

# Types of Mankind: Visualizing Kinship in Afro-Native America



This is a tale about my return to the vault. It's about those moments when something in the archive catches you completely off-guard—and nearly knocks you off your feet. It's a story about how a scholar of literature was taught to sharpen her vision and see beyond the printed page.

I originally intended to write about the dynamic and neglected history of African American engagements with natural science in early black print culture (I still intend to do this, but in a different and perhaps unconventional way). More specifically, I was interested in discussing my experiences at the American Antiquarian Society with a set of little-known ethnological tracts written by African Americans in the 1830s and 1840s, including James W.C. Pennington's 1841 *Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People*, Hosea Easton's 1837 *Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States*, and what is generally regarded as the first ethnology written by an African American, Robert Benjamin Lewis's 1836 *Light and Truth, From Ancient and Sacred History*. Pennington, Easton, and Lewis all wrote ethnologies that challenged the ascendancy of the so-called American school of ethnology in the 1830s. Its practitioners—most famously Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, George

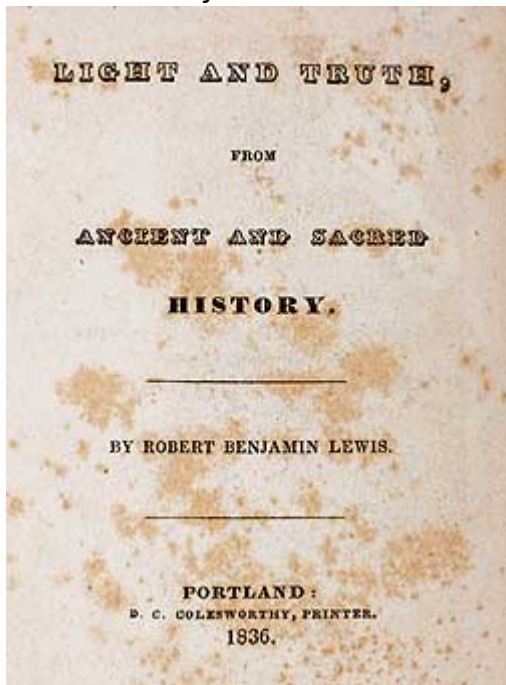
Gliddon, and Josiah Nott—used the tools of comparative anatomy to attempt to prove the innate mental and physical superiority of the Caucasian race. These comparative studies of human anatomy and physiognomy sought to demonstrate the biological and evolutionary degeneracy of African and African-descended peoples. They were also invested in upholding the thesis of polygenesis: that non-white races were not only biologically inferior to the Caucasian race, they also originated in separate creation events by God (they were both inferior and separate “types” of people). In response, black writers and intellectuals waged a war on the American school of ethnology through the creation of a counter-archive of ethnological writing, which told a different story about the origin and descent of the races. Black ethnologies often affirmed the monogenetic hypothesis—the idea that all races were descended from a single stock, rather than through individual creation acts by God, but they also moved beyond monogenesis to make even bolder claims about the descent of man: all races were indeed “of one blood,” they argued, but the white race was actually descended from the black race since the Ethiopians were the first men created by God. These ethnologies boldly proclaimed that the Garden of Eden was in Ethiopia, and hence, Adam and Eve were black. In addition to placing themselves at the center of Biblical history, black ethnologies insisted on the deep influences of Ethiopia on the development of so-called Western civilization in ancient Egypt and across the Mediterranean world: they often, for example, included lengthy lists of Greek and Roman historians, poets, statesmen and philosophers who were of African descent, including Plato, Ptolemy, Alexander the Great, Cicero, Nero, Julius Caesar, and Augustine. In short, these ethnologies offered a rich and expansive view of a glorious black past: African American ethnology challenged the American school of ethnology’s view of the black race as an evolutionarily degenerate group, but it also refused attempts to disinherit African Americans from their illustrious roots and place in history, secular and sacred.

