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## The Colored American Magazine and Black Media Networks in the United States

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In February of this year, the official portraits of former U.S. president Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, were unveiled amid great fanfare at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. While Michelle Obama's portrait was painted by Amy Sherald, her husband's portrait was painted by Kehinde Wiley. Wiley, the more established of the two artists, is known for his large-scale portraits of contemporary young African American men in heroic poses that wittily allude to or derive from the aristocratic poses central to the work of European Old Masters like Manet and Rubens. Recruited on the street by Wiley, the young men (and sometimes women) are depicted in their ordinary clothes in postures conventionally reserved for religious or royal subjects, usually in front of a lushly patterned background, reminiscent of aristocratic wallpaper or textiles. Wiley's work questions conventional representations of African Americans in the mainstream culture and asks us to consider what it means to see their portraits as worth painting, seeing, and valuing in relation to the canon of Western art.

Wiley's work makes central the politics of representation. Representation tells a story about a person; this story might match one's sense of self or aspirations but it can also be shaped by others' perceptions and biases. My focus in this talk is on the U.S. context, specifically in relation to the history of African American representation, but it has confluences with the representation of other marginalized peoples throughout the world. Visual culture has historically skewed towards the negative in representations of African Americans. Here, I am thinking of racist caricatures, lynching postcards, mugshots, and photographs grounded in racial pseudoscience. But we could also think even more generally of visual art, literature, the press, and popular culture. In the introduction to his novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison has described the "'high visibility' [that] actually rendered one *un-visible*" to highlight the ways that African Americans are not seen outside of stereotypes (xv). In this paper, by focusing on photographs published in the early twentieth-century *Colored American Magazine* in relation to not only Wiley's work but also the media of today, I trace a diverse set of portraits of the race. African Americans "painted" pictures of themselves to provide counternarratives—counter-portraits, one might say—opposing poisonous representations that were taken for truth. In working to counteract "un-visibility," these twentieth and twenty-

first century portraits are, in other words, nodes in networks invested in reframing the politics of representation.

The humanities have had a long history—and current life—of aiming to effect change in the world. The humanistic disciplines are built on the entirely modest and utterly audacious idea that part of this mission lies in representing human beings. This notion that the mere representation of human beings is a political act is particularly important for those marginalized in the world. In the United States, African Americans have fought battles around their media representations from the time of slavery to the current day with the Black Lives Matter movement. At the turn of the previous century, during the Jim Crow era, a period of legalized segregation that stretched from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century in the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois, the towering African American intellectual and leader, famously proclaimed that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be” to argue for representation’s political power (22). For the purposes of propaganda, Du Bois used the platform of his magazine, the *Crisis*, to present stories of black success and achievement, alongside portraits of African Americans framed as professional and respectable. These written and visual texts worked to create a portrait of the race that countered the widely circulated images of the criminalized and lynched black body.

In his editorship of the *Crisis*, from its founding in 1910 to his ouster in 1934, Du Bois recognized the power of the press in combating lynching, both through the written word and the visual text. Similarly, the turn-of-the-century activist journalist Ida B. Wells declared that, in combating lynchings, “there is no educator to compare with the press... The Afro-American papers are the only ones which will print the truth...” (70). The early twentieth century was an era when black periodicals exploded in number as African Americans were hungry to see themselves and combat the Jim Crow system with its attendant stereotypes. Anne Elizabeth Carroll has discussed how the *Crisis* and other publications used words and images in concert to present pictures of the race that refuted the inferiority and criminality that characterized white-focused periodicals’ representations of African Americans. But before the influential *Crisis* magazine, there was the *Colored American*; both magazines shared many of the same concerns in their investments in representational politics, particularly in their emphases on portraiture and literature as propaganda tools. The *Colored American*, founded in 1900 and published in Boston and later New York, where it met its demise in 1909, was one of the first genteel magazines aimed at African Americans. Using race biographies, fiction, photographs, and essays, the magazine worked to counter mainstream representations of African Americans, acting as an antidote to their poisons.

