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Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz

Editor's Note: Louis Agassiz, professor at Harvard University during the mid-nineteenth century, was one of the world's most honored scientists. His works on the evolution of the Ice Age were widely heralded as the creation of scientific genius. However, Agassiz's theories on the biological inferiority of the Negro were driven more by personal contempt for the race than scientific rigor. In 1850 Agassiz traveled to Columbia, South Carolina, in order to create a photographic record of black slaves, which he believed would validate his theories on racial differences.

by Brian Wallis

RECENT DISCUSSIONS OF multiculturalism, ethnicity, identity, and race have raised many new questions about the nature of cultural difference. Some critics have derided "political correctness" and challenges to Western canons of culture, while others have struggled to trace the genealogies of cultural oppression.

These debates have made clear that "race" is a political issue, a product of subjective choices made around issues of power, a function less of physical repression than of constructions of knowledge. Who determines what counts as knowledge? Who represents and who is represented? Whose voice will be heard? Whose stories will be remembered? Such questions go to the heart of how history is written and validated by society — through negotiations fraught with silent conflicts and profound implications. For this reason, it is important to place in history not only the concept of race but also the institutions and power-knowledge conjunctions that have fostered it.

Louis Agassiz and Racial Typologies

A particularly revelatory case is that of the so-called slave daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz, discovered at Harvard's Peabody Museum in 1975 and justifiably celebrated in the exhibition "Nineteenth-Century Photography" organized by the Amon Carter Museum in 1992. This extraordinary series consists of 15 highly detailed images on silver daguerreotype plates, which show front and side views of seven southern slaves, men and women, largely naked.

The daguerreotypes, which were taken for Agassiz in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1850, had two purposes, one nominally scientific, the other frankly political. They were designed to analyze the physical differences between European whites and African blacks, but at the same time they were meant to prove the superiority of the white race. Agassiz hoped to use the photographs as evidence to prove his theory of "separate creation," the idea that the various races of mankind were in fact separate species. Though strictly scientific in purpose, the daguerreotypes took on a very particular meaning in the context of prevailing political, economic, and aesthetic theories about race. Thus they help to discredit the very notion of objectivity and call into question the supposed transparency of the photographic record.

The classificatory project that led to the production of the slave daguerreotypes was something of a departure for Agassiz, who, in 1850, was the most famous scientist in America. Born in Switzerland, Agassiz (1807-1873) had shown no interest in the growing American debates over slavery or the division of mankind into separate species before his arrival in the United States in 1846.

At that time, prior scientific theory about evolution was almost universally creationist; that is, it conformed to the Bible in its belief in the unity of all peoples as descendants of Adam and Eve. This theory, called monogenism, asserted origin from a single source. Racial discrepancies were explained by subscribing to one of two views: one, the environmentalist, which said that separate races evolved into different body types and skin pigmentation because of climate, locale, and other physical effects; and two, miscegenist, which held that separate races were the result of intermarriage. But it was polygenesis, the theory of multiple, separate creations for each race as distinct species, that became the hallmark of the American School of Ethnology. For a brief time around 1850, the American theory of polygenesis, with Dr. Samuel Morton as its leader, enjoyed wide credence in international scientific circles. An eminent physician and anatomist, Morton had recently published two skull compendia, *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), works that had profound influence on the understanding of race in America.

Whether or not Morton and Agassiz discussed racial theory at their first meeting in 1846 is unclear. Until that point, Agassiz had shown little interest in racial typologies and had not yet

