Doc Chat Episode Fifty Two Transcript

Friendship and Masculinity through the Lens of a 19th-century Black Photographer (April 14, 2022)

IAN FOWLER Welcome everyone to Doc Chat. I am Ian Fowler, curator of Maps History and Government Information here at the New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, we will be joined by Dr. Travis Foster, who is an associate professor of English and academic director of gender and woman studies at Villanova University. He is the author of "Genre and White Supremacy in the Post-Emancipation United States," which came out on Oxford Community Press in 2019. Delila Scruggs, curator of of photographs and prints at the Schomburg Center. Delila and Travis will discuss a Daguerreotype of two unidentified white men by African American photographer, abolitionist, and businessman, Augustus Washington. Scruggs and Foster will discuss Washington's studio practice and examine the gender dynamics behind the tender intimacy exhibited by the men in this 150-year-old photograph. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general information and comments, but make sure you change your chat mode to everyone so that everyone is included. Once you begin the question-and-answer segment, please use the Q and A function, rather than the chat function, to pose your questions. If you wish to stay anonymous, please check that option. And please take it away.

DELILA SCRUGGS Hi, I'm really pleased to be talking with Travis about this really fascinating photograph. As an art historian I believe that when you use visual images as a primary document, you really have to start by reading the image. By unpacking what you see before jumping into interpretation. And really by making an inventory of those visual anchors, then you could really begin to identify avenues of further inquiry. So, I want to start off by asking, Travis, what spoke to you about the image when I first sent it to you? What are some things you [inaudible]? And I also invite the audience to put in the chat any details that they notice. What's interesting to you about this photograph? What do you notice?

TRAVIS FOSTER Well, first thanks Dalila for the invitation to be part of this and for just sending me this really fascinating image. You know, I'm not a trained art historian, but I notice that they really thought about what they were going to wear that morning, right? And they talked with each other about what they would wear. There is a coordination of the outfits. You can't really see the hair, but it definitely seems like a lot of care was taken in the presentation of appearance. And then the way that they're kind of leaning into one another, or at least one of them is leaning into the other, I notice that they are staging themselves in this more intimate
presentation. And you probably know it better than I do, Dalila, but I think by 1850 a Daguerreotype exposure would have taken about 20 seconds. So, they're sitting here, I think, about 20 seconds. And being very deliberate with how they present themselves. I know the nautical imagery on the bowties or whatever you call those ties I notice. And obviously the hand clasping seems really to stick out from our perspective now.

SCRUGGS Just for anybody who may not know, there's also the Daguerreotype case itself in the medium. So, Daguerreotypes are the first generation of photography. They're a copper plate that's covered in silver and then bucked to a high shine, and then the image itself is made out of mercury paper, and those droplets are what make up the image. So, what you have is a negative and a positive almost near image. As you move the Daguerreotype, it flickers between negative and positive. This one is a little bit damaged. The tarnishing also looks like it might have been cleaned, but it's nonetheless, it's a great primary document.

FOSTER So, Dalila, when you sent me this invitation, I had heard of Augustus Washington before. I think mainly because of the portrait of John Brown which is the cover of more than one kind of monograph that's been put out about Brown over the past several decades. But I was curious kind of what more seems to you interesting about Washington?

SCRUGGS Yes. So, just really briefly. We don't actually have a portrait of Augustus Washington. There's no known portrait, but he left behind a really extraordinary archival record. So, we know a lot about his fascinating life. He was born in New Jersey. He is assigned to a formerly enslaved father and a mother of South Asian descent. And as a young man, he became really active in the abolitionist movement, and so, I'll share this really interesting quote. Frederick Douglas knew of him. And he says that, "Washington was thoroughly imbued with the spirit of reform and determined to labor for the elevation of this space." And it gives you a sense of Augustus Washington's drive or ways to be very publicly vocal about African American rights. And with that, he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he opened his first Daguerreotype studio in 1846 in Hartford, Connecticut.

FOSTER Okay. So, then that was my next -- the other thing that kind of stood out to me. So, when we look at the image with the facing page, there's the address. The Hartford address, and so, I mean that's really prominent when you look at these two, and this image in total. And I wondered what more we know about that particular, the Washington gallery in Hartford.