In the August 1900 issue, the *Colored American* announced its “Photographic Contest” (1.3, “Our Photographic Contest” 191); there is no evidence that this contest came to fruition, but it reflects the *Colored American*’s recognition of the race’s interest in photography. The advertisements in the magazine often used the conventions of portraiture to sell goods, most often cosmetics products. These advertisements presented simple illustrations that represented “before” and “after” images of someone who had used the cosmetics on their hair or skin. The magazine also advertised to its

readers a “photogravure” for the price of \$1.50 in several issues. Originally featured in the October 1900 as the frontispiece, the image, titled “The Young Colored American,” depicts a boy perched on an American flag acting as a kind of stand-in for the “colored American” of the magazine’s title. Significantly, in the May 1901 issue, R.S. Elliott presented a 35-page essay, titled “The Story of Our Magazine,” accompanied by many photographs to highlight the workings of the periodical; the written sketches of the key players associated with the magazine were accompanied by seventy portraits of those figures (3.1). Part marketing move, this photo essay was meant to call attention to the worthiness of those associated with the periodical, providing the readers a way to see them and, in seeing them, see themselves. In other words, the *Colored American* contributed to and was deeply imbricated in the visual culture of the time.

One of the most striking characteristics of the *Colored American* was its use of halftone photographic reproductions. The halftone reproduction process was a late nineteenth-century technological innovation that allowed for the inexpensive printing of images that captured black-and-white gradations with greater detail and realism. The process uses “a screen to rephotograph the original photo and reduce it to a series of patterned dots of differing sizes. Thus rendered, the images could be sent by wire; when reproduced on paper, the areas with large dots close together appeared black or dark gray, and the areas with smaller dots and more space between them appeared light gray or white, thus re-creating a version of the photograph” (Kaestle and Radway 13). The period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been characterized as a time of a “visual revolution” due, in part, to the invention and use of the halftone process that facilitated the explosion of images in periodicals (Trotti 382). This new technology meant that images of African Americans could be disseminated more widely and with greater fidelity to the actual look of the subjects. In outlining Estelle Jussim’s influential claims about the halftone process, Neil Harris has said that her argument suggests that, with the use of halftones, in contrast to labor-intensive wood and metal engravings, “the illusion of seeing an actual scene, or receiving an objective record of such a scene, was immeasurably enhanced” (198). This illusory sense of unmediated access to the real that halftone photographic reproductions offer matched the *Colored American*’s goals in producing a picture of the race that was not offered by the mainstream white press. Halftone photographic reproductions with their ability to capture subtleties of skin tone allowed African Americans to be represented with a greater degree of sensitivity to the differences in racial appearance; this was an implicit rejection of racist descriptions of the race as monolithic in appearance and, ultimately, in character.

Every cover of the magazine in its early years included a portrait of a notable African American person in the center, framed by floral designs, and the issues contained multiple portraits of prominent African Americans in their pages. The June 1900 issue, the second issue of the magazine, for example, spotlights James Warren Payton, a graduate of Yale, in his graduation gown on the cover (1.2). Other portraits within that issue include “Dr. T.W. Robinson, a Prominent Dentist of Boston, Mass.” and “Chas. Fred White, A Real Negro Poet. Springfield and Chicago, Ill” (119,

120). Including the cover image, there are eight portraits in this one issue. In fact, the majority of images in the magazine over time were portraits. These portraits did not simply publicize the figures who were the subjects of articles within the magazine but they worked in concert with the content to provide evidence for the accomplishments of the race. For example, Pauline Hopkins, one of the editors of the magazine and a key contributor, wrote a series called “Famous Men of the Negro Race,” which testified to the race’s achievements by “drawing” portraits with words of figures like Toussaint L’Overture and Booker T. Washington. These written portraits were married with visual portraits to forcefully make arguments for black humanity and achievement. As Shawn Michelle Smith has argued, “visual culture was fundamental not only to racist classification but also to racial reinscription and the reconstruction of racial knowledge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (3). Portraiture is a vital site of this racial reinscription and reconstruction in the magazine’s pages. Maurice O. Wallace and Smith point to the radical nature of portraiture: “Leveling social hierarchies of portraiture that had been in place for centuries, photography offered a ubiquitous and seemingly universal tool of self-representation” (6). They claim, “For many African Americans, photography served not only as a means of self-representation but also as a political tool with which to claim a place in public and private spheres circumscribed by race and racialized sight lines. The photograph became a key site through which a new identity could be produced and promulgated” (5). In other words, photography and portraiture were contested terrain for asserting race identity. Portraits acted as propaganda for at least two audiences: the white viewers to whom African Americans wished to assert their humanity and the black viewers who looked at these images as mirrors to see themselves reflected back, reflections that were not visible in the white press.

