Facing Race:
Popular Science and Black Intellectual Thought in Antebellum America

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ABSTRACT This essay shows how Black Americans responded to and challenged scientific racism in the mid-nineteenth century. Specifically, it focuses on how they adopted and coopted the disciplines of physiognomy and phrenology—two sciences based on the notion that people's heads and faces revealed their moral and mental capacity. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, disciplines like physiognomy and phrenology provided the ideological scaffolding for later versions of scientific racism. This article tells a different story. By focusing on how African American intellectuals strategically analyzed heads and faces, it exposes how people of color engaged with antebellum race theory, reformulating it in unique ways and for their own purposes. Although white people relied on physiognomic "evidence" to argue that African Americans were mentally and physically inferior beings, Black Americans coopted the very discourses that undergirded the rise of racial essentialism, crafting an alternative science of facial analysis to argue for racial equality. When wielded by Black hands, physiognomy and phrenology did not solidify white supremacy; they instead became tools for vindicating the mental capacities of people of color.

In 1849, Frederick Douglass published a scathing critique of white painters in the *North Star:* "Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists," he argued. "It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features." According to Douglass, even the most sympathetic white portraitists invariably sketched their Black counterparts with "high cheek bones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating foreheads." Ignoring the great "variety of form and feature" among Black Americans, white artists drew stereotypes rather than individuals. Through

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insidious visual caricatures, they conjured up an illusion of Black people's "ignorance, degradation, and imbecility."[1]

Scholars have cited this quotation repeatedly, using it to explain why Douglass was so invested in sitting for his own photograph. Only photographs were effective portraits, he suggested, for only photographs portrayed African Americans as they truly existed rather than how they looked in the minds of prejudiced painters.[2] Yet most scholars have not interrogated a major reason that Douglass thought pictures were so consequential in the first place. Like most antebellum viewers, he interpreted portraits using the popular sciences of physiognomy and phrenology. These disciplines rested on the notion that people's faces and skulls revealed their inner capacities. Like many of his contemporaries, Douglass was a popular science enthusiast

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1. Frederick Douglass's review of Wilson Armistead's *A Tribute for the Negro,* published in *The North Star* (Rochester), April 7, 1849. William Lloyd Garrison republished Douglass's criticism of white portrait painters, though not his review of Armistead's book. See Frederick Douglass, "Negro Portraits," *Liberator* (Boston), April 20, 1849.

2. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 51. For the most recent articulation of this argument, see John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, eds., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015). Stauffer has argued that daguerreotyping in the nineteenth century "conveyed more than physical description or even photographic memory, for a daguerreotype was thought to penetrate the sitter's soul as well as his mind." See Stauffer, "Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 25, no. 1 (2005): 120; and Stauffer, "Creating an Image in Black: The Power of Abolition Pictures," in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006), 256–67. Stauffer also published this essay in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 66–94. Other scholars have also written about Frederick Douglass's belief in the power of visual representation. See Ginger Hill, "'Rightly Viewed': Theorizations of Self in Frederick Douglass's Lectures on Pictures," in Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 41; Laura Wexler, "'A More Perfect Likeness': Frederick Douglass and the Image of the Nation," in Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress,* 20–21; Eric Foner, "True Likenesses," in *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 34–37; and Celeste-Marie Bernier, "A Visual Call to Arms against the 'Caracature [*sic*] of My Own Face': From Fugitive Slave to Fugitive Image in Frederick Douglass's Theory of Portraiture," *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015): 323–57.

who believed that it was possible to detect people's character through a reflective process of rational discovery. When he complained about the artists and naturalists who distorted Black features, he was invoking this broader trans-Atlantic discourse and revising a scientific tradition that white thinkers had been using to denigrate Black minds and bodies since the late eighteenth century.

If historians want to understand why visual representation mattered so much for Douglass and his contemporaries, we must recreate their mental universe: a cultural and intellectual milieu in which Americans relied on physiognomy and phrenology to interpret images and construct racial hierarchies. By the mid-nineteenth century, white Americans regularly turned to facial features as evidence that proved the alleged reality of Black degradation. Within this context, physiognomic ideas laid the foundation for scientific racism and the political disfranchisement of people of color.

Popular sciences were malleable discourses, though, and this allowed both white and Black Americans to interpret bodies in unique and oppositional ways. Although white people relied on physiognomic "evidence" to argue that African Americans were mentally and physically inferior beings, Black Americans coopted the very discourses that undergirded the rise of racial essentialism, crafting an alternative science of facial analysis to argue for racial equality. When wielded by Black hands, physiognomy and phrenology did not solidify white supremacy; they instead became tools for vindicating the mental capacities of people of color.[3]

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that disciplines like physiognomy and phrenology served as the ideological scaffolding for scientific racism. That is certainly true. But this article tells a different story.[4] By focusing on

3. For the history of physiognomy in Europe, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 294–305; John Graham, "Lavater's Physiognomy in England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 4 (1961): 561–72; Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Melissa Percival, *The Appearance of Character: Physiognomy and Facial Expression in Eighteenth-Century France* (Leeds, U.K.: W. S. Maney & Son, 1999); Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: European Physiognomy, 1470–1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Judith Weschler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

4. For recent scholarship on the intimate relationship between phrenology and scientific racism, see Susan Branson, "Phrenology and the Science of Race in Antebellum America," *Early American Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017): 164–93; and James Poskett,

African Americans' uses of facial analysis, it exposes how people of color engaged with antebellum race theory, reformulating it in unique ways and for their own purposes. In doing so, it builds on recent work by scholars such as Mia Bay, Bruce Dain, Patrick Rael, and Britt Rusert, who have explored how African Americans both shaped and responded to nineteenth-century racial science.[5] This article also engages with recent interdisciplinary scholarship on how African Americans used visual and literary culture to represent the meaning of freedom, claim citizenship, and challenge racism. Scholars have shown how people like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth manipulated the possibilities of photography to present a carefully crafted image to the viewing public. This article makes a new contribution by recovering the scientific logic on which these practices were predicated. In doing so, it reimagines how people of color saw and were seen in American visual culture. Finally, by exposing the intimate entanglements of art, science, and literature in the early republic, it shows how scientific knowledge traversed the divides between elite intellectual debates, visual culture, and daily practice.[6]

Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

5. See Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Patrick Rael, "A Common Nature, A United Destiny: African American Responses to Racial Science from the Revolution to the Civil War," in McCarthy and Stauffer, *Prophets of Protest;* Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); and Britt Rusert, "Delany's Comet: Fugitive Science and the Speculative Imaginary of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (2013): 801.

6. For scholarship on the intersections of art, science, and literature, see Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress,* 4–5; Christopher Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Marcy Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Rusert, "Delany's Comet"; Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Sarah Blackwood, "'Making Good Use of Our Eyes': Nineteenth-Century African Americans Write Visual Culture," *MELUS* 39, no. 2 (2014): 42–65; and Sarah Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura: Runaway Slave Portraiture and Early Photographic Technology," *American Literature* 81, no. 1 (2009): 93–125. On how Sojourner Truth presented herself

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, racial science was not confined to laboratories and universities. People practiced it in literature, images, and the public sphere. For that reason, this article deliberately avoids the term "pseudoscience" when speaking about physiognomy, phrenology, and other discredited disciplines of the past. Using the term "pseudoscience" makes us feel comfortable because it erects definitive boundaries between our own work and the problematic practices of the past. But this artificial labeling process fails to capture how nineteenth-century Americans experienced their intellectual universe. As Britt Rusert has argued, disciplines like physiognomy and phrenology constituted "legitimate knowledge systems" because the meaning of science was both porous and flexible in the antebellum decades. Before the institutionalization and professionalization of higher education, science was a practical endeavor that welcomed contributions from a diverse array of elite and lay thinkers. This article thus reimagines what counted as science in the early American republic. In the process, it rethinks who might have counted as a scientist. Such a reconceptualization makes room for Black intellectuals such as Frederick Douglass, Hosea Easton, William J. Wilson, and William Wells Brown. These individuals might not have had access to the prestige and privileges of elite educational institutions, but they nonetheless made distinctive contributions to American scientific thought.[7]

This article ultimately argues that Black intellectuals found popular sciences valuable precisely because these disciplines laid the foundation for the new forms of scientific racism that antislavery thinkers sought to challenge. At the same time, physiognomy and phrenology represented conceptual compromise for African Americans. When Black activists embraced facial analysis, they legitimized the notion that the body could be scientifically scrutinized for signs of internal capacity. In the process, they inadvertently validated European beauty standards and helped solidify a broader ideological system that had developed out of the racist discourses of white thinkers. As Audre Lorde has so powerfully argued, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Black thinkers nonetheless used popular sciences in creative ways, crafting their own discursive strategies and cleverly refashioning the rhetoric that was available to them. They were not passive imbibers of white bourgeois ideology, nor were they heroic radicals, insulated from the hegemonic culture in which they existed. They were

through visual culture, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), esp. chaps. 20 and 26.

7. Rusert, *Fugitive Science,* 7.

active cofabricators and refashioners of predominant cultural values who constructed unique ideas about physiognomy and race and then employed those ideas for their own political purposes.[8]

By speaking the same language as the white scientists and popular writers who challenged their humanity, people of color subverted theories of biological determinism from within. Integrating older, environmentalist understandings of human difference with new methods of human description, they argued for the broader capacities of their race. Moreover, by emphasizing Black individuals who had already attained intellectual eminence—and the facial features that purportedly signified it—they challenged the claim that African Americans were an irremediably degraded class. In doing so, they took an established—yet elastic—scientific tradition, wrestled it away from the hands and minds of white practitioners, and instead used it to advocate for the social, political, and economic advancement of Black Americans.

PHYSIOGNOMY AND PHRENOLOGY IN POPULAR AND VISUAL CULTURE

Before the advent of neuroscience and psychology, physiognomy and phrenology were two of the primary tools that ordinary Americans used to understand the human mind. Physiognomy came first, catapulting to trans-Atlantic fame in the 1770s and then taking the United States by storm in the 1790s. This discipline was predicated on a deceptively simple premise: the idea that people's faces revealed their intelligence, personality, and character. The discipline's primary evangelist was a Swiss reverend named Johann Caspar Lavater. His *Essays on Physiognomy* captured the attention of millions, transforming the practice of reading faces into a trans-Atlantic phenomenon. According to Dror Wahrman, Lavater's theory was "reprinted, abridged, summarized, pirated, parodied, imitated, and reviewed so often" that it would be "difficult to imagine any literate, semi-literate, or otherwise culturally conscious person remaining unaware of its basic, and deceptively simple,

8. I rely heavily on Patrick Rael's concept of "cofabrication." See Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest,* 5, 10, 124, 174, and 283. For another examination of class divisions among African Americans in New York, see Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), esp. chap. 6. On ideological hegemony, see Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–14. For a discussion of the historiographical debate surrounding Lorde's analysis, see Rael, "A Common Nature, A United Destiny," 185–86, 195–99.

claims."[9] This meant that even people who never gained access to Lavater's tomes would have encountered his ideas in the published texts they encountered daily.

