Sojourner Truth's Fugitive Images and the Disruptive Power of Circulation Anxiety

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In 1843, almost twenty years after escaping her life as a slave in West Park, New York, Isabella Van Wagenen rechristened herself Sojourner Truth. This act marked the beginning of Truth's self-conscious fashioning of her identity after years of being defined by her servitude to others. Modern scholars are left with a handful of often-contradictory resources on which to base an accurate retelling of Truth's life. For example, Frances Dana Gage's problematic recollection of Truth's "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech from 1851, Truth's facilitated autobiography dictated to fellow abolitionist Olive Gilbert, and countless written portraits of Truth from the popular press comprise only a small portion of Truth's problematic historical archive. The textual ambiguity of these sources stands in stark contrast to Truth's *carte-de-visite* portraits (Figure 1). Beginning in 1864, Truth sat for about seven different card portraits that she sold for a profit throughout the remaining years of her life. Although the pose and props used in each portrait differ slightly, each iteration bears the same inscription on the bottom, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance." This declarative statement implies Truth's position as the creator of her own likeness, analogous to the way she recreated herself in name earlier in life.

Earlier scholarship on Truth's card portraits focuses on how these photographs act as a way for Truth to defiantly assert a more immediate, and more honest, portrait of herself than her common portrayal as a "Libyan Sibyl."[1] In her seminal biography on Truth, historian Nell Irvine Painter writes that the photographs "allowed Truth to circumvent genteel discourse and the racial stereotype embedded in her nation's language."[2] However, these attempts to recognize the authorial intention within Truth's photographs are problematic because they fail to take into account not only the prescriptive nature of antebellum portraiture, but also, and more importantly, the varied functions these portraits

served.[3] Instead of attempting to define the nature of Truth's photographic agency within these images, a more productive mode of interpretation involves examining the modes of circulation and the discursive formulations within which these photographs operated. Such an interpretive framework does not challenge Painter and others who state that these images fundamentally disrupt white Southern patriarchy. Rather, this mode of analysis will more accurately reveal the photographs' truly disruptive nature in their status as what Patrice Petro calls a kind of "fugitive image." In an edited volume by that name, Petro writes that the fugitive image contains a "'certain' testimony—indubitable, incontestable, irrefutable—yet not specified or named in advance; hence, its transient, fleeting, and 'fugitive' quality."[4] In deeming these images to be fugitive, we are therefore able to foreground their powerful associations with movement and circulation, as well as to examine the way that they function within the various discursive contexts in which they appear.

The first step of such an analysis is to engage critically with the conventional reading of Truth's photographs. This reading relies on contrasting the representation Truth provides of herself in her card portraits with other common images that circulated within the abolitionist movement. Allan Sekula's notion of the "shadow archive," an amorphous category of images used to repress and monitor populations, further bolsters such a reading and thus will be closely examined.[5] To problematize these ideas, the prescriptive iconography of antebellum *carte-de-visite* photography will be reviewed. Finally, a turn towards the movement and circulation of these images will demonstrate how they create a tension within three different realms: the realm of economics, of celebrity, and of symbolic identity. John Ernest has recently described Truth's *Narrative* as a "fluid text," writing that it "exists in more than one version" and should be interpreted

[1] See Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); and Kathleen Collins, "Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth," *History of Photography* 7, no. 3 (September 1983): 183-205.

[2] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 198.

[3] The basis for my own thinking on the subject is indebted to Teresa Zackodnik's astute critique of the unaddressed assumptions of Painter's and Collins's work on Truth's card portraits. See Teresa Zackodnik, "The 'Green-Backs of Civilization': Sojourner Truth and Portrait Photography," *American Studies* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 117-143.

[4] Patrice Petro, introduction to *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), x.

[5] See Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64.

with an eye towards the reader rather than the author.[6] It is similarly the assertion of this argument that what is disruptive to the patriarchal white society of antebellum America cannot be located solely within Truth's practice of representing herself in the many versions of her card portrait; rather, any disruptive meaning must be tempered with an account of the way contemporary viewers read Truth's images within various contexts.

