Archives of Resistance: Picturing the Black Americas

Dustin Breitenwischer, Jasmin Wrobel, and Robert F. Reid-Pharr

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Picturing in the Archive: Images and Imagination

“Where there is power, there is resistance,” writes Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, “and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned” (95). Turning this insight onto the discussion of what we frame as “archives of resistance,” one might argue that there is no outside of the archive, only intrinsic dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, contestation, and substitution. Accordingly, the archive is clearly more than a space or a practice of collecting, storing, and distributing. Rather, it is a highly communicative space and an extraordinarily competitive practice of assembling and reassembling, stating and testifying, intervening and witnessing, and not least of identifying and destabilizing established identities. This special issue, “Archives of Resistance: Picturing the Black Americas,” brings together artists and scholars from the fields of Latin American and North American studies, African American studies, comparative literature, and media studies to discuss visual archives that decidedly resist established canons and archives of Black American imagery and biased imaginations of Blackness as part of the cultural legacies of slavery and colonization. The contributions foreground processes of resistant archival practices in the arts and media from a trans-American perspective. Despite their...
individual, local, and, above all, complex peculiarities, the archives discussed here have not been built within the confines of national borders and imaginaries, but by wide-ranging and highly dynamic transnational (and ultimately post-/colonial) mechanisms of representation and visualization. These mechanisms have emerged from a common history and/or experience of colonialism, slavery, segregation, and systemic anti-Black violence, and they refer to and (re)shape each other reciprocally across the Americas.4

At least since the first Africans were violently taken to South America as slaves around 1540, practices of picturing the Black Americas have produced a variety of representations that range from the disturbingly violent and the grotesquely absurd to the politically empowering and the beautifully enchanting. From meticulous blueprints of cargo spaces in the bellies of slave ships to caricatures of Jim Crow minstrelsy and lynching photography; from Jean-Baptiste Debret’s lithographs of enslaved women and men in nineteenth-century Brazil to urban murals; and from Emory Douglas’s drawings in The Black Panther newspaper to Kara Walker’s silhouettes, the cultural history of the Americas is a history of intersecting and conflicting, of public and private, of accessible and hidden, of repulsive and progressive, and of disturbing and endearing pictorial archives that define, question, resist, or reconsider the social and aesthetic imagination of Blackness. In the production of an ever-growing archive that shapes the imagination of the Black Americas, picturing is the quintessential practice. Be it in the disparate stream of images in the individual and cultural imaginary or in the production of physical artifacts in art and media: modes of picturing have for the longest time formed and informed Black subjectivity.

The history of the Americas is significantly marked by modes of neglect and suppression, by absences and exclusion. Whether we look at practices of paratextual patronization in nineteenth-century literature, the literary canonization before the “culture wars,” or at the different social and aesthetic modes of enforcing retreat and withdrawal in the Black diasporic art and literature of the past decades through the present, forms and practices of visibility and invisibility feature all-too prominently and shape much of the transnational cultural imaginary. And these forms and practices have, by the nature and logic of their sensual perception, always revolved heavily around pictorial archives, creative resistance, and the poetics of picturing, which, as we understand it here, is a social and aesthetic practice that materializes in complex networks of human and non-human actors, and in a variety of arts and media that often inform each other across generations. We may want to think of the photographic reimagination of the prologue of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) in Jeff Wall’s “After the ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue” (2000), or the revisiting of Bantu iconographies and symbols in Marcelo D’Salete’s graphic novels Cumbe (2014) and Angola Janga (2017).5 Or we may want to consider historical accounts of Black
In this context, see also Agnes Lugo-Ortiz’s essay on the (dis)appearances of the “slave’s face as dominant and distinctive element of the visual archive of transatlantic slavery.”

