



NEW GROWTH OR THE TEXTURE OF RACIAL CAPITALISM

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Jasmine Nichole Cobb is Professor of African & African American Studies and of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University, as well as a co-director of the “From Slavery to Freedom” (FS2F) Franklin Humanities Lab. A scholar of black cultural production and visual representation, Cobb is the author of two monographs, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (NYUP 2015) and *New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair after Emancipation* (Duke UP 2022). She is the editor for *African American Literature in Transition, 1800-1830* (Cambridge UP 2022) and she has written essays for *Public Culture*, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, and *American Literary History*.

Her third monograph in progress, *The Pictorial Life of Harriet Tubman*, offers a visual history of the abolitionist, from the middle nineteenth century through the present, including the persistence of the abolitionist's image in contemporary art and popular culture.

Coming out of the Civil Rights Movement and political struggles of the middle-twentieth century, the Afro has endured as an icon of black liberation aesthetics. Through a mixed-media archive of photojournalism and print advertisements, this particular black hairstyle has often been associated with the term “freedom” without sufficient exploration of hair's suppression in public culture and visual representation. This talk explores the historical and cultural contexts informing repression where black hair is a stand in for black aesthetics. I argue that the shifting significations associated with “natural hair”—the concept and characteristics of black hair textures in the absence of chemical and mechanical straighteners—begins with slavery, but endures through racial capitalism. Accordingly, this talk thinks through hair as an image and images about hair in order to limn the relationship between black visual culture and capitalism, shifting our scholarly focus away from issues of entrepreneurship, labor and commodification, and toward a question of violence. Hair as a kind of media presents an opportunity to think about representations of black freedom, but also through questions about race, citizenship and social mobility.