A Freakish Whiteness: The Circassian Lady and the Caucasian Fantasy

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When I first stumbled across the photograph reproduced below, over fifteen years ago at an antique show, it struck me as ludicrous, inexplicable, and yet also somehow haunting. Perhaps it was the juxtaposition of the young woman's abstracted gaze with the absurdly wild mass of hair flaming around her head. I found a name, inscribed in pencil more than 130 years ago on the back of the photograph, "Zublia Aggolia," and a title, "Circassian Lady." Even today, I still know nothing about Zublia herself apart from her name, and even that is not what it seems. Despite that, her portrait has taken me down a path of discovery whose connections I would have never guessed.

Figure 1: Moore Brothers, "Zublia Aggolia," carte-de-visite, front and reverse (circa 1870), collection of the author.

[1] Updated April 19, 2013, adding everything after "But don't we now have a choice?" Minor corrections made on May 22, 2013. Updated on July 7, 2013, to include a discussion of the essay "Has 'Caucasian' Lost Its Meaning?" by Shaila Dewan. Updated on February 8, 2014, to discuss recent efforts by the Circassian community to protest the Circassian genocide and the hosting, by Russia, of the Olympic Games in Sochi, the site of the Circassians' final defeat and mass deportation in 1864.

Not that I am the first to learn about these portraits of women like Zublia; scholars such as Linda Frost have cleared the path to make sense of them in a much broader nineteenth-century context of gender and racial representation. What I know now is that the woman depicted here fits the model of a kind of performed personality dubbed the "Circassian Lady" or the "Circassian Beauty" in mid-nineteenth-century America. What I learned about what is essentially a circus identity I find fascinating because of what it tells us about how nineteenth-century Americans treated race, even the white race, as a spectacle, as a performed identity that might not be what it seemed. As a type, the Circassian Lady became quite familiar in the United States, especially after the mid-1860s, when various performers in circus sideshows began playing this role. "Zublia Aggolia" was almost certainly a stage name, given that probably none of the women performing this part were actual Circassians, a people from the Caucasus region in what is now modern Russia.

Why the "Circassian Lady" as the title for this particular type of circus performer? The fact is that the "Circassian Lady" or the "Circassian Beauty" was a staple of nineteenth-century sideshows, but not the "Circassian Gentleman." With the occasional exception of a "Circassian" child (see illustration below), all the photographs we find of sideshow Circassians are of women. Why?

Figure 2: Maker unknown, "Circassian" child, carte-de-visite (circa 1865), collection of the author.

The first thing to consider is the designation "Circassian" itself. Circassia is a mountainous region on the northeast shore of the Black Sea in the Caucasus (see the map below, with the close-up of Circassia in green).

