

Negative-Positive Truths

What is the use of the shadow of anything if there be no substance to it?

—Letter of 26 May 1860¹

THE FACE IS MEMORABLE, as is the caption: “William Casby, born a slave” (fig. 1). Yet little has been written about Roland Barthes’s recourse to this photograph in *Camera Lucida*, partly perhaps because Barthes himself is so typically elusive and contradictory as to how to interpret Richard Avedon’s photograph. Barthes describes this face alternately as a mask and as a demonstration of photography’s power as proof, as a generality and as a record of a reality “that has been.”² Not, Barthes argues, “historical testimony,” not “a matter of exactitude,” but instead an incontestable form of evidence: “The man I see here *has been* a slave: he certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us; and he certifies this . . . by a new, somehow experienced order of proof.”³

Opacity thus competes with transparency in Barthes’s confused response to the power of Avedon’s photograph. Slavery is, he says, unveiled, but whether slavery is made visible as a mask or as a reality remains undecided. All the more so, given that Barthes fails to acknowledge his reliance on the supplement of the caption. Barthes’s startling sense of temporal continuity with slavery derives from how modern he apprehends photography to be. I think many viewers may share that response to the dissonance between a far-removed past and a medium so fully part of modern life.

But without a title Avedon’s photograph would tell us nothing about slavery. For all of Barthes’s celebration of photography as a special form of proof, he chooses at this key moment in his argument to rely on a photograph of a black man whose link to slavery, other than race, is textual, not visual. Yet the sheer strangeness of Avedon’s overly proximate portrait of

ABSTRACT Opening with a consideration of the role played by Richard Avedon’s photograph of William Casby in Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, this essay examines Sojourner Truth’s precocious and knowing use of the technology of photography. Inscribed with the caption “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” Truth’s inexpensive cartes-de-visite functioned as a form of paper currency during the years immediately following the Civil War. As a chemical process, photography transformed precious metals into paper images; as an optical registration of light and shadow, photographic negatives turned white into black and black into white, a reversal noted by Oliver Wendell Holmes in an essay that suggests that racial difference informed understandings of the new medium. REPRESENTATIONS 113. Winter 2011 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734–6018, electronic ISSN 1533–855X, pages 16–38. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI:10.1525/rep.2011.113.1.16.

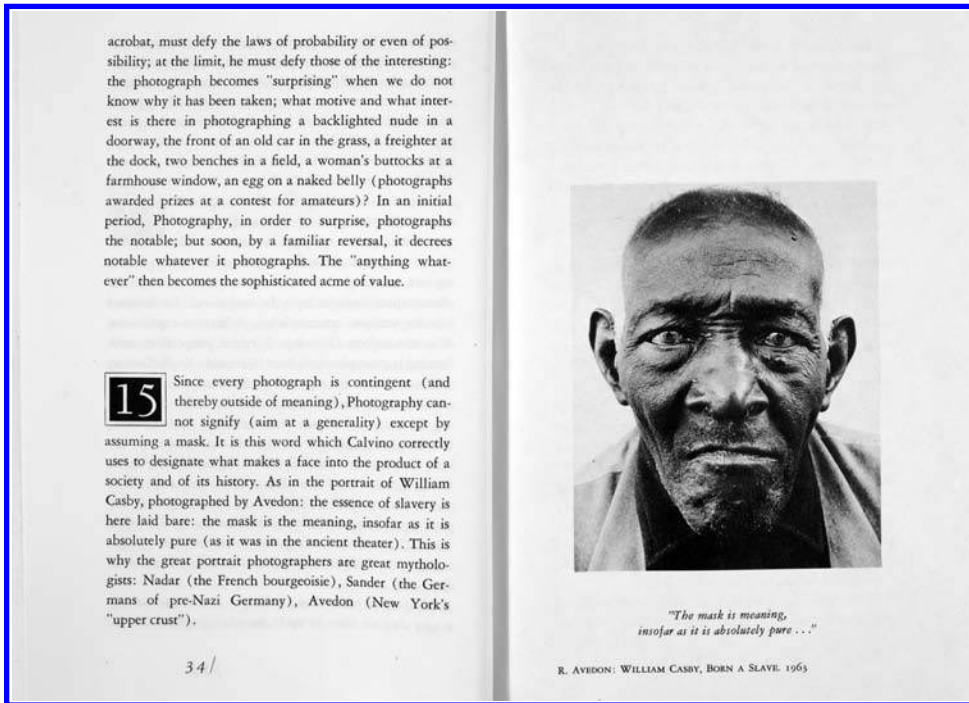


FIGURE 1. Richard Avedon, "William Casby, born a slave," 24 March 1963, as it appears in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981), 35.

William Casby makes it seem otherwise: image here is overwhelmingly non-verbal. Dare we describe how idiosyncratic this face appears? Here is a photograph that delivers, as promised, the always extraordinary and often discomfiting spectacle of an indexical medium: light acting on a chemically sensitive surface registers creases, pores, stubble, scars, the reflective oiliness of skin, the wiriness of individual hairs. Indeed, the photograph purposefully invites a confusion between medium and referent: the surface of Casby's face can be mistaken for the sensitive, chemically treated paper upon which this man has been indexically registered. Avedon's overly proximate view collapses photographic surface with somatic surface; here is a face whose archaeological complexity seems to testify to the long history it has "weathered." That effect depends upon Avedon's startling proximity to his subject. As viewers, we are made to repeat that position but without an apparatus that perhaps, depending on the lens he used, allowed him to stand at a remove. We feel naked and too proximate in our encounter with Avedon's photograph, but not as naked as the photographic subject. Looking at the photograph of William Casby, we feel ourselves to be too close, so close that

we cannot ignore the inequity between our position as viewers and this man's vulnerability as a sight; he is a man who, like all photographed subjects, cannot see us seeing him, an effect all the more heightened by the foggy irises of his eyes.

Barthes is right in one regard: we look at this image and we believe this man "has been." But Avedon's photograph tells us that this man has been not a slave, as Barthes would have it, but a model for a photograph taken by Avedon. He was there, we believe, because the photograph makes so dramatic its optical registration of his face's material specificity as surface.