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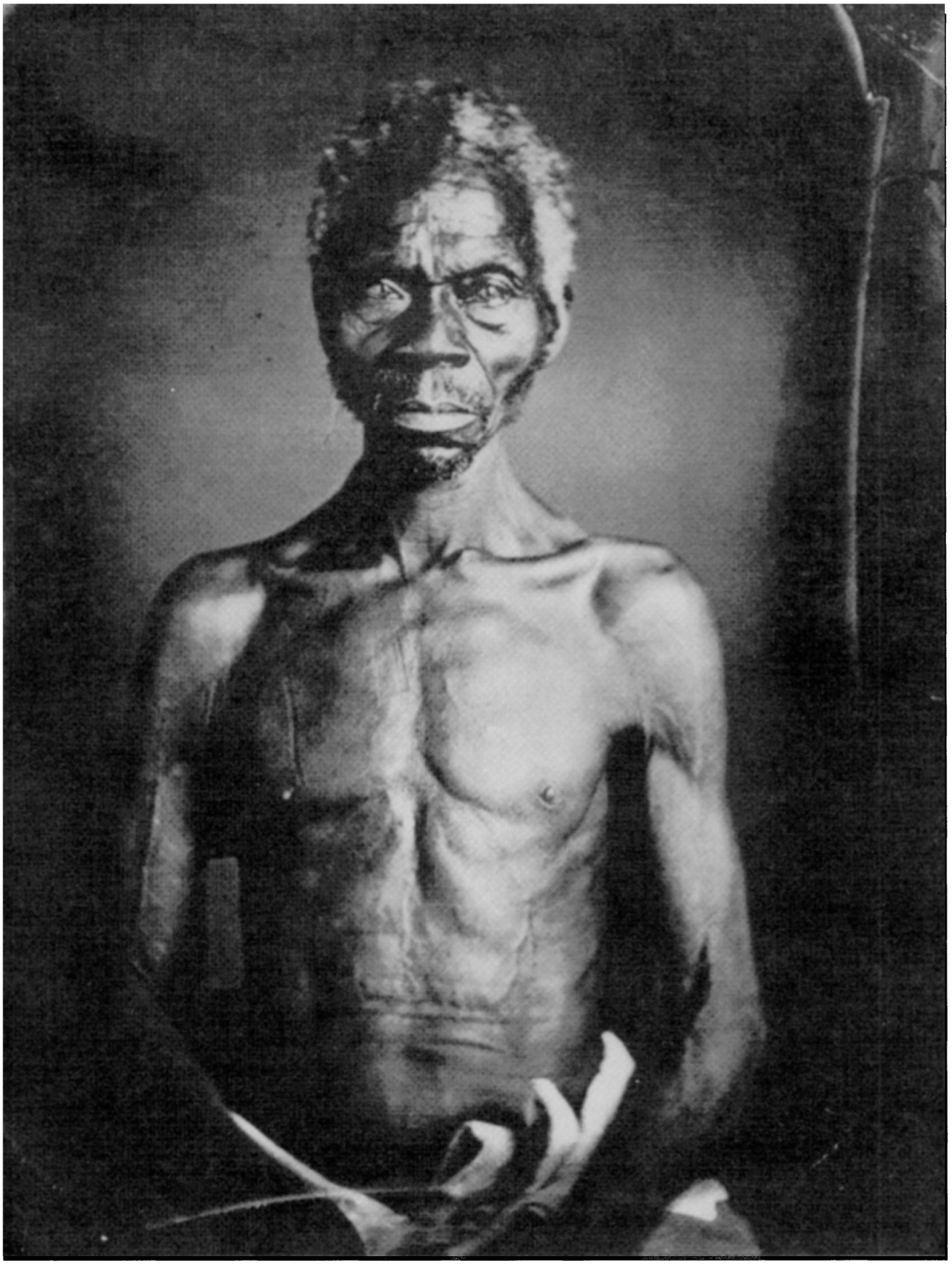

Photo: Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

A slave named Renty, a native of the Congo, from the plantation of B.F. Taylor of Columbia, South Carolina. Daguerreotype taken by J.T. Zealy for Louis Agassiz, March 1850.

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embraced the theory of separate creation. He was impressed by Morton's collection of skulls, though. For a collector like Agassiz, the effect was dramatic, and he wrote to his mother at once: "Imagine a series of 600 skulls, most of Indians from all tribes who inhabit or once inhabited North America. Nothing like it exists anywhere else. This collection, by itself, is worth a trip to America." However, in the same letter to his mother, Agassiz recorded another event that may have either reflected his conversations with Morton or simply jolted him into a confrontation with the issue of race. He wrote of his encounter, for the first time in his life, with a black man:

"All the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. . . . Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away."

Despite his personal repugnance for the blacks he encountered, Agassiz later claimed that his beliefs on racial typologies were without political motivation, and he remained a staunch abolitionist, a position that seems contradictory given the later proslavery embrace of his views. Morton, a Quaker, also argued for disinterested science, although his assertion, in *Crania Aegyptiaca*, that ancient Egyptians were not black and in fact had employed blacks as their slaves seemed to support American slavery. But clearly, highly subjective political and aesthetic decisions governed the development of polygenesis, particularly among southern scientists determined to prove the inferiority of African-American slaves in the decades before the Civil War.