Physiognomists insisted that facial analysis was an unimpeachable form of scientific observation, capable of achieving almost mathematical certainty in its analysis of people's personalities. In reality, it was a murky discipline with unclear and constantly changing rules. As a science, it was internally contradictory and often illogical—a discipline subject to the whims of whoever happened to declare themselves a physiognomic observer. Europeans and Americans were nonetheless intoxicated with physiognomy's potentialities, and they eagerly analyzed external beauty to discern their contemporaries' characters. Ostensibly, they analyzed visages to discern new information about the world around them. In reality, they cloaked old ideas in the new rhetoric of empiricism, conveniently finding what they wanted to see in the faces of others.[10]

Physiognomy was especially enticing for white Americans. If facial features were innate, unalterable, and physiologically manifested, then it stood to reason that all people had a unique corporeal signature—one that any skilled observer could "read." Physiognomy thus allowed individuals to map racial distinctions onto the human body and then defend those constructed inequities by describing them as scientific "discoveries." In February 1792, for instance, an American author calling himself "Africanus" used Lavaterian discourses to denigrate people of color. Africanus argued that there were "marks of inferior mental faculties in the physiognomy of

9. Wahrman, *Making of the Modern Self,* 294. The most popular edition in the United States was Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind,* trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789), which was published in three volumes. Unless otherwise noted, I will cite from this version. There were also translations by Henry Hunter and an abridged version by Reverend C. Moore. For the first American edition, see *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind; Written in the German Language by J.C. Lavater, abridged from Mr. Holcroft's Translation* (Boston: William Spotswood, & David West, 1794).

10. According to Christopher Lukasik, "Lavaterian physiognomy read moral character from unalterable and involuntary facial features, creating a visual system for reading a person's permanent moral character, despite their social masks." Referring to this as the "physiognomic fallacy," Lukasik argues that physiognomy rested on the idea "that a person has one essential character over time and that a face can express it." But in the end, Americans merely placed their hope in a "false opposition between a model of character read from performance and one read from the face." See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters,* 21, 30.

the negro tribes," and insisted that "the physiognomy of the white man excels that of the black."[11] In a similar way, physiognomy underpinned the writings of Samuel Stanhope Smith, the president of the College of New Jersey and one of the early republic's most prominent intellectuals. Despite his environmentalist belief that the human brain and body were malleable entities, Smith viewed Black inferiority as a self-evident truth. In a racist reformulation of Lavater's theory, he insisted that slavery had somehow improved both the minds and the visages of Africans.[12]

Phrenologists expanded on these ideas in the early nineteenth century, suggesting that the bumps and crevices of the human skull revealed hidden "truths" about people's inner nature. By the 1830s and 1840s, Americans were using both disciplines in synergistic ways, simultaneously analyzing countenances and craniums to propagate prejudicial ideas about Black minds and bodies.[13] In 1841, for instance, the *American Phrenological Journal*

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11. Africanus, "For the New-York Journal, &c. Negroes Inferior to the Whites," *New-York Journal and Patriotic Register,* February 4, 1792. For other examples of books and periodicals that used physiognomy to discuss racial difference, see "R," "Memoirs of Hayti—Letter VI," *The Port-Folio* (Philadelphia) 2, no. 5 (1809); "From Humboldt's General Considerations on the Extent and Physical Aspect of the Kingdom of New Spain," *The American Register; or, General Repository of History, Politics and Science* (Philadelphia) 7, January 2, 1810; Henri Grégoire, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes,* trans. D. B. Warden (Brooklyn: Thomas Kirk, 1810); "From the Albany Daily Advertiser," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), November 24, 1817; and Richard Harlan, *Medical and Physical Researches: Or, Original Memoirs in Medicine Surgery, Physiology, Geology, Zoology, and Comparative Anatomy* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1835), 521–28.

12. Samuel Stanhope Smith's first edition was largely a theological defense of the unity of mankind. The second edition focused on environmentalist understandings of human nature. I have taken all my quotations from the second edition. See Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (New-Brunswick: J. Simpson and Co., 1810). For Smith's discussion of Lavater, see pp. 264–67; for mentions of physiognomy more broadly, see pp. 105, 109, 160, 172, 191, 217, 250, 252, 255, and 365. Although Smith argued for the universal humanity of all mankind, he also believed that slavery had improved Africans' minds and bodies, writing, "Hence the American negro is visibly losing the most uncouth peculiarities of the African person, and physiognomy" (252). The French author Henri Grégoire made a similar argument; see Grégoire, *Enquiry,* 29. For evidence that Black thinkers were reading—if not always citing—Stanhope Smith's work, see Dain, *Hideous Monster of the Mind,* 114.

13. Phrenology's intellectual debt to physiognomy was reflected in the titles of the earliest phrenological works. See Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, *The Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815); and G. Spurzheim, *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (London:

described what the magazine dismissively referred to as "the skull of a stupid negro woman," writing that it displayed a "low forehead" with projecting eyes. "This form is incompatible with intellect," the author asserted, providing no evidence for that provocative declaration.[14] White physiognomists and phrenologists ultimately built on a shared set of assumptions: first, they believed that the brain was the seat of human cognition; second, they claimed that the head and face reflected one's character and intelligence; and third, they assumed that Caucasian visages were corporeal symbols of intellectual distinction.[15]

Physiognomy and phrenology remained popular throughout the antebellum decades, but they also evolved into new forms of scientific racism. Beginning in the 1830s, a small group of white male intellectuals began collecting human skulls, measuring the cranial capacities of various "races," and insisting that the "inferiority" of people of color was a quantifiable physiological reality rather than a social or political one.[16] The most influential among them was Samuel Morton. In 1839, he published *Crania Americana,* a voluminous work that would become the foundation for a new "American School" of ethnology. Morton pioneered the discipline of craniometry, which emphasized essential cranial structures over facial features or expressions. His goal was to determine the mental capacity of different "races" by measuring the relative sizes of their brains. To accomplish this goal, he meticulously filled skulls with various substances and then recorded how much they could hold. He suggested that people of European ancestry had bigger craniums—and thus bigger and more powerful brains—than people of color. Unlike most physiognomists and phrenologists, he came to

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Treuttel, Wurtz, and Richter, 1826). For an American edition, see J. G. Spurzheim, *Phrenology, in Connexion with the Study of Physiognomy* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1833). Spurzheim discusses his own reimagining of Lavater's system directly on pp. 8–9 and 22. For a discussion of how phrenology shaped ideas about race, see Branson, "Phrenology and the Science of Race."

14. J. R. Buchanan, M.D., "Article V. On the Faculty of Language and Its Cerebral Organs," *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* (Philadelphia) 3, no. 5 (1841). For a similar example, see William C. Rogers, "Natural History: The Natural History of Man," *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 18, no. 1 (1853).

15. Phrenologists allowed for the possibility that all humans might improve their brains and bodies, but they also propagated a "Eurocentric model of perfection." See Cynthia S. Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' Phrenology and Anti-Slavery," *Slavery and Abolition* 29, no. 2 (2008): 177.

16. For phrenology's relationship to both scientific racism and antislavery politics, see Branson, "Phrenology and the Science of Race"; Poskett, *Materials of the Mind;* and Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?'"

the disturbing conclusion that people from different races were different species entirely.[17]

Morton was part of an emerging—but still insecure—scientific establishment, which encompassed a group of "serious" thinkers who tried to establish their legitimacy by distinguishing themselves from popular scientists. This new group of ethnologists emphasized more quantitative methods than physiognomists and phrenologists, but they had much in common with the popular scientists that they increasingly tried to dismiss as quacks. Morton, for instance, collaborated with the phrenologist George Combe, who penned the appendix for *Crania Americana*. Morton also incorporated physiognomic principles into his work. As Nell Irvin Painter has contended, by the mid-nineteenth century, many professional scientists "rejected Lavater's views as too simplistic, yet his conceits—that the skull and face, in particular, reveal racial worth and that the head deserves careful measurement—lingered on among natural scientists."[18] If Morton was publishing expensive tomes that impressed elite thinkers throughout the trans-Atlantic world, then physiognomists and phrenologists were articulating many of the same ideas. The primary difference? They did so for a popular audience. Sometimes, the boundaries between these disciplines broke down entirely. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, for instance, became two of the United States' most notorious white supremacists by synthesizing Morton's ideas for general readers in their racist magnum opus: *Types of Mankind* (1854). Printing sketches of Black countenances alongside

17. On Morton, see William R. Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–1859* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, [1971] 1987); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, [1981] 1996); and Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). James Poskett has recently placed *Crania Americana* in a trans-Atlantic context, showing how thinkers like James Cowles Prichard—who were trying to carve out space for ethnology as a new discipline—tried to claim Morton's book as a work of ethnology. By contrast, phrenologists like George Combe tried to claim Morton as their own. Such a conflict illustrates the messy boundaries between disciplines like ethnology and phrenology in the early nineteenth century. See James Poskett, "National Types: The Transatlantic Publication and Reception of *Crania Americana* (1839)," *History of Science* 53, no. 3 (2015): 265–95. These new craniological theories differed from both physiognomy and phrenology, which "suggested that character was both malleable and fixed." See Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?,'" 176.

18. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 68.

detailed physiognomical descriptions, they claimed that it was not just skull shape that distinguished the races, but physical beauty itself. As their work reveals, the tenets of physiognomy, phrenology, and craniometry melded together in messy and invidious ways. Merging with white people's aesthetic prejudices, these three scientific traditions combined into a racist ethnological system, predicated on the faulty assumption that external attractiveness conveyed internal worth.[19]

When white Americans deployed these disciplines to argue for Black people's internal inadequacies, they laid an ideological foundation for the political disfranchisement of free people of color. As Douglass Baynton has contended, one of the most common arguments for slavery "was simply that African Americans lacked sufficient intelligence to participate or compete on an equal basis in society with white Americans."[20] Americans at this time not only equated physical beauty with mental fitness; they also associated people's mental faculties with their capacity for self-government. In one tract from 1833, for instance, the proslavery author Richard H. Colfax provided scientific "proof" of the "natural inferiority" of African Americans. He insisted that "we are not believers in physiognomy, (as a science,) yet we cannot avoid making a remark upon the negro's face." He then launched into a diatribe about Black visages, belying his own professed skepticism about the legitimacy of physiognomic analysis. Colfax made wild accusations, insisting that African Americans had thick lips, slanting foreheads, projecting jaws, and retreating chins. Claiming that his belief in Black inferiority was "consistent with science," he declared that it was "improper and impolitic" for Black men to be "allowed the privileges of citizenship in an enlightened country!" Physiognomy, in other words,

19. Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Painting, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854). This book quickly became a touchstone for white supremacists; for just some of the examples of physiognomic analysis, see pp. 124–79, 184–207, 213–16, 219–27, and 246–71.