Part of the difficulty of analyzing photography lies in the volume of extra-aesthetic functions that burden the art form, as indicated by Allan Sekula's formulation of photography as a technology that comprises a "double system: a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*."[7] Sekula dates the rise of this double representational system to the mid-nineteenth century. According to Sekula, this period was characterized by a broader range of society gaining access to bourgeois portraiture through the medium of photography, while at the same time the medium provided the scientific and political domains with a new way to control those populations. In Sekula's words, "Honorific conventions were thus able to proliferate downward…[while] photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*."[8] This discursive formulation provides scholars working on Truth's photography with a useful methodological starting point, for Truth's portrait cards appear at just the time when this "double system" begins to solidify.[9] On the surface, Truth's images appear to operate within the honorific role as defined by Sekula. Truth commonly adopts the poses and props of respectable, bourgeois portraiture in her card portraits. However, since the honorific cannot be defined without its obverse, the repressive, it bears investigating other images from the wider antebellum archive that allow scholars to place Truth's portraiture within the honorific category.

One popular anecdote cited in the literature on Truth's cards concerns a speech Susan B. Anthony delivered to an annual meeting of the Woman's Loyal League.[10] As the story goes, at one point in her speech, Anthony held up two small *carte-de-visite* photographs in a plea to her supporters to donate money to the abolitionist cause. One of the photographs was Truth's recently printed portrait. The other was from the photographers McPherson and Oliver, an image titled *The Scourged Back* (Figure 2). The image depicts an African American slave sitting upon a chair with his back turned to the camera, his head slightly in profile. The popularity of

the image among contemporary audiences derives from the tangled and grotesque mass of scars that rise from the sitter's back, serving to remind viewers of the potential violence that followed each African American under the slave economy of the South. *The Scourged Back* represents a common type of image of African Americans in this period. These images function not as portraits of individuals, but as evidentiary documents to morally compel viewers to repudiate slavery and join the abolitionist cause. As such, they rely on presenting realities seen as shocking to viewers.

We also note abolitionists' preference for these shocking images: *Harper's Weekly* published an engraved version of *The Scourged Back* along with two other portraits of the same man (Figure 3).[11] *The Scourged Back* appears in the center of the illustration grouping, reproduced about three times as large as the other images. The other two images contrast sharply with their better-known counterpart. Printed in the lower-left corner of the page is a portrait of Gordon seated on a stool, facing the viewer. He is barefoot, and his clothes appear old and worn. The caption printed underneath reads, "Gordon as he entered our lines," alerting the reader to the fact that these were the clothes Gordon wore when he escaped his plantation captivity. The other image shows "Gordon in his uniform as a U.S. soldier." The illustration depicts Gordon standing and smiling as he faces the viewer in full Union garb, his hand resting on the end of his rifle. That the original photographs from which the illustrations were derived did not circulate as widely as those depicting Gordon's scarred, beaten back further suggests the abolitionists' reliance on shocking imagery.

The Scourged Back is only one instance of the kind of images that shocked American viewers at the time. Another, more subtle, example from 1863, simply titled *Emancipated Slaves*, comes from photographer Myron H. Kimball (Figure 4).[12] The image shows two rows of people, the back row consisting of three African American adults, with the front row consisting of a line of five smaller children. The adult at the far left has a series of letters that appear to be branded into his forehead, the obvious markings of an abusive slave master. However, the children in the front row comprise the intended focus of this image. Each appears well dressed, staring directly into the camera. A small, dark-skinned boy stands in the middle of the group, with two lighter-skinned children to each side. Upon first consideration, it would appear that

6   John Ernest, "The Floating Icon and the Fluid Text: Rereading the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*," *American Literature* 78, no. 3 (September 2006): 461.

7   Sekula, "Body and the Archive," 6. Italics in original.

8   Ibid., 6-7. Italics in original.

9   Sekula's article focuses on three instances of photographic portraiture: bourgeois *cartes-de-visite*, Francis Galton's physiognomic composites, and Alphonse Bertillon's proto-mugshots, all of which gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century.

