivalent, double-voiced. It speaks to different audiences in different ways, and how one audience sees it may say more about that audience than it does about the original work. In this way, the image "looks back" at the viewer, implicitly asking her to interrogate her own position relative to the contradictions the frontispiece puts on display (Chaney 5).

As the class then circles back to resume the discussion of "On Being Brought from Africa to America," students' grasp of the image prepares them to apprehend the double-voiced nature of the poem. Although the discussion can range widely depending on what students notice and wish to address, I eventually steer the class to consider the poem's closing couplet, which reads: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin'd and join th' angelic train." (7-8, italics original). After centering their attention on these lines, I ask students to consider who exactly the speaker says can be "refin'd." After a few moments, the class usually recognizes that these lines support at least two answers to this question. The comma after "Christians" can be read as marking off "Christians" from "Negros," suggesting that these are two separate referents and two separate groups. In this reading, the couplet seems to implicitly enjoin white Christians to recall that people of African heritage can, like Wheatley, be converted and educated. However, the comma also holds out the possibility that the two words "Christians" and "Negros" are in a relation of apposition. In this

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4 Matthew Steven Bruen's article, "The Archive in the Early American Literature Classroom: Techniques, Exercises, and Assignments," offers an illuminating and related discussion of incorporating archival and paratextual materials in the classroom. In a footnote on page 10, he also describes an approach to teaching Wheatley's work through the frontispiece. However, while Bruen examines how the portrait attempts to "de-Africanize her for...white readers," I focus more on questions of authority (10).
reading, each word has the same referent and thus designates one body, made up of Christians of various races. When read in this way, "Christians" and "Negros" are one in their religion and one in their sinfulness—all are "black as Cain," irrespective of their pigmentation. In this interpretation, the poem's message is more radical. Rather than instructing a white, Christian readership to accept the possibility that black subjects may one day attain their level of supposed civilization, these lines instruct a more diverse readership that that day has already arrived.

The comma after "Christians"—rather than a more decisive colon or dash—allows both these meanings to exist at once, resulting in a poem whose seeming resolution actually presents a multiplicity of meanings. In this way, the poem's speaker functions as a black subject who is not static, but dynamic. Like Wheatley's image in the frontispiece, this poem oscillates between at least two different political stances. By examining the image and the text together, then, students see how this 18th-century volume refuses to present black identity as fixed. Further, they see how it asks careful readers to consider their own position—after all, how one reads the poem's final couplet speaks to a reader's assumptions more than those of the poem.

Exploring Images in the Digital Archive

Later in the course, we build on these ideas. Several weeks after discussing Wheatley's work, we examine Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and I again ask the students to consider the relationship between text, image, and racial representation. To do this, I assign a small project. Students are asked to use either the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs online database or Google images to find an image that interests them and that has some relationship to either Jacobs's or Douglass's narrative. After selecting an image, the students write an analytical reflection that must do three things: (1) identify their image's source, (2) analyze the features of the image, and (3) consider how the image alters, enhances, or otherwise relates back to the themes of the text.
While I am still fine-tuning this assignment, it nonetheless accomplished several goals. First, it helped students build their close reading skills—no small thing in a lower-division course comprised mostly of non-humanities majors. In their analytical reflections, students really impressed me with the careful attention they paid to the details of their chosen images. Furthermore, many commented on the significance of those details with a creativity and rigor that contrasted sharply to the caution (and tendency to summarize) they sometimes brought to analyses of written texts.

Second, many students used the assignment to make connections that deepened and complicated their understanding of Jacobs's and Douglass's respective texts. For instance, several students analyzed photos of Douglass with relatives; they noted that although his Narrative gives little attention to family and domestic relations, these seem to have been a source of pride and happiness later in life, complicating the individualism present in his 1845 text. Another student found a photo of Jacobs's grave, which lies next to her daughter's in Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This student observed that the image suggests that key themes in Jacobs's text (namely, the struggle to keep the family together) have a life beyond the text itself that is historically traceable. These are insights that could, perhaps, have been reached via class discussion. That said, there is never enough time in the classroom to cover all one might want to. Further, digitized databases allow my students to make these connections on their own. This independent exploration is valuable—it not only helps them make inferences and synthesize information, but also gives them a sense of what archival research feels like. They experience the risky but exciting process of looking without knowing precisely what they are looking for.