20. Douglass Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 37. Mia Bay has also argued that "the Negro's capacity was becoming the central issue for spokesmen on both sides of the slavery debate." See Bay, *White Image in the Black Mind,* 20. Frederick Douglass himself made a similar argument. See Douglass, "Selections. Woman's Rights Convention," *North Star,* August 11, 1848, quoted in Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality," 44.

provided white people with a language for rationalizing racial hierarchies by instead describing them as aesthetic and anatomical realities.[21]

White Americans also relied on visual caricature to denigrate the minds of people of color. Between 1828 and 1830, the Philadelphia artist Edward Williams Clay concocted numerous engravings of Black Americans in his *Life in Philadelphia* series. Most of these images envisaged African Americans with distorted facial features, disproportioned bodies, and outlandish outfits. Clay also marked his subjects with facial traits intended to signal their alleged inferiority. Because physiognomy was so prevalent in popular culture, his audience would have been familiar with its rules of character detection, and they likely would have viewed his images within that context.[22] According to physiognomic theory, the face could be divided into three major areas: 1) the forehead and eyes, 2) the nose and middle portions of the face, and 3) the mouth and jaw. The forehead supposedly revealed a person's mental capacities, and the eyes were "the index of the soul." The nose and cheeks signified moral characteristics, like benevolence, virtue, honesty, cunning, or vindictiveness. By contrast, the mouth and lower portions of the face allegedly exposed people's animal propensities. White physiognomists contended that Grecian and Roman facial features were the most beautiful. They also suggested that capacious foreheads reflected intellectual greatness. Someone with a "high brow" was both competent and wise, whereas a "low brow" or "retreating forehead" was the anatomical indicator of a degraded mind. Moreover, if the lower regions of a person's face were more prominent than the upper regions, it meant that a person's animal traits had triumphed over their intellectual characteristics.[23]

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21. Richard H. Colfax, *Evidence Against the View of the Abolitionists: Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York: James T. M. Bleakley, 1833), 25. In a similar way, one European pamphlet—which was translated by an American physician and published in New York in 1853—discussed the "negro physiognomy," describing Africans and American Americans in derogatory ways and hinting that external characteristics correlated with internal nature. See Hermann Burmeister, *The Black Man: The Comparative Anatomy and Psychology of the African Negro* (New York: William C. Bryant, 1853), 11. The British author Cordon Thompson also used phrenology to argue for Black inferiority. See Cordon Thompson, *Strictures on Mr. Montgomery's Essay on the Phrenology of Hindoos and Negroes* (London: E. Lloyd, 1829).

22. For a discussion of the Clay prints, see Cobb, *Picture Freedom,* esp. chap. 3. As Cobb has argued, "Clay's caricatures taught White viewers that free African Americans maintained unlearned and insurmountable racial deficiencies that would permanently bar them from national belonging" (145–46).

23. See Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy,* 1:16. Physiognomists, phrenologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists deployed this tripartite division of the countenance

Clay's drawings reified these racist assumptions. By drawing people of color as physiognomic caricatures, Clay visually conveyed a sinister message: Black Americans—no matter how refined they believed themselves to be—were individuals whose animalistic propensities predominated over their moral and mental faculties. These images, of course, were not accurate depictions of real Black faces. Nor did physiognomy ever constitute a legitimate system for measuring moral character or intellectual cultivation. Instead, Clay's images trafficked in popular stereotypes, strategically using visual culture to reinforce the tenets of scientific racism.[24]

Black intellectuals readily recognized such images as visual mockery, but they also viewed them as insidious statements about the inner capacities of an entire race. In Frederick Douglass's lecture on ethnology, he said he had "never seen a single picture in an American work, designed to give an idea of the mental endowments of the negro." When artists and naturalists portrayed the "European face," he argued, they drew it "in harmony with the highest ideas of beauty, dignity, and intellect." By contrast, they drew Black Americans "with the features distorted, lips exaggerated, forehead depressed—and the whole expression of the countenance made to harmonize with the popular idea of negro imbecility." For this reason, Douglass sought to remedy the reality of racial injustice through the power of pictures. He demanded that artists convey the faces of eminent Black intellectuals such as Henry Highland Garnet, William J. Wilson, and Martin Delany. Their heads, he contended, "indicate the presence of intellect more than any pictures I have seen" in existing ethnological works. As part of his strategy, Douglass sat for dozens of daguerreotypes, eventually becoming the most photographed American in the nineteenth century. Carefully curating his public image, Douglass created a visual archive that refuted racist imagery and served as physiognomic proof of his own mental eminence.[25]

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throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See for example Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative,* vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 422. For a scholarly discussion of the tripartite division of the face, see Lucy Hartley, "A Science of Beauty? Femininity and the Nineteenth-Century Physiognomic Tradition," *Women: A Cultural Review* 12, no. 1 (2001): 23–24.

24. See Edward Williams Clay, *Life in Philadelphia* series, Library Company of Philadelphia, African Americana Digital Collections.

25. Frederick Douglass, *Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester, N.Y.: Daily American Office, 1854), 20–21. William Lloyd Garrison later republished part of Douglass's lecture. See Frederick Douglass, "The Negro Is a Man," *Liberator,* July 28, 1854. William J. Wilson made similar arguments about white

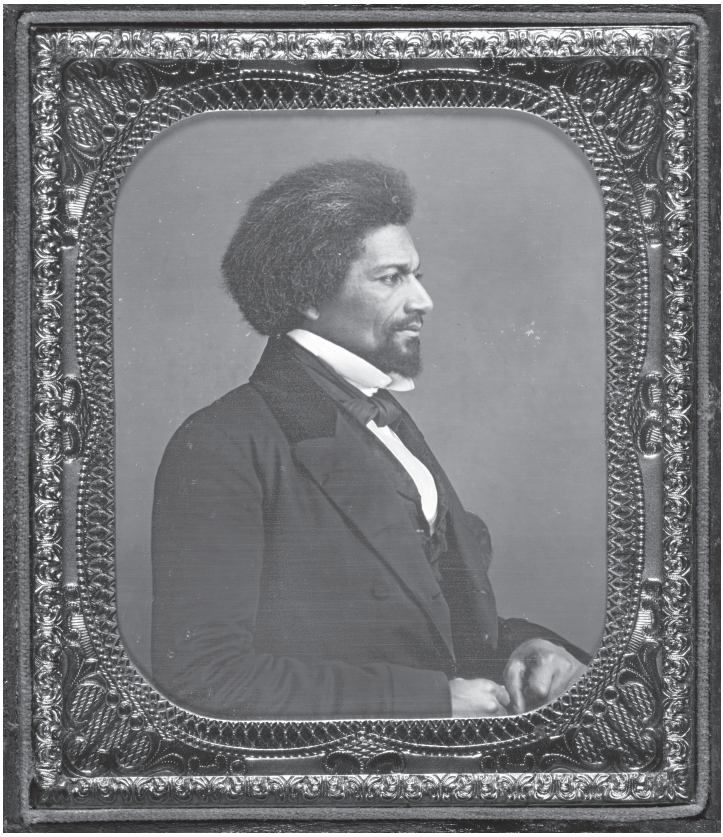

Figure 1. Profile portrait of Frederick Douglass, ca. 1858. Courtesy of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, , Kansas City, Mo. By sitting for portraits, Douglass consciously conveyed a more positive vision of Black physiognomy than prints that might be found in series like Clay's *Life in Philadelphia* or in American and European ethnological works.

Scholars of race and visual culture have often argued that Black Americans embraced visual culture to present a vision of human nature that subverted the racism of white artists. But they have less clearly answered a more fundamental question: Why did Black activists believe that photographs

pictures of Black people, dismissing them as images that were "gotten up for the *American prejudice Market.*" See William J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Second Paper. By Ethiop," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 3 (1859): 88.

visually conveyed human interiority to begin with? Answering that question requires historians to grapple with the cultural salience of popular science in antebellum America. During this period, images were meaningful because all Americans—whether Black or white—inhabited a common intellectual universe in which countenances and craniums counted in the debate over Black capacity. When viewed in this context, Frederick Douglass's obsession with photography was far more than a fascination with a new form of visual representation. For Black activists, visual depictions of heads and faces could function as scientific evidence with broader import in the fight for racial justice.[26]

AFRICAN AMERICAN USES OF POPULAR SCIENCE

African Americans confronted a veritable onslaught of both scientific and political justifications for white supremacy between the late 1830s and the 1850s. Even though they bitterly resented the task, they often felt compelled to repudiate white ethnological theories.[27] As they did so, they turned to physiognomy and phrenology. In her article on the connections between phrenology and the abolitionist movement, Cynthia Hamilton has argued that phrenology proved attractive for antislavery activists because of its flexible methodology. By analyzing the science's doctrinal inconsistencies, she explains how it could simultaneously appeal to both abolitionists and white supremacists. Yet Hamilton focuses primarily on white intellectuals. How were Black thinkers using physiognomy and phrenology? And why did these sciences—which white people regularly used to denigrate Black minds and bodies—develop into disciplines that people of color used for their own purposes? Hamilton is right to point out that phrenology was appealing because of its "mixed messages." Popular sciences allowed people to believe that character was both "malleable and fixed." This gave Americans—whether Black or white—hope that their minds and bodies were improvable. But these

26. In an analysis of Douglass's lectures on photography, Ginger Hill argues that Douglass used photographs to "claim the status of rights-bearing autonomy" and "proclaim his complex interiority." Sarah Blackwood similarly argues that Americans thought that daguerreotypes were "associated with the revelation of certain truths about their sitters." Neither scholar interrogates precisely *why* Americans believed the pictures reflected "truths" about people's character. See Hill, "'Rightly Viewed,'" 46; and Blackwood, "Fugitive Obscura," 97.

