

William J. Wilson's  
Speculative Museum of Black Art

# THE AFRIC - AMERICAN PICTURE GALLERY

BRITT RUSERT



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## Preface

This book is an extended study of William J. Wilson's "Afric-American Picture Gallery" (February–October 1859), an experimental periodical series from the late antebellum period that imagines the first museum of Black art in the United States. I first encountered this little-known text while finishing my first monograph, *Fugitive Science*. Hiding in plain sight in the pages of the *Anglo-African Magazine*, a Black intellectual magazine published monthly out of New York City right before the start of the Civil War, the series is a fascinating and, in some ways, singular publication from the early African American print sphere. Among other things, the Picture Gallery is a deeply visual text that reproduces no actual images.

I began teaching the "Afric-American Picture Gallery" regularly in 2013, and in 2015, with Leif Eckstrom, I edited a digital edition of the series for the American Antiquarian Society's *Just Teach One: Early African American Print* project. Even with a teachable version of the text out in the world, I felt there was still so much to learn about William J. Wilson, his social and artistic networks, and his voluminous contributions to antebellum and post-bellum periodicals. A book-length study of the Picture Gallery also allows us—reading after the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, in which our access to physical spaces of collective art viewership was drastically constricted—to return to the text with renewed attention to Wilson's own necessarily mediated relationship to visual art. Wilson did not have the luxury of regularly viewing art in private studios and art academies. He

was routinely subjected to de facto regimes of segregation in antebellum New York, where white people could bar access to museums, galleries, and other spaces of display whenever they wanted to. Wilson could have been let in to an exhibition one day and then denied access the next. Black access to art in this period was, in this way, controlled by white whim. How do you write on art when you are denied access to it and when daily life is structured by the need to be hypervigilant about your survival? Where did one find the time to contemplate aesthetic questions amid the racial emergencies and daily cataclysms that marked the years leading up to the Civil War? Studio visits offered one crucial haven for Wilson, as did the homes of those few members in his community who had the means to purchase and display fine art in their homes.<sup>1</sup> The print sphere also enabled Wilson to view visual works from the protection of his parlor, a space that, as Jasmine Nichole Cobb has shown, played a crucial role in both the private and political lives of free African Americans in the antebellum period.<sup>2</sup>

The intensification of racial surveillance, scapegoating, and violence unleashed in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdown and the George Floyd rebellions in the summer of 2020 also brought into heightened relief the conditions of state violence, social emergency, and vigilante “justice” under which Wilson was producing his art in late antebellum New York, a notoriously racist city in a nation riven by anti-Black violence and mounting tensions over sectionalism and slavery. In some ways it feels incredible that anyone was writing anything in 1859—as the nation flew headlong toward social anarchy and war—let alone a text as rich, as experimental, and as wide-ranging as the “Afric-American Picture Gallery.” Wilson, his wife, Mary, his child, Annie, and his students were subjected to routine harassment on the city streets, faced housing and employment discrimination, and navigated incessant threats of violence and even kidnapping. Jonathan Wells has described New York City as the largest proslavery bastion in the North. His account of “the Kidnapping Club”—a network of police, private investigators, judges, industrialists, and other thugs who captured African Americans in the city for profit in the years following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850—offers a chilling picture of the manifold threats that surrounded Black New Yorkers at every turn.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the 1850s, African Americans were being stolen from the streets of New York, including adults and children who had never been enslaved. Writing within and against these conditions of political instability, anti-Black violence, and family separation, Wilson somehow found the physical and mental space to write.

In this way, I have come to understand the sheer existence of the “African-American Picture Gallery” to be nothing less than a miracle. I hope that the pages that follow capture and honor the miracle of Black art as works that find their way into the world in the face of white supremacy’s stultifying repressions and violences. Through speculative prose and radical imagination Wilson wills another world into existence, but to do so, he must continually confront the machinations of this one.

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## Introduction

All is tranquil in Gotham, and around the Heights, at least,  
within the *black world*.

**Ethiop**, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 25, 1853

In 2008, art historian Richard Powell coined the phrase “the new black portraiture” to name the proliferation of a particular kind of figural work in contemporary art and to describe the specificities of a diasporic practice. For Powell, Black portraiture, both past and present, depends on a special relationship between the artist and the subject rather than between the subject and the viewer; it is also rooted in the subject’s power to upend dominant regimes of racial representation and stereotypes through self-representation, self-adornment, and self-composure. Highlighting ideas of “collaboration, agency, and introspection,” since “black people are often active participants in spectatorship—either as knowing spectacles, willing actors, or self-scrutinizers,” Black portraiture is a dynamic field that “invests black subjects with social capital.”<sup>1</sup>

Portraiture has indeed become a vibrant site of practice and experimentation among diasporic artists working in diverse mediums and styles, as well as a popular topic for scholarly analysis and curatorial framing.<sup>2</sup> But the new Black portraiture also connects to a much longer debate about racial representation in fine art. In 1853, William J. Wilson was already meditating

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on the glaring absence of what he called “distinguished black” figures in museums and galleries. Writing to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, he concluded, “we must begin to tell our own story, write our own lecture, paint our own picture, chisel our own bust.”<sup>3</sup> In 1859, Wilson answered his own call with the serial publication of his “Afric-American Picture Gallery.” Responding to the absence of fine art representing Black subjects as well as the mass circulation of anti-Black imagery in popular culture, Wilson’s gallery turned to the resources of an expanding transatlantic print sphere to provide an alternative visual archive of Blackness, one wrought, somewhat paradoxically, completely in textual form.

The “Afric-American Picture Gallery” imagines the first museum of Black art before any such institution existed in the United States. Published in seven installments in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, the text is a fascinating experiment in both form and authorship. The *Anglo-African Magazine*, itself an experiment, was a short-lived yet intellectually rich and historically significant magazine edited by the African American bookseller and printer Thomas Hamilton. Hamilton’s shop on Beekman Street was a block away from Printing House Square, the hub of New York’s vibrant publishing industry.<sup>4</sup> It was also adjacent to the historic Black neighborhood in Lower Manhattan that has been chronicled in loving detail by Carla Peterson, a literary scholar and descendant of that very community.<sup>5</sup> Hamilton’s shop, the city’s printing center, and Manhattan’s free Black community were also all proximate to Wilson’s beloved Brooklyn.

Wilson wrote under the pen name Ethiop in Black periodicals during the period and was a frequent contributor to those publications. Beginning in 1851, he served as the Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. For his Picture Gallery series, he transformed Ethiop into a fully developed literary character: a docent, curator, art critic, sketch artist, and flaneur who gives a virtual tour of an imaginary museum of art and later embarks on a mysterious journey to the Black Forest. The text at turns amplifies and complicates Wilson’s own theories about race, representation, and political power as they took shape in his periodical correspondence in the 1850s. Taking inspiration from periodical reviews of art exhibitions as well as the urban sketch, a popular genre that offered readers glimpses into the grittiness and glamour of city life, the Picture Gallery was both deeply embedded in the world of antebellum newspapers, and a world apart from it. Indeed, the series becomes increasingly speculative and harder to define as it proceeds, taking off into flights of fancy and eventually transforming into a fantasy fiction untethered from the interior space of the museum. In lieu of the ordered gallery tour that opens the series, later installments are more plot-driven and include dramatic tales

of fugitive escape and violent retribution taken against enslavers and slave-catchers in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act.

But before we get to how Wilson uses the Picture Gallery as a platform to play out elaborate fantasies about torturing enslavers, let's return to the series' more genteel beginning. The first installment of the Picture Gallery opens with a warm invitation into a mysterious, little-known museum tucked away someplace in the author's Gotham City. Absorbing readers into the world of the text through a lush description of interior space, Ethiop promises a gallery tour that will be an immersive, sensory experience: "Let the reader, with me enter into this almost unknown Gallery. Well, here we are, and looking about us."<sup>6</sup> Ethiop begins with a quick scan of the gallery's collection, an impressive set of "pictures" that "vary according to the fancy or skill of the artist. Some are in oil, some in water colors, and India Ink shadings, a few statues, statuettes, and a few Crayons and Pencillings possessing a high degree of merit; others are mere charcoal sketches and of little worth beyond the subjects they portray." The gallery is introduced as a space of radical equality: Some objects in the collection are deemed valuable because they are "finely executed," while others, "mere rough sketches," are valuable because their subjects are interesting and worthy of study.<sup>7</sup> It seems that all art objects, from the amateur sketch to the finest oil painting, are welcome in this space as are all subjects, irrespective of color or station. (Later in the series, Ethiop's young assistant, Tom Onward, brings in a portrait of himself and asks to have it hung up. Ethiop complies.)