SCRUGGS Yes. So, it was a really successful gallery. The address that's printed on in the case, there's a broad side that he published that tells us a little bit more about the gallery that he was running. And so, we can actually use this primary document to learn a little bit more about his practice. In particular, he describes to his own practice in the third person. He says, "He has made this business his profession and is determined to take as good or better likeness than anyone in the state at prices cheaper than anyone in the city." And so, he has priced his range to set lower down from 50 cents to a $1.00. One dollar in 1850 is about $36 in today's money. And so, he was able to attract both middle class and wealthy clientele. At the top we noticed
that these were probably sailors with the insignia that was on their cravat or their tie. And so, we are not exactly sure whether these men could afford -- were well of or not, but at the size of a six plate Daguerreotype, it's actually the most common size. It's a very modestly sized photograph, and so, it would have been on the lower or mid-level scale of the pay range that Augustus Washington offered photographs at. So, pretty affordable. But he also knew that his clientele and his photographs were typical of the time period, but nonetheless, really beautifully executed. And here are two examples of portraits he took of Hartford's elite. But as you mentioned, Travis, he's really well known for this photograph. He was patronized by abolitionists and notably he is known to have made the earliest known photograph of radical abolitionist John Brown. And it is thought that maybe John Brown saw it as an abolitionist act itself to go to Hartford specifically to patronize a black photographer. And so, with this sort of really quick background on his practice, I am really eager to get to view the photographic moment itself. So, we know it's in Hartford. We know it's this thriving practice. We know this photograph was likely very affordable for these two men. But it still raises the question of what is going on here in this photograph? And particularly for contemporary eyes, what can we make of the embrace? And so, I'm wondering, Travis, if you could say more about how this embrace might have been read or coded in the 19th century?

FOSTER That was just so interesting. I mean for me, I think one of the most useful ways to get at that question is to think about how we, in 2022 read an image like this. And images like this have become circulating a lot more since, I think, roughly the 80s and 90s. And recently in 2020, I have to look down to my notes, but there was another anthology that said Loving a Photographic History of Men in Love, 1850 to 1950. And I think of anthologies like this in contemporary recuperations of images like this, as part of a desire for queer people to turn to history as part of a drive of what Christopher Nealon, a scholar who wrote a book called "Foundlings" caused the drive toward peoplehood. So, this way of using history and using what we think of as queer representations in history in order to feel historical and in order to feel a kind of larger sense of a collectivity that lasts over time. And I don't want to just count that way of reading the image, and I think that for those of you who are teachers, you know, you can very well imagine students coming to an image like that with that sort of desire. This desire to feel their own queerness as something that's part of history. As something that has a long genealogy. But 19th century Americans would have seen it pretty differently. They would have seen this as what they thought of as a kind of romantic friendship which is this common relationship that men would enter, white men would enter especially, in between youth and manhood. And it was seen as something that was really kind of positive for the men involved and that it would kind place a constraint on their sexuality by channeling desires for intimacy to the relationship with a friend rather than externally into kind of heterosexuality. And we know that while sexual intimacy in these sorts of relationships wasn't the norm, it also wasn't outside of the realm of possibility also. So, we might imagine that these two men are sexually intimate, but we just don't know, and it's possible. The interesting thing about the romantic friendship to me is the kind of racial politics of it. And there are two different ways that this kind of friendship between white men had a racial political valance. The first is a practical way. So, this kind of a friendship would be a kind of training ground in feeling sympathy for the other. And by feeling
sympathy for the other, learning to feel sympathy for white men more generally, white American men more generally. And then there's the symbolic where the relationship between the two serves as a kind of metaphor or stand-in for the relationship between white male citizens and all belonging in an American national family more generally. There's a critic Andy Donnelly who I think is doing some of the more interesting work on this stuff right now. So, I think it's okay for us to have our own 2022 sort of attachments to images like these, but it's also really important to see the significance that this is to white men and the significance that this is a relationship that was not uncommon during the period and would have been read in certain kinds of political and racial trajectories.