At least those were my plans. And then I stumbled upon an image, an image that completely transformed the direction of my research by throwing into question many of the major assumptions I carried into my study of African American ethnology. I had returned to the AAS for a two-day trip in which I planned to check a few facts and confirm a couple of citations for a project I had already spent a month researching at the library. That morning, I noticed a citation in the catalog on Robert Benjamin Lewis that I hadn’t seen before. I thought I should give it a glance, but didn’t expect it to be relevant to my project. I put in the request so quickly that I didn’t realize I had requested a graphic item. I expected to receive a text. Instead, I opened the folder to a beautiful, dazzling lithograph of Robert Benjamin Lewis himself (fig. 1). I stepped back a few steps and covered my mouth. It was an incredible discovery: in all of my work on Lewis and his ethnology *Light and Truth* I had never come across an image of him. By pouring over pages and pages of text—of newspapers, books, pamphlets, and other print sources—I expected to learn more about Lewis’s life and his writings, but I never expected to encounter his actual image.

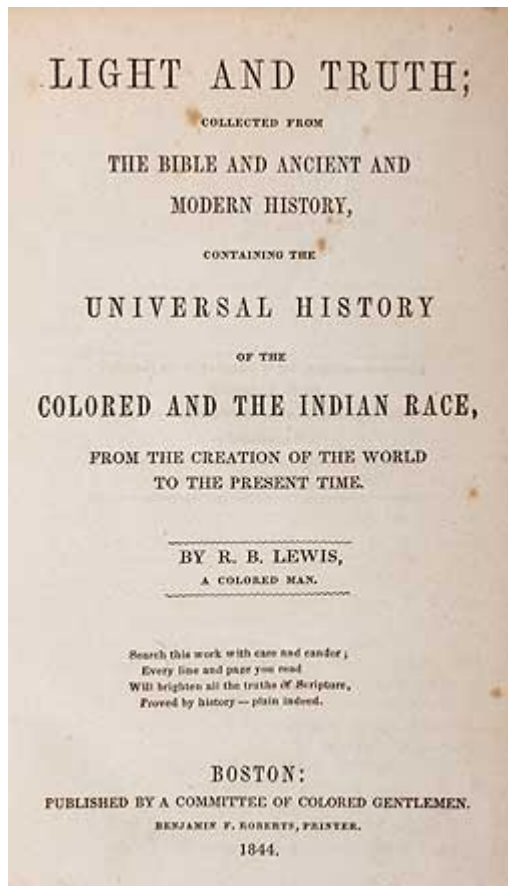
Born in 1802, Robert Benjamin Lewis was a freeman of African and Native American descent. He was born in Maine, where he also lived, worked, and raised a family. Some sources suggest that he passed away in Bath, Maine, in the late 1850s, while others claim he took sick and died in Haiti while scouting out a place to emigrate with his family. In her history of black thought on the white race in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *The White Image in the Black Mind* (2000), Mia Bay refers to Lewis as a “jack-of-all-trades” who “made his living painting, papering, and whitewashing houses, cleaning carpets, crafting baskets, caning chairs, and fixing parasols and umbrellas” (44). Little else is known about his life except for the publication of his ethnological tract in the mid-1830s. Before it was published as a bound volume, Lewis circulated and sold pamphlets of his *Light and Truth* during a lecturing tour of New England. It was first published as a book (fig. 2) in 1836 by the Portland, Maine, printer and poet Daniel Clement Colesworthy. That same year, Lewis set out on another book tour of New England to sell and promote his newly published book. The many re-printings of *Light and Truth* in the 1840s and 1850s suggest that Lewis’s ethnology circulated widely in the region: in 1843, a newly revised and expanded edition was published as a four-volume serial in Augusta, Maine, and in 1844, a self-named “committee of colored gentlemen” in Boston published the expanded serial edition as one large volume. The 1844 edition (fig. 3) was printed by the shoemaker turned radical printer, lecturer, and activist, Benjamin F. Roberts, who also sat on the aforementioned committee. In addition to publishing Lewis’s *Light and Truth*, Roberts had other connections to the foundations of black ethnology: his nephew was none other than Hosea Easton, who published his own ethnology in Boston in 1837 (fig. 4). The 1844 edition of *Light and Truth* was reprinted by Roberts in 1849 and again in 1851. Lewis’s regular book tours and lectures must have expanded his readership and audience even further. Bay suggests that Lewis’s annual book tours may have made *Light and Truth* the most widely circulated black ethnology in the nineteenth century.