Ethiop has a complex and at times ambivalent relationship to the Picture Gallery's publicness. At the beginning of the series, he tries to stave off the hostilities and indignities of the outside world with the order and beauty of a quaint gallery of pictures. Depictions of the slave trade and scenes of plantation slavery are present, but they are carefully kept within the frame. While Ethiop says that the quiet, out-of-the-way gallery has "become one of my dearest retreats," he also holds out hope that it might have a busier future, with the help of the *Anglo-African Magazine's* powers of publication and amplification. He makes this direct and "humble petition" to readers: "The walls are spacious, and contain ample room for more, and, in many instances, better paintings; and many niches, yet vacant for busts and statues; and just here, let me make a humble petition in behalf of this our newly discovered Gallery.—It is that generous artists, will, at their convenience, have the goodness to paint an occasional picture, or chisel a statue or a bust, and we will be sure to assign it to its appropriate place."<sup>8</sup> This moment is a canny invitation for readers to imagine themselves either as would-be visual artists,

contributing to the future of Black art through the making of an “occasional” painting or statue, or as would-be writers who might send their own sketches to the *Anglo-African*. This is just one of many moments where Ethiop uses visual metaphors to provide a metacommentary on the *Anglo-African* and the periodical sphere in which it was embedded.

Ethiop also wants readers to know that he, perhaps like the ideal editor he imagines for his own writing, is a curator with a light touch. Indeed, this is one of a few moments where Wilson appears to be gently ribbing his editor, Thomas Hamilton. Wilson’s gallery is a casual and picturesque space that shirks curation-as-surveillance. The gallery’s works instead have an “unstudied arrangement,” similar to how pictures would be put up in the private interior of someone’s home. The pictures “seem . . . to have been put up out of the way, many of them, than hung for any effect,” a statement that signals the accessibility of the space and asks readers to imagine filling up the empty spaces on the gallery walls with their own contributions.<sup>9</sup> By pointing to still-vacant pedestals and empty wall space, Ethiop also emphasizes the unfinished, improvisatory, and dialogic nature of the text itself, a periodical series that is revised and transformed by readers and editors through the process of serialization, publication, and readership over time. Thus, from the outset, the Picture Gallery series departs from the genre of the art review or gallery tour even as it partakes in it: This is a space that privileges process over product, autodidacticism over formal training. It is a place where amateurs should feel free to try their hand.

Even among the many striking publications featured in the *Anglo-African*, the Picture Gallery stands out. The formal experimentation of the series, the liveliness of its prose, and Wilson’s use of a biting satire to expose the degraded status and ideological function of fine art in a slaveholding nation work together to make a unique contribution to early African American—and American—fiction writing. The series participates in the genre of the periodical art review and resonates with the ekphrastic descriptions of visual art that populate antebellum American literature, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Walt Whitman. But this speculative text also reads like a work of postmodern fiction: The narrative constructs art objects mostly out of existing print sources, including frontispieces and illustrations that appeared in books, pamphlets, and broadsides. It further elevates those images from the print sphere into fine art objects through ekphrastic description and techniques of textual collage. Anticipating theories of the image in industrial modernity from the French photographer Félix Nadar to the Frankfurt School philosopher Walter Benjamin, the Picture Gallery theorizes as it constructs: It reflects on the

meaning of the “original” and the “copy” for the representation of Blackness in modernity, while suggesting that racial slavery profoundly shapes and haunts an increasingly commercial sphere of artistic production.

Building on important book chapters and essays by Ivy Wilson, John Ernest, Derrick Spires, Rian Bowie, Leif Eckstrom, and Radiclan Clytus, this is the first book-length study of Wilson and his Picture Gallery.<sup>10</sup> It contributes to a growing body of scholarly and curatorial work seeking to restore Wilson and his writing to historical memory. To that end, the book includes an appendix that reproduces the full text of the Picture Gallery with an eye to making this early African American text more accessible for teachers, scholars, art workers, and general readers.

In addition to providing a deep analysis of the Picture Gallery itself, this study situates the series within several contexts, including Black cosmopolitanism and bohemian cultures in antebellum Brooklyn, the consolidation of Black political power in the antebellum urban Northeast, and the coming of the Civil War. The project contributes to scholarly conversations in the field on the diverse cultural work of early African American print cultures, the material circuits of Black print and image production, Black paratexts, and the origins of African American visual culture.<sup>11</sup> Wilson’s own text is cannily reflexive about the ephemerality and vulnerability of African American print, especially periodicals, even predicting its own future status as a neglected text. In this way, the Picture Gallery speaks to ongoing conversations about the politics of recovering and republishing lost or otherwise neglected works of African American literature.<sup>12</sup>

I argue that the “Afric-American Picture Gallery” offers a unique vantage onto the origins of African American literary *and* visual culture. As a visually attuned text without images, the Picture Gallery explores the politics of visibility for Black subjects from positions that range from enthusiasm to caution. In this way, it reflects the deep ambivalence that attended debates about race and visibility amid the rise of a scopic regime of racial formation that increasingly tied race to the terrain of the visible and to the body itself, as chronicled by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Sarah Lewis, and others.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time as Wilson argued for the importance of visual representation for the uplifting of his race, his periodical writings suggest that he felt more confident about the power of rhetorical authority, which he flexed across his career, often in wide-ranging and experimental dialogue with his primary interlocutor, the New York-based physician, activist, and writer James McCune Smith. I further argue that the Picture Gallery, deeply embedded within the dialogic networks of Black intellectual exchange and artistic

production in the period, emerged out of a turn in the late 1850s toward more experimental, and less transparently instrumental, forms of writing by African American writers. Wilson's textual museum was part of a more avant-garde aesthetics that was emerging in the years leading up to the Civil War, in which Black texts did not always have to be beholden to the imperatives of abolition, even as its writers were deeply involved with political struggles and organizing on the ground.

Wilson's text also suggests that we still have much to learn about the late antebellum period. Although the *Picture Gallery* was published in February to October 1859, during the months leading up to John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and amid an intensifying sectional crisis, the text registers the nation's headlines in complex and sometimes oblique ways. Ethiop is a flaneur and a dandy figure who moves, reads, and even *looks* slantwise from the dominant political grammar of his time. In this way, he wields the power of what bell hooks calls "black looks" and what Mirzoeff calls "the right to look."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a kind of queer hesitance marks the text, one that suggests a form of politics that differs starkly from the muscular immediatism of a Frederick Douglass or a Martin Delany. Wilson's caustic suspicion about art produced for an interracial audience ultimately glimpses a genealogy of African American artists and activists whose politics cannot be accommodated easily within current historiographies of abolition.

In what follows, I begin by delving into the history of early Brooklyn and the place that Wilson, his family, and his community played in its political and artistic development. From there, I argue that what Carl Plasa, James E. Ford III, and others have called "Black ekphrasis" is a mode that is especially useful for apprehending and navigating the visual binds of racial representation in an age in which race was increasingly being tied to regimes of the visual.<sup>15</sup> I then turn to consider the flamboyance and even queerness of the *Picture Gallery*, connecting the series to cultures of bohemianism and dandyism in an age of Black slavery, freedom, industrialization, and the birth of modern consumerism. I close with a map of the book's chapters, which track alongside Ethiop's own meandering perambulations and thus require some orientation for the reader.

### Wilson's Brooklyn

William J. Wilson became known to readers though his witty and often sardonic contributions to periodicals edited by African Americans in the 1850s and 1860s, including *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, the *Anglo-African*

*Magazine*, and the *Weekly Anglo-African*. Wilson was a proud Brooklynite, and as the Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he not only reported on happenings and politics in the city that were of interest to Black readers but also helped write Brooklyn itself into existence at a time when the city was transitioning from a rural outpost to an industrial hub of commerce and trade.