SCRUGGS You know, when you first introduced that to me, that really got me thinking about where Augustus Washington pits in this triangulation and how somebody, particularly somebody like Augustus Washington who is so local about what he referred to as his own manhood rights. The idea that he too deserves citizenship and was seeking out a place in society, whether in America or elsewhere, to assert his rights as a man, as a person who had claimed to civic belonging, and fortunately we have a scholar, [inaudible] Shaw Smith, who has actually thought a lot about how Augustus Washington really wanted to use his photography to assert himself into what he describes as a civic contract of photography. The idea that he's standing by the camera and looking at these men is yes, they are constructing a kind of metaphor of white -- the imaginary community of white male citizens, but he is troubling simply by being there looking at that, and also particularly at the time when black people were not really allowed to look directly in the eyes of white people, particularly in the south. Then the question is how is photography practice actually empowering him to actually on an ocular level be on the same level with these white men and maybe find a place in that community or at least stretch with that community who belong to that in that civic space? One of the things that Shawn Michelle Smith points out is that even the print representation of a photographer is always white. And so, he already is [inaudible] that by choosing these images to advertise his business. But, of course, you know that when you go and pay him, you're paying a black man to participate in taking your image. Go ahead. Go ahead.

FOSTER I mean I think it is so interesting to think about where he saw himself in relationship to these men and this image of this particular time. Particularly since he must have had some sort of sense about the kinds of symbolic significance an image like this would have held during the period. I mean is it a kind of liberal inclusion desire where he imagines himself as partaking in the kind of intimacy through being the photographer, through being part of this, or is it something else that's going on with his own kind of authority and agency in this particular scene? I think it's so fun to speculate about what's going on for him at this moment.

SCRUGGS Exactly. I got the sentiment, but I lost your audio a little bit. Could you say it again? Just that's a great way to end as a speculative question so I would love that.

FOSTER Yes. So, we can only speculate on what for Washington was going on here. And I think on the one hand, we might think of a kind of liberal inclusion desire, right? That he is
imagining himself as being a part of this symbolic community represented by the image that he is creating in this moment, or is he doing something else? Is his agency and authority as the photographer [inaudible] Daguerreotype in this moment allowing him to imagine an alternative kind of politics. Something that doesn't just rest on liberal inclusion but another kind of radical possibility altogether.

SCRUGGS I think that's a great way to end. He has a whole other practice in Liberia, West Africa, where he is able to play out that experiment. Like really create that image and test [inaudible] and vision of black male citizens. But because of time, we'll just have to leave it here with thinking about a moment before he was able to realize that vision of a black male citizen.

FOWLER Thank you both so very, very much. I wish we had another hour. This has been a great introduction. Dalila, if you could, can you tell us a little bit more about the Daguerreotype collection at the Schomburg and what this is a larger part of?

SCRUGGS Oh, I would be thrilled to do so. I'm going to advance the slide. So, the Schomburg holds a wide range of 19th century photography. So, we have about -- if you look in the chat, I have a link to the [inaudible].

FOWLER Yes. I have it right here. I'll throw it right in.

SCRUGGS We just had a [inaudible] so I'm very proud, and we are in the process of digitizing all of our case photographs that we have. We have a case of Daguerreotypes, [inaudible] . We also have a couple of case of tin types, and with this array of images, really get a sense of different lives of black people. And we also have three key black photographers represented in the collection. Augustus Washington, Thomas Paul, and the Goodrich brothers. So, this is a -- and their work in the case of Thomas Paul, we have a couple of different formats of his photography. So, our collection really offers a way of both seeing black people in the 19th century but also African American production in the 19th century.

FOWLER That is tremendous. An exceptional, exceptional resource. We do have a question in the Q and A, and I want to add a question onto this question. So, going to the actual photograph, to the Daguerreotype itself, is it the original frame that it would have been issued in? Does the gentleman on the left have a wedding band on his right hand? And then my question is do you think that they would have made two copies of this, or would they have shared one, or do you have any insight into that?

SCRUGGS I didn't hear the last part of the question, but I'm going to actually -- there certainly looks like there is a gold band embellished. Like hand painted onto the image. It looks like my connection is breaking up. Travis, do you know a little bit more about where wedding rings were worn or if we can make any inference about the jewelry?

FOSTER I don't. I wish I did. I have actually never done research into male hand jewelry during
the period, and it's really hard to tell from just looking at the image what fingers those are on. One of them is maybe on the middle finger.

SCRUGGS They actually both look like they're on the middle finger.

SCRUGGS In the middle finger. So, they're matching bands, right?

FOSTER Yes. That's what it looks like.