Archives of resistance decidedly move beyond the purpose of collection, categorization, and provision. They are, in and of themselves, creative agents in that they store and simultaneously shape and reform images and imaginations. As such, archives of resistance are counter-archives that not only circumvent but explicitly and confrontationally break with the hegemonic gaze of colonial rule, White supremacist imagination, and racist stereotyping. In In the Wake, Christina Sharpe inadvertently alludes to the interventionist impulse of resistant archives by (re)considering moments of invisibility in the social and cultural history of the Black Americas. Sharpe asks “what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival”? (14). Drawing on the intersecting practices of picturing and archiving, Sharpe ventures into the relationship between “imaging” and “imagining,” using portraiture as her medium of choice:

If we understand portraiture to be both the “art of creating portraits” (image and text) and “graphic and detailed description,” how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image-making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deadly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures? Much of the work of Black imaging and the work that those images do out in the world has been about such imaginings of the fullness of Black life. (115)

Arguably, this has held true ever since the advent of early photographic technology and the detachment of Black image-making from the gaze, pencil, brush, and imagination of White picture-making.

Picturing Frederick Douglass: A Paradigm

Processes and practices of picturing eventually translate into processes and practices of archiving, potentially turning the archive into an interrelated network of cultural resistance. In that regard, the mid-nineteenth century was not only marked by a paradigm shift in the (hi)story of human picture-making but also by the promise of archives that were, until then, outright unimaginable. Early photographic technology, from
the ambrotype to the daguerreotype, has revolutionized the production, distribution, and reproducibility of images. For Black Americans across the United States, most notably for the social reformer Frederick Douglass, it sparked the idea that the democratization of artistic technology and practice could be translated into moral and political progress. In 2015, John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier collected, published, and analyzed a fascinating archive, a body of 160 separate photographs of Douglass, who was the most photographed U.S. American of the nineteenth century (at least among persons of public interest). In *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, the three editors show that Douglass, throughout his life as fugitive slave and freedman, purposely built an archive of photographic portraits. Douglass knew that in the modern world, an individual’s legacy—as well as a community’s—depended on its representation and perpetuation in images.

Accordingly, Douglass did not only enjoy being the subject of picture-making practices; he was also a brilliant theoretician of this newly developed technology (cf. Breitenwischer; Stauffer). Between 1861 and 1865, when the United States was fighting a civil war over the future of their union, Douglass toured the Northern states with different lectures about picture theory, photographic technology, and democracy. Against the backdrop of his conviction that “the picture-making faculty of man is a chief element of all that is religious and poetic about us” (“Lecture on Pictures” 132) and in light of an increased hope that the war would lead to a victory of the Union and hence to the abolition of slavery across the entire United States (particularly after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863), Douglass understood the invention of early photographic techniques in an existential interrelation of technological, political, and moral progress. “Material progress,” he asserted, “may for a time be separated from moral progress. But the two cannot be permanently divorced” (“Lecture on Pictures” 140), only to add in “Age of Pictures” that “[t]he brazen ribs of slavery and despotism […] must break down under the pressure of physical progress. All material improvements look toward freedom and unity of man” (159).

For Douglass, photography and the affordance to have one’s picture taken constitutes the technologically enabled liberation from the White gaze, which he, according to an 1849 review of Wilson Armistead’s *A Tribute for the Negro*, felt everywhere. “Negroes,” he wrote, 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. (“A Tribute” 2)

Until the advent of photographic picture-making and the ensuing ability to curate one’s own pictorial archive, picturing Black subjectivity predominantly was a matter of pseudo-scientifically infused stereotyping.
Aside from the egalitarian spirit of photography, Douglass scrutinized pictorial representation of Black Americans in a way that would resonate strikingly in W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1926 essay “Criteria of Negro Art,” in which Du Bois provocatively wonders, “[s]uppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?” (102). The future of picturing was in the hands of photography, which enabled an unbiased, morally unencumbered, and lasting representation that many viewed as the epitome of human progress, social inclusion, and Black emancipation and self-empowerment. As Douglass put it, “[t]he humblest servant girl, whose income is but a few shillings per week, may now possess a more perfect likeness of herself than noble ladies and even royalty” (“Lecture on Pictures” 127), for “[f]ormerly the luxury of a likeness was the exclusive privilege of the rich and great; but now, like education and a thousand other blessings brought to us by the advancing march of light and civilization, such pictures are brought within the easy reach of the humblest members of society” (“Age of Pictures” 143).