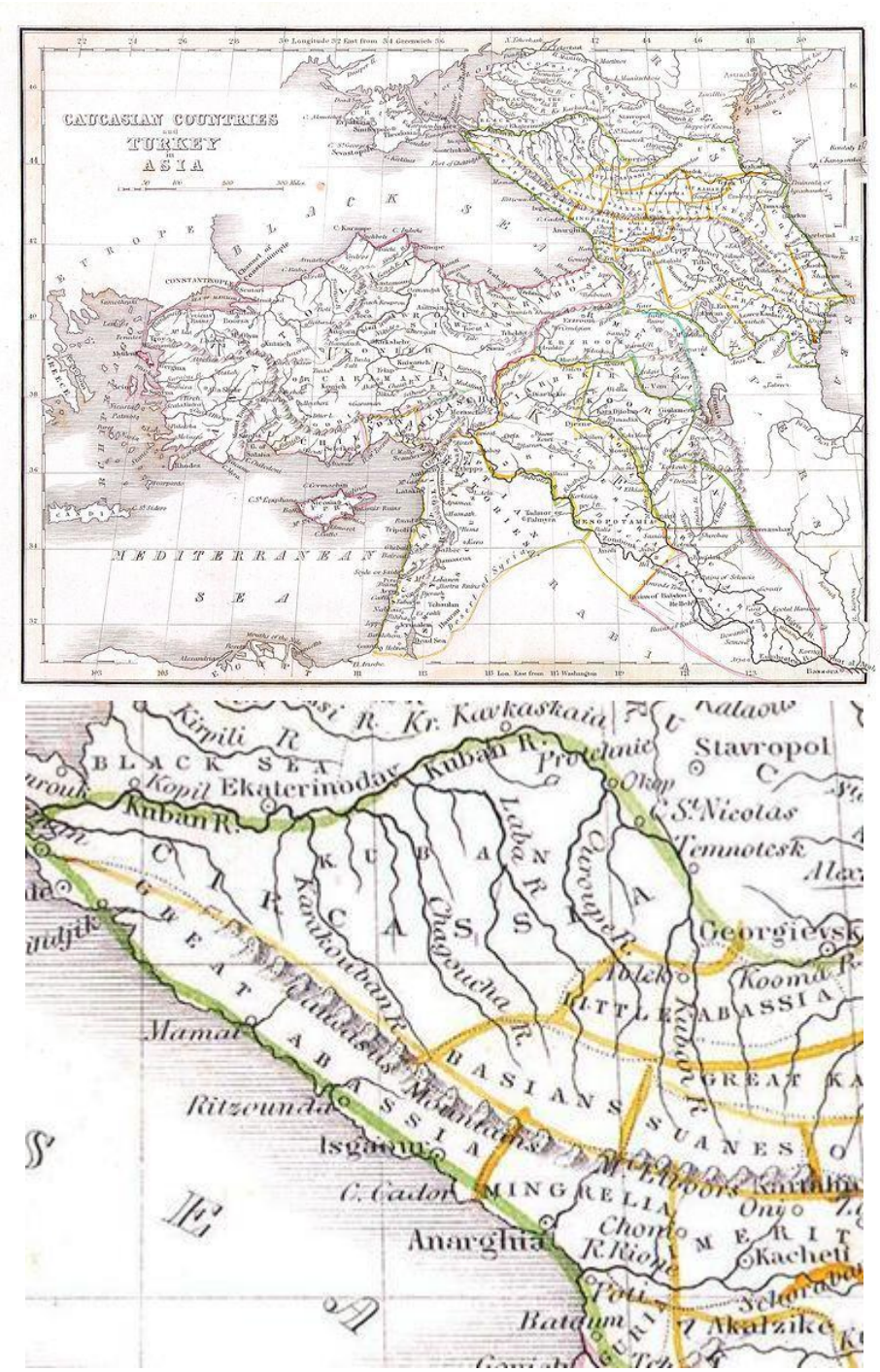

Figure 3: Thomas Gamaliel Bradford, "Map of Caucasian Countries and Turkey in Asia" (1835), Wikipedia Commons.

When Zublia's photograph was taken, around 1870, Circassia had long been a battleground between the Russians to its north and the Turks of the Ottoman Empire to the south, after Russia invaded the Caucasus, starting in the late eighteenth century. The Circassians were

finally defeated in 1864, and the Russians brutally dispersed hundreds of thousands of them from their native land. It is a cruelly ironic twist of history that the "Circassian Lady" became an invented trope of circus spectacle in the United States at precisely the time that the actual Circassians were suffering ethnic cleansing in their homeland—by some estimates, over six hundred thousand Circassians died in the Russian campaign to expel them from the region. That irony has resonance even now. In 2014, the Circassian diaspora across the world sought to use the hosting of the Olympic Games in Sochi, where the Russians celebrated their victory over the Circassians in 1864, as an opportunity to protest the 150th anniversary of what some have called the first genocide in modern European history.

Figure 4: Circassians commemorate the banishment of the Circassians from Russia in Taksim, Istanbul. Wikimedia Commons.

It is all the more remarkable then that for nearly a century before their conquest and dispersal, the Circassians had been an object of European fascination. In 1775, the German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840) published On the Natural Variety of Mankind, a work that became one of the most influential texts in the emerging European science of race. Blumenbach was a specialist in comparative anatomy, and he initiated the division of human beings into five distinct "races" defined by region and color: the Caucasian or "white" race, the Mongolian or "yellow" race, the Malayan or "brown" race, the Ethiopian or "black" race, and the American or "red" race.

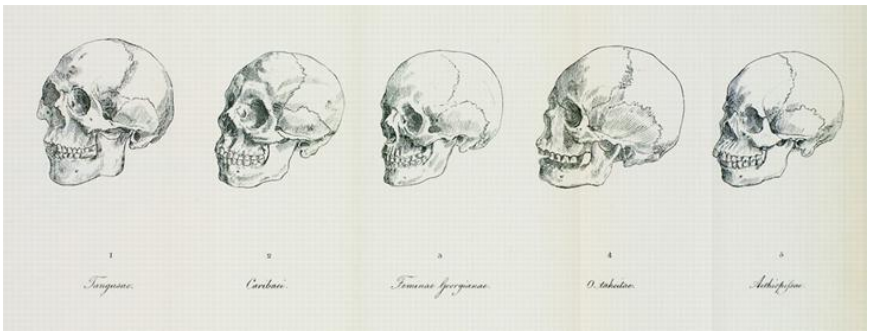

Figure 5: Illustrations of the skulls of the five races, from On the Natural Variety of Mankind. *Wikimedia Commons. The middle skull is labeled* feminae Georgianae, *Georgian female, "Georgian" being another name for Caucasian.*

It is a testimony to the influence of Blumenbach that we still use the term "Caucasian" to signify "white" people, and of course the color scheme of white, yellow, brown, black, and red still has currency, too, although in altered forms. This is the case despite the fact that contemporary biological science has completely discredited Blumenbach's theory of the origins and categories of human beings.

According to Blumenbach, the white race originated in the Caucasus region, and all other human races derived from this original source as degenerations of the Caucasian, the highest type. Here is the full context from Blumenbach's *On the Natural Variety of Mankind:*

> *Caucasian variety*. I have taken the name of this variety from Mount Caucasus, both because its neighborhood, and especially its southern slope, produces the most beautiful race of men, I mean the Georgian (fn 1); and because all physiological reasons converge to this, that in that region, if anywhere, it seems we ought with the greatest probability to place the autochthones of mankind. For in the first place, that stock displays, as we have seen (s. 62), the most beautiful form of the skull, from which, as from a mean and primeval type, the others diverge by most easy gradations on both sides to the two ultimate extremes (that is, on the one side the Mongolian, on the other the Ethiopian). Besides, it is white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind, since, as we have shown above (s. 45), it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white, when the secretion of precipitation of this carbonaceous pigment (s. 44) has once deeply struck root.

Blumenbach adds this footnote to the word "Georgian" in the passage above:

> From a cloud of eye-witnesses it is enough to quote a classical one, Jo. Chardin, T. I. p. m. 171."The blood of Georgia is the best of the East, and perhaps in the world. I have not observed a single ugly face in that country, in either sex; but I have seen angelical ones. Nature has there lavished upon the women beauties which are not to be seen elsewhere. I consider it to be impossible to look at them without loving them. It would be impossible to paint more charming visages, or better figures, than those of the Georgians"
> (Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, 269).