Yet William Casby's face is also a contoured shape and, as a shape, less an index than a two-dimensional element of a composition. Avedon has knowingly played haptic surface against visual shape here, very tightly cropping Casby's face, dropping out the surrounding context, exploiting the sitter's dark collar to exaggerate the length of a head that already appears unusually long and square-jawed. Most decisively, Avedon has chosen to expose the photograph so as to register the dark face's surface and to bleach out Casby's brilliantly lit white hair. He thereby alters and makes strange, one could say deforms, the shape of Casby's head, implying a precipitous narrowing at his temples. Avedon's photograph therefore pretends to bring darkness into light as an indexical surface but does not immediately divulge that it also uses the blinding brilliance of light to turn index into shape, the man who-has-been into (distorting) image.

And this image, like all of Avedon's photographs, asserts its status as elite art object: technically dazzling, oversized, glossy, costly, and without the complexity of (high and low) allusions in Avedon's more personal photo-booth identification with his boyhood friend and collaborator James Baldwin, in which he holds half of a photographic cutout of Baldwin's face up to his own. (Regrettably, permission to reproduce this image was denied by the Avedon Foundation. The image is reproduced in *Evidence 1944–1994: Richard Avedon* [New York, 1994], 147.)⁴ Even reprinted on the cheap paper of *Camera Lucida*, the photograph of William Casby looks decisive and artful. No wonder Barthes turns to Avedon's photograph immediately after ending the previous section with the statement: "In an initial period, Photography in order to surprise, photographs the notable; but soon, by a familiar reversal, it decrees notable whatever it photographs. The 'anything whatever' then becomes the sophisticated acme of value."⁵ William Casby is being used here by Avedon and Barthes alike to prove that "anything whatever" can accrue value if photographed; in this proposition, he who once was property now signifies matter turned by photography into value.

None of this comes as any surprise: the socially marginal turned into value by art is a very old story indeed. Nor is it specific to photography. But photography—precisely because of its "this has been"—can heighten our

awareness of representation's inequities. Avedon turns the "anything whatever," in this case a man, into a thing—an artwork—whose value enriches Avedon, not William Casby. The man Casby flickers in and out of value here, and paradoxically, or should I say predictably, his worth recedes precisely when he owns himself rather than being owned by others. Eclipsed between this man's birth as a slave and his capture as an object before Avedon's lens is the length of a life gone unremarked except as a sign of the physical continuity between past and present. That life as a self-determined free man is not valued here; it is merely the interim, the medium by which Casby's present is bound to his birth as a slave. Casby accrues value (and visibility) only once image and caption define him as a slave turned into an art object. The slave turned into light, then paper, then wealth (wealth over which the Avedon Foundation now presides).

*Now that I cannot do anything,
I am living on my shadow.*
—Sojourner Truth, 17 June 1863⁶

"Sojourner Truth. I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance." Sojourner Truth's cartes-de-visite, made one hundred years before Avedon's photograph, are meditations by a former slave on value and authorship (fig. 2).⁷ The caption alone makes this abundantly clear. While Avedon's photograph of William Casby depends upon a title that must be appended to the photograph by publishers, the majority of Sojourner Truth's portrait cards incorporate text into the photographic object. Her cartes-de-visite concede the need for a textual mooring. With her caption, the illiterate orator instantiates herself as author as well as named sitter. Her use of the first-person present tense "I sell" also declares her ownership of her image: to sell it, she must own it. But what is it that she sells? A shadow, she tells us, a shadow that can be sold.

Sojourner Truth's terminology is hardly original. As scholars have long pointed out, photographs were sometimes called shadows, and advertisements cajoled readers "to fix the shadow 'ere the substance fades."⁸ In an 1861 letter, a correspondent explained that he could not send a photograph because there were no "itinerant shadow catchers" in the area.⁹ Most simply then, the shadow is the small, modest, cheap, mass-produced, and exceedingly popular photographic carte-de-visite that Sojourner Truth sold to support herself, often at lectures, sometimes by correspondence.¹⁰ In the most rudimentary of ways, Sojourner's shadows supported her substance. Sojourner seems fully to have understood the implications of her sale of her own image. According to an 1870 issue of the *New York World*, she said that she herself

“used to be sold for other people’s benefit, but now she sold herself for her own.”¹¹ In the 1860s, the decade of the Civil War, the word “selling” inexorably conjured slavery, especially when the status of black persons was at issue. Indeed, this statement implies that the photographic image of her self can be conflated with a self that was formerly defined as property.

By contrast, her caption “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance” refuses to conflate image and body. Instead the caption insists that shadow and substance are incommensurate. The power of the phrase nevertheless derives from the condition of slavery that is its foil. Here the woman who once was a fugitive slave and who renamed herself Sojourner, the peripatetic wanderer, proposes the sale of the shadow *her body has left behind*. The cast shadow is by definition nonidentical with the person who causes it. Likewise, the photographic shadow optically (and chemically) fixes a self that is not oneself. It represents the vestige, or residue, of a body’s encounter with a camera, and that encounter is over; that body is gone. Sojourner has moved on. The *carte-de-visite*, like the letters that often enclosed it, was a sign of mobility across distances; the fragile phantom substitute for the presence of persons exercising their freedom of movement.¹²

Still, it is worth pausing over the reference to photographs as shadows because it is far stranger than interpretations typically suggest. After all, a shadow is the interception of light by one’s body. The contradiction inherent to the term—unlike the word “photograph” or the phrase “writing by light”—is that a shadow represents the absence of light, a withholding. The term “shadow” places emphasis, that is, on the subtraction of light rather than on light’s capacity to inscribe a chemically sensitive paper.¹³ In fact, a photograph depends on the action of light on chemically sensitive paper, not just once, but twice. In the making of the negative and in the development of the positive, the paper responds to the presence of light and turns dark. Light is what causes the chemical reaction; shadow is merely the absence of such a reaction.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes is completely uninterested in photography’s elaborate chemical process; he defines a photograph as the consequence of the click of a shutter. But in 1863, the same year Sojourner began making her *cartes-de-visite*, the American physician and essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes drew attention to this “strange aspect” of the photographic process.¹⁴ He begins his essay “Doings of the Sunbeam,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, by emphasizing the staggering amounts of valuable metal required by the photographic process. “In another portion of the same establishment are great collections of the chemical substances used in photography. To give an idea of the scale on which these are required, we may state that the estimate of the annual consumption of precious metals for photographic purposes, in this country, is set down at ten tons for silver and half a ton for gold.”¹⁵