Indeed, the gentrified Brooklyn that is recognizable to us today has its roots in Wilson's moment. Both Williamsburg and Bushwick were annexed in 1854, "making Brooklyn one of the five largest cities in the nation and a key commercial center in its own right."<sup>16</sup> Developers, including Brooklyn land-owners whose families had controlled the island's land and wealth since the colonial era, aggressively developed Brooklyn's shoreline and used the city's lower taxes and available land to attract business owners away from Manhattan across the East River. The slave economy was also thriving in Brooklyn: From the mid-1850s through the Civil War, Brooklyn was one of the world's largest slave ports. Slave ships were outfitted and unloaded in broad daylight; sugar and cotton from the slave South filled Brooklyn warehouses. The sugar refining business grew to startling prominence among Brooklyn's industries in the 1850s, and Brooklyn "sugar lords" glutted the Northern market with refined sugars and syrups. Sugar refineries themselves were a dominant and haunting presence on the Brooklyn-Williamsburg shoreline: They were a central part of the landscape that Wilson traversed and wrote about.

Readers should keep in mind that William J. Wilson lived in a Northern city that was actively engaged in the slave economy and that it continued to do so into the beginning years of the Civil War. When sugarcane ceased to be easily available from Southern ports during the war, Brooklyn sugar lords turned to the plantations of the Caribbean. Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, her epic 2014 installation of melting sugar statues in Brooklyn's old Domino Sugar Refinery, should remind us that the commodities of the slave trade were literally Wilson's surround. The sickly sweet smell of sugarcane hung in the air. To follow Christina Sharpe, in William J. Wilson's Brooklyn, slavery was the weather.<sup>17</sup>

Given this context, in which Brooklyn was emerging as a bustling site of industrial labor, manufacture, trade, and where the air smelled of exploitation and brutality, it is notable that Wilson was depicting Brooklyn as a space of quiet serenity and intellectual contemplation. In his very first column as Brooklyn correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he writes, "New York is a great city. When I say New York, I of course include its environs.—New York, proper, may be considered the body, of which the adjacent towns

around it, are the limbs, or members thereof. Brooklyn, from its quietness, serenity, morality and intellectuality, may be regarded the head.”<sup>18</sup> Here Wilson is seeking to draw attention to Brooklyn’s growing status, portraying it as New York’s intellectual and moral “head,” and thus also as the city’s center of culture. In writing Brooklyn as New York’s privileged site of cultured “quietness, serenity, morality and intellectuality,” we see a late antebellum Black writer working to decelerate the pace of industrialization and the urban chaos that surrounded him. This intentional tranquility, I want to argue, links up to the aesthetics of Black ekphrasis that can be found in the Picture Gallery: the idea that a studied and careful interpretation of a work of art can, even if only for a moment, take one away from the logics and grammars of the dominant world and, in so doing, help to recalibrate one’s relationship to the political. In the March 25, 1853, issue of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, Wilson observed, “All is tranquil in Gotham, and around the Heights, at least, within the *black world*.” That such an autonomous Black world exists in Wilson’s Brooklyn is notable, as is his comment that it is a space of intellectual calmness and even rest, not industrial clamor and chaos. Across his work and writing, Wilson was interested in how Black enclaves—spaces of retreat, rest, and contemplation—might be carved out amid the processes of industrialization and urbanization that surrounded his community. In other words, his writing here suggests that all was not tranquil in the *white* world.

Although Wilson identified as a proud Brooklynite, he was himself a migrant to the city. Born around 1818 near Shrewsbury, on the northern coast of New Jersey, he held free status, but this did not exempt him from frequent experiences of discrimination and even humiliation. His 1878 obituary in the *People’s Advocate* noted that as a youth he attended a common school where his “presence was regarded as a practical joke.”<sup>19</sup> It’s not clear whether Wilson was the first generation of his family to have escaped the bonds of slavery, but it’s certainly the case that the shadow of slavery loomed large over him and his home community. Slavery was outlawed in New Jersey in 1804, but only through a gradual manumission process, and small numbers of people remained enslaved until 1865. Wilson’s own father was born on Virginia’s Eastern Shore in Accomack County, a place where enslaved people frequently intermingled with the region’s significant free Black population.<sup>20</sup>

As soon as he reached adulthood, Wilson struck out for New York City in the hopes of finding more job prospects and a larger community. He landed first in Manhattan, where he met his future wife, Mary Ann Garret Marshall, opened a boot-making shop, and became connected to a number of prominent activists and community leaders in the city, including James

McCune Smith, James Pennington, Phillip A. Bell, Henry Highland Garnet, and George T. Downing.<sup>21</sup> But Wilson's 1854 short story "Terance Ludlam" suggests that he initially found New York unwelcoming; he also struggled to find gainful employment and was shocked by the various forms of discrimination and indignities experienced by Black workers in the city. This early experience may have contributed to his decision to join the American League of Colored Laborers and an emerging American labor movement.<sup>22</sup>

An announcement of Mary and William's wedding appeared in the *Colored American* in November 1837.<sup>23</sup> The pair were married by Rev. Peter Williams, the prominent abolitionist and Episcopalian pastor of St. Philip's African Church in Lower Manhattan. St. Philip's was the congregation of Manhattan's best-connected and most prominent Black families.<sup>24</sup> Wilson's early connections to Black leaders and activists in the city may very well have been enabled by Mary's social connections. After all, it was she who had been born and raised in New York. Before settling in Brooklyn, William and Mary moved from Manhattan to Newtown, Long Island (present-day Queens), and lived there for a short period of time. News coverage of Newtown's African American community reveals that only a few years after his arrival in New York, Wilson was already highly active in Black politics, organizing circles, and the fight for suffrage and abolition.<sup>25</sup>

The Wilsons can be found in Brooklyn city directories beginning in 1842. That year William was appointed principal of Brooklyn's Colored School No. 1, one of the city's three public schools designated for Black students.<sup>26</sup> Wilson would quickly become a central figure in education in Brooklyn; Mary also taught at Colored School No. 1 and served for a short time as principal of its primary department.<sup>27</sup> William and Mary had one daughter, a girl they named Ann and called Annie. Census data and city directories show Wilson and his family living at several addresses in Brooklyn in the 1840s and 1850s, including residences on Chapel Street, Nassau Street, and Atlantic Street. The Nassau Street residence places the Wilsons around the corner from Duffield Street, a famous street of Black abolitionist activity that included homes of activists known to shelter fugitive slaves. Prithi Kanakamedala notes that in 1852, Mary opened a crockery store along the waterfront on Atlantic Street, in the heart of a "fashionable shopping district" in the city. She writes, "Mary was part of a long history of entrepreneurial Brooklynites fulfilling their neighbors' every dining needs. Crockery, particularly china, once a luxury for the rich, was especially in demand by middle- and upper-middle-class New Yorkers and Brooklynites in the mid-nineteenth century."<sup>28</sup>

Kanakamedala reminds us that even though their presence is not always reflected in the archive, Black women like Mary were at the “center of radical community building” in the city.<sup>29</sup> Mary and William also both contributed to efforts to build and sustain the autonomous Black institutions that Craig Steven Wilder has chronicled in detail.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Brooklyn city atlases from the period register a surprising number of such institutions in their mapping of the city, including the African Church and the city’s Black schools, including Colored School No. 1.<sup>31</sup> What comes as a surprise regarding these institutions is not their existence as much as that they were allowed a prominent presence in official records of the city. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine city maps today affording such priority of place to Black spaces and institutions.

Black Brooklynites worked to carve out and name Black space in and against growing Irish immigration and labor competition, anti-Black sentiments and violence, and a casual proslavery agenda that viewed abolition as a threat to business interests and trade in the city. The official recording of African space in antebellum Brooklyn is notable, as is the insistence with which Black people named their institutions “African” in a moment of active experimentation with different forms of racial nomenclature, including both Hamilton’s “Anglo-African” and Wilson’s “Afric-American.” (The latter had roots in anticolonization organizing in the early 1830s.)<sup>32</sup> Even though this was a moment when the African American population in Brooklyn was declining in numbers, Black presence and political power was more visible than ever.

Census data on Wilson’s family further reflects the complexity of family and housing arrangements for African Americans in New York. At the same time that the African American print sphere was idealizing the Black family and white periodicals were pathologizing public displays of Black collectivity and intimate relation, actual people lived together in ways that challenged the nuclear, heteropatriarchal family. And of course, such nontraditional living arrangements and alternative forms of kinship were deeply tied to the disruptions and dislocations produced by slavery itself. For example, the 1860 US census suggests that the Wilsons had welcomed a twelve-year-old named Mary into their home, a young woman who is listed as a student and likely attended William’s school. Another family is listed as living at the same address. The Bruce family, labeled “M.” for “mulatto,” included George Bruce, a thirty-five-year-old man; his wife, Elizabeth; a two-year-old named William; and a fifty-nine-year-old woman named Jane Redding (possibly Elizabeth’s mother). George is listed as having no real estate, having been born in Virginia, and working as a steward, so it seems likely that he was a former slave. The

presence of a mixed-race family with a possible past in the plantation South in Wilson's own home again highlights the material and, indeed, intimate presence of Southern slavery in the lives of Black Brooklynites like the Wilsons who were born nominally free.