In Blumenbach's racial typology, then, the purest, most original "white" people came from the Caucasus region. Already in his 1775 text, Blumenbach specifically identified the Circassian women among the peoples of the Caucasus as the single most beautiful representatives of this pure and primordial "Caucasian" type: "Take, of all who bear the name of man, a man and a woman most widely different from each other; let the one be a most beautiful Circassian woman and the other an African born in Guinea, as black and ugly as possible" (Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treatises*, 363). In this passage, Blumenbach is discussing the fact that all human beings form part of the same species, because they can reproduce together, despite the external differences of appearance. But his offhand valorization of the Circassian woman as the ideal of whiteness and the Guinean man as the anti-ideal of blackness could not be more evident; while he holds that they form part of the same species, he clearly considers the Guinean man a devolution from the Circassian type, itself supposedly the most perfect form of the Caucasian.

One hundred years later, around 1870, this identification of the Circassian and Caucasian as the most perfect representatives of whiteness had taken hold of the public imagination in the United States. The image below presents a woman of the "Circassian" style who is labeled a "Caucasian"; bear in mind that all these titles are fictions applied to a person performing an imagined type:

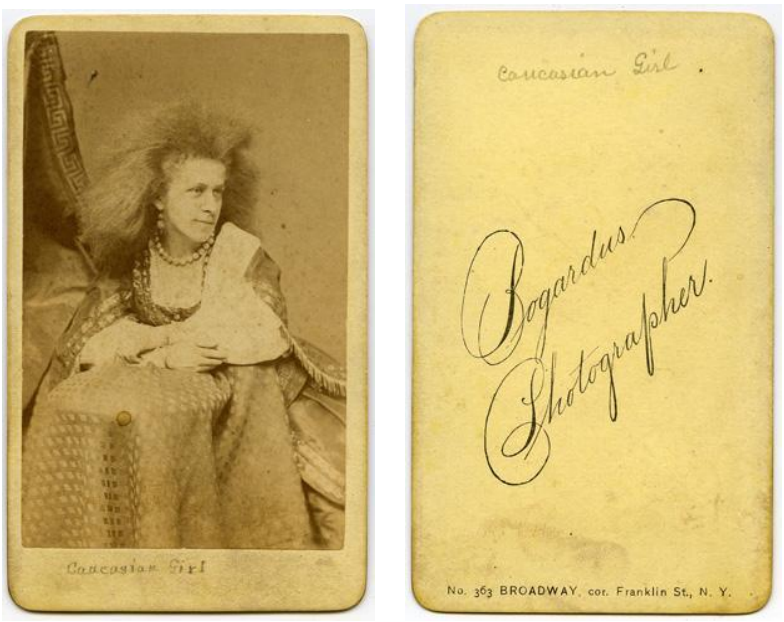

Figure 6: Abraham Bogardus, "Caucasian Girl," carte-de-viste, front and reverse (circa 1865), collection of the author.

Apart from the influence of the new science of race, another cause for this fascination with Circassians was that, starting in the mid-1700s, it had become a matter of dramatic and romantic lore that beautiful Circassian women were being sold in the slave markets of Istanbul and throughout the Ottoman Empire, to serve in the harems of the sultan and other potentates as the most desirable beauties of the realm. Lord Byron's epic poem, Don Juan (1818–1824), contains this telling passage (Canto IV, verses 114 and 115) about a slave market in Istanbul:

But to the narrative:—The vessel bound

With slaves to sell off in the capital,

After the usual process, might be found

At anchor under the seraglio wall;

Her cargo, from the plague being safe and sound,

Were landed in the market, one and all,

And there with Georgians, Russians, and Circassians,

Bought up for different purposes and passions.

Some went off dearly; fifteen hundred dollars

For one Circassian, a sweet girl, were given,

Warranted virgin; beauty's brightest colours

Had deck'd her out in all the hues of heaven:

Her sale sent home some disappointed bawlers,

Who bade on till the hundreds reach'd eleven;

But when the offer went beyond, they knew

'T was for the Sultan, and at once withdrew.

The legend of the white "Circassian Beauty" being sold into sexual slavery had taken on such a life of its own that in the early 1860s P. T. Barnum, the great American showman and promoter of hokum, conceived the idea of buying a Circassian woman out of captivity in Turkey to exhibit in his wildly successful American Museum in New York City. In a letter of May 1864, Barnum authorized his agent, John Greenwood Jr., to spend up to $5,000 in gold each (a vast sum in that day) for two Circassian beauties if Greenwood could successfully infiltrate the slave markets of Istanbul to buy them without being detected as a Westerner.

Greenwood failed in his attempt, but that did not stop Barnum, who had no qualms about finding someone who could "pass" as Circassian to put on exhibition along with other remarkable individuals in his sideshow, such as Tom Thumb. Later in 1864, Barnum put on show someone he dubbed "Zalumma Agra" ("Star of the East"), a young woman who had come to his operation seeking work whom he dressed up in the invented costume that became the model for the "Circassian Ladies" who subsequently sprang up in circus sideshows all over the country. Zalumma was the first of several "Circassians" in Barnum's shows, and even her name was his invention. The gallery below presents several views of Zalumma (with the name variously spelled); a portrait of another of Barnum's Circassians, Zoe Meleke (a made-up name again); and a group portrait of the "freaks" in Barnum's Circus; note that all are white, including the "whitest" of the white, albinos:

Figure 7: H.R: Doane, "Zaluma Agra, Star of the East," cartes-de-visite, two views (circa 1865), collection of Greg French.