1. "Robert Benjamin Lewis," B.F. Nutting, lithograph by Pendleton's, 18.3 x 15 cm. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



2. Title page from Light and Truth, from Ancient and Sacred History by Robert Benjamin Lewis (Portland, Maine, 1836). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

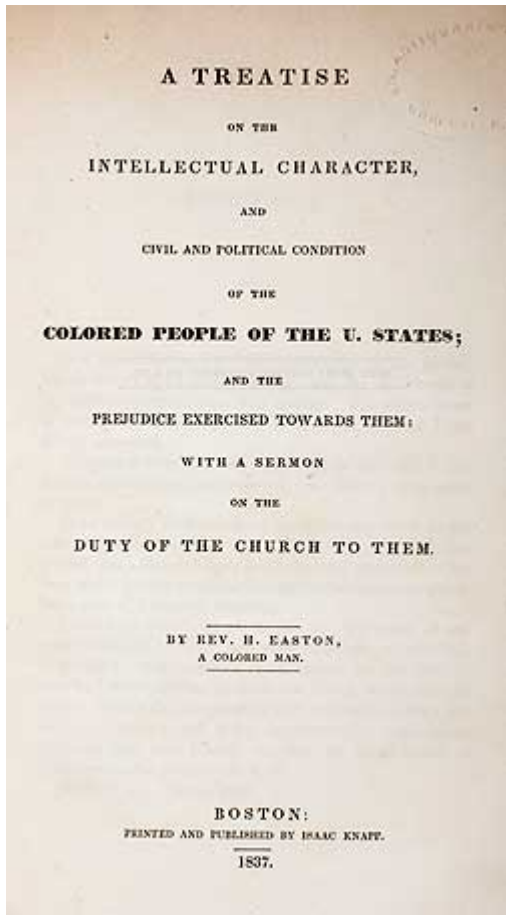


3. Title page from *Light and Truth*, Collected from The Bible and Ancient and Modern History, ... by Robert Benjamin Lewis (Boston, 1844). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Both the 1840s and 1850s printings of *Light and Truth* and the lithograph of Lewis place him in Boston during that period, either as a visitor or as a more regular participant in Boston's vibrant community of black activists. Although I have not been able to determine its exact date of production, the lithograph of Lewis must have been produced sometime in the late 1820s or early 1830s since it was printed by Pendleton's Lithography, an extremely important yet short-lived firm in Boston owned by brothers William S. and John B. Pendleton. The Pendleton brothers were at the forefront of lithography's ascendancy in America: their Boston studio and Anthony Imbert's studio in New York were the first professional lithography firms established in the United States. Pendleton's opened its doors in 1825 and transferred ownership to the firm's bookkeeper, Thomas Moore, in 1836, the same year that Lewis published *Light and Truth*. Lewis's portrait was drawn by Benjamin Franklin (B.F.) Nutting, a popular Boston artist and engraver who worked as an apprentice at Pendleton's from 1828 until about 1834. The handsome and large lithograph was clearly produced in anticipation of and in conjunction with Lewis's forthcoming book publication. Given Lewis's frequent travels throughout the region and the wide regional circulation of *Light and Truth*, it seems likely that the portrait was produced to sell at Lewis's lectures, as many activists of the period sold

their self-portraits at such events. Although it did not appear in the 1836 edition, or in any subsequent editions, the lithograph may also have been intended for use as a frontispiece to *Light and Truth*. Many other portraits from the studio were used for this purpose. For example, B.F. Nutting also drew a portrait of the Methodist missionary, Reverend Samuel Osgood Wright, for Pendleton's in the early 1830s, sometime before Wright departed for Liberia in 1833 (fig. 5). The lithograph subsequently appeared as a frontispiece engraving in *Memoir of Rev. S. Osgood Wright, late missionary to Liberia*, published in Boston after Wright passed away from typhoid fever in 1834, just a year into his missionary work abroad (fig. 6). In his foundational history of lithography in America, *America on Stone* (1931), Harry T. Peters notes that Pendleton's specialized in portraits for magazines and books. The question remains: after going to the trouble of having his portrait engraved on limestone, printed, and reproduced, why didn't he include the lithograph in his ethnology? Peters notes that artists working for Pendleton's received upwards of sixty dollars for each portrait and the studio charged additional printing fees for copies (a bill from Pendleton's, for example, lists a \$50 charge for the cost of 500 copies plus paper). While Lewis benefitted from the democratization of image production in the Northeast enabled by the rise of commercial lithography during the 1830s, allowing him to have a distinguished portrait taken when it wouldn't have been possible in previous decades, the high printing costs may have made further reproduction of the portrait unfeasible for Lewis, who cobbled together his livelihood from lecture tours, odd jobs, and various forms of craft work.

