

How Black Women Created New Visual Representations For Themselves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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“African-American Woman and Child”. ca. 1860s,
Collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

By Greta Arbogast

In the mid nineteenth century, Black women began to reshape the way they were viewed in American society. During slavery, Black women were exploited, dehumanized, abused, and sexually assaulted. They were viewed as inferior by white Americans who saw Black people as a group unfit to join American society. Black women sought to make a standing for themselves in this society that deemed them inherently lesser -than due to their race and gender. One important method used to achieve this was portraiture and photography. The picture that I chose for this paper depicts an African-American mother and her child sitting for a portrait.[1] This photograph is a Tintype, which was an affordable photography method in the 1800s for middle and lower class people who wanted their portraits taken.[2] This photograph dates back to 1860, and is extremely significant in that the two women appear to be confidently middle class, which was not how many African-Americans were depicted at this time.[3] Through pictures like this, Black women fought to change the narrative that they were inferior, second class people. This image displays the ways that Black women in the mid nineteenth century took agency over their own bodies and appearances and created new visual representations of Black people, in order to resist oppressive stereotypes and discrimination.

Black people who appeared in photography in the mid nineteenth century attempted to create a new visual depiction of themselves. Black women and men took portraiture seriously, arriving at photography studios with elegant attire, especially women, who “showed up at the studio highly decorated for the occasion.”[4] The mother and her child in this photograph wear fancy, elegant white dresses that feature details of lace and mesh. Both the mother and child wear ribbons in their hair, the mother wears nice gloves, and the daughter wears fancy shoes, which displays their tasteful style. The mother in the image has on earrings and a necklace and her daughter holds a fancy hat, which further adds to their distinguished appearance. Something as simple as dress allows the mother and child in this image to be deemed as middle class people who have a strong standing in their society. Black people’s confident appearance in early portraiture “countered a long history of contemptuous representations of Black people by portraying ‘black pride and identity’” in positive ways.[5] By sitting for these photographs, Black people were able to control the depictions of the Black body and to create a new form of Black visibility that did not exist before. These photographs are significant because they “documented the existence of free ‘Americans’ of African descent, even as the issue of Black freedom and national belonging remained in question.”[6] By staring confidently at the camera, like the woman and her child do in this image, Black women showed that they were worthy of being photographed, and thus worthy of being seen as equal members of society. Black women took agency over their citizenship and acceptance in America through photographs like this one. The women in this image, as they sit proudly in their fine clothes, show that they deserve to be seen and that they belong in American society as much as anyone else does.

During slavery, Black women’s bodies were exploited, abused, and assaulted. This established Black women’s bodies as inferior and it deemed Black women commodifiable. Some sources estimate that “58% of all enslaved women aged 15–30 years were sexually assaulted by slave owners and other white men,”[7] and because

Black women were legally defined as property, this sexual assault was not a crime.[8] By deeming Black women and girls un-rapeable from a legal standpoint they were extremely dehumanized. Further, Black women who were considered “‘strong’ were sold as breeders and routinely sexually assaulted to birth more children into slavery.”[9] This caused Black motherhood to become associated with the labor production of future slaves. Thus, this image of the Black mother and her child becomes extremely significant as it shows motherhood through an empowering lens in which the mother has authority over her own child, body and sexuality. This representation of a mother sitting proudly with her child creates a new form of visibility for Black mothers and the agency they have, which opposes the notion that Black motherhood is exploitable and commodifiable.

From an early time, Black women and their anatomy were viewed as extremely different from that of white women. Sixteenth and seventeenth century male travelers saw African women’s bodies as “inherently laboring ones – as female drudges that stood in stark distinction to the idealized idle and dependent English woman.”[10] Early ideals that Black women’s anatomy was different from the “pure” white women’s allowed white slaveholders to justify their exploitation of Black women’s bodies. By appearing in photographs in the clothes and mannerisms that were held by white women, like the women in this photograph do, Black women were able to challenge this notion that they were vastly different and inferior to white women. This made dress and appearance something extremely important for Black women during slavery and afterwards, as it allowed them to reclaim their own bodies and appearance.[11]