The semiregular moves of Wilson's family in Brooklyn either reflect housing insecurity and Black itinerancies in the city or possibly track alongside increased financial security. Indeed, each move corresponded to a move closer to the homes and businesses of Brooklyn's Black elite.<sup>33</sup> Kanakamedala hypothesizes that it may have been the success and ultimate sale of Mary's business that allowed the Wilsons to become more upwardly mobile and financially secure in the 1850s.<sup>34</sup> By 1859, the year the Picture Gallery appeared in print, Wilson and his family were living at 4 Greene Avenue, in the Fort Greene area of Brooklyn. Carla Peterson notes that Fort Greene was a vibrant hub of Black social life and entrepreneurship: "Entrepreneurs rather than artisans and tradesmen, Fort Greene residents counted real estate agents, restaurateurs, and undertakers among their ranks. They too established their own churches and schools. To a greater extent than Blacks in Weeksville and Carrville they formed social clubs and literary societies similar to those across the East River."<sup>35</sup> It was in Fort Greene, in this milieu of Black elitism and cultural avant-gardism, proximate to Walt Whitman and other Brooklyn bohemians, that Wilson conceived his Picture Gallery.

Although Wilson did not have the national reputation of a Douglass or a Delany, he was active in several local and state-level struggles, including the battle over suffrage in New York. He was part of a group that in 1855 petitioned the New York state legislature to remove the property qualifications that had been put in place to limit African Americans' access to the franchise.<sup>36</sup> He attended meetings of the National Colored Conventions and served as both a press correspondent and as a secretary for some of those proceedings. He also became a member of the Committee of Thirteen, a group of leaders and activists in New York who came together to strategize and challenge the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The group held a strong anticolonization stance, arguing that colonization was a malicious scheme intent on removing antislavery influence from the nation. They also worked to shelter and protect fugitives who arrived in New York.

While this was a period of increased immigration into New York, especially from Ireland, it was also a time of dislocation and migration for African Americans *within* the city and its boroughs. For example, Black Manhattanites moved from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn in the mid-1850s after the historic Seneca Village was destroyed so that Central Park could

be put in its place. As Derrick Spires notes, “This land grab not only displaced a well-established Black community but also eroded that community’s political power, because the state’s payment was not enough to allow them to reestablish themselves in the city.”<sup>37</sup> In the 1850s, Brooklyn, Harlem, and Queens also became attractive sites for resettlement as activists were advocating for migration out of urban centers in favor of subsistence farming as a path toward elevation.<sup>38</sup> These were also places where land could still be purchased so that Black New Yorkers might qualify to vote. Property ownership for Black New Yorkers was not only about putting down roots; it was also a practical means to secure voting rights. In 1863, in the middle of the war, New York’s Draft Riots initiated another round of traumatic displacements for Black New Yorkers, again often from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Donald Yacovone says that around this time Wilson was pushed out of his principal position by the city’s board of education because he had delivered a series of lectures endorsing Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation at the Cooper Institute.<sup>39</sup> We know that Wilson and his family were among the teachers who left New York during the war to provide education and aid to former slaves in the South, but it’s also likely that Brooklyn’s rising anti-Black violence and tense political atmosphere contributed to William and Mary’s decision to leave the city for good.

### **Late Antebellum Black Aesthetics**

Despite their tireless organizing efforts, Black New Yorkers struggled to both access and maintain citizenship rights. In the face of an attenuated citizenship, many turned to other venues for representation, including writing and the visual arts. Ivy Wilson has argued that in a period before formal political representation, African Americans used “representation in art as a proxy for their desired representation in politics.”<sup>40</sup> He is particularly interested in how “Black Americans used rhetoric and ekphrastic writing to articulate the meanings of their own personhood in opposition to the definitions imposed upon them by the far reach of slavery, even if one were not a slave. Such a focus on cultural production is especially necessary to recover the African American presence in political debates before the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.”<sup>41</sup> For Ivy Wilson, the Picture Gallery stands as a superlative example of ekphrastic expression operating as a form of political surrogacy for antebellum Black Americans.

Ekphrasis can be found across Black antebellum writing, but it is not always a wholly celebratory or even confident modality; works like the

Picture Gallery series also embody what W. J. T. Mitchell calls ekphrastic ambivalence.<sup>42</sup> *Ekphrasis*, in the broadest terms, is a written description of a work of art. In ancient Greece, ekphrasis was a popular rhetorical exercise for students. While ekphrasis is traditionally defined as the representation of visual art in written form, in this project I broaden its definition to highlight the specificities of the visual field for Black subjects subjected to an increasingly visual regime of racialization in the nineteenth century, and to account for the material constraints on image production for African Americans. To produce public work, writers need writing materials and printing presses; painters need canvasses, paint, and exhibition space; photographers need cameras, chemicals, and studios. These materials and technologies were not easily accessible to most Black creatives in the period. Thus, when Black writers created ekphrastic accounts of art objects that didn't exist, they were also pointing to the infrastructural conditions and economic inequalities that suppressed their creative production.

In this way, the ekphrastic mode in Black antebellum aesthetics did more than simply uphold the primacy of the visual or forward the idea that aesthetic representation is the equivalent of political representation. Black ekphrasis was deeply attuned to the dangers of ocularcentrism in an age where race was being increasingly tied to visual signifiers and regimes of racial surveillance. Thus, rather than ossifying the visual, these works traffic in what Tina Campt talks about as the *hapticity* of Black art, an orientation that privileges multisensory connection and invites “feeling across difference and precarity.”<sup>43</sup> It is also a mode that invites alternative ways of viewing and relating to art. Writing about her own method, Campt notes, “Rather than writing *about* artworks, I spend most of my time at exhibitions and galleries sitting with and writing to them. I write to them about the feelings they solicit, the forms of discomfort they evoke, the emotional work they require and often demand, and the potentially transformative effects they have when we allow ourselves to inhabit those feelings and responses.”<sup>44</sup> Ethiop has a strikingly similar relationship to the art objects in the picture gallery, standing or sitting before them, “sketching” his reflections on the works and the emotions and responses they elicit from viewers. The texts that are of concern in this study all engage with Black art's haptic orientation: They rewire the relationship between race and representation, denaturalize our understanding of the relationship among the senses, and refuse a hierarchy among different forms of media. Given the historical surveillance and suppression of Black art, in this book I widen ekphrasis to include literary descriptions of art works that may have never existed.

African American writers had to be incredibly creative and resourceful in the face of such conditions of material scarcity and a pervasive racism in the print sphere. Throughout this book, I rethink the late 1850s as a moment of profound experimentation in Black writing, and in Black creativity more generally. The years leading up to the Civil War were a period of profound instability, and the anarchism of the moment was unleashing energy that moved Black writers to produce experimental texts with which we have yet to fully reckon. What kinds of aesthetic forms, I ask, are produced when a society is on the cusp of collapse?

It has been difficult to identify the emergence of Black experimental writing in the late 1850s in part because the mainstream abolition movement and the coming of the Civil War have often operated as historical steamrollers that swallow up everything else that happened in the decade. This deeply collaborative and dialogic genealogy of writing has also been obscured by scholarly reluctance to think about nineteenth-century literary production beyond the production of single authors and single works. Zooming in on what Elizabeth McHenry calls the “workspaces” of African American literature, we might instead become closer attuned to the vibrant networks of Black cosmopolitanism, queer bohemianism, and periodical exchange that Wilson belonged to.<sup>45</sup> Paying attention to *networks* of writing shows how Black writers in this moment were goading each other on, extending and fulfilling each other’s calls, and engaging in a vigorous debate—in and through their work—about the nature and meaning of Black aesthetics. These debates could not be captured by the instrumentalism of abolitionism, and for this reason they have often been neglected in scholarship. While scholars have capably elaborated how white abolitionists framed and co-opted Black narrative throughout the period, African American writers were also working to cultivate an autonomous domain of creative expression in the very same moment that they were deeply enmeshed in interracial politics, intersectional alliances, and coalitional struggles.