Both in his lectures and in his desire to have his picture taken, Douglass was invested in the future, legacy, and lasting impact of the visibility and transgenerational relatability of Black subjectivity in the United States (and beyond). Douglass urged Black Americans in the United States and the Black diaspora to build their own pictorial archives. He thus highlighted the need for and the lack of proper self-archiving practices that marked Black life well into the nineteenth century, producing, as Michael A. Chaney notes in Fugitive Vision, conflicting effects. “Countless images of tree-climbing slaves escaping dogs and Elizas leaping over ice cakes circulated the culture, emblazoned on everything from the pages of newspapers and books to plate ware, toys, and pillows. Paradoxically,” Chaney continues, “these proliferating scenes presumably marketed to denounce slavery’s dehumanization of the African American body replicated and amplified the process by which the slave was reduced to an object of commodification, becoming nothing more than a marketplace signifier of self-dispossession” (6). Douglass’s implicit call for expanded picturing and self-archiving in the Black community sought to annihilate the status of endlessly commodified object. In fact, according to Douglass, the technological process of photography itself might serve that purpose, for it allows its subject “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.” And this, Douglass concludes in “Pictures and Progress,” “is at [the] bottom of all effort and the germinating principles of all reform and all progress” (170).
Archives of Resistance

Douglass’s cultural call to arms during the Civil War and the early Reconstruction era was a call to establish what we frame as archives of resistance. In a letter from 1870 to the befriended printer Louis Prang, Douglass wrote accordingly,

[heretofore, colored Americans have thought little of adorning parlors with pictures. [...] Pictures come not with slavery and oppression and destitution, but with liberty, fair play, leisure, and refinement. These conditions are now possible to colored American citizens, and I think the walls of their houses will soon begin to bear evidence of their altered relations to the people about them. [...] Every colored householder in the land should have one of these portraits in his parlor, and should explain it to his children, as the dividing line between darkness and despair that overhung our past, and the light and hope that now beam upon our future as a people. (37)

So, in his reading of Douglass’s lectures, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes that “Douglass was acutely aware that images matter, especially when one’s rhetorical strategy had been fashioned around the trope of chiasmus, the reversal of the black slave-object into the black sentient citizen-subject” (204; emphasis in original). Building on Douglass’s efforts to construct an emphatically resistant archive that ultimately “reverses” objecthood into self-empowered subjectivity and spans generations, this issue focuses on practices and objects of picture-making that feed into Douglass’s hope and desire to create a visual archive beyond the type-casting forces of race and racism.

Accordingly, as the title of Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith’s Pictures and Progress (2012) suggests, for many Black Americans picture-making after the invention of early photographic processes meant the equation of technological and social advancement, which turned archiving practices into modes of social, political, and cultural self-positing. The technological progress in picture-making thus allowed Black Americans “to perform identities and to shape a dynamic visual culture” (13), and ultimately build and curate ever-growing archives. All of which, of course, played out not only in the archiving of images as a political or an intimately private enterprise, but also and substantially as a mode of artistic communication through the implementation of Black imagery by Black artists (“imagery” understood in the broadest sense as a product of picturing in literature and the visual arts). As such, the production and accumulation of artistic representations of Black life and Black experience across the Americas (and beyond) were, by definition, interventionist practices that sought to enrich as well as destabilize established aesthetic norms. In a way, the archiving of such artistic interventions was in and of itself an expression of political claims for social reform.

Thus did the early-twentieth-century debate arise between Alain Locke and Du Bois over the question of whether all Black art self-ev...

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8 For more on literature—and particularly the novel—as a mode of self-institutionalizing the Black experience, see Cloutier. On comics and graphic narratives, see the interview with artists Breena Nuñez, André Diniz, and Marcelo D’Salete in this issue.
identically is or at least should strive to be propaganda in the name of liberation, self-empowerment, and, as mentioned above, self-positing. Du Bois, of course, argued that all art needs to be propaganda, while Locke held that Black art needs to adhere to established aesthetic standards, fighting for its place in the canon of so-called Western art history (cf. Du Bois, “Criteria”; Locke). To put it differently, Du Bois and Locke publicly engaged scholars, critics, and artists in a debate about whether newly institutionalized archives of Black art were, in fact, politically mobilizing archives of resistance. Drawing on this logic of archiving as artistic participation and intervention, Stuart Hall, in a somewhat Du Boisean spirit, asserts that “[t]he moment of the archive represents the end of a certain sense of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement” (89). Again, archives of resistance are not merely storehouses of images and imaginations, but creators of new forms and practices of picturing and visualization that seek recognition. They are, in this sense, engines of disturbance and, quite emphatically, reformation by de-formation.