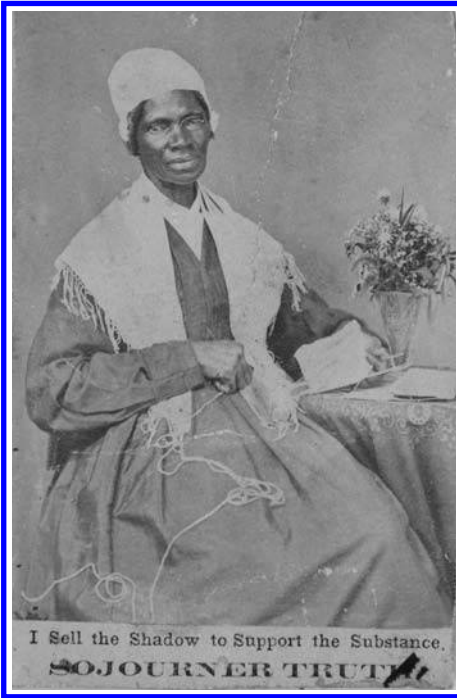


FIGURE 2 (*left*). Sojourner Truth, “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance.” Carte-de-visite, 1864. Author’s collection.

FIGURE 3 (*right*). Sojourner Truth’s carte-de-visite (fig. 3) seen in negative.

Describing the making of a paper negative, Holmes noted that on its surface treated with silver nitrate, “where there was light . . . we have shadow, and where there was shadow we have light” (fig. 3).¹⁶ And he continued: “Presently the fluid grows brownish, and at the same time the whole picture gains the depth of shadow in its darker parts which we desire. . . . This is a *negative*—not a true picture—which puts darkness for light and light for darkness. From this we can take true pictures, or *positives*.”¹⁷ The negative inverts. Subsequently, during the printing of the positive picture, the negative’s dark areas block the action of light—thus producing, in the final print, white where once there was white, black or brown where once there was darkness. The sense of the negative’s reversal of the world is acute, and we are not surprised that Holmes is quick to stress that the positive print is the “true picture.” According to Holmes, (pictorial) truth is restored when white is finally once again white, and dark is once again dark (after a temporary disorienting inversion).

Let us now think about the making of the photograph of Sojourner Truth. Exposure time, as we all know, is decisive to a successful photographic

portrait. Holmes had called the timing of exposure one of photography's greatest challenges. He pointed out that in an underexposed photographic portrait, "the young lady's face is very dusky on a very dusky ground. The lights have hardly come out at all."¹⁸ Perfect exposure makes "it look[] as if Miss E. V. had washed her face since the [earlier] pictures was taken." Overexposure, surprisingly, produces a photographed face that "has a curious resemblance to No. 1, but is less dusky."¹⁹ And still requires soap. Thus, underexposure and overexposure both produce a dusky face that does not emerge from the dusky surrounding; whether too dark or too light. These incorrectly exposed photographs fail adequately to distinguish the figure from the ground.

Holmes's essay of 1863 is rife with the imagery of complexion. In reference to the photographic plate, for example, he remarks, "No Sultana was ever veiled from the light of heaven as this milky tablet"; thereafter he describes the chemical reaction: "Stop! What is that change of color beginning at this edge, and spreading as a blush spreads over a girl's cheek?"²⁰ In the midst of the Civil War, Holmes not only presumes a white sitter but also associates the photographic process itself with the subtle shifts that he believes a pale feminine complexion alone can register.²¹ Indeed, his instructions can be interpreted partly as an attempt to help photographers preserve that certainty: a true picture is a picture of white people who appear white, not dusky, and who do not ambiguously disappear into the ground. Photography was easy, he argued, but "we should, no doubt, over-time and undertone, and otherwise wrong, the countenance of some of our sitters; but we should get the knack in a week or two."²²

To "wrong" the countenance of a sitter was likely, given the complexities of exposure and the development process, but eventually the photographer would get it right. Subtending Holmes's argument is his commitment to the preservation of racial difference. It would be wrong to make a white person appear "dusky," because that term, while conjuring a diminution of light, was typically used to describe African Americans, those "dusky" sons and daughters of Africa. Take, for example, a statement of 1867 about suffrage juxtaposing the paleness of woman to the duskiness of the African race: "If we are to make any new partnership, let it be the fair hand of woman instead of the dusky hand held out to us, no matter how filled with bribes. The effect of universal suffrage would be to give up the Gulf states to a hybrid African population."²³ "Dusky" could also be collapsed with absolute blackness: "I can scarcely realize my feelings at my first sight of colored soldiers. It was all new to me. Everywhere dusky faces were flitting about and they looked so black."²⁴ Although a condition of lighting is quite unlike skin color conceived as permanent, they were repeatedly conflated.

How then would a photographer produce a “true picture” of Sojourner Truth, a “woman,” and one of African descent? How would nineteenth-century photographers, white men in Battle Creek and Detroit, Michigan, determine the rightful appearance of a “clean,” “washed” black face? Here was a woman described both as “dusky” and “immaculate”; a woman who addressed freedmen with the words: “Be clean, be clean, for cleanliness is a part of godliness.”²⁵ Certainly, the exposure time, already at least thirty seconds, would need to be lengthened in order to register the subtle shifts in the dark values of her face. But to register the details of Sojourner’s face would entail the bleaching or overexposure of the lighter areas such as her cap, her shawl, and the knitting yarn she holds in her hands. All of these objects, I remind you, could have been any light color, and indeed unlike colors, of the same high (or light) value. The overexposure of these lighter areas eliminated their details; reducing them to unmodulated shapes of darkness on the negative and unmodulated shapes of paper-whiteness on the final positive print.

Correctly photographing a dark person’s face thus entails a loss of information about the light areas elsewhere. And of course the inverse also holds true: exposing for a light-skinned person entails loss of detail throughout the dark areas. Much of the strangeness of Avedon’s overly proximate view of William Casby’s face derives from the photographer’s decision dramatically to overexpose the sitter’s backlit white hair in order to register distinctly the details of his dark face. In all photographs, gaining information about one tonal range necessarily entails sacrifice about another. This is always the case, although some complexions might more closely match their surroundings in value (or tone). Indeed, this similarity between figure and ground seems to be the cause of Holmes’s anxieties about their potential merging. If Sojourner Truth’s photograph required an overexposure of lights in order to capture the subtleties of darks, a sitter—of whatever complexion—who more closely approximated the tones of her setting offered a different challenge: insufficient contrast.