These writers were also invested in a set of affects and forms that resist historical memorialization. When Douglass launched into his diatribe against racial science in his 1854 speech “Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered,” he began by stating his hesitance: “There are three ways to answer this denial. One is by ridicule; a second is by denunciation; and a third is by argument. I hardly know under which of these modes my answer to-day will fall. I feel myself somewhat on trial; and that this is just the point where there is hesitation, if not serious doubt.”<sup>46</sup> This study explores how Black antebellum resentment, hesitation, ambivalence, and even exasperation

produced an alternative theory of Black aesthetics on the cusp of the Civil War. My argument is not that these writers were detached from politics; indeed, the book is filled with figures who were prominent antislavery activists. William J. Wilson himself was a committed race man and was deeply engaged in politics. As noted above, he was a member of the Committee of Thirteen, an anticolonization group formed after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act; he also participated in Black state conventions in New York and served as a delegate to the National Colored Convention held in Philadelphia in 1855. While serving as principal of Colored School No. 1 in Brooklyn, he advocated for many years on behalf of his students in a racist and violent city that often targeted youth. This is all to suggest instead that at the same time as writers like Wilson were organizing locally, agitating at the level of the state legislature, and engaging in robust local and national debates about Black emigration and colonization, they were also experimenting with rhetorical forms and expression in ways that are not reducible to their political activities. Indeed, Black aesthetics in the late 1850s is marked by a surplus that can't be read in terms of the political pragmatism of the moment. In the simplest of terms, this project questions the desire to make Black literature and activism isomorphic.

Literary scholar Derrick Spires notes that in the two years preceding the Civil War, a literary explosion was occurring in Black periodicals and magazines, “where writers were producing fiction, poetry, and essays at a blistering pace.”<sup>47</sup> He notes that this uptick in literary production on the eve of the Civil War—as well as the crucial theorizing being done in this work—“often gets overshadowed by what comes after in much the same way that *Dred Scott v. Sandford* overshadows events of 1856, including ‘Bleeding Kansas’ and Margaret Garner’s killing of her daughter.”<sup>48</sup> By delving into the landscape of Black letters right before the beginning of the Civil War, Spires is interested in capturing “the tensions between possibility and disappointment from this prewar perspective—as if emancipation and the Reconstruction amendments had not and perhaps would never happen—and from a moment when all signs pointed toward the permanence of enslavement and increasing racism.”<sup>49</sup> This moment just before the Civil War witnessed an increase in published Black writing, and also marked a shift toward an increasingly experimental Black aesthetics. Writers like William J. Wilson, James McCune Smith, Harriet Wilson, and Harriet Jacobs were developing literary forms and tropes that departed from the propagandistic and documentary imperatives of Black narrative that had defined the 1840s and the earlier 1850s under the directive of abolitionist demands and priorities. By

the end of the 1850s, Black writers continued to excoriate the nation for the suffering of their people under the lash and through broader regimes of racial surveillance and terror, but their writing is also marked by a kind of frustration and even exhaustion about being asked to fight, relentlessly, in a white supremacist nation that seemed unlikely to ever leave behind its reliance on enslavement and exploitation.

Writers like Wilson and McCune Smith also resented how anti-Black racism and the imperative to be politically expedient narrowed the horizon of Black expression. In other words, antislavery gains—as well as demands that African Americans be “practical” and fight for a freedom that had already been guaranteed to them during the Revolutionary War and then betrayed—occurred at the detriment of the development and advancement of Black aesthetics and intellectual freedom. As literary flaneurs, slowly and performatively parading about town (and writing about what they saw as they strolled), Wilson and McCune Smith’s writing refused hegemonic political grammars, especially those that involved a kind of accelerationism and the narrowing of experience and politics around single-issue causes and priorities.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, at several points in their periodical correspondence, Wilson and McCune Smith complain about the Garrisonians because of how they instrumentalized the struggle—and exploited Black suffering and enslavement—in order to drive their own political agendas.

In opposition to the documentary demand placed on Black writing (that all writing by African Americans, even fiction, be true, verifiable, respectable, and not deviant), Wilson and McCune Smith experimented with alternative forms of address and rhetoric. They refused to allow any outside force to limit the range of creative expression, and their writing displays a virtuosic relationship to topic, tone, and style. McCune Smith, for example, was known for sprinkling Latin phrases and classical references into his writing. Doing so reminded readers of his cosmopolitan commitments and elite medical education in Scotland, but it was also a tactic that forced readers to slow down rather than skim the newspaper. Ultimately, Wilson and McCune Smith rejected an attenuated definition of Blackness as a political category; they instead defined Blackness as an aesthetic category, or what McCune Smith calls “our essentially aesthetic or art-nature.”<sup>51</sup>

Even though prominent leaders like Douglass and Delany threw their weight behind mobilizing soldiers and support for the Union cause, others continued to organize alternative plots and plans. Indeed, some African Americans remained hesitant about the war effort and continued to put together plans to jump ship from a sinking nation. Some even continued to

organize emigration support and missions during the war. Spires points to the radical possibilities—and forms of radical imagination—that were actually foreclosed by the Civil War. In his *Picture Gallery*, Wilson sometimes seems to be already lamenting the narrowing of Black radicalism into a series of reforms, laws, and amendments during the Reconstruction period. My turn to a microperiodization, focusing here on roughly 1859–61, aims to help us tune into the grammars of hesitance, political restraint, and experimental noninstrumentalism that characterized Black aesthetics during a brief yet significant historical flashpoint. By looking closely at specific desires, polemics, and theories being developed by Black intellectuals, activists, and writers right before the Civil War, we glimpse the beginning of a Black avant-gardism that was forestalled by the pragmatism and masculine militarism of war politics and priorities.

### **Dandies, Bohemians, and Antebellum Afropolitanism**

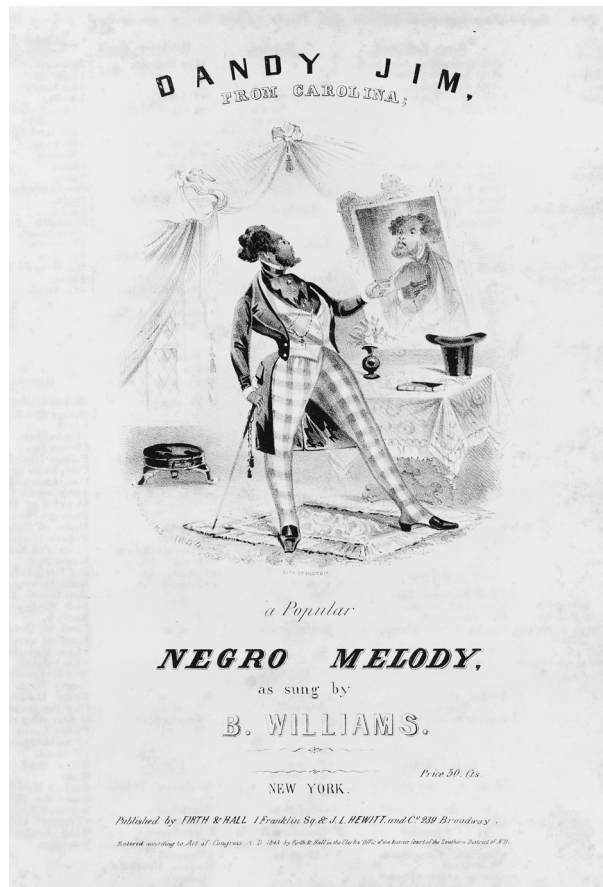
In her foundational study *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, Monica Miller traces how the figure of the Black dandy emerged in the context of the rise of conspicuous consumption alongside the explosion of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, especially as planters and merchants sought to show off their wealth through the possession and display of fashionable, “luxury” slaves. But dandyism was not just foisted on captives. The sartorial displays, gestures, and wit of the dandy, she argues, were also wielded by people of African descent to challenge violent limits placed on their selfhood and to refashion social and political possibility.<sup>52</sup> The Black dandy was also viciously satirized in popular culture in the antebellum United States. In cartoon series like Edward Clay’s *Life in Philadelphia*, African American men were lambasted as lazy fops who dressed up in finery and tried to pass as civilized gentlemen. A dandy figure named Zip Coon, along with Dandy Jim, were frequent targets of derision on the minstrel stage (figure I.1). These pervasive anti-Black images mocked both enslaved and free people for their aspirations to freedom and dignity and for their audacity to look and act like citizens of the nation. According to Richard Powell, “In a society that sought comfort in clearly defined social roles and a spatially predictable landscape (despite idealistic claims of a broad-based democracy and upward social mobility), the Black dandy’s striking, audacious appearance on America’s street corners disrupted the white majority’s false notions of social order, racial homogeneity, and cultural superiority.”<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, popular depictions of Black dandies registered white anxieties about the growing political power of African Americans. As Black communities in places like New York became more organized, figures like William J. Wilson embraced dandyism as a way to establish their status, wealth, and cosmopolitanism, as well as their intellectualism. As Miller notes, the dandy was also a global figure, one that allowed former slaves and free people in the United States to connect to diasporic solidarities. She understands Black dandyism as being a sign of an “early Afro-diasporic identity” and a cosmopolitanism “that African subjects did not choose but from which they necessarily reimagined themselves.”<sup>54</sup>