The portraits in the *Colored American* are, to our twenty-first century eyes, conventional, possibly dull. However, their very conventionality is radical because representing black people as worthy of portraiture was not conventional. These portraits are, in fact, characterized by a political aesthetic. Representing black humanity at this time was a radical political act, and the magazine’s tactics in doing so, I argue, have found continuity in the battlegrounds of black representation in the changing world of today. Kehinde Wiley, for example, takes ordinary young African American men in their t-shirts, tank tops, and tattoos and places them in religious scenes in triptychs, wood panels, and stained glass that asks viewers to re-see the men as extraordinary—as religious figures such as saints and as other figures worthy of high art. Wiley’s “Mugshot Study” (2006), an oil on canvas, takes a mugshot of a young black man and re-paints it to offer up a counternarrative to society’s categorization of the subject as simply a criminal. In an interview, Wiley explains, “It’s a rebuke of the mug shot, it’s an ability to say ‘I will be seen the way I choose to be seen’” (“The Exquisite Dissonance of Kehinde Wiley”). Similarly, the portraiture of the *Colored American* magazine offered a rebuke of the mugshot, racist caricature, pseudoscience photograph, lynching postcard, and more and asserted the right of the race to be “seen the way it chooses to be seen.”

In the U.S. context, generative energies around black representation have been produced by the

Black Lives Matter movement, a movement that sprang from the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager in Florida who had gone out to buy iced tea and candy. At its core, Black Lives Matter insists upon the humanity of black people, a humanity that has been ignored and threatened with violence. In death, Trayvon Martin was depicted by some media outlets as a “thug,” with all the racialized connotations that word entails, and news stories of his death were accompanied by reports of traces of marijuana found in his system. This journalistic reporting had the effect of criminalizing a murder victim, making him responsible for his death.

As a way of questioning these representations and those of Michael Brown, who was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, African Americans, communicating via Twitter, began posting photographs of themselves with the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. This hashtag, accompanied by two photographs of the Twitter user, asked which photograph the media would use if the user were killed. One photograph showed the user in a manner that fit negative stereotypes of black criminality, while the second photograph depicted the user engaged in ordinary or even high-status behaviors. The most famous example was that of Tyler Atkins, a high school student, who posted one picture of himself in a bandanna posing in a way perceived as a stereotypical gang stance and one picture in a tuxedo with his saxophone.<sup>1</sup> The implication was that the former photograph, which was taken from a rap video that he made for a school math assignment, would have been used by the mainstream media because it fit cultural assumptions about black criminality, even if he had been the victim.

The hashtag was used to protest the criminalization of African Americans, like Martin and Brown, even in death to show the ways African American lives are devalued in the public sphere and the related stakes of the politics of representation. These newer social media networks have been deployed to counter representations in mainstream media networks (along with those on social media, as well). As Ida B. Wells, the anti-lynching activist, wrote, more than a century ago, “No other news goes out to the world save that which stamps us as a race of cut-throats, robbers and lustful wild beasts” (71). The hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was an attempt to expose the “stamping” of African Americans in the mainstream press and popular culture as belonging to “a race of cut-throats, robbers and lustful wild beasts.”

African Americans were afforded a very narrow series of categories of representation within Jim Crow ideology and that they were represented as respectable humans, worthy of equality, not criminals or lynched bodies, in the *Colored American* magazine was a radical political act. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw points to the subversive nature of this focus on portraiture: “During the early colonial project... it was rare that enslaved Africans were depicted as individual subjects in visual images created by Europeans and European Americans. Instead blacks were most often shown as peripheral to the main subject, as ancillary figures subordinated to a dominant white figure” (16). The pages of the *Colored American* were filled with stories about notable African

1. See Tanzina Vega, “Shooting Spurs Hashtag Effort on Stereotypes,” for an account of this instance of hashtag activism.

Americans and, at the same time, alternative black histories, such as a focus on the wonders of ancient Ethiopian civilization. In other words, the *Colored American* worked to reinscript African Americans into history not as ancillary and inferior figures but as central, as main subjects worthy of portraiture, both in photographic terms and in terms of the written word. Ultimately, the networks of black representation that stretch from the past to the changing world of today ask us to open our eyes and truly see the people standing before us.

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