First Salvos of Scientific Racism in America

This "scientific" issue came to a head at the third meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science held in Charleston in March 1850. The central theme of the conference was the question of the unity of diversity of species, and the featured speaker was Agassiz. His comments to the Charleston audience, his first public statement regarding separate creation, were circumspect. But he made it clear that he sided with the southern view of polygenesis and accepted the inferior status of blacks. The various races of mankind, he stated, were "well marked and distinct" and did not originate "from a common center . . . nor a common pair."

This statement elicited a firestorm of controversy with the conservative clergy in his hometown of Boston, and Agassiz was obliged to make his positions on Christianity and abolitionism clear in three long articles published in the *Christian Examiner*. In these, Agassiz stressed that his views regarding separate creation did not contradict the biblical notion of a unified human origin. Rather, he argued, the Bible referred only to the Caucasian inhabitants of one portion of the globe; Negroes, Indians, Hindus, and the other "species" he identified inhabited different and discrete geographical regions, having originated and evolved in unique ways.

In attempting to organize his data regarding Africans, Agassiz sought firsthand evidence. Since the importation of Africans had been outlawed in 1808, Agassiz was doubtful about finding "pure" examples of the race in America. But Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, who had given two papers in Charleston, encouraged Agassiz to visit the plantations around Columbia. Gibbes, the son of a prominent South Carolina family, was a close friend of many of the leading plantation owners, including such families as the Hamptons, the Hammonds, and the Taylors. He was also Columbia's foremost authority on science and culture. He was a nationally recognized expert on American paleontology and, like Agassiz, an obsessive collector of scientific specimens.

Whatever Agassiz may have thought about the racial status of Africans as he wrote out his lectures in Boston, his attitude was radically transformed once he witnessed the real-life situation of African-American slaves in Columbia, South Carolina. There, he encountered a tiny caste of aristocratic white slaveowners who commanded vast plantations (Wade Hampton's alone was more than 18,000 acres) and owned as many as 3,000 slaves. In 1850 the white population of Columbia was just over 6,000, whereas the slave population was in excess of 100,000. Given this huge disparity, upcountry plantation owners were justifiably fearful of slave uprisings and used a variety of fear-inducing tactics to ensure docility. Thus, if attitudes toward slaves were more tolerant, even paternalistic, in Massachusetts or even Virginia, in South Carolina discipline was deemed necessary, and the need for discipline seemed to encourage an attitude of contempt toward slaves.

How Agassiz hit upon the idea of photographing the slaves is not fully known. The idea may have come from Morton,

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who had given Agassiz a daguerreotype of a young African boy he had exhibited before the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. Or, Agassiz may have been familiar with various calls in contemporary European scientific journals for the creation of a photographic archive of human specimens, or types. For instance, Agassiz's colleague Étienne-Reynaud-Augustin Serres, a professor of comparative anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes and the president of the Academy of Sciences in Paris, had proposed the establishment of a museum of photographs of the races of mankind. And, in 1845, a French daguerreotypist named E. Thiessson had taken studies of Brazilians and Portuguese Africans in Lisbon. But there was no precedent in America for the type of photographic collection that Agassiz sought to build.

In a letter to Morton, Gibbes explained that during a tour of plantations around Columbia, Agassiz had selected various slaves to be photographed: "Agassiz was delighted with his examination of Ebo, Foulah, Gullah, Guinea, Coromantee, Mandingo, and Congo Negroes. He found enough to satisfy him that they have differences from the other races." After Agassiz departed, Gibbes had the slaves brought to the local daguerreotypist, Joseph T. Zealy, and photographed. Gibbes carefully recorded the names, African origins, and current ownership of the slaves. In June 1850 Gibbes wrote to Morton, saying, "I have just finished the daguerreotypes for Agassiz of native Africans of various tribes. I wish you could see them."

Professor Louis Agassiz, 1874

The 15 daguerreotypes are divided into two series. The first consists of standing, fully nude images showing front, side, and rear views. This practice reflected a physiognomic approach, an attempt to record body shape, proportions, and posture. The second series was more tightly focused, showing the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women. This series adhered to a phrenological approach, emphasizing the character and shape of the head.