10   Painter recounts the story in her biography of Truth. However, she gives no specific information concerning the location or date of the meeting. See Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 187. Zackodnik also addresses this meeting, as well as Painter's interpretation of the events. See Zackodnik, "'Green-Backs of Civilization,'" 125-26.

11   These images can be found in the 4 July 1863 edition of *Harper's Weekly*.

12   Nicholas Mirzoeff offers a sophisticated reading of this image in his article "The Shadow and the Substance." See Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self,* ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, exh. cat. (New York: Harry J. Abrams: 2003), 116-117.

the lighter-skinned children are not, in fact, African American. However, the printed text above the image properly guides its interpretation. The text reads, "Emancipated slaves brought from Louisiana by Col. George H. Hanks." Nicholas Mirzoeff sums up the abolitionist appeal of such an image when he writes, "The selling point and scandal of the photograph was precisely the fact that all the children, by virtue of their status as former slaves, were African American."[13] In contrast to *The Scourged Back*, Kimball's *Emancipated Slaves* derives its shock not from the physical signs of abuse, but from its subtext of miscegenation, an anxious subject even for well-meaning Northern abolitionists.

The initial contrast between these images and Truth's card portraits is striking. In one of her earlier card portraits Truth appears wearing modest, Quaker-style clothing, seated next to a small side table facing the camera. Across her lap lies a string of knitting material, the end of which she holds in one hand. On the table sits a small vase of flowers and an open book. This image seems to contain neither the evidentiary bluntness of *The Scourged Back* nor the implied scandal of *Emancipated Slaves*. Kathleen Collins explains what she perceives as Truth's intention in this photograph when she writes that the props with which Truth poses may have served to "emphasize [Truth's] femininity" in order to counter her rougher, masculine reputation.[14] Along similar lines, Painter argues that Truth very well could have created a photograph similar to the more scandalous images to increase her sales, emphasizing that it was Truth's choice to *not* make such an image.[15]

While accounts of Truth's agency may be convincing on the surface, they fail to account for two very important assumptions that throw these previous conclusions into doubt. First is the prescriptive iconography and production of antebellum *carte-de-visite* portraits. Many photography studios of the time had access to only a limited number of props, backdrops, and seating options from which to choose, narrowing the amount of personal choice in the construction of the image. Furthermore, photographers often made many decisions on behalf of their client regarding the pose, the arrangement of the props, and even the type of clothes to wear, all in order to produce the best photograph. Photographic posing and etiquette guides were widely circulated by popular studios in order to teach clients how to behave and what to expect from the photographic experience, further mediating the supposed agency of the portrait sitter.[16] As Elizabeth Siegel points out, while posing guides were only one factor that influenced the appearance of card portraits, "the combination of standard poses, mass-produced

backgrounds, and overused accessories had a pronounced leveling effect, resulting in pictures that looked repetitive and formulaic."[17] This prescriptive mediation on the part of photographers themselves explains why so many *carte-de-visite* portraits resemble one another, often stripping away the individuality of the actual sitter. We can see this redundancy of bourgeois portraiture when viewing Truth's card portraits alongside the numerous examples of similarly constructed portraits, the cumulative effect of which underscores the utter conventionality of the *carte-de-visite* form.

Readings attributing agency to Truth in the production of her card portraits also fail to take into account the viewing audience of her photographs. Teresa Zackodnik explicitly refers to this problem, writing that, "However much we want to believe that Truth might have strategized or controlled [her photographs'] composition and circulation, her portraits nonetheless participated in a culture of racial and social difference."[18] In other words, no matter the level of agency Truth may have exerted in the production of her photographs, their interpretation ultimately relied on her viewing audience. That Susan B. Anthony brandished Truth's card portrait alongside *The Scourged Back* implies that white abolitionists perceived a link between the two images that had little to do with the self-representation of an African American woman. Because of these problems in attempting to read agency into Truth's card portraits, a more productive interpretation involves examining the contexts of their circulation. Zackodnik begins such an investigation when she acknowledges the power of the viewing audience in shaping a photograph's meaning. However, she stops short of any definitive statement on the power of Truth's photographs, merely concluding that a definitive or unambiguous reading of Truth's photographs may be impossible.[19] By contrast, this paper will demonstrate how the circulation of Truth's card portraits created a palpable anxiety among different viewing contexts and audiences, revealing a structural pattern to the way these images operate.