In looking at Lewis's image for the first time, I was immediately struck by its preciousness. Scholars of early African American culture and history often spend years—and sometimes entire careers—researching figures for whom no known image exists. As a scholar of print culture, I must also admit my own bias toward print sources, a bias that, I realized in this archival moment, sometimes blinds me to other key contexts and stories. Seeing Lewis's image I was immediately reminded of the importance of the visual—both for present-day scholars of African American life and culture and for those nineteenth-century freedom fighters who knew the visual field was a key site of struggle for representing the race. The lithograph of Lewis reminded me that his *Light and Truth* was not just about challenging claims of degeneracy and inferiority in antebellum race science, it was also about the politics of visibility and representation for people of color in the United States.



4. Title page from *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States;...*, by Rev. H. Easton (Boston, 1837). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



5. "S. Osgood Wright," B.F. Nutting, lithograph by Pendleton's. Frontispiece



from Memoir of Rev. S. Osgood Wright, Late Missionary to Liberia (Boston, 1834). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



6. "Rev. S. Osgood Wright, Missionary to Liberia," B.F. Nutting, lithograph by Pendleton's (Boston). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

African American portraiture made important interventions into discourses of race and physiology throughout the period. Crude illustrations were regularly used to delineate racial "types" by ethnologists and to establish racial inferiority through the field of the visual (see, for example, Nott and Gliddon's famous chart of Negro physiognomies in *Types of Mankind*) (fig. 7). In response to the rude visual typologies of racist science, figures like Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and Lewis himself turned to the detailed art of portraiture in order to establish counter-archives of black respectability, beauty, and intelligence. Indeed, my detective hunt in the AAS reading room led me to the simple yet important realization that the lithograph was likely produced so that readers would have to encounter Lewis's proud portrait before they read his treatise or heard him speak on the noble origins of the African race. In viewing Lewis's portrait, they were asked to confront an image of undoubtable manhood and respectability: his straight posture, regal and almost exotic garb, slightly pursed lips and that downward glance, a glance that seems to resist even as it receives the gaze of viewers. I realized at this moment that the text of *Light and Truth* was not Lewis's only intervention into the dominant discourses of antebellum ethnology: with his noble visage displayed and mixed parentage—"Indian, Ethiopian, & European"—prominently announced in the caption, the portrait itself served as a powerful counter-ethnology. Although the portrait never appeared in an edition of *Light and Truth*, Lewis's



bodily presence on the lecture stage surely served a similar purpose: as a powerfully embodied intervention into the discourses of ethnology.

Instead of tracking down citations and checking facts, as planned, I spent most of that day staring at Lewis's portrait. The lithograph gave me insight into key aspects of his identity that had gone undetected in my research, including the fact that he was a freemason. In the image, Nutting portrays Lewis with a seven-pointed star on his head and a striking pendant around his neck bearing the famous Eye of Providence. These two Masonic symbols would have immediately signified Lewis's affiliation with freemasonry to nineteenth-century viewers. Lewis's racial background seems deliberately ambiguous in the image, an ambiguity that positions him as an apt representative for all oppressed people around the globe. The caption notes he "will plead the rights of all." Through the image and caption, Lewis is presented as a worldly, even cosmopolitan figure, combining and representing the noblest qualities of the global races of man, both East and West ("Indian, Ethiopian, & European"). Indeed, throughout *Light and Truth*, Lewis advocates a kind of global, cosmopolitan religion as he artfully draws together—and "amalgamates"—the origin stories and teachings of Christianity, Judaism (suggesting American Indians are the lost tribes of Israel), Islam, and Native American belief systems. The ethnology even ends with a Native American creation story of the Great Spirit, which serves as yet another challenge to the Biblical creation stories used and manipulated by the proponents of polygenesis. Like the portrait, Lewis's closing account of the Great Spirit's creation of "his white and his red children" is yet another counter-ethnology, another challenge to the racist origin stories perpetuated by the American school of ethnology.