Photography, for all its purported indexicality, is quite rudimentary in its capacity to make distinctions. The overall chemical reaction entails a leveling of registered information; compromises and losses are built into its procedures as well as its results. One must decide what to lose and what to preserve. We can now better appreciate Sojourner’s reliance on the term “shadow.” The “shadow” evokes absence, unlike the “photo-graph,” which emphasizes inscription. Sojourner’s face and hands come into view by sacrificing the modulated details of inanimate substances such as her clothing and the objects at her side. And her caption, “I sell the shadow to support the substance,” suggests a comfort with photography’s limitations. Sojourner

admits that she sells nothing more than a shadow—her body’s interception of light and its consequent darkening of the positive print even at the cost of the potential disappearance—or should I say dematerialization?—of the lighter objects surrounding her, including the manual labor and craft attested by knit rows of yarn. The rows are gone, the yarn as physical substance is gone, and the remaining blank white square and riveting, meandering line of thread, so much like script, are no more than their signs.

The caption also tells us that substance is external to the picture. Sojourner Truth is selling the shadow that buyers hold in their hands in order to support a substance that is elsewhere. She is, as I said before, already gone. And yet the shadow is also the site of value, the means by which to accrue money. Sojourner Truth’s sale of her shadows supported her in daily ways; they paid for food, repaid debts, and even allowed her to procure needed loans. They also helped her buy other forms of property, including her house in Michigan. Due to the serious illness of her self and her grandson, she had to refinance her house in 1874.²⁶ Here is a glimpse of the Substance external to Sojourner Truth’s Shadow: property owned and lost; debt and accrued value; a strong, if aged, body that also succumbs, like her grandson’s, to illness. Substances, like shadows, are subject to perpetual fluctuation. Indeed, it might be appropriate to emphasize that Sojourner’s shadows served as a fairly consistent form of currency. Certainly their prices went up: Sojourner notified her correspondents and readers of their rising cost due to the escalating prices of paper and stamps, but her small, modest cartes-de-visite sustained their value and continued to function as an exchangeable form of paper currency.²⁷

When she turned mass-produced paper into currency in 1863 and 1864 (and thereafter throughout the 1870s), Sojourner Truth precociously embraced new technologies.²⁸ Carte-de-visite photography entailed the exposure of a single photographic negative by a camera with multiple, usually four, lenses, thus producing numerous small inexpensive prints from a single negative (and leading to the mountainous stacks of cartes-de-visite for sale at photographic studios and bookstores).²⁹ She also relied on the postal service reforms that had made the inclusion of photographs in letters all but free, and she exploited the publicity provided by the press, asking editors to publish letters indicating where and how to buy her photographs.³⁰ In a letter of 13 February 1864, published in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, Truth stipulated: “My friends who send for photographs should not forget to enclose a stamp for postage.”³¹

But most significantly, Sojourner Truth’s decision to caption her cartes-de-visite “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance” knowingly aligned her photographs with paper money. Photographic historians Allan Sekula and Alan Trachtenberg have pointed out that Oliver Wendell Holmes interpreted



FIGURE 4 (left). Five-cent fractional currency note (also called postage currency) with President Thomas Jefferson, 1862–63. Author’s collection.

FIGURE 5 (right). Green-colored back of the five-cent fractional currency note shown in figure 5, a so-called greenback, 1862–63. Author’s collection.

stereographic views in the terms of monetary currency, especially banknotes that turned “substance” into “form.”³² In his 1864 article, Holmes also likened cartes-de-visite to paper money: “As everybody knows, [card-portraits] have become the social currency, the sentimental ‘green-backs’ of civilization, within a very recent period.”³³ Sekula and Trachtenberg have emphasized early photography’s imbrication with the rise of capitalism and commodity fetishism. What they do not address is the specific history of currency during the period in which Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote. Not only were Civil War debates about money intense and contentious but they also explicitly expressed proslavery and antislavery commitments.

Greenbacks were the first federally issued banknotes in American history, authorized in 1862 only a year before Holmes wrote his essay, by a Republican government desperate to finance and win the Civil War (figs. 4–5).³⁴ With their typically green backs, the notes were a paper representation of value: the fiction required faith and consensus, precisely the qualities that were in low supply during the strife of the Civil War. As soon as the bills were issued in 1862, inflation, as predicted, drove their value down, and the hoarding of gold was widespread, leading in one case to the utter collapse of a hoarder’s house in New York City.³⁵ Greenbacks were attacked by those who believed that money was a matter not of representation but of “substance.” Hard money advocates believed that gold, not its representation, held value (fig. 6). How very easy it was to mock paper that Congress had declared to have value, as if naming made it so! The conflict was complex and shifting, but its politics can be generalized: invented to win the Civil War, paper money was Republican and abolitionist; coin was upheld by those in the North and the South who opposed the war and supported slavery. In 1863, a



FIGURE 6. Thomas Nast, “Milk-Tickets for Babies, in Place of Milk,” illustration to David Wells, *Robinson Crusoe’s Money, Or, the Remarkable Fortunes and Misfortunes of a Remote Island Community* (New York, 1876), 97.

newspaper editor opposing the recruitment of black soldiers linked such a strategy to the creation of paper money: “For finance, issue Greenbacks, for war, Blackbacks.”³⁶ Significantly, the allied Northern merchants, financiers, cotton manufacturers, and Southern slaveholders who wished to sustain slavery were called “Copperheads,” a nickname connotative of viper and metal as well as racial prejudice.³⁷

A print from a Copperhead, antigreenback, tract from the 1870s tells us that “substance” and “shadow,” Sojourner Truth’s very terms, were economic as well as photographic metaphors (fig. 7).³⁸ In the debates about money, shadow was aligned with the abolition of slavery, substance with proslavery



FIGURE 7. Thomas Nast, “A Shadow Is Not a Substance,” illustration to Wells, *Robinson Crusoe’s Money*, 58.

and antiblack sentiment. Sojourner Truth knew this opposition very well; she had been attacked by Copperheads chanting racial slurs in Indiana in 1861.³⁹ At another point, she purportedly joked about her shift from “scouring brass door knobs” to “scouring copperheads.”⁴⁰ When she captioned her carte-de-visite “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” Sojourner Truth at once exploited the resonance of the terminology and embraced the shadow—the paper representation that was not substance, not body, not gold, but capable, like greenbacks, of being exchanged among the politically like-minded to finance the end of slavery. Photography, like paper currency, was alchemy in reverse; it turned silver and gold into paper (remember Holmes’s postulation that the new medium required ten tons of silver and half a ton of gold per year). Photography devoured precious metals on behalf of a representation with different, quite fragile, claims to value.

