Mr. Hunnewell's Black Hands: Agassiz and the "Mixed Races" of Manaus

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Published May 8, 2012

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Louis Agassiz Photographic Collection. Mixed Race Series. Portrait of a racial type, unidentified man. Photographer: Walter Hunnewell. Manaus, 1865–1866. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

On October 23, 1865, the steamer *Icamiaba* pulled into the humid river port of Manaus, "carrying on board the learned scholar Agassiz and people from his party," which included a list of six "naturalists," a Brazilian engineer, a "seaman," three servants, and Madame Agassiz,

[1] A previous, shorter version of this article was published in Maria Helena P. T. Machado and Sasha Huber, eds., *(T)races of Louis Agassiz: Photography, Body, and Science, Yesterday and Today* (São Paulo: Capacete and 21st São Paulo Art Biennial, 2010), 66–71.

whose "employment was not declared."[2] Professor Agassiz had planned to use Manaus as a base for excursions into the vast network of rivers and streams to collect known and unknown fish species, but the Thayer Expedition found itself stranded in the city for well over a month, due to a shortage of alcohol, which was needed in the collecting enterprise. Agassiz was anxious to remain busy, since "being interrupted in his collections, he is making a study of the various intermixture of races, Indians and Negroes, with their crossings, of which a great number are found here." According to Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, this initiative resulted "in a very complete series of photographs . . . [p]erhaps nowhere in the world can the blending of types among men be studied so fully as in the Amazons."[3]

Located on the left bank of the Rio Negro near its confluence with the Solimões or Upper Amazon River, Manaus already had a long history of intercultural exchange when the Thayer Expedition arrived there. Founded in 1669 as a remote Portuguese fort strategically placed at the crossroads of an extensive network involving the movement of forest products and Amerindian slaves, by 1865 Manaus had blossomed into a burgeoning town of around fifteen thousand inhabitants, serving as capital of the vast and sparsely inhabited Amazonas Province. Although Amerindian diversity remained an important feature of the local population, Brazilian authorities and foreign travelers alike reported the notable presence of a mixed population, which they sought to classify in a variety of categories based on race, color, and descent. In 1840, for example, the provincial president João Antônio de Miranda calculated that of 100 individuals, only 9 were white, 26 *mameluco* (mixed offspring of white-Indian unions), 58 Indian, 4 *mestiço* (other degrees of mixture, different from first-generation *mamelucos*), and 3 slave, a category including Africans and people of mixed descent, including Afro-Indians and mulattoes. By the time of the first national census, in 1872, a total population of 17,686 fell into three overarching categories: 16.4 percent white, 12.6 percent black and *pardo* (dark-skinned *mestiços*), and 69 percent *caboclos*, a catchall category for Indians considered to be "civilized" or who were of mixed ancestry.[4]

In her account of the expedition, Elizabeth Agassiz offers many comments on "half-breeds" in the Amazon, which provide an interesting key to understanding at least part of the context surrounding the pioneer photographic undertaking under discussion here. Mrs. Agassiz provided a more human, although not necessarily more optimistic, perspective when compared to the scientific point of view that guided Professor Agassiz's negative assessment of race mixing. In one of the most revealing excerpts, she discusses one of their servants,

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[2] Arquivo Público do Estado do Amazonas (State Archives of Amazonas, Manaus, Brazil), Secretaria da Polícia, Ofícios Expedidos (Livro 2), Ofício n.787, 24 October 1865.

[3] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1868), quotes from pages 276 and 296. Most of this book was written by Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, with notes and appendices signed by her husband, the professor.

[4] Population figures in Patrícia Maria Melo Sampaio, *Os Fios de Ariadne: tipologia de fortunas e hierarquias sociais em Manaus*, 1840–1880 (Manaus: Editora da Universidade do Amazonas, 1997), 30, 42.

