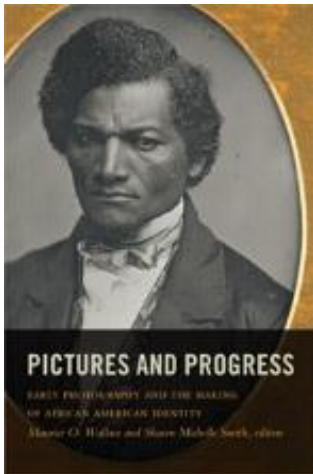


**Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity**, ed. by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith. Duke University Press, June 2012. 408 p. ill. ISBN 9780822350859 (pbk.), \$27.95.



*Pictures and Progress* is an edited volume of essays that underscores the role of photography in the production of African American identity during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It comprises an introduction, eleven chapters, and four “snapshots,” which are interpretive interludes that organize the work into thematic groupings. Its contributors are skillful scholars from diverse fields who employ a variety of critical practices to call attention to the cultural, social, and political aspects of early African American photography. These authors seek to disrupt the familiarity of photographs – more a means of persuasion than of proof – and emphasize the plurality of photographic practice during the ante- and postbellum periods. Many of these essays make reference to major tenets from photography theorists such as Benjamin, Barthes, Trachtenberg, Sekula, and others, but, in general, they are more aligned with the domains of literary, visual culture, and African American studies.

A stern Frederick Douglass peers at the reader from an enlarged detail of a daguerreotype portrait (circa 1852), which is arranged slightly askew on the cover. The first essays in this volume examine Douglass’s numerous photographic portraits alongside the various iterations of his “Pictures and Progress” address, from which the publication derives its title. An equally striking frontispiece follows, displaying a detail from a tintype portrait of a woman wearing a straw hat and single hoop earring (circa 1870s). Scratched and speckled, it presages the concluding chapter, which presents a modern-day, first-person account of the materiality of a nineteenth-century album of tintypes.

Although this volume contains more than seventy images, it is not a traditional art book. More visually inclined readers may want for at least larger, if not better quality, illustrations. Still, the “snapshot” segments incorporate a very clever design device: the images selected for these close readings are isolated and reproduced on black grounds with captions in white type. The paper stock does not change, but this reversal is enough to evoke the coarse black paper found in photograph albums of yesteryear. These images suddenly take on a preciousness lacking in the other illustrations because of their straightforward integration with the text. This visual cue encourages the reader to linger over these snapshots, to consider their specificity of time and place all the while confronted with the slipperiness of photography as historical record.

This publication offers extensive footnotes following each chapter, biographical notes for each contributor, a bibliography listing archival sources as well as published materials, and a robust index. As an octavo-sized, adhesive-bound paperback, it would be a likely candidate for laminated covers or other library binding. *Pictures and Progress* is certainly recommended for art libraries that specialize in the history of photography or visual and material culture studies.

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