In its most radical expression, this interventionist mode of de-formation plays out in the aesthetic of “Black grotesquerie,” which Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman sees at play in the difference between “disturbed form” and “disturbing content.” Abdur-Rahman writes,

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\text{black grotesquerie marks in contemporary black cultural production the deployment of the grotesque as an expressive mode that undermines the prevailing social order by confounding its representational logics. [...] } \text{The acceptance of catastrophe as the context for black being, the practice of living on in outmoded shapes, the appetite for the unbearable underside of enjoyment, and the determination to make last what has already been ruined are the signal features of black grotesquerie. (683)}
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Picturing, in this context, is also a mode of materializing grotesquerie to undermine, distort, and disenfranchise prevailing archives. “As an expressive practice, black grotesquerie infuses the materiality of the black body with the textuality of the art object. Rather than merely signifying excess, dread, or decay, black grotesquerie delineates an aesthetic practice of contortion, exaggeration, substitution, inversion, corruption” (683).

Along these lines, the pictorial archives in the Americas are inadvertently tied to what Robert F. Reid-Pharr, co-editor of this issue, has referred to as “archives of flesh” (Archives). In the archives that emerge from the history and legacy of colonialism and slavery, the body is uncircumventable. And this holds true both for repressive and progressive archival practices and media. Therefore, we return to the history of photography in the United States. For bell hooks, photography (and potentially also the art of graphic narrativization) is a medium to “re-member,” which “evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of de-
But not least the public murder of George Floyd in May 2020 underscored the still dominant presence of the colonizing eye that not only records the dehumanization of Black people but that desires ever-new images of such dehumanizing spectacles. Picturing is then ultimately tied to the practices and media technologies of watching and witnessing, of surveillance as much as voyeurism. In Texte zur Kunst, Robert F. Reid-Pharr therefore notes, “We (Americans, Germans, blacks, whites, indeed the whole of the planet) watch and rewatch George Floyd’s being killed because watching black men being killed is what we always do” (“Anatomy”).

12 This, of course, holds just as true for disability studies, performance theory, queer studies, feminist theory, and gender studies. See, for example, Laura Mulvey’s paradigmatic 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

13 In The Black Atlantic, particularly in chapter 4, Paul Gilroy further complicates Du Bois’s concept by arguing that “[d]ouble consciousness emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalistic in that it derives from the nation state in which the ex-slaves but not-yet-citizens find themselves, rather than from their aspiration towards a nation state of their own. The third is diasporic or hemispheric, sometimes global and occasionally universalistic” (127). See also Blight; Fanon; Gooding-Williams, especially chapter 2; Posnock.

Poetics and Practices of Picturing the Black Americas: The Contributions

The contributions in this issue intricately rely on material in existing archives while drawing on their inherent gaps, silences, and invisibilities, thereby adding to the resistant archival practices and processes themselves. The contributions thus cover a wide array of works that engage in constituting, shaping, and changing archives of resistance,
from comic books and visual albums to children’s magazines and (social) media archiving practices. The emphatically resistant forms and modes of archiving discussed in this introduction and, above all, in the contributions, challenge the practice of archiving as a socially, politically, and aesthetically violent form of merely constructing hegemonic imageries, narratives, and historiographies. This issue only parenthetically focuses on visual representations and inscriptions of racism, White supremacy, and/or anti-Black violence, but instead centers its focus on self-directed and self-empowering modes of creatively resisting (structural) visual absences, aggressions, and abuse.

The issue opens with an article by Daniel Stein who argues that Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Black Panther* comic book series investigates the political potentials and liabilities of colonial and postcolonial archives in and for the contemporary Black Atlantic diaspora. Stein distinguishes between archives in the storyworld and the medium of the comics themselves, and thereby argues that Coates’s engagement in the world (and archiving practice) of comic book writing serves as an attempt to create alternative genealogies for the Black superhero and marks an attempt to offer new critical frameworks for rethinking the history of the genre and the legacies of Western imperialism.