The economic realm provides a cogent example of one such context and audience. In 1862, two years before Truth sat for her first card portrait, the US government began to issue the first federally sanctioned banknotes in the country's history. To the broader American public, the support for and usage of these "green-backs" connoted one's political sentiments, for the introduction of this currency served two obviously political purposes. The first was the need on the part of the Republican government to fund the Civil War and defeat the Confederate Army. The second was an attempt to further undercut the Southern economy, which obstinately

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[13] Ibid., 117.

[14] Collins, "Shadow and Substance," 195.

[15] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 186.

[16] See Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven, CT:

Yale University Press, 2010), 34-53, for a fuller description of the kind of posing guides published at the time.

[17] Ibid., 35.

[18] Zackodnik, "'Green-Backs of Civilization,'" 138.

[19] Ibid.

continued to use coined currency. As the two political sides hardened their economic allegiances, publishers and political commentators of the time developed a new economic terminology to mock and denigrate their opponents. As Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby and others have shown, Southern slaveholders frequently employed the term "shadow" to disparage the new paper currency.[20] To these Southerners, paper currency contained no intrinsic worth in contrast to metal coinage, which they often referred to as having a true and meaningful "substance." By captioning each of her card portraits with the phrase, "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance," Truth slyly subverts the terms of this economic debate while carving out a clear political position attributed to her likeness. Furthermore, since photographers frequently used the term "shadow" to describe photographs in advertisements during this period, Truth's caption designates her card photographs as symbolically analogous to the newly created paper money it circulated alongside.

The rise of the publicized personality and the cult of celebrity that arose in the mid-nineteenth century also provided a contentious territory exploited by Truth's card portraits. During this time, a growing anonymous reading public placed increasingly intrusive demands on well-known authors for public appearances and speeches. According to Michael Newbury, the "demands placed by the public on those occupying the increasingly conspicuous cultural stage came to be imagined in the unexpected terms of slave labor and slave economics."[21] Through his analysis of authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Jacobs, as well as his reading of the contemporary rhetoric of slave economics, Newbury asserts that slavery and celebrity were linked through the public's desire to "consume the celebrity body itself" rather than his or her cultural or economic productions.[22] This is not to conflate the demands placed upon celebrities to those placed upon African American slaves, but merely to elucidate the anxieties surrounding the new role of celebrities within the American public sphere. As a former slave and rising public figure, Sojourner Truth occupied a unique position that enabled her to simultaneously embody both modes of public consumption. By directly selling her *Narrative* and *carte-de-visite* portraits at her many public appearances, Truth actively cultivated her celebrity status while highlighting her independence through cultural production. Truth herself once remarked, "I always had something to pay my way with…for I was a free agent, to go and come when I pleased."[23] Buying Truth's card portrait enabled her supporters to participate in the exchange of cultural commodities and also, and perhaps more importantly, to possess a part of the celebrity body. This particular cultural consumption represented a highly ambivalent position in the minds of many Americans, considering Truth's increasing publicity as an outspoken, independent African American abolitionist.

The last context worth examining combines the aforementioned economic circulation and the symbolic consumption of the celebrity body. Although the primary audience of Truth's card portraits was composed primarily of white abolitionists, there do exist records of other African Americans purchasing and exchanging Truth's images.[24] Collins cites a letter written to Truth from Josephine J. Franklin in 1864. The letter reads, in part, "I brought [the photographs] myself and gave one to my sister… in the city of Poughkeepsie and the other to my niece… in the city of Brooklyn."[25] This letter suggests perhaps one of the most powerful abilities of Truth's card portraits. By sharing her card portraits with other African Americans, Truth and her followers created a virtual community connected through her image. Truth tightened the bonds of this virtual community by personally distributing her portraits, most often by mail or through a small network of personal friends. This stands in stark contrast to other celebrity portraits that photographers sold from their studios, an exchange divorced from the celebrity, him- or herself.