Miller’s and Powell’s nuanced accounts of early Black dandyism help to bring into view the flamboyances and flourishes that characterize Wilson’s writing as Ethiop and appear throughout his periodical correspondence with McCune Smith. I agree with Radiclan Clytus that scholars would do well to pay attention to a vibrant Black masculine belles lettres tradition as it takes shape in periodicals like *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*.<sup>55</sup> However, in seeking to establish the centrality of republican values in an emerging culture of Black belletrism, harking back to the epistolary cultures of the Revolutionary era, we risk missing the performativity as well as the queerness of these exchanges. Wilson and McCune Smith were working to establish something like their own literary vanguard in the 1850s, and they did so through a flexing of intellectualism, countercultural references, and a rhetorical playfulness that seems worlds away from the ideals and rhetoric of American republicanism.

It is my wager that while Wilson and his cohort certainly drew on the rhetoric of republicanism to make their views legible within the civic sphere, their actual commitments—to the terrain of culture, cosmopolitanism, and aesthetics—feel closer to the bohemian homosociality of Walt Whitman and his own cohort in 1850s Brooklyn. James Smethurst has located the emergence of a Black bohemianism in the late nineteenth century in the writings of Paul Laurence Dunbar, predating American countercultural movements and avant-garde aesthetics by several decades.<sup>56</sup> This study draws the timeline of Black bohemianism even further back, to include the networks of Afropolitans in antebellum New York that Peterson traces in *Black Gotham* and that come into view through Wilson’s Picture Gallery and his periodical correspondence with McCune Smith in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*.

The queerness and bohemianism of Wilson’s writing inheres perhaps most powerfully in its articulation of both space and movement, especially its interest in strolling and other forms of wayward movement as a form of freedom. In “Terance Ludlam,” Wilson’s narrator recounts a recent trip he



I.1 *Dandy Jim, from Carolina; A Popular Negro Melody as Sung by B. Williams* (New York: Firth & Hall, 1843). Consolidating white fears about Black freedom, wealth, and sexuality, the dandy was a common figure in antebellum minstrelsy.

took to a village north of New York, possibly upstate to Washington Irving's Hudson Valley. (Irving was a formative influence on Wilson and Wilson's story is Irvingesque.) Setting out on this journey, the narrator says that "the pleasure of the undertaking lies in the absence of any arrangement how or where to go, time and liberty being the only requisites."<sup>57</sup> Strolling and wandering give Wilson's narrator occasion to comment on a changing, industrialized landscape based on his own observations on the ground. Recalling a familiar language of queer movement and practice beginning in the twentieth century, Wilson's narrator refers to his retreat upstate as a country "cruise."

Indeed, given Wilson's sardonic wit, his dandyism, and his interest in dragging and "reading" his closest friends in print, we might also place Wilson's writings within the beginnings of a Black queer aesthetic that is often dated to the New Negro Renaissance but that we can start to see emerging in this crucial historical turning point in the late 1850s.

Both Wilson and McCune Smith also deployed wry humor and even caustic critique as a way of establishing a critical distance—and creating a zone of self-defense—from the racism of the US public sphere. Here I'm thinking about Gabrielle Foreman's idea of how sentimentalism could operate as a cover for Black women writers and intellectuals: Black women's sentimentalism was less about the earnest belief in sentimental values than about how it could be used as camouflage.<sup>58</sup> Something similar could be said about how Black masculine writers in the period deployed republicanism and used it as a cover for the expression of alternative ideas and desires. Wilson and McCune Smith's multiyear correspondence in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* is sometimes cantankerous; at other points, it revels in a playful homosociality. Wilson, for example, emphasizes the "luxury" of homosocial comradeship in his account of an 1855 soirée held in honor of Douglass at the Broadway Tabernacle, which he praised as a "brilliant pageant": "I found myself comfortably seated in one of the luxuriating chairs of the gorgeous apartments of the Sybarites, with Frederick Douglass on the one side, and Communi-paw on the other."<sup>59</sup> In this and other such moments in Wilson and McCune Smith's correspondence, homosocial exchange intermingles with commodity fetishism ("luxuriating chairs"; "gorgeous apartments"). In this regard, see also McCune Smith's description of a formerly enslaved dandy in New York in these terms: "That memorable walk! His blue cloth coat and double gilt brass buttons! And the silks that rustled by his side!"<sup>60</sup> Wilson, too, turns his eye to the extravagant sartorial displays of young Black men in the city. Marx famously called the commodity "a queer thing"; Wilson and comrades add to this that the commodity is especially "queer" when it is you, your friend, or your family member that has been commodified and circulated as an object.

This study also connects the Picture Gallery to later histories of the avant-garde and countercultural writing as a way of pushing back against the fetishization of circulation in early African American literary studies. Scholars of the period tend to privilege circulating texts and make arguments that depend on assumptions about circulation, sometimes without concrete knowledge about the actual distribution, circulation, and readership of texts, all of which can be incredibly hard to pin down. What, for example, to do with copies of slave narratives in the archive that were clearly never opened

and read, but instead displayed in a parlor to show off one's own sympathies with the situation of enslaved people? Ultimately, we need to drill down into the facts of readership and circulation if we want to make arguments about readership and circulation. At the same time, we need more methods and frameworks that allow us to take noncirculating African American texts seriously.<sup>61</sup>

In this project, I make an argument for the centrality of a text that barely circulated and that left almost no trace of reception in the nineteenth century. I do so because it is a singular text that speaks not only to the problem of Black aesthetics in the late 1850s but also to many of the most pressing conversations about Blackness, art-making, and the politics of institutions today. The *Anglo-African Magazine* had only five hundred subscribers, though they reached beyond New York City and likely included a broad swath of prominent Black intellectuals and cosmopolitans as well as white abolitionist-leaning readers. At this point, I can verify three readers of the text: Thomas Hamilton, editor of the *Anglo-African*; William Wells Brown (who cites from the Picture Gallery in his 1863 collective biography, *The Black Man*); and William J. Wilson himself. The "Afric-American Picture Gallery" nonetheless warrants our attention even though and perhaps even *because* it seemed to have little influence in its own moment of publication. Scholars in performance studies have long argued for the importance of attending to ephemeral forms and other works and contexts that refused or never reached an audience.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Wilson's Picture Gallery thematizes the question of audience throughout: And when Ethiop chases gallery visitors back out the door of his beloved gallery "retreat," it actively refuses one.

Wilson's Picture Gallery is indeed only one text, and one that did not shape history or literature in an obvious way, but it warrants a full book because it is fascinating on its own terms, and with further circulation and study it might make a mark on our own moment. As in my past collaborative work on the statistical graphics that W. E. B. Du Bois and his students at Atlanta University created for an exhibition at the 1900 Paris Exposition, scholars can help to further the transmission of archives and texts that remain hidden or inaccessible because of historical neglect, racism, and inattention to the preservation of Black archives. In the case of the Du Bois infographics, the housing of the contents of the American Negro Exhibit from the Paris Exposition in the Library of Congress kept these crucial images out of the hands of the communities they were meant to both represent and serve for over a hundred years.<sup>63</sup> The Picture Gallery might also take on a new life

today, especially given its deep connections to current conversations about the politics of race and museums, Afrofuturism, and the politics of Black archives and collections.

## Chapter Overview

While census data, newspapers, convention records, and other documents help fill out the shape of Wilson's biography, they do not offer many details about Wilson's personality and temperament. Luckily, William Wells Brown includes William J. Wilson in *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), alongside leaders and creatives ranging from Benjamin Banneker and Placido to Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass. As in the Picture Gallery, Wells Brown's biographical entries are not just characterological descriptions of Black leaders; they are also ekphrastic sketches. Of Wilson, Wells Brown notes, "In personal appearance he is under the middle size; his profile is more striking than his front face; he has a rather pleasing countenance, and is unmixed in race."<sup>64</sup> Wells Brown was himself part of the illustrious group he featured in *The Black Man*, and the book was published by none other than Thomas Hamilton. The book likely bears the traces of Hamilton's editorial input and contributions.