Figure 8: E. & H. T. Anthony, "Zaluma Agra, The Star of the East, Now on exhibition at Barnum's Museum" cartes-de-visite, front and reverse, collection of Greg French (left) and the author (right). The US Internal Revenue stamps on the back of each image were required on photographs by law, from August 1864 to August 1866, to raise funds for the Civil War. Each is canceled with a stamp that reads "Barnum's Museum" and dated April 26, 1866 (left) and December 5, 1865 (right).

Figure 9: Maker unknown, inscribed on reverse "Zoe Meleke, Circassian Lady, Born in Asia Minor," carte-de-visite, front and reverse (circa 1865), collection of Greg French.

ZURUBY HANNUM, } Circassian
ZULUMMA AGRA } Girls.

ANNA SWAN, Nova Scotia Giantess, 8 feet 1 in. high.
AMOS, Albino Boy.

MISS LIZZIE READ, Miniature Lady, 22 years old, 33 in. high, weighing 25 lbs.

COL. NOAH ORR, Ohio Giant, 22 years old, 8 feet 3 in. high, weighing 550 lbs.

JOHN BATTER-BY, Living Skeleton, weighing 69 lbs.

HANNAH BATTERSBY (his wife), mammoth fat woman weighing 702 lbs.

GENL. GRANT, JR., Smallest man living, 14 years old, 23 in. high, weighing 18 lbs.

ANDREW HUREN, Norwegian Giant, 8 ft. high.

CHARLES GORHEN, Albino man.

All at Barnum's Museum.

Figure 10: Maker unknown, Barnum's Circus, carte-de-visite, front and reverse (circa 1865), collection of Greg French.

And so Barnum invented the "Circassian Lady," or sometimes the "Circassian Beauty," as a sideshow performer of a particular kind. The type included a number of key features: the woman must be pretty, or even beautiful, by Victorian standards; she would wear exotic clothing, generally more revealing than that worn by European and American woman of that era; she might display striking jewelry and other ornaments, such as strings of pearls or richly embroidered clothes. And the most telling feature of all: the big hair. This extraordinary hairdo was entirely Barnum's invention, but it stuck as one of the defining markers of the "Circassian" woman, no matter what circus or sideshow put a Circassian performer on the stage: a huge mass of hair, washed in beer and teased to a frizzy cloud resembling what might remind someone today of an Afro from the 1960s or 1970s. What is especially ironic is the tax stamp on the back of the portrait of Zulumma Agra: these stamps raised revenues for the Federal troops fighting in the Civil War, and yet the image traded in part on their titillating suggestion of white women sold into slavery. It is worth underlining that this costume and hair had nothing to do with how actual Circassian women looked, as the illustrations below indicate.

Figure 11: Maker unknown, Circassian wife and husband, albumen photograph (circa 1865).

Figure 12: Edmund Spencer, Circassian Lady (1855), Wikipedia Commons.

The carte-de-visite of Zublia Aggolia displays the prevalent features of a "Circassian" portrait. Cards like this were sold at circuses and shows and by promoters, the profits shared by the performers and the show owners. She wears a jeweled crucifix and pearl-studded, low-cut dress, and the characteristic hairstyle is unmistakable.

So now we are in a better position to answer our question: Why "Circassian Ladies" but not "Circassian Gentlemen"?

As Linda Frost has suggested, the "Circassian" woman occupied a very peculiar place in the nineteenth-century imagination, a place that challenged the dominant classifications of race, gender, and sexuality. Because this strange position enticed nineteenth-century viewers to transgress these categories, at least in their imaginations while viewing the sideshow or in private while gazing at a photographic portrait, the natural place for this kind of performance was the strange and yet protected and circumscribed space of the freak show, pioneered so effectively by P. T. Barnum himself.

First of all, we have to take into account that the myth of the Circassian included several intersecting elements of overwhelming interest, if not fixation, for nineteenth-century white Americans: race, slavery, and ideals of feminine virtue, beauty, and sexuality. Add to this heady brew the tincture of *Orientalism* that Edward Said has dissected as a feature of European colonial imagination, and we have in the Circassian Lady an archetype at the intersection of multiple Victorian obsessions, however covert. The Orientalist fantasy, especially the imagining of the harem and the seraglio, allowed Europeans and Americans to project their subterranean prurience onto a safely distant world.

The legend of the Circassian woman involved a provocative component for white Americans: the idea that the Circassians were the most primordial form of the white race, and therefore also the purest and most beautiful exemplars of whiteness, especially their women; yet at the same time, these Circassian women were subject to the slave trade of the Ottoman Empire. The idea that a white woman might be sold into slavery, and especially sold into a slavery that marked her as a sexual object in a potentate's harem, was a matter of both moral horror and transgressive fascination to the white imagination.

That potent combination of horror and fascination was evident at least as early as the display of Hiram Powers's statue The Greek Slave at the Great Exhibition in London in 1845 and then again in 1851. Powers was an American sculptor who worked in Florence, and his depiction of a white woman, stripped naked with only chains covering her genitals, about to be sold in a Turkish slave market, created a sensation as well as a tremendous controversy because of her nudity, which Powers intended as an ideal form, a symbol of her pure Christian virtue in the face of heathen subjugation.