In the mid-nineteenth century, purchasing and trading celebrity card portraits became a popular aspect of that era's "cartomania," as consumers of celebrity card portraits increasingly infused the images with heavy symbolic worth. Siegel underscores this point in her own analysis of *carte-de-visite* albums, stating that securing celebrity card portraits "may have allowed Americans to envision themselves as members of…an 'imagined community,' in which most people will never meet but are nonetheless aware of the existence of others."[26] Celebrity card portraits, like Truth's, "seemed to provide a moral education and blueprint for self-improvement" for their owners.[27] Consequently, the exchange and circulation of Truth's image among African Americans surely caused a great degree of anxiety among those unsympathetic to her views. This far-flung, symbolic community of card-carrying supporters thus represents a great disruption to Southern white patriarchy during the antebellum period.

In conclusion, the previous scholarship on Truth's *carte-de-visite* portraits often focuses on Truth's manner of representation and her authorial agency. This focus on the author

20   Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 26-27.

21   Michael Newbury, "Eaten Alive: Slavery and Celebrity in Antebellum America," *English Literary History* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 161.

22   Ibid.

23   Quoted in Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 197.

24   Extant records of African Americans owning Truth's card portraits are

few, although there are recurring references in much of the literature to one document in particular. Despite the vast amount of primary research previously completed regarding other aspects of Truth's life, this is one area that is still open to future examination by other scholars in the field. See Collins, "Shadow and Substance."

25   Quoted in ibid.,199.

26   Siegel, *American Photograph Albums*, 6.

27   Ibid., 65.

of an object unfortunately excludes an equally important consideration of audience and viewership. An analysis that focuses on the circulation of Truth's images within various contexts seeks to correct this omission and serves three main purposes: one, it deepens the initial, and sometimes problematic, work provided by previous scholarship that focused on the representational content of Truth's images; two, such an analysis synthesizes information regarding photography's relationship and interconnectedness to other discourses, such as economics and the status of celebrity in the antebellum period; three, in viewing Truth's card portraits through this interdisciplinary lens, we can more accurately define the power such images are able to generate. Through their fugitive circulation, these images simultaneously foreground and disrupt the various aspects of white Southern ideology active in the mid-nineteenth century.

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Figure 1. Sojourner Truth, *I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance*, 1864, carte-de-visite photograph, 4 x 2 1/5 inches. Gladstone Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Figure 2. McPherson and Oliver, *The Scourged Back*, 1863, carte-de-visite photograph, 4 x 2 ½ inches. The Library Company of Philadelphia.
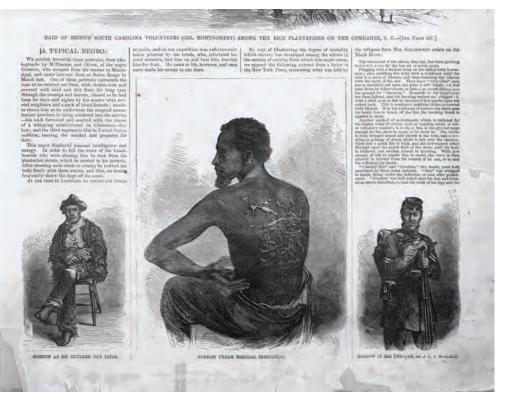

Figure 3. Harper's Weekly, *Gordon as he entered our lines*, *Gordon under medical inspection*, *Gordon in his uniform as a U.S. soldier,* 1863, wood engraving illustration, 22 x 16 inches (full journal page). Gladstone Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Figure 4. Myron H. Kimball, *Emancipated Slaves*, 1863, albumen silver print, 5 3/16 x 7 3/16 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005.