Sojourner Truth was making money, and her cheap, mass-produced paper notes featured her portrait. This was no insignificant achievement. When the

Republican government first replaced coin with paper, it relied on the precedent of federally issued postal stamps. The first national banknotes, called fractional currency, attested to that precedent by placing images of postal stamps at the center of their engravings.⁴¹ Thus familiar and revered faces were centrally framed in the new fractional bills for, let's say, three cents or five cents. Greenbacks could be described as cheap, circulating portraits of former presidents. Ten years later, in 1874, a congressman continued to insist that "all that is necessary for a government to do to create money is to stamp upon what it would change into money 'its image and superscription,' and it will be money."⁴²

Scandal erupted, however, when Spencer Morton Clark, first chief of the National Currency Bureau, decided to place his own portrait on the five-cent note (fig. 8). Should the face of a miscellaneous bureaucrat preside over paper bills? Debates eventually led Congress in 1863 to prohibit the use of the portrait of any living person on a security of the United States.⁴³ The preceding year, Congress, in an attempt to secure the status of fractional currency, also forbade "the use of any [other] items intended to circulate as money in amounts of less than \$1."⁴⁴ In 1864, Sojourner Truth elevated the cost of her cartes-de-visite to three for a dollar or thirty-five cents for one.⁴⁵ She was therefore circulating her portrait not only as a form of currency but also as an illegal fractional currency worth less than a dollar. She had invented her own kind of paper money and for the same reasons as the Republican government: in order to produce wealth dependent upon a community willing to believe in representation's capacity to produce material results, to make money where there was none, and to do so partly in order to abolish slavery.

But paper money, whether greenbacks or cartes-de-visite, abundantly and freely circulated. Herein lay its special, frightening power: here was paper-thin value at once unstable, fluctuating, elusive, and difficult to control. Anxieties about counterfeiting immediately accompanied the manufacture of the first greenbacks.⁴⁶ At first the Treasurer himself was authorized to sign all bills until the government realized the job required a full-time staff of seventy clerks.⁴⁷ Designs and printing methods were devised to thwart counterfeiters. The very first bills of 1863 featured a bronze oval encircling the face portrait—as if paper money needed to recall the precious metal coin, the substance, it had sacrificed and turned into an image (fig. 9). How menacing was this brown ring, all that is left of gold coin, encircling the white forefather's face in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation?

Significantly, photography, that strange process whereby valuable metals were turned into paper, had compelled this strange ghosting of coin: the bronzing technique was devised to prevent the photographic counterfeiting of paper money.⁴⁸ Because the photographic process is sensitive only



FIGURE 8 (left). Five-cent fractional currency note with the portrait of Spencer Clark, Superintendent of National Currency Bureau, 1865. Author’s collection.

FIGURE 9 (right). Ten-cent fractional currency note with “bronzing” around President George Washington, 1863. Author’s collection.

to tone, it could not produce a negative capable of distinguishing the brown (and reflective) metallic circle from the engraved lines that lay beneath it. Compared to photography, engraving was a more complex form of representation because it could overlay images made of different inks and different colors. Monochromatic photography was, as we have seen, a crude leveling instrument that the federal government rightly believed it could outwit.

Paper money was designed to prevent unauthorized duplication. Not so, photographs. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln had told someone requesting one of his many cartes-de-visite: “I have not a single one now at my control; . . . I suppose they got my shadow and can multiply copies indefinitely.”⁴⁹ Lincoln accepted the infinite reproduction of his shadow, but he attempted two years later to exert control over the printing of federal banknotes. By contrast, Sojourner Truth’s photographs were her currency, and for these reasons she was far more troubled. The back of her cartes-de-visite are stamped with the copyright she quickly had filed in her name in 1864. The back of each of her cartes is stamped with the statement: “Entered according to act of Congress in the year 1864 by SOJOURNER TRUTH, in the Clerk’s Office, of the U. S. District Court, for the Eastern District of Mich.” (fig. 10).⁵⁰ Unenforceable, a year in advance of the addition of photography to U.S. copyright law, Sojourner Truth’s copyright nonetheless attests to her ambition to control and thereby profit from her shadow’s circulation.

In 1867, Sojourner told the *New York World*: “Speaking of shadows, . . . I do not carry ‘rations’ in my bag; I keep my shadow there. . . . I stand on principle, always in one place, so everybody knows where to find Sojourner,

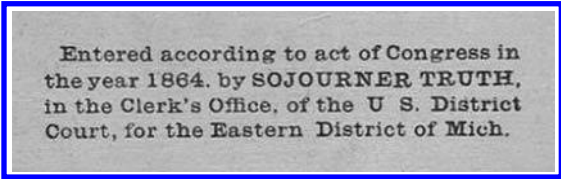


FIGURE 10. Back of Sojourner Truth's carte-de-visite, 1864. Author's collection.

and I don't want my shadow even to be dogging about here and there and everywhere, so I keep it in this bag."⁵¹ Startling here is how the potential loss of control over her cartes-de-visite leads Sojourner to redefine herself as fixed rather than wandering. And she imbues her shadows with their own volition: they need to be sequestered in her large bag to insure that they won't "be dogging about here and there and everywhere." But Sojourner Truth knew very well that cartes-de-visite were infinitely reproducible. When she herself ran out of cards, she either had more cards made from negatives she had saved, or she had photographers make negatives from the cards themselves. Anyone could have done this, of course. Own a carte-de-visite, photograph it, and you can make a hundred more. Sojourner Truth's copyright was a textual inscription that attempted to convince others that her shadow was ultimately her property, her substance to sell. The first-person statement "I sell" is a remarkable assertion of her agency as well as a claim to ownership of her own shadow. She did not need to pretend the carte-de-visite was gold, or her body, or more than the interception of light by her body, but she did want to make herself the proprietor of an image that was at once a humble substance and a representation of value.

Truth's knitting yarn, so elaborately wending its way, scriptlike, across her dress is so overexposed, like the square she has knitted, that it is merely paper. The precious metal—silver nitrate—had first inscribed the negative with a deep black wandering line, but the final print turns precious silver into a script that is no more than blank paper; it does so in order to convey the shadow of Sojourner Truth's face.