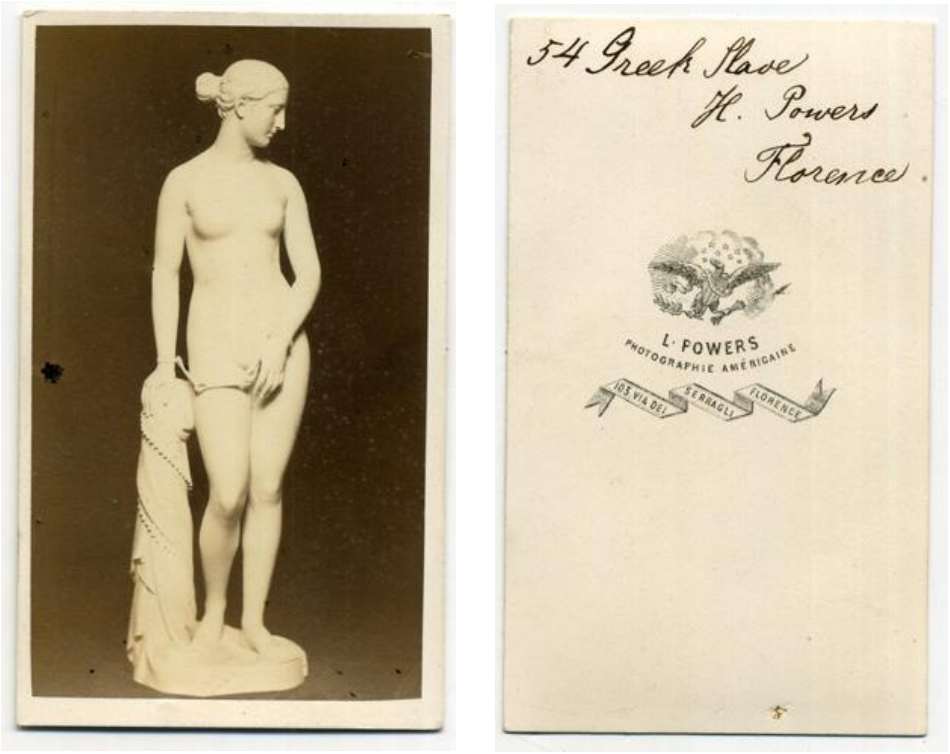

Figure 13: L. Powers, The Greek Slave *by Hiram Powers, carte-de-visite (circa 1865), front and reverse, collection of Greg French.*

Greece was on the public's mind at the time, especially the minds of romantics and idealists, for the country had fought a successful war of independence from the Ottoman Empire from 1821 to 1830. Europeans had sympathized with Greece not only for its being the font of Western civilization and its ideal of freedom but also for its resistance as a Christian nation against the Muslim Ottomans. As such, Greece became a symbol of republican liberty against corrupt tyranny. Of course, back in Powers's American homeland, what was most on the public's mind when the sculpture went on tour there was the Compromise of 1850, including the Fugitive Slave Act. In the American context, that meant that human beings seeking to escape from their own form of very real enslavement could expect their liberty to be respected nowhere in the nation, not even in the supposedly free states of the North. If the interlocking themes of slavery, whiteness, Christianity, and freedom in Powers's Greek Slave resonated so deeply in the United States, it was because it hit home as a kind of portrait in racial negative of the tightening noose of slavery at home. The statue sealed Powers's fame, despite the debates that the statue aroused.

Indeed, arousal was precisely the point of contention. Powers insisted that the nakedness depicted was not offensive but rather elevating, that it was no incitement to lust but rather an instance of what he called an "ideal type," a form that transcends the human body and symbolizes pure principles of human virtue. In the case of The Greek Slave, he meant to portray a white Christian woman facing a terrible fate with faith, modesty, and fortitude. But

there was no mistaking the meaning of that fate, even then: as a slave, her body would be at the disposal of her buyer, and it was precisely this fact that would be staring the statue's viewers in the face as they stared, in turn, at her white granite body—or the many photographic reproductions of that body.

The idea of a woman being at the sexual mercy of her owner was not foreign to the imagination of the white public at the time in the United States, but Powers's statue of a naked white woman alluded only indirectly (and perhaps for that reason in the only way then publicly possible) to the fate of many enslaved black women: it was a well-known but largely unspoken fact that slave owners in the United States often entered into sexual relationships with their enslaved women, relationships that involved a range of coercion, almost all of which we would classify as rape today. Thomas Jefferson himself had sired children with his slave Sally Hemings, herself the child of an enslaved mother and a white master—and the half sister of Jefferson's deceased wife. Whatever we might say about the complexities of their particular relationship, mass rape was a defining feature of the history of slavery in the United States.

As another example, in 1868, the English sculptor John Bell produced a sculpture entitled The Octoroon. Clearly influenced by Powers's *The Greek Slave*, Bell's statue depicts an octoroon, that is, a person of one-eighth African ancestry, as a naked woman in shackles, perhaps awaiting the auction block, her modesty protected only by her inordinately long hair. It is worth underlining this use of hair as a marker of forbidden sexuality, for it turns up again with the Circassian Ladies, but in a more subtle form. Photographic reproductions of Bell's statue circulated on stereoview cards in the United States (see below), which allowed viewers to get a three-dimensional sense of the figure.

Figure 14: Maker unknown, The Octoroon by John Bell, stereoview card (circa 1870), collection of the author. Note: It is possible for some viewers to see this image in 3-D. To try this yourself, allow

your eyes to cross slightly, creating two images in your field of vision; then allow the images to align so that the right frame of one and the left frame of the other superimpose, presenting a 3-D image.

This theme replicated itself in fiction, too. For example, in 1859, a play by Dion Boucicault called The Octoroon opened in London. The play tells the story of Zoe, the octoroon of the title. Zoe looks white and lives free on a plantation in the American South. The white nephew of the plantation owner falls in love with Zoe and seeks to marry her, even after she tells him the truth of her ancestry. In the British version, they do marry, despite the taboo (and the laws) against miscegenation, and they live out their lives together, but not before fending off another man who attempts to see her enslaved as a declared black woman so that he can buy her as his own mistress. The play was a huge hit in England, but when it came to the United States, the ending changed: there is no marriage, and Zoe dies along with her lover in a final fiery cataclysm. For an American audience both morbidly fascinated and panicked by the prospect of race mixing, transgression of the taboo could go only so far before being sealed with disaster.