Enslaved Black women had multiple bodies that allowed them to survive the many hardships they faced during slavery. One of their most important bodies was the outlawed body that existed as a site of pleasure and resistance.[12] This body represented pleasure, pride, and self-expression, which Black women enacted through small indulgences such as “making and wearing fancy dresses and attending illicit parties.”[13] This body allowed Black women to have control over their attire and their social lives, which was a way for them to have agency over their typically exploited bodies. This body also allowed them to take part in the style and femininity that was reserved for white women. Enslaved women were often forced to wear uncolored, shapeless clothes that denounced their femininity.[14] They fought against this by spending their free time making fancy clothes that they enjoyed, which included fashion trends white women wore, such as the hoopskirt. This allowed them to “appropriate a symbol of leisure and femininity (and freedom) and denatured their slave status.”[15] Black women dressing in popular styles worn by white women continued after slavery, and it was an important way for them to counter the idea that Black women were unworthy of participating in the “elite” lifestyle of white women. After slavery, free Black women continued to fight for Black visibility[16] and against the oppressive beliefs that their bodies were inferior and exploitable. Images like this one of the mother and her child show the ways that Black women created new representations of themselves, by dressing confidently in elegant attire, showing that they had control over their lives and their bodies.

This image of the mother and her child shows the ways that Black women in the mid nineteenth century created new visual representations of the Black body that fought

against negative stereotypes and discrimination. Following slavery, Black people used photography to create positive depictions of themselves, in order to show that they belonged in American society, at a time when their citizenship was questioned. Black women used authority over their own self-expression to fight against the prevailing ideals that Black women were exploitable and commodifiable. They used portraits like this one to create new visibility for Black women that showed that they were strong, confident, and deserving of equality. This image shows a mother who has agency over her own appearance, motherhood and body. Through pictures like this, Black women proved to America that they had control over their own lives and narratives which allowed them to resist oppressive ideals, and fight for a world where they would be treated as worthy and equal.

In the mid nineteenth century, Black women began to reshape the way they were viewed in American society. During slavery, Black women were exploited, dehumanized, abused, and sexually assaulted. They were viewed as inferior by white Americans who saw Black people as a group unfit to join American society. Black women sought to make a standing for themselves in this society that deemed them inherently lesser -than due to their race and gender. One important method used to achieve this was portraiture and photography. The picture that I chose for this paper depicts an African-American mother and her child sitting for a portrait. This photograph is a Tintype, which was an affordable photography method in the 1800s for middle and lower class people who wanted their portraits taken. This photograph dates back to 1860, and is extremely significant in that the two women appear to be confidently middle class, which was not how many African-Americans were depicted at this time. Through pictures like this, Black women fought to change the narrative that they were inferior, second class people. This image displays the ways that Black women in the mid nineteenth century took agency over their own bodies and appearances and created new visual representations of Black people, in order to resist oppressive stereotypes and discrimination.

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[1] *African-American Woman and Child*. Collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, 2013. <http://allenartcollection.oberlin.edu/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/id/35869>.

[2] Ibid. *African-American Woman and Child*.

[3] Ibid. *African-American Woman and Child*.

[4] Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. “Parlor Fantasies, Parlor Nightmares.” Introduction. In *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, 1–27. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

[5] Ibid. Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. “Parlor Fantasies, Parlor Nightmares.”

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[7] Prather C, Fuller TR, Jeffries IV WL, Marshall KJ, Howell AV, Belyue-Umole A, King W (2018) Racism, African American women, and their sexual and reproductive health: a review of historical and contemporary evidence and implications for health equity, *Health Equity* 2:1, 249–259, DOI: 10.1089/heq.2017.0045.

[8] Ibid. Prather C, Fuller TR, Jeffries IV WL, Marshall KJ, Howell AV, Belyue-Umole A, King W (2018) Racism, African American women, and their sexual and reproductive health

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[10] Stephanie M. H. Camp. "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861." *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 533-72. Accessed November 6, 2020. doi:10.2307/3070158.

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