Finally, multiple students found contemporary images that related to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. These images included book covers, a photo of a modern-day stage adaptation, a painting of Jacobs's garret, and a mural. Students drew a variety of conclusions from the various contemporary images that they examined. Still, for all of them, being able to

5 In future iterations of the assignment, I want to give students more guidance on finding and selecting images, and on the types of questions that one might productively ask of an image pulled from a digital archive. Specifically, I think searching an online database together in class, selecting an image together, then asking and researching key questions would help orient students to the project. [See Appendix for list of questions.]
link a modern-day image to a nineteenth-century text underscored the fact that narratives such as Jacobs's continue to be read, illustrated, and circulated in a range of media. In seeing this, students saw how slave narratives may be historically distant, yet many of their concerns remain concrete and immediate.

Ultimately, students' encounters with archival images—both those that I bring into the classroom and those they find for themselves—push them to make a variety of connections. These include connections between textual and visual works, between seemingly minor details and a work's overall message, and between historical issues and contemporary ones. In making these connections, students will (I hope) gain a broadened sense of what literary study can do. As our culture becomes increasingly visual, students need a way to make sense of the images that call out to them from billboards, magazines, and all manner of screens. Moreover, they need to know that the visual and textual materials of their daily lives are anything but divorced from the social hierarchies that persist. A survey of American literature offers a unique opportunity for students to explore these linkages by examining artifacts from a historical context that is distant from the present they inhabit, yet is nonetheless related. Archival images offer students access to earlier American culture in a way that feels tangible. Further, analyzing such images helps students see that the bread and butter of literary study (i.e. – noticing specific details in a work and considering what these tell us about the broader whole) can be fruitfully applied to texts that do not announce themselves as "literary," or that might not strike students as needing further critical study. Thus, as incorporating images in the classroom puts students in touch with the continuing relevance of slave narratives, it also highlights the practical relevance of learning to analyze cultural materials.


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Appendix: Student Handout

Preliminary Questions to Ask About Your Image

Directions: Use this list of questions to get started analyzing your image. You need not answer every question on this list—some questions will be more relevant to your image than others. Still, you should read through the entire list since there may be a question that leads you to examine an aspect of your image that you had not yet considered. As you run into questions that seem relevant to your image, but which you do not have an answer for, do some research (and feel free to see me for guidance).

- What in the image surprises you? What details stand out? Why might such details have been included?
- Where in the image is your eye drawn?
- Does the image depict its subject(s) positively? Negatively? Ambivalently? How can you tell?
- What does this image suggest about its subject(s)?
- Why might this image have been produced? For instance, was it made for political reasons? Personal reasons? Both?
- Does this image include any references to other kinds of art or culture? Are there any symbols? If so, how are they being used?
- How is light used in the image? For example, is light uniformly present throughout the image, or are some parts brightly illuminated and others shadowed?
- If there are people in the image, how are they dressed? Are they holding or pointing to any props or objects? What kinds of expressions do they have on their faces? What postures are they in?
- What is the setting of the image?
- Who was responsible for making this image? What people and/or institutions were likely involved? An artist? A patron? A publisher? A board of editors? Who had to collaborate?
• What type of image is this? An etching? A carving? A lithograph? A painting? A
daguerreotype or photograph? Something else?
• How might this image have been made?
• Was this image likely expensive to produce? To disseminate? How can you tell?
• Who might have been likely to see this image? For instance, some images (such as
murals or other forms of art) get displayed in public places. Some images circulate in
newspapers or magazines. Some (such as family portraits) are displayed in private
homes. Some images, by contrast, are private—they do not get displayed at all. How
public or private does this image seem to be, and how can you tell?