The supposedly scientifically established purity of the Circassian Ladies' whiteness played on a white audience's need for reassurance about its identity in a world where octoroons like Zoe might dare to cross the color line. And yet the image of the Circassian Lady played into an already well-established, if illicit and subversive, fantasy of white women (or at least a white-seeming woman) subjected as slaves to the sexual whims of real or potential owners; after all, the sideshow allure of the Circassian Beauties was that they might well have ended up as slaves in a harem. This was an explosive idea because it raised questions about the assumptions that white people in the United States might have held about the supposedly natural inviolability of the white race when it came to both submitting to slavery and surrendering sexual virtue: here were white women, supposedly from the stock of the purest and most beautiful white women in the world, who were nevertheless no longer able to enjoy the certainty of freedom to which their race, at least in the United States, would have entitled them. Whiteness, then, might be seen as no longer a guarantee of liberty and mastery, and so the prospect of the Circassian Lady offered the subtle thrills of danger and ambiguity. Even more subversively, the very idea of white women as sexual slaves must have presented a titillating object to the imagination, at least for white men. "The Circassian Lady" therefore literally embodied a taboo.

This last point helps to explain the costume of the Circassian Ladies in the sideshow: their outfits were inventions, having nothing to do with the actual clothing of women from the Caucasus region. What the "Circassian" costume did do was invoke a certain Orientalism, a hint of the harem and the seraglio. It offered the viewer an opportunity to view, and stare at, a sexualized white woman and to imagine her possible fate as a slave were she not "spared" it by appearing in the sideshow. (Although we must remember that this was a fantasy: the "Circassian Ladies" were performers playing a part.) The costume did much to accent both

exoticism and sexuality by using strange cuts, fabrics, jewelry, and embroidery, and often by exposing arms, legs, and busts in ways that would otherwise have been out of bounds for a white Victorian woman. How intentional this exposure was is evident in the portrait of Zublia Aggolia: in high magnification, one can see that the photographer has retouched the negative to accentuate the cleavage of her bust—something that would never occur in an ordinary portrait of a Victorian "lady." But at the same time, at her throat, just above the bust, hanging like a protective talisman, lies a large, ornate crucifix, an item common to Circassian portraits. The crucifix also shows up in Powers's statue *The Greek Slave*, where it can be seen, along with her removed clothes, just beneath her hand on the post on which she leans. As with Powers's Greek slave, the presumed Christian faith of the Circassian Beauty puts into play another paradox: the sexualized Other who is nevertheless both contained and made virtuous by her deep faith, despite her terrible fate.

The charged ambiguity of the Circassian Beauty, straddling sexual transgression and religious transcendence, marks this type of person with a certain mystical value grounded in her freakish whiteness. Symbolic and only barely covert sexualization seems to have thrived in the liminal space of the sideshow freaks, as in this portrait of a snake charmer:

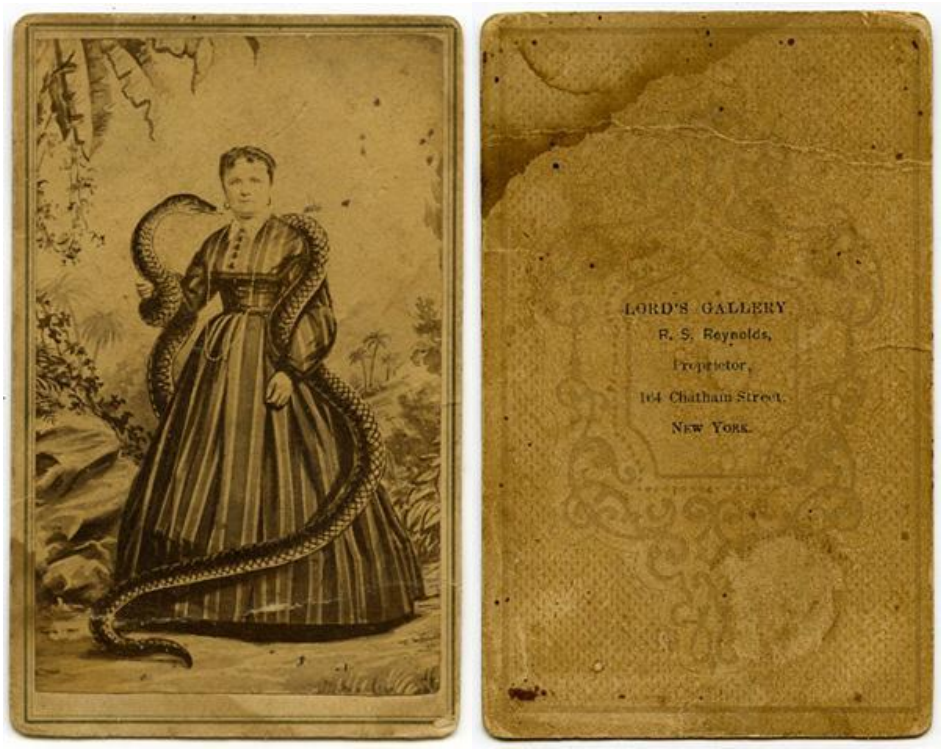

Figure 15: R. S. Reynolds, subject unknown (snake charmer), carte-de-visite, front and reverse (circa 1865), collection of the author; this image is a composite, formed from a photograph and ink drawing, and rephotographed for reproduction and sale; note the combination of exotic, tropical location with a lady clothed in the (rather out-of-place!) garments of a respectable whiteness.