This one portrait turned my myopic gaze from a genre of scientific writing in early black print culture to the whole history of Afro-Native peoples and relations in the nineteenth century, a history that is too often wholly neglected or subsumed under the rubric of African American history and literature (I had been myself guilty of doing as much in my work on Lewis). My encounter with this one singular image not only enriched my research on Lewis by foregrounding his identity as a black-Native American, but it also allowed me to "see" ethnology in a whole new light. I realized that my understanding of Lewis's text as a black ethnology did not adequately capture the complexities and real political aims of the text. It might, I think now, be more fruitful to think of it as an Afro-Native ethnology. Indeed, in the 1844 edition of *Light and Truth*, the preface by the committee of colored gentlemen packages the tract as an Afro-Native ethnology by an Afro-Native man: "The author of this compilation has been some years in gathering this information. He is a descendent of the two races he so ably vindicates." What became clear to me is that Lewis was interested in ethnology because it provided him with a powerful language with which to articulate the shared descent of African and Native peoples. The text insists on other commonalities as well, namely a shared history of subjection at the hands of the United States government. As a discourse that had been used to justify the exploitation of black labor and dispossess Indians from their land, ethnology was deeply implicated in the

subjection of both African American and American Indian communities. This last realization enabled by Lewis's portrait was perhaps the most surprising and startling to me. While I had always assumed this counter-archive of ethnology had been written to challenge the American school of ethnology's pro-slavery arguments, I realized that black and Afro-Native ethnologists like Lewis were also likely producing these texts as responses to the U.S. government's production of ethnological knowledge to justify Native American removal and extermination. In *Light and Truth*, ethnology is transformed from a science of subjugation to a science of Afro-Native alliance. In opposition to the various scientific "proofs" of black and Indian inferiority that populated dominant ethnological discourses, Lewis uses ethnology to imagine new forms of solidarity and to forge models of mixed-race identity in America.

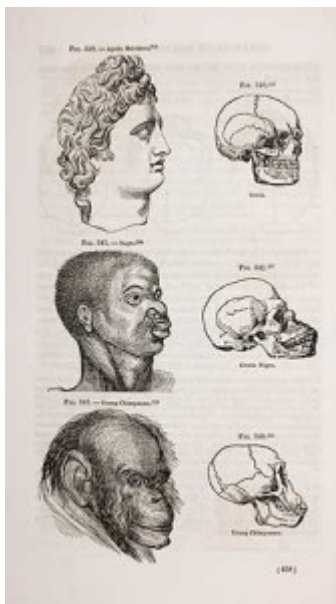




Fig 7. "Illustrations of Comparative Types of Races," from pages 458 and 459 of *Types of Mankind or, Ethnological researches based upon the ancient monuments, paintings, sculptures, and crania of races...* by Josiah Clark Nott and Geo. R. Gliddon (Philadelphia, 1854). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

My encounter with Lewis's image was soon intensified by a second, happy shock, another archival moment deeply tied to the visual. While hunting down more clues about Lewis's history and background, I came across an 1873 article in a Maine newspaper that contained quite a surprise: the article claims that Robert Benjamin Lewis was the father of Mary Edmonia Lewis, the Oberlin-educated Afro-Native American sculptor (fig. 8). In 1865 she traveled to Rome where she lived and worked among an international community of artists. She would go on to receive international acclaim for her sculpture. This was the second time in a day that I covered my mouth in surprise. There were reasons to believe the newspaper article, the first being that I wanted to. But there were other reasons, rooted in evidence rather than desire: Edmonia was a freeperson of African and Ojibwa heritage. In the early 1840s, Edmonia's mother met and married a man named Lewis (R.B. Lewis from Maine?) outside of Albany, New York, where Edmonia was also born in 1844. And finally, like Robert Benjamin Lewis, little is else is known about Edmonia's family history and early life. I spent the rest of the day tracking down citations that would confirm or deny the biological ties between Edmonia and Robert. In my unexpected search for the possible genetic relation between these two Lewises, I realized that I was now conducting genealogical research. I was struck by the irony of attempting to learn more about Robert Benjamin Lewis's family history in the middle of a research project about Lewis's own writings on genealogy. Apart from this single newspaper reference, I was unable to uncover any evidence that would further substantiate a biological connection between Edmonia and Robert. But I started to wonder how else we might understand their relationship to one

another. I started speculating on alternative forms of kinship. Both Edmonia and Robert, for example, were interested in creating alternative images of Afro-Native America. Both were interested in the crafting of Native-black identities in the nineteenth century, she through sculpture and exhibition, he through ethnology and lecturing (another kind of public exhibition).