27. As Mia Bay has argued, Black Americans were "frustrated by the absurdity of the case they had to confront," but they nonetheless "felt compelled to disprove, rather than dismiss, even the earliest, tentative arguments for black inferiority made by white Americans." See Bay, *White Image in the Black Mind,* 21, 37.

sciences also appealed to Black thinkers for two other reasons: they were easily accessible to practitioners of all races and they had provided the intellectual building blocks for the later forms of scientific racism that Black authors sought to refute.[28]

Facial analysis was particularly appealing for Black writers because it was more accessible than the "hard" ethnological sciences that solidified between the 1830s and 1850s. Craniometry usually required access to medical training, as well as an expensive and colossal collection of human skulls. To be a physiognomist, however, all one needed was a discerning eye and a steady supply of faces. Physiognomy lacked phrenology's detailed charts of cranial bumps and crevices, as well as its intimate probings of people's skulls. It also did not require the mathematical skull measurements of disciplines like craniology, allowing its practitioners to agree on a general premise—that facial features revealed internal character—without having to agree on a set of specific, universal, or unchanging rules. Facial analysis depended on the perceptions of the person doing the observing. For this reason, Black physiognomic observers had considerable latitude in their efforts to interpret visages.[29]

Facial analysis was also powerful because it was ubiquitous within American society. If craniometry happened in the laboratory, popular science happened "in print, on stage, in the garden, church, parlor, and in other cultural spaces and productions."[30] When antebellum readers picked up a newspaper, got lost in their favorite novel, or delved into the latest magazines, they would have encountered detailed descriptions of human visages. Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville relied on physiognomical techniques of character description in their novels.[31] Magazine editors also debated the merits of these sciences

28. Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?,'" 176.

29. Rael, "A Common Nature, A United Destiny," 190–91.

30. Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, 4.

31. For a discussion of physiognomy and its prevalence in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, see Lukasik, *Discerning Characters;* Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. 34–49, 118–20; James V. Werner, "The Detective Gaze: Edgar A. Poe, the Flaneur, and the Physiognomy of Crime," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2001): 5–21; Kevin J. Hayes, "Visual Culture and the Word in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56, no. 4 (2002): 445–65 (esp. 457, 465); Kevin J. Hayes, "Poe, The Daguerreotype, and the Autobiographical Act," *Biography* 25, no. 3 (2002): 477–92; Matthew Rebhorn, "Minding the Body: 'Benito Cereno' and Melville's Embodied Reading Practice," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 2 (2009): 157–77; and Andrew Miller, "Favoring

in their publications and used the language of facial analysis to describe both real and fictional figures.[32] Political periodicals did the same. Between the 1830s and 1850s, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* published several articles evaluating the mental, moral, and facial traits of America's leading politicians.[33]

Discussions about popular sciences were also common within the antislavery press. *The Liberator,* for instance, regularly defended phrenology and advertised phrenological lectures. *The Colored American,* by contrast tried to expose its logical "fallacies."[34] Physiognomic sketches likewise appeared in abolitionist fiction, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) as well as works by Black authors such as Frank Webb, William Wells Brown, William Cooper Nell, and Josephine Brown. These authors deployed physiognomy as a rhetorical shorthand for defending the

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Nature: Herman Melville's 'On the Photograph of a Corps Commander,'" *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 3 (2012): 663–79.

32. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the United States' most popular women's magazine, regularly published articles on popular sciences, as well as fictional stories that were full of physiognomic character sketches. For just a few examples, see "The Doctrine of the Temperaments," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* (Boston) 2, no. 8 (1829); "What Good Will Phrenology Do the Ladies?," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 5, no. 10 (1832); "The Gatherer," *Lady's Book* (New York), September 1, 1830; "Moral and Personal Deformity: A Hint to Those Who Frame Advertisements for Apprehending Offenders," *Lady's Book,* September 1835; and Emma C. Embury, "Our Jessie, Or, The Exclusives," *Godey's Lady's Book* (New York) 20, no. 5 (1840). Hale also relied heavily on physiognomy in her novels. See S. J. Hale, *Northwood: A Tale of New England* (Boston: Bowles & Dearborn, 1827); and S. J. Hale, *Sketches of American Character,* 4th ed. (Boston: Freeman Hunt, 1831). Finally, Hale used physiognomy to describe the characters of the world's most famous women in her magisterial volume, *Woman's Record, Or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853).

33. For just a few examples, see "A Reporter," "Glances at Congress," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (New York) 1, no. 1 (1837); "Political Portraits: Theodore Sedgwick," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 7, no. 26 (1840); and C. Montgomery, "The Presidents of Texas," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 26, no. 81 (1845). This latter example describes General Stephen F. Houston of Texas in this way: "His countenance is noble and expressive, despite the stony coldness of a hard, grey eye, and a something of insincerity about the lines of his mouth" (286).

34. See for example "Anti-Phrenology," *Colored American* (New York), September 16, 1837; "Phrenology Exploded," *Colored American,* November 25, 1837; "Phrenology," *Liberator,* November 29, 1839; "Lectures on Phrenology," *Liberator,* November 13, 1840; and "Practical Phrenology," *Liberator,* November 11, 1853.

moral and mental merit of Black individuals.[35] This language was influential because it was so culturally pervasive. Even after physiognomy and phrenology began to lose their scientific legitimacy in elite intellectual circles, these disciplines continued to enthrall the broader public. As late as 1872, one newspaper critic still felt the need to scold his fellow Americans for their "big head and high forehead mania."[36]

Within this cultural climate, Black writers saw the value of scientific facial analysis and used it to defend those who struggled to maintain their dignity in a white supremacist culture. The abolitionist William Still, for instance, used physiognomy to argue that enslaved people were capable of freedom and self-government. As he recorded encounters with fugitives on the Underground Railroad, he explained how refreshing it was "to observe in every countenance, determination, rare manly and womanly bearing, with remarkable intelligence." When recounting the stories of former slaves, Still highlighted individuals whose faces revealed their "ardent thirst for liberty." If someone had a particularly "intelligent countenance," he was sure to note it, also spotlighting those with "marked intellectual features," a "large and high forehead, indicative of intellect," or "a countenance indicative of intelligence and spirit." In one instance, he turned his focus to a formerly enslaved young woman named Hannah, who had "a countenance that indicated that liberty was what she wanted and was contending for, and that she could not willingly submit to the yoke." In these descriptions, Still seized on facial analysis as one strategy in his larger

35. For examples of physiognomic description in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life Among the Lowly* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company and Cleveland: Jewett, Proctor, and Worthington, 1852), see vol. 1: 13–14, 16, 40–41, 98, 133, 184, 211–12, 229, and 269; and vol. 2: 12, 32, 70, 102, 112, 114, 164, 166, 181, and 189. For other examples of antislavery works that employ physiognomy as a technology of character detection, see Hale, *Northwood;* William Wells Brown, *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1853); Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave,* in *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett, & Co., 1853); William Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855); William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855); Josephine Brown, *Biography of an American Bondman, by his Daughter* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1856); Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1857); and William Wells Brown, "Chapter IV: Slave Revolt at Sea," in *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867).

36. "The Modern Athens: A Hartford Greenhorn in Boston," *Hartford Daily Courant* (Hartford, Conn.), November 18, 1872.

assault on a slave system that had tried—and failed—to turn autonomous beings into property.[37]

William Wells Brown similarly relied on physiognomy when arguing for the genius, history, and achievements of Black people in America. When describing the features of the Black lawyer John Mercer Langston, he wrote that Langston was an eloquent public speaker with a "high and well-formed forehead, eyes full, but not prominent, mild and amiable countenance, modest deportment, strong, musical voice, and wears the air of a gentleman." Similarly, when recounting the mental and physical character of an elite young African American woman named Charlotte Forten, Wells Brown described her as a skilled intellectual who "possesses genius of a high order," a trait that was visible in her "finely-chiselled features, well-developed forehead, countenance beaming with intelligence, and her dark complexion." Wells Brown repeatedly argued that an intelligent mind could shine through all complexions, so long as a person exhibited the facial characteristics that indicated refinement. Although he did not believe that one's skin color reflected capacity, he contended that people's *features* were reliable indicators of their inner nature. As Wells Brown recognized, white ethnologists, political thinkers, and popular writers were using physiognomic descriptions to denigrate the mental and moral capacities of people of color. He responded by coopting physiognomic language and using it to positively describe the faces of Black women and men.[38]

Scholars are used to thinking of physiognomy and phrenology as the forerunners to scientific racism and biological essentialism. These disciplines were, indeed, dangerous in the hands of white supremacists. But Black thinkers saw value in them, too. Recognizing the inherent instability

37. For William Still's physiognomic descriptions, see "Journal C of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia kept by William Still: containing notices of arrivals of fugitive slaves in Philadelphia with descriptions of their flight, 1852–1857," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, AmS.232; and William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872). Lydia Maria Child also used physiognomy to suggest that certain individuals were particularly unsuited for slavery. When telling the story of a fictional slave who advocated for rebellion, she wrote: "His high, bold forehead and flashing eye indicated an intellect too active, and a spirit too fiery, for Slavery." See L. Maria Child, "The Meeting in the Swamp," in *The Freedmen's Book* (Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 107.

38. William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 237; for the description of Forten, see pp. 192–93.

and lack of systematic methodology of these sciences, African American intellectuals deployed them for radical purposes. Some white authors and artists recognized the trend. In an effort to simultaneously undermine phrenology and mock Black scientists, they printed cartoons portraying African Americans as bumbling quacks and as sexual threats to white womanhood. One almanac, for instance, parodied "Black Bumpology." This was both a critique of popular science and a racist indictment of Black practitioners. As Britt Rusert has contended, such cultural productions betrayed "a cultural anxiety that phrenology might be, or become, a black science." In a similar way, another political cartoon showed "Professor Pompey," a Black man, "Magnetizing an Abolition Lady." In the image, a Black advocate of "Mesmerism" practically mounts a white woman as other Black men conspire to seduce the female activists nearby. These cartoons were racist mockeries, but they also betrayed a deeper anxiety that popular sciences, by their very nature, could not be limited to white practitioners.[39]

Despite the cultural criticism they engendered, Black thinkers continued to use popular sciences in their struggle for racial equality. Even as white artists portrayed them as intellectually deficient caricatures and bumbling practical scientists, Frederick Douglass and other Black intellectuals sat for portraits in an attempt to convey the power of Black minds. They were especially intent on highlighting African Americans' impressive foreheads, knowing that physiognomists, phrenologists, and craniometrists mostly agreed that foreheads revealed one's mental capacity. For some thinkers, though, it was not enough to highlight those who exhibited "high brows" and "intelligent countenances." These individuals devised more inventive physiognomic paradigms to advocate for racial justice.