In nineteenth-century anthropology, blacks were often situated along the evolutionary ladder midway between a classical ideal and the orangutan. From these pseudoscientific studies a Negro type emerged that was highly distorted and almost unique to ethnographic illustration. In comparing various skulls, taxonomists often relied on the device of the facial angle. This technique, invented by the eighteenth-century Dutch taxonomist Peter Camper, involved the systematic evaluation of the profile measurement from the tip of the forehead to the greatest protrusion of the lips. For Camper and others, the mathematical capability of scientifically classifying such information offered a new tool for the investigation of evolution, or linear development. Camper described his project: "I observed that a line drawn along the forehead and upper lip indicated a difference in national physiognomy. . . . When I made these lines incline forwards, I obtained the face of an antique; backwards of a negroe; still more backwards, the lines which mark an ape, a dog, a snipe, &c." Representations of the facial angle of the Negro skull almost always showed an abnormally pronounced brow, protruding lips and teeth, and a back-sloping forehead. Curiously, these "scientific" representations preceded most of the more familiar stereotypes and derogatory images of African Americans in popular culture. The popular images built on the scientific ones and enhanced or exaggerated distortions of the black body. The subject's clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded,

Photo: Carleton Watkins portrait of Louis Agassiz, circa 1874, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

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or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor. Moreover, many of the exposed and attacked bodies were shown in explicitly erotic poses, raising the question of how these largely proslavery images functioned as a type of pornography.

It is perhaps not coincidental that by their unprecedented nudity, the slave daguerreotypes intersect with pornography, that other regime of photography so central to the 1850s (at least in Europe) and so exclusively concerned with the representation of the tactile surface of the human body. While there is no absolute connection between photographs of the nude body and pornography, the vaguely eroticized nature of the slave daguerreotypes derives from the unwavering, voyeuristic manner with which they indiscriminately survey the bodies of the Africans, irrespective of the subjects' lives.

"The various races of mankind were well marked and distinct and did not originate from a common center nor a common pair."

— Louis Agassiz, 1850

Agassiz was undoubtedly influenced in this regard by his great mentor, Baron Cuvier, who took a particular — if not perverse — interest in the Hottentot Venus, an African woman who was exhibited naked as a curiosity in Europe because of her unusually prominent posterior. After her death, Cuvier conducted an autopsy of her body and published a text about its distinguishing features. The case of the Hottentot Venus marked the collapse of scientific investigation of the racial other into the realm of the pornographic. This sort of elision of the exotic and the sexually illicit explains in part the mid-nineteenth-century fascination with distorting the features of blacks in popular representations. In many texts (including Agassiz's letter to his mother), blacks were made not only animal-like or simian, but also vulgar and overtly seductive. Like all representations of difference, Louis Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes exploit the familiar ethnographic convention of introducing the comfortable white viewer to that which is not only exotic and safely distant, but also generally and deliberately invisible. But not all designations of difference are the same. As Frederick Douglass noted in a review of the work of the American School of Ethnology in 1854:

"It is fashionable now, in our land, to exaggerate the differences between the negro and the European. If, for instance, a phrenologist or naturalist undertakes to represent in portraits, the difference between the two races — the negro and the European — he will invariably present the *highest* type of the European, and the *lowest* type of the negro. . . . If the very best type of the European is always presented, I insist that *justice*, in all such works, demands that the very best type of the negro should be taken. The importance of this criticism may not be apparent to all — to the black man it is very apparent."

As Douglass so pointedly noted, the meaning of representations is governed not only by who makes the image but also by who looks. If this view accords with much recent critical theory that acknowledges the role of the observer in constructing knowledge, it also points to the part that museums and archives play in fixing meanings. By adhering to immutable versions of historical truth, such institutions structure information according to ideologically inflected principles. But rather than dismissing or rejecting these institutions, it is important to critically examine their practices and to recognize that their versions of history are not absolute. Such critical methods will help foster multiplicity, subjectivity, and relativity in the construction of histories.

In the case of the slave daguerreotypes, this suggests that their meaning extends well beyond the empirical proof that Louis Agassiz sought. Quite different — but no less valid — histories and personal meanings can be connected with these images. If colonialism and ethnographic exploitation depend on appropriation, one must acknowledge that what is taken can always be taken back. In 1991, for example, the African-American artist and photographer Carrie Mae Weems journeyed to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina to record the remnants of the culture of the Gullah, the survivors of slaves from Africa. Weems photographed brick shelters and other surviving records of the Gullah, producing a series of works that combined texts, narratives, photographs, and plates. Among the images incorporated into Weems' works were old pictures of several slaves who had come from Africa — reproductions of Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes. She did not alter or transform the images; she only selected, enlarged, and recontextualized them. By placing them beside pictures of remnants of the African culture the Gullah brought to America, Weems viewed their lives empathetically from a black point of view. She saw these men and women not as representatives of some typology but as living, breathing ancestors. She made them portraits. JBHE

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