The photographs have a reality for me that the people don't.
—Richard Avedon⁵²

Avedon told this story about the making of his first photograph:

You know, I think really my first photographs were portraits of my sister, Louise, burned into my skin. My father was a teacher, you know, before he opened his store, and he used to teach me things. He taught me about photography, how light passed through a lens and created a negative, bleaching out areas on sensitized paper.

Somehow I realized that my skin could be a sensitized surface. Since Louise was the photographic subject of the house, I put a negative of a picture of her on my upper arm, and taped it there with surgical tape. I was eight or nine, and we were still living in Cedarhurst, before we moved to Manhattan, so I went out into the sun, in the backyard, with the negative taped to my shoulder. I actually kept it on for two or three days. Then I peeled it off, and there was Louise, burned into my skin. That was my first portrait.⁵³

Putting aside whether the famously self-promoting photographer's anecdote is true, it is notable that he here eclipses the act of taking a photograph in order to emphasize the procedures of developing a negative into a positive image. In this anecdote, no camera is mentioned. (His emphasis is therefore the opposite of Barthes's, which focuses on the click of the shutter). Instead, Avedon implies the preexistence of negatives of his gorgeous, tragic sister, "the photographic subject of the house." To produce a positive image of the fair-skinned Louise from a photographic negative in which she appeared black, Avedon had to darken his own skin. His arm's unexposed surface thereby served as photography's white paper, bringing his sister's face into visibility and also restoring her family resemblance. The boy was willing to become dark in order that his sister appear pale on his arm.

This photographic experiment introduces color to the highly stylized convention of black and white photography. The negative of Louise was predicated on the simple binary of black and white, but, taped to the arm of her brother, it produces the browns, pinks, oranges, and reds of her sunburned eight-year-old brother. If she appeared fair on the arm of this boy, she did not appear "white." Real skin color confuses the opposition of black and white so fundamental to both black and white photography and received ideas about race. Black and white photography naturalizes an American conception of racial difference; it turns William Casby's face into a black surface punctuated by white hairs and pools of reflection. The man who was born a slave is black, not white, but also not brown (brown in American iconography is the color of other peoples, not former slaves). And Avedon's photographic choices in his portrait of William Casby exaggerate and inscribe this simplified binary.

But photography, as Holmes knew, can produce far more ambiguous results. People of all races can appear "dusky," and they can merge with the background. Compare, for example, the two sides of Abraham Lincoln's face as photographed in 1864; the illuminated half bleaches into white, mere paper; the side in shadow is dark black, articulated only by its sheen (fig. 11). Skin color depends on how you light the sitter and expose and develop your photographs.⁵⁴ Avedon knew this very well, as do all photographers, even amateurs. In the case of Avedon, we have specific visual evidence of his

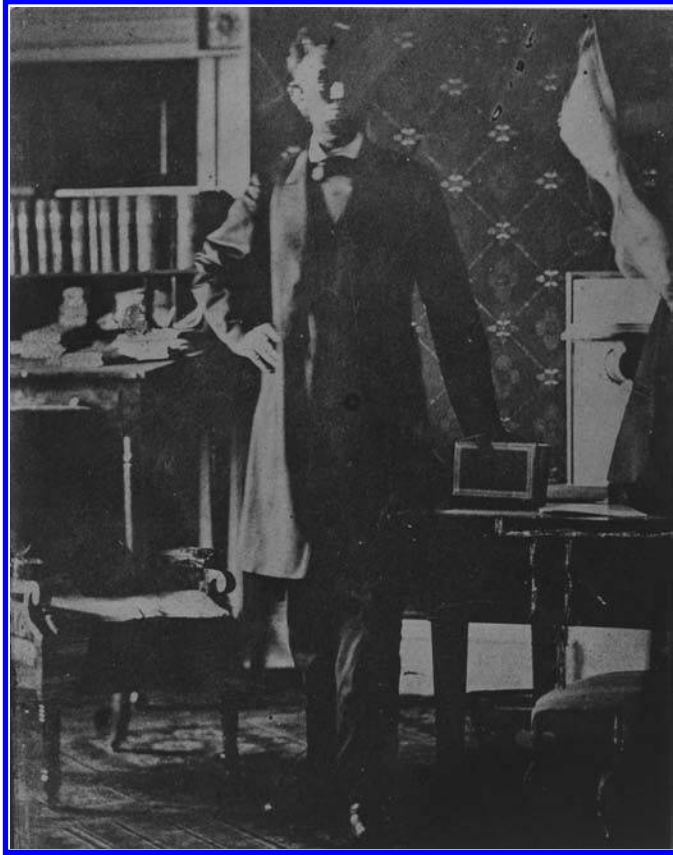


FIGURE 11. Anthony Berger, Abraham Lincoln, 26 April 1864.

awareness in the 1964 photo-booth photograph he took of his own face, half-hidden by a paper photograph of his old friend James Baldwin. The two men had attended the same high school in the Bronx, where they worked together on the school's magazine.⁵⁵ At the time, Avedon aspired to be a poet, and Baldwin, one of the school's few African American students, commuted to the Bronx from Harlem. In the photo-booth picture, Avedon was marking the publication of their co-authored photo-essay *Nothing Personal*, in which the photograph of William Casby was first published.⁵⁶

Here are a white man and a black man as an array of shades of gray. The overexposed and blurry photograph of Baldwin, who is posed too close to the photo-booth's camera, appears no darker in skin tone than Avedon, whose upper face, cast in deep shadow by his hand, appears one of the blackest parts of the photograph. To a lesser extent than Baldwin's, Avedon's face

also appears blurred; only his ear is crisply focused. The difference between the two men's faces resides primarily in their slightly discrepant scale. Baldwin's less focused face is larger, and his features appear emphatically so: we see one of the protruding eyes that made him so self-conscious, the largeness of his lips and nose, in contrast to Avedon's receded, more sharply delineated, birdlike face. And while Baldwin's blurred eye appears unfocused and unaware of being on view, Avedon's eye is alert and directed at the camera, whose position we now occupy. Here Avedon has manufactured another image in which a black man appears unable to return our gaze. Yet this spectacle does not rely on the contrast of brilliantly lit black skin and the blinding white of glossy paper. Rather, it exploits black and white photography's capacity to level differences. In his photo-booth portrait, Avedon made black and white skin continuous in value. The medium of photography, as we have seen, can heighten or diminish contrast. Racial difference was an effect photographers had to work to achieve because all persons produce shadows—which they subsequently leave behind.