RACE, CLASS, AND THE PROBLEMS OF POPULAR SCIENCE

In 1837, the abolitionist and minister Hosea Easton became the first Black thinker to craft a comprehensive theory explaining the historical and scientific significance of race in the United States. After enduring violent attacks by white mobs on at least three occasions between 1834 and 1836, he published *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition*

39. Rusert, *Fugitive Science,* 123. For the images satirizing Black practical scientists, see "Free-knowledgy, or Black Bumpology," in *Crocketts Comic Almanac* (New York: 1839), and "Professor Pompey Magnetizing an Abolition Lady," Digital Collections, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. James Poskett has pointed out that phrenologists of color traveled around the globe, facing mockery in the London press, just as they did in the United States. See Poskett, *Materials of the Mind,* 16.

of the Colored People of the U. States (1837).[40] For years, Easton had extolled the value of racial "elevation," but in his *Treatise,* he divulged a sense of frustration and rage. No matter how "respectable" Black people had proven themselves to be, it seemed as if prejudice was ineradicable. Seeing white supremacism as "an almost insurmountable barrier," he challenged it with "a direct intellectual assault." Although he had previously called on African Americans to "uplift" themselves, Easton penned his *Treatise* as a rebuke to white people for how thoroughly they had managed to degrade the minds and bodies of Black Americans.[41]

Like white environmentalists, Easton viewed the body and mind as mutable. He argued, moreover, that slavery had altered the brains and physiognomies of those in bondage. White authors like Samuel Stanhope Smith had blamed people of African descent for their supposed mental and physical "degradation." Easton modified this interpretation, this time placing the blame entirely on whites. To show "the lineal effects of slavery on its victims," Easton highlighted the "Contracted and sloped foreheads" of enslaved individuals, as well as their "prominent eye-balls; projecting under jaw; certain distended muscles about the mouth, or lower parts of the face; thick lips and flat nose." For Easton, these were physical traits that resulted from environmental forces unleashed by the greed and moral deprivation of white people, not from innate African inferiority.[42]

To be clear: physiognomy is not and has never been a neutral technology for interpreting human capacity. There is no evidence to support the notion that characteristics such as a "contracting and sloped forehead," "projecting

40. Hosea Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837). Bruce Dain has called this work "the first major African American writing on record to address in an original and systematic manner racial differences and racial history." James Brewer Stewart and George R. Price have similarly argued that before Easton published his *Treatise,* "no American writer had ever attempted so comprehensive an analysis of 'black and white' in all of its ramifications." See Dain, *Hideous Monster of the Mind,* 173; and George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 26.

41. Dain, *Hideous Monster of the Mind,* 173.

42. Easton, *Treatise,* 23. It was common in the nineteenth century for abolitionists to claim that slavery damaged both the minds and bodies of enslaved people. As Dea H. Boster has argued, antislavery activists and enslaved people often claimed that slavery precipitated epileptic fits among bondspeople. See Dea H. Boster, "A 'Epileptick' Bondswoman: Fits, Slavery, and Power in the Antebellum South," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 2 (2009): 285–87.

under jaw," "thick lips," or "flat nose" truly do reflect mental inferiority. Nor are these traits accurate descriptors of all Black people's appearances. These ideas, after all, were the products of a racist physiognomic discourse, which white scientists began propagating in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, it is important to remember that Hosea Easton was living and operating within the ideological milieu of the 1830s. During this period, American intellectual thinkers—both Black and white—believed that physiognomic features revealed important clues about the human character. Although Easton brazenly challenged certain aspects of this worldview, he also internalized other elements of physiognomic discourses.

When engaging in public activism during the 1830s and 1840s, Easton and other Black intellectuals were often torn between two objectives. On the one hand, they wanted to demonstrate their personal refinement and capacity for republican citizenship. This meant distinguishing themselves from the enslaved and from the Black working classes. On the other hand, they wanted to advocate for racial justice more broadly. This meant fighting against slavery and arguing for the social, political, and economic advancement of working-class African Americans. To reconcile these sometimes-competing objectives, middle-class Blacks often argued for the "moral uplift" of their race, practicing a form of respectability politics that at times aligned more closely with the goals of white abolitionists than with the aims of working-class African Americans. This tactic often resulted in Black intellectuals trying to distance themselves from the laboring poor. As Leslie Harris has argued, Black reformers thought that they understood working-class Blacks better than white abolitionists did. "But they, too, viewed the mass of blacks as inferior to whites, and perhaps to themselves, and believed that blacks needed preparation and education for citizenship." Although they sought to emphasize unity among people of color, middle-class Blacks sometimes tried to "reform," "uplift," and "educate" their recently freed and working-class counterparts.[43]

This class- and status-based understanding of Black capacity translated into physiognomic descriptions. When Frederick Douglass complained that white artists did not focus on the refined physiognomies of the Black community, he drew attention to other middle-class intellectuals—men such as Alexander Crummel, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles Remond, James Pennington, and Martin Delany.[44] Similarly, when William Wells Brown compiled a volume on "the black man, his genius, and his achieve-

43. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery,* 200.
44. Douglass, *Claims of the Negro,* 21.

ments," he focused his narrative on individuals such as Benjamin Banneker (a skilled astronomical observer), James McCune Smith (a licensed physician), and Ira Aldridge (an internationally renowned actor).[45] In a periodical series that provided sketches of both real and fictional people of color, the author William J. Wilson emphasized the superior countenance of the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture and the "finely formed head and ample brow" of the Reverend Peter Williams (the first editor of *Freedom's Journal*). By contrast, he described a fictional group of enslaved people during a white minister's sermon by writing that they listened with "eyes dilated, mouths agape, nostrils distended and ears alert." To be fair, Wilson described other enslaved people at the same fictional church service as having more impressive visages: "These faces, in contrast with the others of the congregation, give a most striking effect to the picture," he wrote. Identifying signs of active intelligence and defiance in the faces of some enslaved people led Wilson to further conclusions about their inner selves. Admiring what he presented as their irreverence to the white minister's teachings and their resistance to the degradations of enslavement, Wilson suggested that militant enslaved people were more honorable and intelligent than their more passive counterparts. Their defiance, Wilson claimed, was visible in their faces.[46]

Black intellectuals were invested in the project of racial justice, but they were also intent on proving their capacity for republic citizenship. This often meant distinguishing themselves from enslaved people and lower-class Blacks, whom they sometimes regarded as less refined than themselves. Easton's discussions of enslaved people's physiognomies should be viewed in this intellectual context. When grappling with racial difference, he problematically contended that some Black countenances might, in fact, be unattractive. But he also insisted that the disparity could be eradicated with the elimination of slavery and the moral and mental cultivation of all African Americans.

For Easton, appearances were primarily significant because they reflected the workings of the mind. Throughout his *Treatise,* he repeated a single refrain: "Mind acts on matter." Building on the physiognomic premise that internal dispositions influenced people's external features, he described the human body as a malleable entity, capable of change. He also believed that faces and bodies could change as the brain developed. He tied this claim

45. Wells Brown, *Black Man.*

46. William J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Fifth Paper. By Ethiop," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 7 (1859): 217.

directly to abolitionism by arguing that slavery imprisoned the minds of Black Americans and disfigured their appearances. If enslaved individuals attained liberty, he contended, their physiognomies would transform for the better: "The countenance which has been cast down, hitherto, would brighten up with joy. Their narrow foreheads, which have hitherto been contracted for the want of mental exercise, would begin to broaden. Their eye balls, hitherto strained out to prominence by a frenzy excited by the flourish of the whip, would fall back under a thick foliage of curly eyebrows, indicative of deep penetrating thought." Easton claimed, in other words, that when bondswomen and bondsmen became free, their foreheads would eventually broaden, their eyes would recede, and their brows would begin to reflect "deep penetrating thought."[47] Of course, Easton's claims themselves reified white physiognomic theories, which had suggested that broad and high foreheads were the symbols of intellectual excellence. Despite his offensive against white supremacy, he nevertheless lent credence to white beauty standards, which misguidedly maintained that Black people's eyes projected further than white people's eyes.

At the same time, by arguing that liberty transformed the mind as well as the physical body, Hosea Easton argued for emancipation while simultaneously challenging the doctrines of proslavery physicians. During the antebellum era, enslavers and physicians alike had argued that emancipation was impossible because freedom would vitiate the minds and bodies of African Americans, causing both mental and physical disabilities. Both the enslaver John C. Calhoun and the *New York Journal of Medicine,* for instance, claimed that deafness, blindness, and insanity afflicted free people of color more often than enslaved people. Easton, by contrast, argued that freedom would lead to mental and physiological *improvement.* Like Samuel Stanhope Smith before him, Easton employed a form of positive physiognomic environmentalism that was simultaneously premised on two notions: that the body reflected the mind, and that bodies could change as the mind improved. Though he died at the early age of thirty-five, Easton

47. Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People,* 52–53. For "Mind acts on matter," see pp. 6, 24, and 44. For more information on Hosea Easton as an intellectual and activist, see Dain, *Hideous Monster of the Mind,* 170–96; and Price and Stewart, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice.* William J. Wilson suggested a similar argument in a fictional series. See Wilson's description of the underground railroad and slavery's effect on Black bodies in William J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1859).

left an important legacy as the first African American to methodically theorize racial difference in a book-length work.[48]

As one of the only Black Americans to train as a professional medical doctor in the nineteenth century, James McCune Smith likewise challenged white scientists by claiming that climate, culture, and geographical position could transform people's mental and physical characteristics. In 1859, he critiqued Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* arguing that improvements in African Americans' mental faculties exerted osteological changes in their skulls and faces. Because African Americans were exposed to a more temperate climate than their African counterparts, McCune Smith believed their appearances had already begun to change. He suggested that the slope of their foreheads decreased, just as their jaws protruded less, their skin became lighter, and they became more attractive and intelligent. These ideas are obviously problematic. Like Easton, though, McCune Smith tried to highlight the mutability of the Black body and demonstrate the importance of both environment and education on the human form.[49]

McCune Smith ultimately had a complicated relationship with physiognomy, phrenology, and the "American School" of ethnology. In 1837, he