Wells Brown deepens one's sense from Wilson's newspaper correspondence that there was something both idiosyncratic and extravagant about the way he carried himself in the world. Wells Brown hints at the view of Wilson-as-libertine that I have sought to draw out at the fringes of the respectability politics of Black print in this period. He says Wilson is known for writing some of the "raciest" essays found in "public journals in the country" and goes on to reproduce Wilson's bawdy poem "The Teacher and the Pupil" in its entirety from the *Anglo-African Magazine*.<sup>65</sup> He goes on to highlight Wilson's unique capacity to use writing to stimulate the senses and the imagination. Wells Brown writes, "With acute powers of conception, a sparkling and lively fancy, and a quaintly curious felicity of diction, Mr. Wilson wakes us from our torpidity and coldness to a sense of our capabilities."<sup>66</sup> In what follows, I want to hold on to the "sparkling" dimensions of Wilson's correspondence and fiction writing as they are described by Wells Brown, including this idea that his powers of conception—and "felicity of diction"—have a stimulating and enlivening effect on readers, "wak[ing] us from our torpidity and coldness to a sense of our capabilities."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Wilson's writing refuses to be pinned down; it moves and puts readers on the move. It participates in the

flaneur culture of urban dandyism and the perambulatory epistolary networks of New York's periodical culture, while at the same time recognizing that Black movement was constantly being surveilled and contained. Wilson's is a dynamic, life-making kind of writing that attempts to vivify in the face of slavery's necropolitics.

This book would not be possible without a rich scholarship on Blackness and visual culture as well as theories of race and visibility, especially as they intersect with histories of slavery and abolition.<sup>68</sup> I have benefited tremendously from this work. But instead of reading the Picture Gallery solely through the lenses offered through theories of race and visibility, I ask how a textual museum such as Wilson's asks us to *see* differently. Through *Ethiop*, Wilson uses narrative both to insert himself into a visual sphere and to raise philosophical, social, and political questions about the limits of a knowledge and a politics rooted in visibility. In this way, we might understand ekphrasis as a kind of fugitive visual practice, one that evades capture at the same time as it explores the complex terrain of race and vision in an age in which the two were becoming inextricably linked to one another. Across the book, I take seriously the ways African American commentators on the visual in the period were often relying on rhetorical—rather than visual—authority to make their arguments.

Indeed, Wilson, McCune Smith, Douglass, and their cohort luxuriated in the powers of verbal and textual rhetoric. To that end, I begin with a brief reading of the ekphrastic description of a slave ship that inaugurates *Ethiop*'s gallery tour. Upon entering the gallery-text of the "Afric-American Picture Gallery," visitor-readers are immediately confronted with a large painting of a slave ship hung near the museum's entrance and titled "Picture Number 1.—The Slave Ship." Wilson encourages readers to interpret the museum's holdings, and the rest of the text, through the lens of the Atlantic slave trade and the horrors of the Middle Passage. In that same spirit, I position Wilson's ekphrasis of the slave ship as a frame for the rest of this study, a reminder that slavery's mark is everywhere in the Picture Gallery, as in the world outside it.

Chapter 1 reads the Picture Gallery as a text that theorizes Black art in an industrializing society structured by slavery and racial capitalism. What, Wilson asks, is the status of the work of art in an industrializing, slaveholding society? How must philosophies of the image take into account racial capitalism's deforming and degrading influence? To do so, I place the Picture Gallery in conversation with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Wilson and Benjamin, situated in two moments of historical transition in the history of capitalism, are both interested in the status of the work of art in regimes that

are increasingly defined by the commodity form and by individual acts of consumerism. The second half of this chapter explores the curious status of photography in the Picture Gallery. The Picture Gallery suppresses photography as a signifier at the same time as it is deeply shaped by this new visual technology and its transformation of the visual field. I argue that the Picture Gallery's repressed photographic unconscious signals Wilson's participation in the elevation of photography into a field of fine art; it also marks an ambivalence regarding the move to capture and submit to the camera in the name of making African Americans visible and legible as citizens.

Chapter 2 situates the Picture Gallery within the broader landscape of African American aesthetics in what I conceptualize as a late antebellum period. The Picture Gallery is, among other things, part of what Nafissa Thompson-Spires calls the nineteenth-century "black sketch tradition."<sup>69</sup> I am interested in how "sketching" by African American writers in the period privileged provisional experimentation over elegantly completed masterpieces, and favored active (if sometimes cantankerous) intellectual collaboration over the singular productions of individuals. Focusing on the multiyear periodical correspondence between James McCune Smith and William J. Wilson in the pages of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, I consider the deep dialogism of Black writing in the 1850s and how McCune Smith and Wilson were themselves forging a theory of Black aesthetics through their exchanges. I argue that Wilson created the Picture Gallery as a contribution to the dialogic and collaborative cultural production that was happening within coteries of Black writers and artists in the 1850s.

Chapter 3 pauses to consider the significance of Wilson's installation of Phillis Wheatley's portrait in the center of his imagined gallery space. It takes seriously the possibility that when Wilson was writing as Ethiop, he was paying homage to and perhaps even writing in a kind of drag as the enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley, who, like Wilson, used writing to connect to other working Black artists and writers in her community. More broadly, the chapter considers the Picture Gallery's investment in reclaiming Black heroes from the Revolutionary era, concluding with an analysis of Ethiop's description of a portrait of Crispus Attucks, martyr of the Boston Massacre. The Picture Gallery contributes to a broader culture of Black memorialization in the 1850s, which sought to make sacred communion with Black heroes and artists across time and space. This was a radical act in a white supremacist society that continually worked to disrupt connection and solidarity among people of African descent.

A final chapter turns to the Black Forest fairy tale that comes to preoccupy the plot of the Picture Gallery, transforming the series from a gallery tour to a work of fantastic flight and speculative fiction. Halfway through the seven-part series, readers are asked to leave the picture gallery to follow Ethiop on a journey to visit a Black artist living deep in a mysterious forest. I am interested in how the seemingly nonpolitical dimensions of a quest fantasy allow Wilson, in a moment of abolitionist immediatism and political agitation, to sit with feelings of ambivalence. In general, political propaganda does not allow for messy feelings or uncertainty. I argue that the Picture Gallery—like the Black antebellum epistolary cultures to which it was deeply connected—becomes political insofar as it seeks to be a space where contradictory views, half-formed positions, and deep ambivalences can be held without neat or easy resolution.

The book's conclusion returns to questions of aesthetic experimentation and vanguardism in order to better understand how the Civil War and Reconstruction both augured new Black futures and obscured others that were being actively constructed by Wilson and his Afropolitan cohort in the late 1850s. Writers like Wilson and Harriet Jacobs, along with other Black educators and activists, left New York City during the Civil War, committing themselves to educating and caring for former slaves in the South. I pause to think about how these migrations left absences and forms of grief in their wake in post-bellum New York. The spectral presence of Wilson's departure can be felt in a curious and stunning archival trace: A notice in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* from 1865 notes that mail has been waiting for him at the post office for three months. Given Wilson's embeddedness within Black epistolary networks of exchange, this cache of waiting mail—letters never received and never to be answered—bears a haunting weight that might tell us something about aesthetic genealogies that are present to us only as absences. Wilson's Picture Gallery gives us an important origin point for a Black queer aesthetics that would continue to proliferate in the shadows across the nineteenth century, ultimately flourishing in the New Negro Renaissance. I ask what it might mean to place Wilson at the origins of a Black queer aesthetics that could be glimpsed, often only intermittently, across the nineteenth century.

Finally, a word on method. This project takes much inspiration from the Picture Gallery's expansive visual imagination, including the work it does to carefully describe a visual field in the absence of actual images reproduced on the page. Throughout the book's chapters, I often pause to study a particular object of ekphrasis in the text, contextualizing it within relevant art-historical contexts, political history, and, when relevant, the world of antebellum print

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and periodical culture in which the Picture Gallery was embedded. In so doing, I seek to illuminate the specific ways Wilson was situating his work within debates about both print and visual culture in the period, and the various ways he was speaking back to the world of fine art, especially portraiture and landscape painting, to make visible how American aesthetics participated in grammars of both slavery and Blackness in America. In other words, this book includes many of my own descriptions of Wilson's ekphrastic descriptions. I work to excavate and disentangle multiple layers of citation and meaning as they are combined and condensed within individual objects in Wilson's gallery. I have found that my own experiments in ekphrasis often work, as in the Picture Gallery, as freeze-frames that ask readers to pause, decelerate, and shift their focus to a single work of art, static and still in appearance but vibrating with a rich palimpsest of meaning. The book also includes several images, some of which are direct inspirations for Wilson's word portraits; others are visual objects that are meant to supplement and further expand the visual imagination of the original text.