Along similar lines, Nina Mickwitz focuses on a selection of contemporary U.S. comics that feature young Black female protagonists and are written and drawn by Black female creators. These comics, Mickwitz argues, demand that readers pay attention to issues of textual representation and to the social and cultural contexts of the creative industries as well, and they thus highlight questions concerning both race and gender. Against the backdrop of the #BlackGirlMagic online phenomenon and the intersection of creation and reception, Mickwitz’s discussion pays particular attention to central characters, aspects of the superhero genre, and affinities with Black feminist speculative fiction. She argues that the comics in question revise dominant representational repertoires and contest racialized and gendered assumptions about comics creators and their readership.

In a close reading of *Morro da Favela* (2011), a graphic novel by contributor André Diniz (see interview), Javiera Irribarren Ortiz proposes that while Maurício Hora’s original photographs, which inspired Diniz’s novel, represent the image of the favela to create a counter-hegemonic visual archive, Diniz’s graphic novel serves as a visual remediation that reinforces Hora’s artistic commitment to social contestation. The poetics and aesthetics of both registers, photography and graphic narrative, merge in Diniz’s work and thus become themselves a resistant archive against the array of widely replicated and misrepresenting images of the favela in the media.

In her reading of the children’s magazine *The Brownies’ Book* (1920–1921), Verena Laschinger examines its strategic use of photographs to counter the demeaning depictions of Black Americans (both visually
and textually) that commonly circulated in mainstream culture of the time. Laschinger interrogates the politics and poetics of photography in *The Brownies’ Book* and shows how the magazine twists the figure of the angelic child, a staple of the (White) nineteenth-century sentimental novel, idealizing the Black child as angel and thereby challenging the White hegemonic use of angel iconography.

Returning to the resistant iconography of popular culture, Raphaëlle Efoui-Delplanque looks at Beyoncé’s visual albums *Black Is King* (2020) and *Lemonade* (2016) to argue that Beyoncé engages with audiovisual representation as a way of *rewriting* existing narratives of Blackness and *representing* the African diaspora and the African continent. Efoui-Delplanque claims that the albums navigate a contentious space in which feminist empowerment, sexual objectification, conservative gender roles, hyper-capitalist consumption, and the imagination of African and Afro-diasporic cultures coexist and contest each other simultaneously in order to make the individual collective, the personal political, and the disparate united in the Black diaspora as both a creative community and an addressee.

In the concluding essay of this issue, Michael Thomas explores the work of Fabrice Lubin, a psychotherapist in Chicago, and Marquise Davon, an educator in Reading, PA, who organize online events and promote media that engage with the impact of racism on professional, political, and community life. Thomas argues that Lubin’s and Davon’s work turns to the practice of resistant self-archiving in order to bring individuals together in communities that can potentially serve as political counterpublics. Focusing on the aesthetics of “bearing witness,” these communities, Thomas claims, can interlink individual experiences and community interests on a platform of collective action.

The issue closes with an interview with comics artists and graphic narrative authors Breena Nuñez (USA / El Salvador / Guatemala), André Diniz (Brazil), and Marcelo D’Salete (Brazil). While Black and Brown experiences have long been neglected (or, worse, ridiculed and discriminated) in the medium, Nuñez, Diniz, and D’Salete explain how graphic narratives with their multimodal and transmedial language have become an important artistic space of Black resistance in recent years, a fact the authors have contributed to in the past and continue to contribute to with their own multifaceted works: autobiographical and queerfeminist comic strips (Nuñez), a graphic biography about the Brazilian photographer Mauricio Hora (Diniz), and semi-fictional narratives around the history of Quilombo dos Palmares, an important center of slave resistance in colonial Brazil (D’Salete). Their individual artistic ways of picturing the Black Americas, in different formats and on different platforms—from zines to graphic novels and the webcomic—help to create counter-hegemonic visual archives of resistance that address the gaps left or harmfully intended in traditional Western culture.
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Works Cited