Notes

This essay stems from a book in progress on Sojourner Truth's use of photography. I thank Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson for their invitation to give a talk on the subject at their conference *Out of Sight: New World Slavery and the Visual Imagination*, held at Northwestern University in March 2007.

1. Letter from George Mason Graham to Thomas Overton Moore, 26 May 1860, in *General W. T. Sherman as College President: a Collection of Letters, Documents, and Other Material, Chiefly from Private sources, relating to the life and Activities of General William Tecumseh Sherman, to the Early Years of Louisiana State University, and to the Stirring Conditions existing in the South on the Eve of the Civil War, 1859–1861*, ed. Walter Lynwood Fleming (Cleveland, 1912), 399; available online in *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*, Alexander Street Press Data Base: <http://solomon.cwld.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/phil/cwld/documentidx.pl?sourceid=S1609>.
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981), refers to the Avedon photograph twice, on 34 and 79. On 34:

Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word which Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into the product of a society and of its history. As in the portraits of William Casby, photographed by Avedon: the essence of slavery is laid bare; the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theater). This is why the great portrait photographers are great mythologists (the French bourgeoisie); Sander (the Germans of pre-Nazi Germany), Avedon (New York's "upper crust").

3. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
4. The image was made in New York City on the occasion of the publication of their co-authored book *Nothing Personal* (New York, 1964), in which the full-page photograph of William Casby originally appeared across from a diminutive picture of Adlai Stevenson. In Richard Avedon and Doon Arbus, *Avedon: The Sixties* (New York, 1999), the photograph of William Casby is included, again full-page, but it is less tightly cropped; its caption reads “William Casby, former slave, Algiers, Louisiana,” which shifts the emphasis from the moment of Casby’s birth and its historical removal to the present and its place; we now know where Avedon encountered him.
5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.
6. Battle Creek, Michigan, 17 June 1863, letter to Mr. Redpath; published as “Letter from Sojourner Truth,” *Commonwealth* (Boston), 3 July 1863.
7. On Sojourner Truth’s use of photography, see Kathleen Collins, “Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth,” *History of Photography* 7, no. 3 (July–September 1983): 183–205; and Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York, 1996), 185–99. On Sojourner Truth, see Painter, *Sojourner Truth*; and also Carleton Mabee, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York, 1993); Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)* (New York, 1995), 40–45.
8. Despite the commonplace that early photographs were called shadows, as shown in the oft-repeated advertising slogan cited here, there is spotty evidence in the secondary literature. Collins, for example, cites a South African example; Vicki Goldberg, “Death Is Resurrected As an Art Form,” *New York Times*, Sunday, 2 May 1993, argues, without citation, that “death offered a good living. Daguerreotypists’ ads exhorted customers to ‘Secure the Shadow’ Ere the Substance Fade.’ In 1854, one daguerreotype gallery was put on the market with the claim that ‘pictures of deceased persons alone will pay all expenses.’” An 1891 interview with Matthew Brady asked the photographer, “I suppose you remember many ladies you grasped the shadows of?” in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (Albuquerque, 1981), 204. On the idea that photography fixed the shadow, see William Henry Fox Talbot, “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing” (1839), reprinted in Goldberg, *Photography in Print*, 40–41: “Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there, and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change, even if thrown back into the sunbeam from which it derived its origin.” I am not convinced by the racialized interpretation of photography as a “black art” offered by Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index,” in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York, 2003), 111–28.
9. William Thompson Lusk to Elizabeth Freeman Adams Lusk, 20 December 1861, in *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*.
10. On cartes-de-visite in the United States, see Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (New York, 1964), 138–52; and William C. Darrach, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, PA, 1981).
11. According to the *New York World*, 13 May 1870, she said that she herself “used to be sold for other people’s benefit, but now she sold herself for her own”; cited in Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 216.

12. See David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2006), esp. 57–60.
13. On shadows, see E. H. Gombrich, *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art* (London, 1995); Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven, 1995).
14. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Doings of the Sunbeam” (1862), *Atlantic Monthly*, 12 July 1863, 1–15; here 5.
15. *Ibid.*, 2. 16. *Ibid.*, 5. 17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.* 19. *Ibid.*, 6–7. 20. *Ibid.*, 4, 5.
21. Richard Dyer, *White* (London, 1997), 94, points out that today’s photographic how-to manuals sustain Holmes’s assumption that “the normal face is a white face.” One manual, at least, is explicit: “When used as a standard for quality control purposes, it is assumed, unless stated otherwise, that the typical subject is Caucasian with a skin reflectance of approximately 36%”; Leslie Stroebel and Richard Zakia, eds., *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1993); cited in *ibid.*, 95.
22. Holmes, “Doings of the Sunbeam,” 3.
23. “The Convention. Right of Suffrage,” *World* (New York), Tuesday, 23 July 1867, 8.
24. Oliver Wilcox Norton, “Memoir of Oliver Wilcox Norton,” in *Army Letters, 1861–1865: Being Extracts from Private Letters to Relatives and Friends from a Soldier in the Field during the Late Civil War, with an Appendix Containing Copies of Some Official Documents, Papers, and Addresses of Later Date* (Chicago, 1903), 298.
25. “The Defeat of the Amazons,” *World* (New York), Monday, 1 July 1867, discussing the betrayal of the feminists by Horace Greeley: “If the fair and unsophisticated breast of ANNA DICKINSON was turned into an abode of wrath, and if SOJOURNER TRUTH’s immaculate visage became a sickly mask . . . who can blame them?” Here the fair breast becomes wrathful while Truth’s “immaculate visage” becomes “a sickly mask”; the author describes Truth’s face as clean and also avoids referring to its color in contrast to Dickinson’s fairness; to describe its alteration he resorts to the terms sickly and mask; implying perhaps paleness but also artifice. Cited in Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 120.
26. Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 202.
27. Letter from Sojourner Truth to Mary Gale, 25 February 1864: “Say that I sell the three for \$1 or a single one for 35 cents. I have to charge a little more than the common price because the paper & envelope and sometimes the stamps cost XXX and they will see by my card that I sell the shadow to support the substance”; Sojourner Truth Letter from the Library of Congress American Memory Project, Washington, DC: U.S. Library of Congress, 9999, 2. S2018-D001.
28. A number of recent books attend to the technological skills of slaves, often, however overlooking photography; see, for example, Carroll Pursell, ed., *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).
29. Taft, *Photography and the American Scene*, 149: “It is difficult at the present day to realize the tremendous volume of business done; card photographs could be found ‘piled up by the bushel in the print stores, offered by the gross at book stands.’ At one time the Anthony firm was making thirty-six hundred *cartes-de-visite* of celebrities a day, and other firms must have done so as well.”
30. Henkin, *The Postal Age*, 59.