The mystical symbolism of a freakish whiteness seems to have been even more accentuated in the case of some albinos, the "whitest" persons of all, who adopted the cachet of mysterious powers, such as mind reading, as a feature of their sideshow acts:

Figure 16: Obermüller and Kern, "Miss Millie La Mar, Mind Reader," cabinet card (circa 1890), collection of the author.

This comes full circle in the portrait below of Aggie Zolutia, representing the highest possible pitch of a fetishized whiteness: an albino Circassian. Aggie also wears the crucifix, just above a low neckline, and she seems to relish the pose of this persona, playing it with conscious irony by mimicking the actual pose of the small bronze shepherdess on the table beside her. What might be particularly striking to the modern viewer, again, is the big hair, which looks so much like the "Afro" of the late 1960s and 1970s, then as much symbol of Black Power as a fashion statement.

Figure 17: Maker unknown, Aggie Zolutia, carte-de-visite (circa 1875), collection of Steven Bolin.

It is not merely arbitrary to compare the Circassian hairstyle and the Afro. We have to remember that the explosion of frizzed hair in the portraits of "Circassian" women was an entirely artificial effect, both cosmetically and culturally: it had to be created with beer shampoo and teasing comb; it had nothing to do with how actual Circassian women wore their hair. All the more remarkable is that the Afro of the 1960s was to a large extent a symbol of rebellion against the norm then for many blacks, namely, straightening the hair to look more "white"; with the Circassians, we have a nearly reverse effect: frizzing the hair to appear more other, while still remaining identifiably white. The untamed hair evoked exoticism; it served as a marker that this woman, who otherwise appeared entirely white, was in fact something Other. Other features suggested this Otherness, such as the clothing. There is also the fact that so many "Circassian" women's stage names began with "Z": the letter itself is largely foreign to English and American names—almost none begin with it. Also peculiar is how many of the "Circassians" have names beginning with a combination of "Z" and "A" or "A" and "Z"—Zublia Aggolia, Zalumma Agra, Aggie Zolutia—as if they were the alpha and omega of whiteness. Furthermore, white viewers would have had one very striking point of comparison for supposedly outlandish frizzy hair: this was the hair

texture they would attribute to black people. This is confirmed by the portrayal of other "types" in the circus sideshows of the period, such as this "Egyptian" (another performed persona):

Figure 18: Charles Eisenmann, "Zumiya the Egyptian, Age 20," carte-de-visite, front and reverse (circa 1870s), collection of Greg French.

So here we land in yet another seeming paradox: the putatively purest, most primordial, most beautiful form of the white race, the Circassian, is constructed to share, however subtly, its signature feature—a wild mane of hair—with Africans. In this way, the purest "white" is made an Other—by associating it, however subconsciously, with white Americans' physiological stereotypes about blacks. And we can account for this by connecting the dots: both African slaves and Circassian slaves were subject to sexual exploitation, even if the latter were supposedly rescued from that fate, and this is the point of contact that played so powerfully on white Americans' imagination: wildness, even a contained and constrained wildness, suggested that the sexual exploitation was in some sense natural to the enslaved women's own instincts, character, and desires. African women were routinely portrayed as sexually lascivious, and therefore in some sense willing and complicit in their sexual exploitation. Surely that is part of what was so titillating to the white male viewer of the Circassian Beauty as a type: her narrowly avoided fate as a harem slave, her strange clothes,

her exposed flesh, her half-mad hair all indicate an uninhibited, if publicly exposed, even forced, sexuality.

And yet, at the same time, because the Circassian was thought to be the purest, most primordial exemplar of the white race, that may have led the white viewer to yet another thought: that the sexual fate and the sexual proclivities of the "Circassian Lady" (no true "lady" by Victorian standards because of these very proclivities) might just as well be those of any given "American Lady," who must be, after all, the racial descendant of the woman on exhibit. And that, in turn, would suggest that the white American "lady" was, at bottom, in her unadorned, uncultured nature, no different from the Circassian—and so no different from the African. From there, the viewer—primarily the white male viewer—could contemplate a further question: whether the sideshow depicts an erotic truth that is or ought to be more than a sideshow in ordinary domestic life. Add to this the fact that the "Circassian Ladies" were no Circassians at all but ordinary women costumed and frizzed to "pass" for a purely invented "Circassian" type, and the ambiguities rise to an even greater height: these transgressive women were not the Other at all but the white viewers' own kind. The self as Other, and the Other as self: in this liminal zone, which one defines the meaning of whiteness, of freedom, and of acceptable sexual license?

But the very appearance of the Circassian Lady in the circus sideshow, alongside other human types designated "freaks," must have blunted all such questions. P. T. Barnum perfected the sideshow as a form of exploitation and entertainment, imitated by hundreds of carnivals and circuses throughout the nation, that allowed the visitor to depart from a customary world of limits and expectations, but only in a temporary way, and in a context that marked the experience as decisively exceptional, questionable, and quite possibly fraudulent—in a word, freakish. The very nature of the sideshow allowed the viewer to displace any genuinely discomforting questions into the realm of ambiguity, where they could then be safely bundled up and forgotten, just as we today confront our fears in the safety of a horror movie or a roller-coaster ride: as mere entertainment, a thrill to experience and then purge as at bottom unreal. Such adventures bring no lasting insight or transformation; quite the reverse, in fact: they tend to shunt a disquieting experience or question off into a limbo that has the effect of making it disappear from active reflection. Titillation should not be confused with illumination. In this sense, the sideshow served as an inoculation against genuine questions that, if given a real voice, might have unsettled the prevailing categories and assumptions of human classifications such as race and gender. The sideshow therefore only exploited the ambiguities; it never truly challenged them, and the Circassian Lady never really allowed the Victorian world to call into question the dividing lines of race, freedom, and sexual self-possession that she embodied, if only as a performance of an imaginary human type.

