

# In Their Own Form

Frederick Douglass, fugitive slave, activist, famed author, and orator of the nineteenth century, had a deep and abiding interest in the era's new and burgeoning medium of photography. The most photographed American of his time, Douglass strategically used photographs of himself to advance his anti-slavery message. With a wholehearted belief in the unique power of photography to capture the humanity of black people in the United States, he used the medium to counteract prevalent stereotypical portrayals such as *Sambo* and *Mammy* figures.<sup>1</sup>

Through consistent dissemination of his own image, Douglass highlighted his and other black people's subjectivity. This exercise, the constant manipulation of his likeness achieved by posing for hundreds of photos, captured by the best practitioners of the time, not only functioned as a more truthful representation of people of African descent, but also as political tactic. Douglass's contemporary and fellow anti-slavery supporter Ralph Waldo Emerson further explored this idea in his essay "Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies" (1844):

So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood or Douglass, if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English and American humanity. The Antislavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness and nervousness; the might and the right are here. Here is the Anti-Slave . . . now let them emerge clothed and in their own form<sup>2</sup>

The above passage, which inspired the title of this exhibition, uniquely emphasizes the importance of subjectivity and representation expressly present in photography. Although explored in new and exciting ways with the emergence of early photography, subjectivity and representation, both recurring themes in contemporary forms of the medium, have the power to illuminate the seemingly unending and daunting task of opposing the exhaustive number of negative portrayals of black people in mass media.

Writer Celeste-Marie Bernier explains, "For Douglass, photography was the lifeblood of being able to be seen and not caricatured, to be represented and not grotesque, to be seen as fully human and not as an

object or chattel to be bought and sold."<sup>3</sup> This sense of photography's authenticity still rings true today, as the power to present oneself in one's own form is as necessary now as it was in the antebellum United States of America. By reimagining the power of photography and dignified images of black Americans, Douglass used imagination as resistance. A gifted writer, Douglass also explored themes of speculative futures and alternative realities in his sole fiction work, *The Heroic Slave* (1852). Here we can assert that Douglass contributed to proto-Afrofuturist ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Coined in the early 1990s by author and cultural critic Mark Dery, the term *Afrofuturism* is a movement, a concept, that combines elements of non-Western mythologies, specifically Egyptian, Afrocentrism, mysticism, science fiction, technology, music, poetry, and other forms of media. Although further popularized in the 1990s, with the influx of cultural studies and race theory, Afrofuturism has roots that can be traced to early black liberators such as W. E. B. DuBois. Like Douglass, DuBois expounded upon the fragmented identities of African Americans—through both his theory of Double Consciousness and his early writings on black speculative fiction in his lesser known science-fiction short story "The Comet" (1920). Similarly, Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* explores alternative realities and black existentialism also found within the movement. Additional contributors to Afrofuturist ideals include the prolific jazz musician Sun Ra, famed science-fiction writers Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, and visual artists Krista Franklin and Rhonda Wheatley, among others.

Both simultaneously steeped in history and undeniably timely, the acts of looking forward and backward, collectively, reflect the Afrofuturist movement. Scholar Alondra Nelson says Afrofuturism is also about "speculation and utopia—part of the resilience of Black culture and Black life is about imagining the impossible, imaging a better place, a different world."<sup>5</sup> Juxtaposing Douglass's views on the power of photography, his success in reframing his image, and skill for challenging the proposed futures of black Americans, with the work of contemporary photographers aiming to define themselves in light of ties to one's history, extraordinarily presents the chance to re-vision their speculative futures.

Mohau Modisakeng (South African, b. 1986), Mary Sibande (South African, b. 1982), and Kudzanai Chiurai (Zimbabwean, b. 1981) examine collective memory, personal memory, and complex histories. Modisakeng's *Endebeni 1* (2015) merges self-portraiture with past and present aesthetics against a stark background. His immersive film *Passages* (2017) investigates the effects of the transatlantic slave trade. Sibande's *A Terrible Beauty* (2013) refers to a 1989 protest in South Africa where anti-apartheid supporters were sprayed with purple dye for easy identification later. Chiurai's *We Live in Silence III* (2017) challenges the dominant colonial narrative.

Fabrice Monteiro (Belgian, b. 1972), Jim Chuchu (Kenyan, b. 1982), and Aida Muluneh (Ethiopian, b. 1974) explore post-human and post-apocalyptic entities. Monteiro's *The Prophecy* (2014) series expresses the grave future of environmental pollution in Senegal; Chuchu's *Pagans* (2014) presents the timelessness of otherworldly ancient African deities; and Muluneh's Surrealist imagery from her *The World is 9* (2016) series reflects a deeply personal connection to time and space.

Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972), Ayana V. Jackson (American, b. 1977), Paulo Nazareth (Brazilian, b. 1977), and Zohra Opoku (German, b. 1977) connect the self, origin, and time in their works. Muholi's self-portraits consider the complexity of her identity as a queer, African woman. Opoku's *Rhododendron* (2015) investigates traditional African spirituality and familial relationships as well as her identity as a Ghanaian-German woman. Jackson's *The Becoming Subject* (2015) series grapples with the complicated histories of black identity and of photography. Nazareth's *Untitled For Sale* (2011) series and *Untitled, Objects to Keep the Sun Out of Your Eyes* (2010) excavate the racial, religious, and philosophical hybridization of his native Brazil.

Alun Be (Senegalese, b. 1981) and Alexis Peskine (French, b. 1979) explore the role of Afro-diasporic generations traversing a very contemporary present. Peskine's *Aljana Moons* (2015) series investigates black masculinity through personal and collective African diasporic experience. In his *Edification* (2017) series Be captures the societal impact of technology and challenges typical depictions of Africa.

And finally, Teju Cole (American, b. 1975) merges text and image to analyze memory. In *Black Paper* (2017), Cole presents a visceral response to our present experiences, specifically the November 2016 US election.

Speculative futures, coping with the past as a means of navigating the present, and re-imagining the future are themes deeply entrenched within the Afrofuturist movement and recur in each artists' work. In his foundational text *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose*, Mark Dery poses the question "Can a community whose past has deliberately been rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"<sup>6</sup> *In Their Own Form* is a collection of thirty-plus works by thirteen artists who contemplate their pasts—and in the process grapple with their possible futures.

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### Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave 'Clothed and in Their Own Form,'" *Critical Inquiry* 42, no.1 (Autumn 2015): pp. 31–60. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682995>.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Gates, "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura," p. 31.
3. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson, *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass 1818–2018* (Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 51–55.
4. Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 110–15.
5. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 95–97.
6. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," *Flame Wars* (Jan. 2012): pp. 179–222. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822396765-010>.