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48. Samuel Forry, "On the Relative Proportion of Centenarians, of Deaf and Dumb, of Blind, and of Insane in the Races of European and African Origin," *New York Journal of Medicine and the Collateral Sciences* 2, May 1844. For a discussion of John C. Calhoun and other nineteenth-century arguments claiming that African Americans would be "disabled by freedom," see Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality," 37–39. For more on the rhetoric of disability within pro- and antislavery activism, see Douglas Baynton, "Slaves, Immigrants, and Suffragists: The Uses of Disability in Citizenship Debates," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 562. Easton was hopeful that freedom would invigorate the bodies and minds of formerly enslaved people. But Jim Downs has shown that Emancipation often left enslaved people with significant health problems and a lack of medical aid. See Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

49. James McCune Smith, "Civilization: Its Dependence on Physical Circumstances," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1859): 5–16. Nicholas P. Wood also describes McCune Smith's opinion on the changing human form in "Jefferson's Legacy, Race Science, and Righteous Violence in Jabez Hammond's Abolitionist Fiction," *Early American Studies* 14, no. 3 (2016): 590. For the essay in which McCune Smith makes these claims, see James McCune Smith, "On the Fourteenth Query of Thomas Jefferson's Notes on Virginia," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 8 (1859): 225–38. For other instances in which McCune Smith used physiognomy to argue for racial equality, see "For Frederick Douglass' Paper," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester), December 18, 1851; and Communipaw [James McCune Smith], "Nicaragua," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* January 8, 1852.

had given a public lecture on "the fallacy of Phrenology," using a collection of skulls and "extemporaneous drawings" to challenge the legitimacy of this "so called" science. McCune Smith likewise mocked phrenologists through a wry and satirical piece on the "Heads of the Colored People." And yet, despite his antipathy for phrenology, he embraced comparative anatomy, which was rooted in many of the same physiognomic principles. He also seemed to accept the notion that higher facial angles signaled intellectual eminence.[50] Writing for the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, he felt it necessary to prove that the "flat, retreating forehead" was not a physical trait that defined every Black American. Within the "colored churches" of America, he argued, a careful observer "will find the low, retreating forehead to be the exception, and not the rule." In other words, McCune Smith contended that observers would find a collection of high, intellectual foreheads in a congregation of "refined" Blacks, just like they might find in white churches. Even though McCune Smith remained deeply conflicted about the scientific legitimacy of cranial analysis, it played an important role in his works. His ambivalence demonstrates just how central physiognomic ideas had been in shaping the debate over racial difference in America. Though he resented the need to engage with white ethnologists, McCune Smith also felt he had to battle them on their own terrain. Even so, his continued attachment to environmentalist understandings of human nature demonstrates just how differently these ideas functioned in proslavery and abolitionist thought.[51]

Even when African American writers agreed with white scientists in saying that the face and skull reflected inner capacity, they rarely described heads and faces as permanent and heritable features incapable of physical change. This allowed Black writers to analyze faces in creative ways. On the one hand, they regularly pointed to African Americans with impressive

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50. For reviews of James McCune Smith's lecture on the "fallacy of phrenology," see "Phrenology," *The Colored American* (New York), September 23, 1837; and "Dr. Smith," *The Colored American* (New York), September 30, 1837. Interestingly, the newspaper pointed out that Smith's antiphrenology position was "unpopular" with his audience, even as it lauded him for his eloquence and learning.

51. McCune Smith, "On the Fourteenth Query of Thomas Jefferson's Notes on Virginia," 228. In general, James McCune Smith was more dismissive of phrenology than he was of physiognomy. He entitled his iconic series, "Heads of the Colored People," as a critique to phrenological discourses, and yet even in these articles, he employs physiognomic descriptions of his subjects. See John Stauffer, *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185–242.

foreheads, chiseled jaws, and refined features. Yet they also sometimes argued that *certain* people of color were mentally and physically inferior beings. This strategy was part of a larger process by which Black intellectuals sought to challenge white racism while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the working poor and the enslaved. At the same time, they never wavered in their argument that minds could improve with cultivation, making the face more beautiful as the mental powers developed. Their strategy undermined the arguments of slavery's apologists, who often claimed that Black bodies were not suited for freedom and warned that the end of slavery would lead to a proliferation of mental insanity and physical degeneration among African Americans. Instead, they described Black bodies and minds as dynamic entities that were constantly transforming for the better.

THE LIBERATORY POTENTIAL OF FACIAL ANALYSIS

If faces and minds could change over time, then it stood to reason that there were African Americans who had not only attained mental refinement, but who also exhibited the facial features that signified inner excellence. As another physiognomic strategy, Black writers highlighted the visages of prominent African Americans to illustrate what was possible when the Black mind was nurtured and encouraged to develop. William J. Wilson, for instance, used physiognomy and phrenology to assure Black readers that many of their contemporaries had already achieved intellectual eminence and that others were capable of further advancement. Wilson served as the headmaster of the African Free School in Brooklyn and regularly drafted pieces for *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and the *Anglo-African Magazine,* usually writing under pseudonyms of "Ethiop" or the "Brooklyn Correspondent." Like Douglass, Wilson believed that white artists presented prejudicial images of Black faces. Yet Wilson was equally concerned with how Black Americans interpreted each other's appearances. To remedy this problem, he drafted a submission to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* that reflected on Philadelphia's Colored National Convention of 1855 and focused on the heads and faces of two figures who spoke at the meeting: Isaiah C. Weare and Mary Ann Shadd.[52]

52. Isaiah Weare kept a manuscript version of this document in his collection of "Notebooks, Letters, Financial Papers, and Newspaper Clippings (1855–1900)." For the manuscript, see "Leon Gardiner Collection of American Negro Historical Society Records, 1790–1905," Collection 8, Box 9G, Folder 4, Document 2, HSP. For the published version, see William J. Wilson, "For Frederick Douglass' Paper. From Our Brooklyn Correspondent," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* November 9, 1855.

As a member of the Pennsylvania delegation at the Colored National Convention, Isaiah Weare was an intellectual giant, despite being "a young man, and very small." He was so slight in stature that those who observed him might have asked themselves: "how can a large mind be contained within so small a mould?" To answer this question, Wilson argued that Weare's intellectual eminence could be seen in his head, form, and features. He contended that Weare's "lower face, too, especially the under jaw, is wonderfully indicative of intellectual power." After spotlighting Weare's appearance, Wilson noted Mary Ann Shadd's "small and penetrating" eyes, "fine physical organization," and "feminine" features. Melding the language of physiognomy and phrenology, he suggested that the human exterior revealed the inner man or woman.[53]

Wilson's comments reveal a subversive form of scientific observation. By locating Isaiah Weare's "intellectual power" in his lower jaw, Wilson revised traditional physiognomic doctrines, articulated first by Lavater and adopted by thinkers in both Europe and the United States. For physiognomists, it was the forehead and eyes that portrayed intellectual capacity. The jaw, by contrast, portrayed the baser instincts of humankind. By arguing that Wilson's intellect could be seen in his jaw, Wilson not only undermined racist depictions of Black people's supposedly "prognathus" jaws; he also created his own physiognomic system, in which it was not merely the forehead and eyes that revealed intelligence, but also the "lower face."[54]

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53. After Wilson's physiognomic profile, Isaiah Weare angrily wrote to *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* claiming he never spoke to the anonymous "Brooklyn Correspondent" who had nevertheless "volunteered to be my daguerreotypist, and to give to the public, pictures *gratis.*" It appears that Weare was far less radical than both Douglass and Wilson, for he made sure to insist that he *was not* the leader of the Philadelphia delegation, and that "no word or sentence, indicating a sectional idea or preference, escaped [his] lips." See Isaiah C. Weare, "Letter from Isaiah C. Weare," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* November 9, 1855. Weare maintained a relatively low public profile in the 1850s, but he did serve on the Executive Committee of the Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church and became an active advocate for Black voting rights. He forged relationship with both William Still and James Forten, two prominent members of the Philadelphia Black community. The historical record is ambiguous on the proper spelling of his last name, at times it is listed as "Weare" and at others, it is listed as "Wears." I used "Weare" because this is how both he and Wilson spelled it in the 1850s (though it appears he later used "Wears"). For a closer examination of Weare's political activism in the decades following the Civil War, see Harry C. Silcox, "The Black 'Better Class' Political Dilemma: Philadelphia Prototype Isaiah C. Wears," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 1 (1989): 45–66.

54. Wilson, "For Frederick Douglass' Paper."

Wilson knew that African Americans were intelligent and attractive, but he feared that even people of color preferred white facial features—mistakenly believing that only whites could exhibit the physical signs of inner greatness. Because of this unconscious and internalized prejudice, he argued, many African Americans were wholly incapable of recognizing specimens of genius within their own ranks. Fearing that people of color too often turned to white bodies for examples of physical and intellectual distinction, Wilson implored Black communities to turn inward when searching for faces of genius. If intellect could not be confined to white brains—and he knew that it could not—then the physical manifestations of intellect should be visible on Black features as well as white ones. By talking about the "beautiful" and "intellectual" countenances of Isaiah Weare and Mary Ann Shadd, he argued for the power of their minds.[55]

Wilson was so deeply invested in the liberatory potential of facial analysis that he dedicated an entire periodical series to describing fictional images of Black figures. Like Douglass, Wilson believed that white artists and writers could never accurately represent the faces and minds of Black Americans. As a result, he argued that African Americans needed a gallery of artistic works in which Black artists portrayed Black subjects. Because such a gallery did not exist, Wilson generated a fictional one in the pages of the *Anglo-African Magazine,* a periodical written by Black authors and specifically intended for Black readers. By touring through corridors that never materialized and analyzing artworks that did not exist, Wilson visualized a virtual art exhibit for his readers. He published these essays in serial form, over the course of nine months. In each installment, he guided readers through the gallery, encouraging them to meander and examine the pieces. Through the narrative voice of "Ethiop," the museum's fictitious curator, Wilson coached readers on how to interpret these mental images.[56]

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55. Wilson, "For Frederick Douglass' Paper."

56. "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Second Paper. By Ethiop," 89. Though writing in the twentieth century, bell hooks echoed Wilson's concerns. During the era of segregation, she argues, African Americans needed a space to portray images of their race: "Since no 'white' galleries displayed images of black people created by black folks, spaces had to be made within diverse black communities." See bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 59. For secondary work on the Afric-American Picture Gallery, see John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 321–29; and Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145–68.