31. Letter of 13 February 1864 printed in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*; cited in Collins, "Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth," 187.
32. Allan Sekula, "Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41 (Spring 1981): 15–25, here 21–23. Alan Trachtenberg cites Sekula in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989), 19; see also Stephen Michael Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago, 2004); Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1982), discusses "nothing" pretending to be a "something"; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley, 1987).
33. Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," 8.
34. On greenbacks, see Irwin Unger, *The Greenback Era: A Social and Political History of American Finance, 1865–1879* (Princeton, 1964); *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962* (Washington, D.C. 1965), 2–13. On the debates about money in relation to issues of race see Michael O'Malley, "Specie and Species: Race and the Money Question in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 369–95; and the critical response of Nell Irvin Painter, "Thinking About the Languages of Money and Race: A Response to Michael O'Malley, 'Specie and Species,'" *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 396–404. Painter emphasizes that O'Malley's discursive focus overlooks the fact that slaves were in fact property, or value; racial difference was therefore not simply a matter of metaphor (of fixed or intrinsic value like gold): "Enslaved black people were not simply likened to money, they were a kind of money" (398).
35. *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 8–9.
36. *Atlas and Argus*, 19 January 1863; quoted in Forrest G. Wood, *The Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley, 1968), 44; cited in O'Malley, "Specie and Species: Race and the Money Question in Nineteenth-Century America," 380.
37. On Copperheads, see Unger, *The Greenback Era*, 72–73.
38. Almost twenty-five years ago, Walter Benn Michaels published an article in *Representations* that addressed this print from David Wells, *Robinson Crusoe's Money*; see his "The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 105–32; reprinted in his *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 137–80. Wells's *Robinson Crusoe's Money* was first published in 1876 as an antigreenback tract and reprinted in 1896 as an attack on free silver. Wells was both a civil servant and a journalist who wrote on money questions.
39. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 180.
40. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life": Also, A Memorial Chapter*, ed. Nell Irvin Painter (1884; reprint, New York, 1998), 214: "During the war, Sojourner met one of her democratic friends, who asked her, 'What business are you now following?' She quickly replied 'Years ago, when I lived in the city of New York, my occupation was scouring brass door knobs; but *now* I go about scouring copperheads." See also an anti-abolition article in a New Jersey paper (137), which attacks Sojourner Truth's appearance and refers to her "random" speech on women's rights and "copperhead Jersey."

41. On the history of fractional currency, see *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 8–13.
42. Congressional Record, 43rd Congress, 1st Session, 31 January 1874, 1089; cited in O'Malley, "Specie and Species: Race and the Money Question in Nineteenth-Century America," 379.
43. *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 12. Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 126–27, recounts an anecdote published in 1880 and 1890 that Sojourner had tried to get Lincoln in 1865 to exchange a greenback bearing his picture for her photograph; supposedly she said, "It's got a black face but a white back; an' I'd like one o'yourn wid a green back." Mabee concludes that the story was likely fabricated in order to make more exciting her interaction with President Grant. Sojourner herself recounted that she gave President Grant her carte-de-visite, and he, in turn, gave her a five-dollar bill. I would emphasize that the Lincoln story, while in all likelihood fictional, nonetheless indicates that Sojourner's cartes-de-visite were being linked to paper currency. Note the role of portraits on the bills and even the color printing jokes: black face versus green backs!
44. *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 9.
45. See letter from Sojourner Truth to Mary Gale, 25 February 1864.
46. On counterfeiting, see *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 11.
47. *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 2; signatures were immediately a problem, requiring so much time that only nineteen days after the original act President Lincoln had to stipulate that the secretary could designate others to sign bills; eventually seventy clerks were hired to work full-time signing their own names; they were paid \$1,200 a year, an unforeseen cost of making paper money. Six months later, Spencer Morton Clark realized signatures could also be printed; see also Jason Goodwin, *Greenback: The Almighty Dollar and the Invention of America* (New York, 2003), 222.
48. On the relatively little-known history of bronzing, see *History of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, 1862–1962*, 11.
49. Letter of 7 April 1860 to H. G. Eastman, Esq.; cited in Patrick Maynard, "Drawing and Shooting: Causality in Depiction," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1985): 115–29, here 115. A photograph of the letter is reproduced in Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf, *Lincoln in Photographs: An Album of Every Known Pose* (Norman, OK, 1963), 35.
50. There is an inadequate literature on nineteenth-century copyright of photography in the United States; see Jane M. Gaines, "Photography 'Surprises' the Law: The Portrait of Oscar Wilde," in *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 42–83; here 49. In 1865, photographs and photographic negatives were officially added to copyright law, perhaps because of the popularity of Mathew Brady's photographs during the Civil War.
51. Cited in Collins, "Shadow and Substance: Sojourner Truth," 200.
52. Cited in Joshua L. Miller, "'A Striking Addiction to Irreality': *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of the Photo-Text Genre," in D. Quentin Miller, *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, 2000), 154–89, here 154.
53. Adam Gopnik, "The Light Writer," in *Evidence, 1944–1994/Richard Avedon*, ed. Mary Shanahan (New York, 1994), 103–19; 104.
54. On the ways Hollywood films, and also photography, key their lighting to white actors, see Dyer, *White*, esp. 82–116.

55. On Baldwin and Avedon at DeWitt Clinton High School, see James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (Berkeley, 2002), 14–15; David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, 1994), 26–27.
56. Little has been published on *Nothing Personal*. An exception is Miller, “‘A Striking Addiction to Irrationality’: *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of the Photo-Text Genre,” which champions the book as a critique of standard photo-text practices. For a negative criticism, see Max Kozloff’s essay devoted to the more often discussed series *In the American West*, “Through Eastern Eyes: Richard Avedon’s in the American West,” first published in *Art in America* in January 1987 and reprinted in Max Kozloff, *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames: Essays on Photography* (Albuquerque, 1994), 62–75; on *Nothing Personal*, see 65–67. Kozloff only mentions the photograph of William Casby as “one of the most vivid faces in the history of portraiture” (66). Joshua Miller does not refer to the photograph.