8. "Edmonia Lewis," photograph by Henry Rocher, 3 5/8 x 2 1/16 inches, albumen silver print (c. 1870). Courtesy of the Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., <http://www.npg.si.edu>.

Indeed, I had found myself engaged in a project similar to Lewis's in *Light and Truth*: we were both speculating on forms of kinship in the absence of reliable records, in the face of the enormous losses and absences of the Middle Passage, and in the many gaps of the archive. These surprising archival encounters forced me to think about antebellum ethnology in entirely new ways: they forced me to see what I was blind to and keyed me into something I had missed all along: the power that speculating on kinship held—and continues to hold—for African American, American Indian, and Afro-Native peoples. Moreover, these counter-discourses of kinship did not always privilege biological kinship. Of course, Lewis was interested in the histories of reproduction between African American and American Indian communities, but he was also interested in a history of commingling and community that did not depend on blood. Indeed, Lewis's account of shared descent does not hinge on genetics, but on a shared plight—a shared history of racial violence, removal, containment, and subjugation by the United States. Just as I was energized by the speculative connections between Edmonia and Robert, *Light and Truth* reveals in the bonds of speculative kinship, those forms of kinship and community that are not restricted by the norms of biological kinship and the imperatives of reproduction.

Ethnology provided Lewis with a powerful language to articulate a shared heritage—both reproductive and cultural—between African American and Native American peoples. In a fascinating way, African American and Afro-Native ethnologies from the nineteenth century anticipate the popular interest that surrounds genetic ancestry testing in our contemporary moment. Indeed, one needs only to look to the interest in direct-to-consumer ancestry testing among communities of color and to the popularity of television series about family ancestry like Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *African American Lives* and *Faces of America* on PBS to recognize the appeal of the tools and technologies of genomics. In *African American Lives*, Gates and his team use the tools of history (genealogy) and science (DNA ancestry tests) to help prominent individuals like Oprah Winfrey, Quincy Jones, Don Cheadle, and Maya Angelou find out more about their ancestral heritage. Viewers of the series will likely recall that a number of people featured on the show believed they had Indian ancestry, but were subsequently informed that the genetic results did not confirm their beliefs. However, many of those featured on the show stated that they planned to continue valuing the stories and histories they had grown up with even if they weren't confirmed by science. They would continue to favor oral and family history over the "truth" of genetics. In our immediate moment, in the midst of the genomics revolution and the ongoing production of scientific knowledge about race, we might consider how communities have begun to use DNA analysis and ancestry tools to tell their own stories and to forge counter-histories that challenge official discourses of race and genetics, much like R.B. Lewis used ethnology to imagine other ways of being and belonging in the world, imagining an Afro-Native America that existed autonomously from the United States of America. Scholars have rightly worried about the re-biologization of race through the new sciences of genomics, but these nineteenth-century counter-ethnologies remind us of the ways in which discourses of race and science have long been—and continue to be—challenged, subverted, and rewritten by the subjects of those discourses.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Further Reading**

Mia Bay's *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York, 2000) remains the most complete study of African American ethnologies in the nineteenth century. In his *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), Bruce Dain also writes on black ethnology and provides a comprehensive treatment of African American responses to scientific theories of race in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Ann Fabian's recent study of Samuel George Morton and the rise of craniology, *The Skull Collectors: Race,*

*Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago, 2010), is a refreshing update to Stephen Jay Gould's still classic and important study, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981; New York, 1996). On the U.S. government's use of linguistic ethnology–philology–to inform Indian policy and removal efforts, see Sean P. Harvey, "'Must Not Their Languages Be Savage and Barbarous Like Them?': Philology, Indian Removal, and Race Science," *Journal of the Early Republic* 30.4 (Winter 2010): 505-32. Harry T. Peters's 1931 *America on Stone* (New York, 1976) and Graham Hudson's *The Design and Printing of Ephemera in Britain & America, 1720-1920* (London, 2008) offer detailed histories of the development and practice of lithography in America. On the pleasures of conducting African American genealogy, see Pauli Murray's *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1956; Boston, 1999); on its haunting absences, see Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2008). For more on the fascinating and understudied figure Edmonia Lewis, see Kirsten Pai Buick's *Child of the Fire: Mary Edmonia Lewis and the Problem of Art History's Black and Indian Subject* (Durham, N.C., 2010).

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