This "Afric-American Picture Gallery" never existed as a physical space, nor did Wilson draw the images he described. Instead, he provided his readers with "word paintings," through which he encouraged them to imagine a collection of artworks, even if they could not experience the gallery in person. As Ivy Wilson has argued, Wilson used the gallery to imagine "that which does not quite exist . . . as a way to present alternative ways of seeing for his black readers." Because the gallery was fictional, he could have included anything within its walls. The choices he made reveal just how deeply he believed in the power of facial analysis for African Americans' own perceptions of racial difference. Through a literary dramatization of an illusory art gallery, Wilson articulated artistic, scientific, and political messages that rejected the theories of Euro-American ethnologists.[57]

Though Wilson used physiognomic descriptions throughout his entire public career, his meditation on Phillis Wheatley's "portrait" in the Afric-American Picture Gallery was one of his most detailed uses of this science. Wilson likely based his description on the only existing portrait of Wheatley: a profile engraving from the late eighteenth century, which pictured her in the act of poetic composition. Wilson had almost certainly seen Wheatley's portrait, and he likely imagined this image as he crafted a description of her countenance for the *Anglo-African Magazine*'s readers. Before Ethiop mentioned anything about Wheatley's history, poetry, or achievements, he first gave his readers a detailed description of her facial angle, forehead, and brain:

> The facial angle contains full ninety degrees; the forehead is finely formed, and the brain large; the nose is long, and the nostrils thin, while the eyes, though not large, are well set. To this may be added a small mouth, with lips prettily turned, and a chin—that perfection of beauty in the female face—delicately tapered from a throat and neck that are themselves perfection. The whole make-up of this face is an index of healthy intellectual powers, combined with an active temperament, over which has fallen a slight tinge of religious pensiveness. Thus hangs Phillis Wheatley before you in the Afric-American Picture Gallery.[58]

To begin, Wilson's narrator focused on Wheatley's ninety-degree facial angle. Here he referred to a theory invented and popularized by Petrus Camper, a Dutch physician, artist, and naturalist who published extensively about art and anatomy. Camper claimed that the Grecian face demonstrated facial angles between ninety-five and one hundred degrees. Europeans were

57. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy,* 148.
58. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Fifth Paper," 218.

supposedly closest to this standard, with purported facial angles between eighty and ninety degrees, followed by other groups, such as "Moors," "Calmucks," and "Negroes," all with facial angles between seventy and eighty degrees.[59]

In the mid-nineteenth century, proponents of scientific racism would exaggerate Camper's theories, arguing that lower facial angles indicated animality, whereas facial angles between ninety and one hundred degrees were the markers of human perfection. When placed in this context, Ethiop's insistence that Phillis Wheatley's portrait conveyed a ninety-degree facial angle, an "intellectual" countenance, and a "finely formed" forehead becomes more significant. Using a fictional image of a Black woman, he argued that African Americans could display the physical features necessary for great mental accomplishment. In the process, Wilson invoked the same physiognomic theories that rationalized scientific racism, but he used them to argue for the "eminence" of Wheatley's brain.

In many ways, Wilson's use of the facial angle may have approached Camper's original intentions more closely than the scientific racists who misinterpreted Camper's work. As Nell Painter has argued, Camper "insisted on the unity of mankind, even going so far as to suggest that Adam and Eve might well have been black, because no one skin color was superior to the others." By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, however, "scientific racists in Britain and the United States . . . went on reproducing his images as irrefutable proof of a white supremacy that Camper himself had never embraced." To be sure, Camper *did* arrange the skulls of white and Black individuals on a hierarchical continuum, with Black skulls positioned next to the skulls of apes. But he also argued in favor of human variation and natural equality. When Wilson used the facial angle to describe Phillis Wheatley, he strategically reinterpreted Camper's late-eighteenth-century vision of universal humanity—a theory that white

59. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery.—Fifth Paper," 218. For the history of Phillis Wheatley's portrait, see Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, "'On Deathless Glories Fix Thine Ardent View': Scipio Moorhead, Phillis Wheatley, and the Mythic Origins of Anglo-African Portraiture in New England," in Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw and Emily K. Shubert, eds., *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 26–40; and Eric Slauter, "Looking for Scipio Moorhead: An 'African Painter' in Revolutionary North America," in Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, eds., *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 89–111. For the theory of the facial angle, see Petrus Camper, *The Works on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary, &c. &c., Translated from the Dutch by T. Gogan, M.D.* (London, 1794), 42.

Figure 2. "Phillis Wheatley, Negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston," frontispiece for Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: Printed for Archibald Bell, bookseller, 1773). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia. In the 1850s and 1860s, Black intellectuals emphasized Wheatley's "finely formed" forehead, facial beauty, and ninety-degree facial angle. In the scientific culture of this time period, these traits were seen as signs of intellectual refinement.

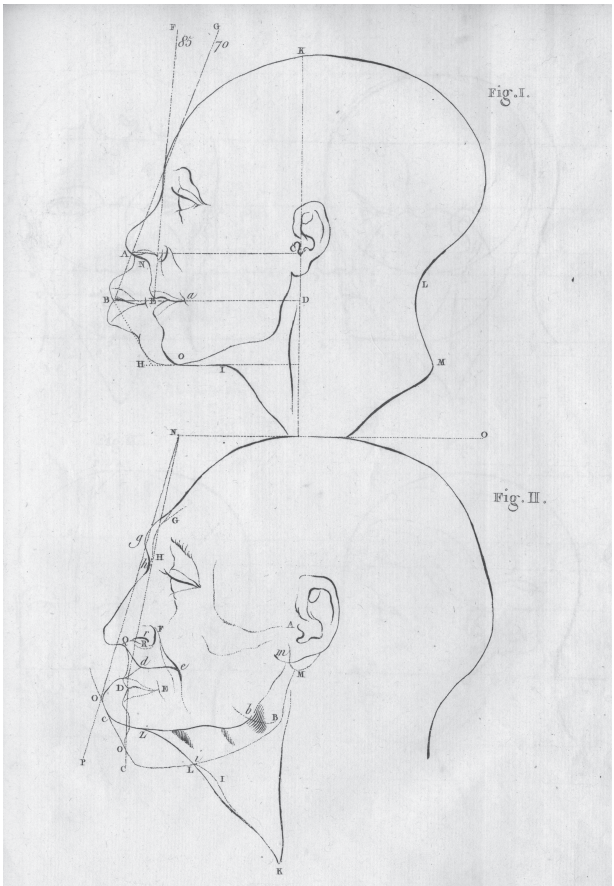

Figure 3. An illustration of Camper's facial angle, from *Dissertation sur les variétés naturelles qui caractérisent la physionomie des hommes des divers climats et des différens ages* (Paris: Chez Francart, 1792). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia. The facial angle was calculated by drawing a horizontal line between the nose and ear, and then intersecting it with a vertical line that passed from the forehead to the lips. Camper argued that the facial angle was the angle created at the intersection of these two perpendicular lines. In this image, two different facial angles are depicted. The top image—which readers were supposed to recognize as Caucasian—portrays an eighty-five-degree facial angle. It is layered on top of a figure with a larger jaw, larger lips, and a seventy-degree facial angle. Readers were supposed to recognize the hidden figure as a person of African descent. The implication was that people of color had protruding jaws and lips—as well as "retreating" foreheads, resulting in smaller facial angles. Throughout the nineteenth century, scientific racists adopted Camper's facial angle method as a mathematical technique for defending white supremacy.

ethnologists had distorted for their own purposes during the antebellum period.[60]

By the mid-nineteenth century, Wheatley's countenance was already a battleground: one arena of a physiognomic conflict in which ethnologists, abolitionists, and popular writers clashed in their interpretations of racial difference. For example, Robert Chambers, the famous British writer and anonymous author of the influential *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), provided extensive commentary on Wheatley's countenance and capacities. Citing the British ethnologists James Cowles Prichard and William Lawrence, he argued that intellectual "cultivation" was "capable of modifying even the shape of the skull." At the same time, he started from a belief in white supremacy, arguing for "a decided inferiority of cerebral organization in the Negro, attended with a corresponding inferiority of faculties." Chambers allowed that *some* Black individuals might exhibit great mental prowess and physical attractiveness, and he cited Phillis Wheatley as his example. But he also suggested that the most intelligent African Americans had visages with purportedly "white" features. Phillis Wheatley's eighteenth-century portrait, he argued, demonstrated "not only a Caucasian brow and head, but those of the finest order." In Chambers's view, she was not a "typical" African American at all. She was merely an exception that proved his racist rule.[61]

White authors often argued that Wheatley's face marked her as a unique individual, fundamentally unlike other African Americans. By contrast, white and Black abolitionists claimed that Wheatley's face displayed her intellectual eminence and hinted at the possibility for the mental refinement of Black people more generally. In *Narratives of Colored Americans* (1826), for instance, the white female abolitionist Abigail Mott suggested that Wheatley's "countenance appears to have been pleasing, and her head highly intellectual." The British Quaker and abolitionist Wilson Armistead

60. Painter, *History of White People,* 66–67. Miriam Meijer argues that nineteenth-century racial theorists purposefully distorted Petrus Camper's work. She contends that Camper was arguing for the universal humanity of mankind. See Miriam Claude Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper, 1722–1789* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

61. Robert Chambers, *Chamber's Information for the People: A Popular Encyclopedia,* 1st American Edition (Philadelphia: G. B. Bieber & Co., 1848), 1:68. Cynthia Hamilton has likewise argued that white thinkers used a tautological form of cranial analysis. When they discovered African Americans who exhibited eminent minds and forms, they described them as exceptional, not representative. See Hamilton, "'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?,'" 176.

likewise used Wheatley's face to prove the moral and mental equality of the "coloured portion of mankind." This meant that when William J. Wilson "sketched" her portrait in 1859, he was building on a tradition of Black and white activists who interpreted Wheatley's portrait for political purposes. William Wells Brown then continued this tradition, copying Wilson's description in *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863). Using Wheatley as an example, these authors argued that Black people, too, could have high, "finely-formed" foreheads, "chiseled" features, and "beautiful" Roman or Grecian countenances. It was important for abolitionists to highlight African Americans that displayed these physiognomic features, because these were the criteria by which white scientists were judging the entire race.[62]

As anthropologists recognize, "race" is more a social construct than a biological reality. Human variation is vast, and individuals of all backgrounds display a wide array of facial features. The messy reality of human diversity belies the existence of a racially standardized facial type. This is something that people of color recognized in the 1840s and 1850s, long before white intellectuals embraced the idea. Rightly insisting that people of color were distinct individuals, Black writers pointed out that all Black faces were unique. James McCune Smith, for instance, described race not as a biological reality but rather as a way of seeing—a lens that shaped white viewers' perceptions of African Americans. White people did not see Black people for who they were, he argued. When they conceptualized a Black person, they did not imagine an "actual physical being of flesh and bones and blood." Instead, they relied on a stereotypical vision of Blackness, in which a person of color was not an individual but merely an exemplar of a type: "a hideous monster of the mind." Frederick Douglass similarly argued that white artists began with "a theory respecting the distinctive features of the negro physiognomy," not an inspection of the individualized faces of Black individuals. Rather than closely examining the physical features of the being in front of them, whites saw what their preconceptions had conditioned them to see.[63]

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62. For abolitionists' descriptions of Wheatley's "intellectual" countenance, see Abigail Mott, *Narratives of Colored Americans: Printed by Order of the Trustees of the Residuary Estate of Lindley Murray* (1826; rep., New York, 1875), 8; Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro* (New York: William Harned, 1848), 346; and Wells Brown, *Black Man,* 231.