Following the Picture Gallery's exhilarating refusal of historical chronology and understanding that history only ever reaches us mediated by narrative, the chapters that follow are willfully experimental, at times playfully so. Historical context is given when and where it helps to illuminate some aspect of the text, which I want to keep at the center of my view and attention (inasmuch as a text such as this one allows it: more on the politics of aesthetic absorption and distraction in the Picture Gallery later). I take some leaps of faith in the hopes that they will encourage further study and thought on this unique work written in a period of profound political and cultural transformation. In this way, these chapters are not intended as definitive interpretations of the text; rather, they are offered—humbly—as preliminary starting points for future thought and study. From delineating the source materials and works of art that inspired represented objets d'art in the gallery to illuminating Wilson's complex relationship to the politics of emigration and colonization, there are countless ways into this text, and countless ways out of it. There is nothing definitive about the Picture Gallery itself: It's a work that refuses to be pinned down and that aims to spark the imagination. I thus write about it in adherence to its own spirit of evasiveness and refusal of capture. I also take inspiration from Wilson's own commitments to a dialogical aesthetics. Writers like Wilson and McCune Smith composed what they called "outlines" and "sketches" because they wanted others to further flesh out their writings and ideas. This book thus also stands as an invitation for future work on the Picture Gallery, Wilson, and his milieu.

## Notes

### Preface

- 1 For example, in correspondence from 1873, Wilson appends a note saying that he looks forward to a return visit to the Philadelphia studio of William Henry Dorsey, a Black artist, collector, and son of the prominent activist and early historian of African America, Thomas Dorsey. See William J. Wilson documents in Thomas and William Dorsey Collection, series B, box 132-2, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
- 2 Cobb, *Picture Freedom*.
- 3 Wells, *Kidnapping Club*.

### Introduction

- 1 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, xvi.
- 2 For example, the influential *Black Portraiture[s]* conferences have brought together scholars, curators, gallerists, educators, collectors, and artists in different sites around the world for over a decade since 2013.
- 3 “From Our Brooklyn Correspondent,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 11, 1853.
- 4 Lorang and Weir, “‘Will Not These Days.’”
- 5 Peterson, *Black Gotham*.

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- 6 W. J. Wilson (Ethiop), "Afric-American Picture Gallery," 53. This and all subsequent citations of the Picture Gallery are drawn from the Arno Press reprint edition of the first volume of the *Anglo-African Magazine*.
- 7 W. J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery," 53.
- 8 W. J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery," 53.
- 9 W. J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery," 53.
- 10 Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*; I. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*; Clytus, "Visualizing in Black Print"; Bowie et al., "Visionary History"; Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*.
- 11 This literature is vast and expanding. See, for example, Cohen and Stein, *Early African American Print Culture*; MELUS's 2015 special issue on "African American Print Cultures," edited by Joycelyn Moody and Howard Ramsby II; Fielder and Senchyne, *Against a Sharp White Background*; Cobb, *Picture Freedom*; Gonzalez, *Visualizing Equality*; Wallace and Smith, *Pictures and Progress*.
- 12 See Helton et al., "Question of Recovery."
- 13 Mirzoeff, *Introduction to Visual Culture*; Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*; Lewis, *Unseen Truth*; Jay and Ramaswamy, *Empires of Vision*; Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*; Fabian, *Skull Collectors*.
- 14 hooks, *Black Looks*; Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*.
- 15 Plasa, "Ekphrastic Poetry and the Middle Passage"; Ford, "Notes on Black Ekphrasis."
- 16 Wilder, *Covenant with Color*, 52. My portrait of Brooklyn in this section is largely inspired by Wilder's richly textured account of the city's commercial expansion in the mid-nineteenth century.
- 17 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.
- 18 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 11, 1851.
- 19 *People's Advocate*, November 30, 1878.
- 20 Watson, "Free Blacks in Accomack County."
- 21 *People's Advocate*, November 30, 1878; mention of Wilson's boot-making shop appears in the September 16, 1837, issue of the *Colored American*.
- 22 Yacovone, "William J. Wilson," 400.
- 23 *Colored American*, November 18, 1837.
- 24 For more on St. Philip's Church and the lives of its congregants, see Peterson, *Black Gotham*.
- 25 Many thanks to Marc Landas for this new information on Wilson's residences and activities.

- 26 W. J. Wilson, "Public Schools for Colored Children," letter to Henry R. Stiles, ca. 1863, Henry Stiles Papers, Brooklyn Center for History, Brooklyn Public Library.
- 27 W. J. Wilson, "Public Schools for Colored Children." Wilson wrote that Mary took up this post after the previous principal of the department and possible family relation, Almyra Wilson, "from Boston Mass," passed away in 1862.
- 28 Kanakamedala, *Brooklynites*, 106.
- 29 Kanakamedala, *Brooklynites*, 4.
- 30 Wilder, *Covenant with Color*.
- 31 See city atlas holdings (*Maps of the City of Brooklyn*) in the Brooklyn Center for History, Brooklyn Public Library.
- 32 On shifts in racial nomenclature in the antebellum period, see Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 82–117.
- 33 Scholarship on the nineteenth-century Black elite includes Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*; Peterson, *Black Gotham*; E. D. Taylor, *Original Black Elite*.
- 34 Kanakamedala, *Brooklynites*, 175.
- 35 Peterson, *Black Gotham*, 286.
- 36 Records of the Colored Men's State Convention of New York, Troy, September 4, 1855, [coloredconventions.org](http://coloredconventions.org).
- 37 Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 158.
- 38 Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 294.
- 39 Yacovone, "William J. Wilson," 400.
- 40 I. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*, 7.
- 41 I. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*, 7.
- 42 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 156.
- 43 Campt, *Black Gaze*, 104.
- 44 Campt, *Black Gaze*, 27.
- 45 McHenry, *To Make Negro Literature*.
- 46 Douglass, *Claims of the Negro*, 7.
- 47 Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 28.
- 48 Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 28.
- 49 Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 28.
- 50 On the complex terrain of political aesthetics in Black antebellum writing, see I. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy*. Throughout this book, I am deeply

inspired by Wilson's careful attention to how Black writers in the antebellum period "conceptualized the relationship between art and politics" (7) as well as to his pathbreaking chapter on the Picture Gallery, which reads William J. Wilson's curatorial efforts as "the means though which he articulates a form of black subjectivity that is hemispheric and transnational" (146).

- 51 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 5, 1855.
- 52 Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*.
- 53 Powell, "Sartor Africanus," 222.
- 54 Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 6.
- 55 Clytus, "Visualizing in Black Print," 54.
- 56 Smethurst, *African American Roots of Modernism*.
- 57 "Terance Ludlam," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 11, 1854.
- 58 Foreman, *Activist Sentiments*, 7. See also Yao, *Disaffected*.
- 59 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 9, 1855.
- 60 Quoted in Clytus, "Visualizing in Black Print," 45.
- 61 An exemplar in this regard is Hager, *Word by Word*.
- 62 D. Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- 63 Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*.
- 64 W. W. Brown, *Black Man*, 235.
- 65 W. W. Brown, *Black Man*, 230, 233.
- 66 W. W. Brown, *Black Man*, 235.
- 67 W. W. Brown, *Black Man*, 235.
- 68 This literature is vast. Some relevant titles include Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez, *Migrating the Black Body*; Finley, *Committed to Memory*; Wood, *Blind Memory*; Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal, *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*; K. J. Brown, *Repeating Body*; English, *How to See a Work of Art*; Beach, *Sculpture at the Ends of Slavery*; and Deborah Willis's entire oeuvre, especially *Black Civil War Soldier* and *Reflections in Black*.
- 69 Thompson-Spires, *Heads of the Colored People*, 199.

#### Picture Number 1. The Slave Ship

- 1 W. J. Wilson, "Afric-American Picture Gallery," 53.
- 2 For more on the *Brooks* and its relationship to the abolitionist movement and visual depictions of the transatlantic slave trade, see Wood, *Blind Memory*.