FOSTER And like you said, Delila, we don't know if those are bands that they're wearing or that were painted on after the fact by Washington. Is that right?

SCRUGGS Well, the fact that they're gold, it's very clear that they're a painting. The question is, is there an underlying photographic image of a band that was then embellished with the gilding? That's interesting. This is what I mean by just looking for the anchors and how they lead us onto forms of research. We don't have the answer now, but now I have a research question about male jewelry in the 19th century.

FOWERL And then I assume since the case is stamped with Washington's imprimatur that this is the original way that this would have been presented. Is that true?

SCRUGGS Yes. That's correct. Yes.

FOSTER And then, Travis, you seem to like this part of the question. So, do you think they would have gotten two copies? One for each of the gentleman, or do you think they would have shared one, or do you have any insight into kind of that commodity part of the process?

FOSTER Were you able to hear that, Dalila?

SCRUGGS Oh, yes. Yes, I can answer that. First of all, it was very affordable. Daguerreotypes do not have a negative. So, they are unique objects. So, if they were going to have matching ones, they would have had to sit twice. Sit for the 20 seconds. It's probably a little less at this point, but yes, a long duration for holding your body. And then Augustus Washington would have had to put another photographic plate into his camera, unscrew the lid, and then they would had to reset and hold their body again. So, I mean, I guess logistically it's possible, but they would not have been identical images in as much as they're completely different takes.

FOSTER And then, we have another question. I think this is a good one that ties into this what would you get from students if you were teaching with this material? So, the question is, is there any chance that the hand clasp is a form of secret society handshake or it's some other kind of signifier?

SCRUGGS This is not something that I was able to research ahead of time, but it did make me
-- well, there's a couple of things that I want to discover with the help of conservation. To me, there looks to be some handwriting or something at the bottom of the case on the glass. Would they be etched into the copper plate that's covered in silver? And so, one thing that I would love to be able to do is to take the Daguerreotype apart, take the glass off so you could actually see the plate itself and see if in fact it's written with the names. Because that would -- or whatever is down there, I think that would be a huge clue to unlocking the relationship that we just don't have access to right now without the help of conservation. So, that's where I would start in answering that question.

FOSTER Yes, I think too just the historical context given that there are other images with this kind of physical intimacy between two young men, and that there are written, many, many, many written descriptions of that kind of intimacy. My suspicion is that the holding hands is about the signifying that intimacy rather than a kind of freemasonry thing, but I would want to do more research to rule it out entirely.

FOWLER All right. That's great. Well, thank you both so very much. This is the time that we have for today. What a fascinating discussion, and please do look at that finding aid and check back on that link. We'll I'll tell you about that. Links to these collection items and other resources, along with a video and transcript of this episode, including, of course, a link to the finding aid of the Schomburg Center. It will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which will be sent out to all registrants, whether you were able to attend or not. All the previous episodes can also be found on that blog channel. And the easiest way to find those is to subscribe to the Doc Chat channel on the NYPL blog. I think there are all the things you need to know in the chat and also please follow us on social media. Doc Chat's are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode is NYPL's Charles Cuykendall Carter and Jane Austen scholar Devoney Looser, examine manuscripts from the papers of Jane Porter, the 18th and 19th century Scottish historical novelist, who's fame once rivaled Sir Walter Scott's. Carter and Looser discuss Porter's unusually large archival collection and ways of reexamining the lives in both Jane Porter and her younger sister, Maria Porter, also a writer. Let me put that link in the Doc Chat, and thank you again, Dalila and Travis so very, very much. This has been a fascinating episode, and watch for the blog everyone.

FOSTER Ian, is there time to just put a shout out to all of the authors that I relied on?

FOWLER Please do. Please do.

FOSTER I just want to put on [inaudible] some of the literature that has been written about August Washington. [Inaudible] Gonzalez, Marcy [inaudible], Shawn Michelle Smith, and to start out with. [Inaudible] gave an exhibition in the early 90s about August which really brought him to light. They're all [inaudible], and I wrote this small essay also that's in the African American print culture about some of his [inaudible] photography.

FOWLER Excellent. Thank you so much for adding that. And those will all be in the blog along
with links to as many resources as we can possibly fit. So, thank you both again so very much, and thank you everyone for attending and have a wonderful afternoon.

SCRUGGS Thank you.