63. [Smith], "Nicaragua"; and Frederick Douglass, "A Tribute for the Negro," *North Star,* April 7, 1849.

These insights are particularly important, because they reveal both the perils and possibilities of physiognomy for advocates of racial justice. By encouraging people to use facial analysis, Black writers demanded that white Americans examine the "flesh and blood and bones" of African Americans rather than relying on harmful stereotypes. Yet by themselves deploying facial analysis, they gave credence to the idea that the physical form truly did reveal character. Even as they adapted physiognomic precepts for their own purposes, Black writers fashioned artificial distinctions between people of color who had "good" or "intelligent" physiognomies and those who, allegedly, did not. This meant that they sometimes reified white beauty standards, inadvertently legitimizing a system of facial analysis that had devalued them from its very inception.

One Black author, M. H. Freeman, explicitly highlighted this problem. He argued that the "great want of the free colored race in this country" was its failure to recognize "its own intrinsic worthiness" and beauty. Freeman pointed to the "deplorable" practice in which every Black child "is taught directly or indirectly by its parents that he or she is pretty, just in proportion as the features approximate to the Anglo Saxon standard." When Black parents commented on the "good hair" or "good features" of their children, everyone knew this meant straight hair and "white" features. No wonder Black children were not proud of their racial heritage, he scoffed. How could they be proud when they spent so much time trying to "fix" their hair and features to approximate European standards of beauty? In a cultural climate like this—where "white" faces were "good" faces—how could young African Americans ever develop the self-respect necessary for racial advancement? Freeman argued that this process must start with Black parents, who should teach their children not only to value and improve their minds, but also to love their Black bodies. Crafting a prescient critique of antebellum aesthetic standards, he highlighted the many problems that resulted when Black families reified a physiognomic value system created by white intellectuals.[64]

Freeman's focus on learning to love Black bodies predated the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as twentieth-century

64. M. H. Freeman, "The Educational Wants of the Free Colored People," *Anglo-African Magazine* 1, no. 4 (1859): 115–19. Freeman raised issues that Black Americans continue to face. As scholars like Susannah Walker have argued, "forty years after Stokely Carmichael declared that 'black is beautiful' the phrases 'good hair' and 'bad hair' still have meaning for African Americans." See Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 2.

Black feminist critiques of white beauty standards. But, as bell hooks has argued, there "has been little change" in how Black people are represented in popular culture since the nineteenth century. Most images, she argues, are either "constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy." Freeman anticipated hooks's argument by over a century. African Americans regularly criticized whites for how they portrayed Black appearances. But Freeman was quite unique in his unapologetic and absolute refusal to adhere to a set of physiognomic standards that had been created by white people and reinscribed by Black writers.[65]

"THERE IS POWER IN LOOKING"

Physiognomy and phrenology presented Black thinkers with a series of thorny ideological conundrums. As people like M. H. Freeman and James McCune Smith realized, whenever Black thinkers engaged with physiognomic ideas, they legitimized the very discourses that white Americans were using to rationalize white supremacy. Despite this, numerous Black intellectuals embraced facial and cranial analysis between the 1830s and the 1860s. For them, popular sciences constituted antiracist technologies of character detection that were capable of illustrating the eminence and improvability of Black brains. Abolitionists argued for a scientific understanding of human difference that allowed for the possibility of facial improvement, mental development, and physical perfection over time. Melding older, eighteenth-century environmentalist theories with new techniques of physiognomic observation, they rejected the notion that facial features were permanent and unchangeable reflections of internal character. This vision represented a subversive alternative to the scientific racism of Euro-American ethnologists.

By the mid-1860s, however, Black writers had mostly stopped invoking physiognomy and phrenology when defending the mental capacities of African Americans. This was, in part, because these popular sciences were being challenged by an increasingly organized group of professional scientists who rejected their legitimacy. As more and more Americans denounced practitioners of these disciplines as "quacks" and "humbugs," physiognomic and phrenological defenses of the Black mind began to lose their intellectual purchase. Yet nineteenth-century Americans—both Black and white—continued to analyze heads and faces for signs of human interiority,

65. Freeman, "Educational Wants of the Free Colored People." See also bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 1.

and we should not forget the physiognomic worldviews that indelibly shaped their conceptions of race, beauty, and intellect.[66]

In particular, Frederick Douglass's ideas about photography had been forged within this intellectual universe. By the 1860s, he gave four lectures on "Pictures" that repudiated the arguments of white ethnologists rather than reformulating them. Yet he never abandoned his commitment to visual culture, seeing photography as a liberatory technology that fostered democracy, equality, and a speculative imaginary of freedom. Douglass knew that pictures served an important function: they could undermine the discourses of the "so called learned naturalists, archaeologists, and ethnologists" without giving credence to their racist diatribes. Images, he claimed, could "speak for themselves." Douglass eventually recognized that reasoned discourse alone would never cure racism. "The mighty fortress of the human heart silently withstands the assaults by the rifled cannons of reason," he declared. Although egalitarian logic was rational, it was cold, hard, and unconvincing. Pictures were different. When words and arguments failed, images captured people's emotions and sparked their imaginative faculties. They spoke to the soul.[67]

Above all else, Douglass had an unfailing faith in the universal equality of all mankind. He believed that this elemental truth would eventually reveal itself to the world, and he had faith that new technologies like photography would facilitate the process. But he also suggested that people could not always trust their eyes. Douglass never saw images as fully objective reflections of reality, as some scholars have suggested. Instead, he hinted that the imaginative politics of vision might ultimately be more important than the images themselves. For Douglass, pictures were less meaningful than the way people read them. Even portraits of unattractive figures, he contended, would become beautiful as soon as the public decided that those people were worthy of admiration. The physical realities of the portrait itself did not have to change; it was the viewer's mindset—their particular way of seeing—that mattered. As Douglass recognized, each

66. On the slow decline of phrenology in the United States, see Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, [1978] 1997), 163–65. Daniel Patrick Thurs has also argued that while phrenology did not fully disappear in the 1860s and 1870s, it "became somewhat marginalized in the newly organized and increasingly bounded world of the late nineteenth century." See Daniel Patrick Thurs, *Science Talk: Changing Notions of Science in American Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 52.

67. For Douglass's lectures from the 1860s, see Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass,* 123–73 (direct quotations are from pp. 130–34).

person was equipped with a unique interpretive arsenal that allowed them to see the world in distinctive ways. During the first half of the nineteenth century, physiognomy and phrenology were important ideological weapons for Black and white Americans alike.[68]

Even today, art historians sometimes perpetuate the physiognomic rhetoric of the early nineteenth century. Particularly when analyzing portraits of Douglass, scholars identify traits like dignity, intelligence, defiance, and fortitude. For them, Douglass becomes the face of freedom. He is fearless, confident, and self-assured—an idealized vision of Black manhood. Douglass certainly knew that nineteenth-century Americans would have used popular sciences to interpret his portraits in this manner. But he could not have anticipated the extent to which future intellectuals would embrace this rhetoric, too. Silently imbibing some of the physiognomic language of the nineteenth century, scholars now look at portraits of Douglass and see precisely what he had wanted people to see all along. In some ways, then, Douglass succeeded by teaching Americans to see race in a new way. Rejecting the white supremacist caricatures that Douglass despised, modern scholars now embrace the alternative model of visual politics that he played a role in crafting.[69]

In the end, African American thinkers engaged in a radical act simply by practicing physiognomy and phrenology. By asserting their right to scientifically discern heads and faces, they not only used practical science to challenge white supremacy, but they also undermined many of the tenets that white physiognomists followed. White thinkers often hinted that only the most beautiful and intelligent individuals could be successful body decoders. If the racist caricatures of white artists and naturalists were to be

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68. Celeste-Marie Bernier, John Stauffer, and Zoe Trodd suggest that Douglass valued photographs for their "truth value, or objectivity." See Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass,* xi. For Douglass's complex meditations on the politics of vision, see his lectures on photography in Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass,* 130, 134, 143, 148, 165. See also Hill, "'Rightly Viewed,'" 54–58.

69. For almost physiognomic efforts to read Douglass's character in his likeness, see Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men,* 46; and Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass,* xxiv–xxvi. Nell Irvin Painter has also found traits like strength, intelligence, and maturity in images of Sojourner Truth. See Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 485. Celeste Bernier has explicitly argued that when interpreting portraits of Black Americans, scholars should "return not only to earlier black authors' and artists' strategies of self-imaging in general but to Douglass's endorsement of an alternative theoretical language in particular." See Bernier, "A Visual Call to Arms against the 'Caracature [*sic*] of My Own Face,' 356.

believed, then people of color not only lacked physical attractiveness but also the mental faculties to properly recognize it in others. The implication was unmistakable: wealthy, educated, white men were the best physiognomists. Beauty might be in the eye of the beholder, whites conceded, but only the truly beautiful could be skillful beholders. Black writers thus challenged a central element of physiognomic thought simply by asserting their claim to scientific knowledge. By insisting that they, too, were physiognomic observers, they exhibited their influence over scientific and popular culture. To quote bell hooks: "There is power in looking."[70]

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70. hooks, *Black Looks,* 115. Both Walter Johnson and Jasmine Nichole Cobb have argued that white men positioned themselves as viewers in the nineteenth century, priding themselves on their ability to "see" and scrutinize Black bodies, particularly those of enslaved Americans on the auction block. Cobb calls slavery a "peculiarly ocular institution," rooted in the idea that white men were somehow particularly gifted "seers." See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 137; and Cobb, *Picture Freedom,* 38–43. Christopher Lukasik has similarly pointed out that Lavater's physiognomic system rested on the premise that "the physiognomist needed to possess a number of traits—beauty, education, leisure, and, by extension, capital among them—in order to read faces accurately." See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters,* 35. See also Christopher Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 94.

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