But don't we now have a choice? The first photograph of a Circassian Lady I found led me on a journey of inquiry whose strangeness I would never have guessed. Who would have thought that this mad explosion of hair was connected to the racial theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by way of the fun-house mirror of sideshow exploitation? Had we understood that, we might know now that Blumenbach's division of the human species into five different "colors"—with the Circassian Caucasians as the purest white, the most original and true of them all—is simply false, a fantasy of European narcissism about the pure origins of the white race. Still, we might not see how laughably absurd that white mythology is until confronted with it in the form of the Circassian Lady.

More to the point, isn't it just as absurd that now, nearly 250 years after Blumenbach, we still refer to "white" people as "Caucasians"? After all, there is no more reality to the designation "Caucasian" than there is to the frizzed hairstyle of the Circassian Ladies. In fact, the "Caucasian" label is more absurd, and more pernicious, because by now we really should know better. Why not just give up using this freakish label, whose only reality has been a staged reality, as a performed character in a circus sideshow? That would be a fitting end to a term for whiteness worn out long ago.

But can we really *choose* to give up such a term, one that is so intertwined with our history and collective ways of seeing that some of us still use the label "Caucasian" as a way of identifying ourselves and others, even when we know, or at least ought to know, that it is a fantasy? Of course, individuals may make that choice in the way they use everyday language, but that choice is made more difficult to the extent that government officials still employ "Caucasian" as a legitimate identifying label, as Shaila Dewan has pointed out in a recent essay, "Has 'Caucasian' Lost Its Meaning?," in the *New York Times:* Justice Anthony M. Kennedy saw fit to use the term in the pivotal affirmative action decision, Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin; on the very first page, in the statement of facts, Justice Kennedy describes Abigail Noel Fisher, who sued the university for discrimination, as the "Petitioner, who is Caucasian . . ." This was June of 2014. As Dewan points out, the word *Caucasian* "gives discussions of race a weird technocratic gravitas, as when the police insist that you step out of your 'vehicle' instead of your car." As her article makes clear, this pseudoscientific discourse, which makes the pretense of objective neutrality, actually masks the fact that people are uncomfortable talking about race, especially what counts as "white." This prudery about race contributes to the conceptual inertia about race in our society, because the inability to speak openly about the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of whiteness helps hold in place the "color" scheme of racial categories, with "white" its privileged and supposedly unambiguous status at the top.

The writer and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates has emphasized the potential vulnerability of such constructed concepts in an essay, "Good People, Racist People":

> Last night I had the luxury of sitting and talking with the brilliant historian Barbara Fields. One point she makes that very few Americans understand is that racism is a creation. You read Edmund Morgan's work and actually see racism being inscribed in the law and the country changing as a result.
>
> If we accept that racism is a creation, then we must then accept that it can be destroyed. And if we accept that it can be destroyed, we must then accept that it can be destroyed by us and that it likely must be destroyed by methods kin to creation. Racism was created by policy. It will likely only be ultimately destroyed by policy.

By "policy," we must understand not only the three hundred–plus years of law and governmental action that established categories of human beings fit for enslavement and other forms of oppression but also the shared conceptual and linguistic heritage that has formed the meaning of race in our world and that has worked its way into everything from everyday talk to official forms and the pronouncements of the Supreme Court. Our choices about language are never just private. They are also constrained by collective decisions, both conscious and unaware, about what things mean; as such, those decisions can mold widespread beliefs and attitudes as well as governmental policy in the narrow sense.

So can we retire not just the fantastical label "Caucasian" as a name for whiteness but also the very notion of the human divisions that constitute "whiteness" itself, as well as the whole umbrella concept of race as "color," in which "white," "black," "brown," "yellow," and "red" find their place?

While individuals may choose to refuse these labels, the sheer fact is that these categories are so deeply engraved into our ways of seeing that they are even embraced by those victimized by that history, in part precisely *because* they were victimized *as such* and by that history of race. To deny that race matters, to deny that we do see color, as Stephen Colbert often does as an act of parody, would be to deny that the history of racism has had and continues to have its profound effect; such denial would only reinforce white privilege as the default. We are caught in the Catch-22 of history: only if we acknowledge the historical and constructed meaning of race can we face up to the ongoing burden of that history in our present. We cannot just shrug off this history by individual fiat.

And yet we can combat the most absurd aspects of racial nomenclature. As a name for whiteness, "Caucasian" is among the most pernicious because of its role as a label for the purest, most original race. We can refuse to use "Caucasian" to describe people, we can point out its absurdity whenever possible, and we can insist that the government not use it in any official capacity. "Caucasian" should become odious as a name for whiteness, just as "Aryan" already is now.

In an astonishing historical irony, when the police gave their first press conference in the manhunt for the two men suspected of perpetrating the Boston Marathon bombing, an officer identified one suspect as "a light-skinned or Caucasian male." This time, though, the people in question actually *were* Caucasians: they came from the Caucasus as modern refugees from the age-old conflicts there. Perhaps it will take an event as revolting and traumatic as the Marathon bombing to finally uncouple the name "Caucasian" from whiteness and lay it to rest.

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