Alexandrina, "who, by her appearance, has a mixture of Indian and black blood in her veins. She promises very well, and seems to have the intelligence of the Indian with the greater pliability of the negro." According to the author, Alexandrina "turns out to be a valuable addition to the household, not only from a domestic, but also from a scientific point of view." Here Elizabeth Agassiz comments on Alexandrina's role in preparing fish skeletons for Professor Agassiz's collection, while also revealing paths in the forest to assist Mrs. Agassiz herself in her "botanizing excursions." But Alexandrina also proved to be interesting from a scientific point of view in another sense, noted Mrs. Agassiz, as an object of observation. "Nimble as a monkey," wrote Elizabeth Agassiz, Alexandrina "thinks nothing of climbing to the top of a tree to bring down a blossoming branch." But the main interest lay in Alexandrina's racial characteristics: *A Journey in Brazil* includes a woodcut based on a sketch by William James, portraying Mrs. Agassiz's "little house-maid."

[F]rom her mixture of Negro and Indian blood, [Alexandrina] is rather a curious illustration of the amalgamation of races here. She consented yesterday, after a good deal of coy demur, to have her portrait taken. Mr. Agassiz wanted it especially on account of her extraordinary hair, which, though it has lost its compact negro crinkle, and acquired something of the length and texture of the Indian hair, retains, nevertheless, a sort of wiry elasticity, so that, when combed out, it stands off from her head in all directions as if electrified. In the examples of negro and Indian half-breeds we have seen, the negro type seems the first to yield, as if the more facile disposition of the negro, as compared with the enduring tenacity of the Indian, showed itself in their physical as well as their mental characteristics.[5]

[5] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 235–235, 246. Alexandrina's portrait appears on p. 245.

Head of Alexandrina. Woodcut from a sketch by William James. Agassiz and Agassiz, A Journey in Brazil (Boston: Ticknor, 1868), 245.

In the notes by Louis Agassiz inserted in the paragraph that follows his wife's description of Alexandrina, we get a better feel for the project at hand. In his view, the Amazon region could only advance when populated by "a better class of whites . . . [the white population] presents the singular spectacle of a higher race receiving the impress of a lower one, of an educated class adopting the habits and sinking to the level of the savage." Drawing a comparison with other situations, Agassiz concluded: "Americans and Englishmen might be sordid in their transactions with the natives; their hands are certainly not clean in their dealings with the dark-skinned races; but they would not degrade themselves to the social level of the Indians as the Portuguese do; they would not adopt his habits."[6] This disparaging attitude lay at the foundation of Professor Agassiz's project for studying the "permanence of characteristics in different human species," adopting "the natural history method" of comparing "individuals of different kinds." With this in mind, during the expedition's prolonged stay in Manaus, Agassiz instructed Walter Hunnewell to make "a great many characteristic photographs of Indians and Negroes, and half-breeds between both these races

[6] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 247.

and the Whites." He continued: "all these portraits represent the individuals selected in three normal positions, in full face, in perfect profile, and from behind."[7]

Nearly 150 years later, the "mixed-race" photographic series produced in Manaus in November 1865 remains most impressive, not only as a pioneering effort in producing visual documentation of the local population, but also as an example of the darker side of early anthropological photography. As we shall see, the conditions surrounding the composition of these images raise serious issues concerning the consent of the models to pose nude or partially nude, and place the pictures in an uncomfortable zone between scientific and erotic photography, genres that overlapped with considerable frequency during the nineteenth century. At the same time, the poor quality of the photographs, taken by Agassiz's student Walter Hunnewell, whose equipment was unreliable and who was deficient in technical knowledge, attests to the makeshift arrangements that lend the collection a unique character.

Whether because of poor quality or poor taste—maybe both—the collection never came to press, although Agassiz expressed his plans in his appendix to *A Journey in Brazil*: "I hope sooner or later to have an opportunity of publishing these illustrations, as well as those of pure negroes made for me in Rio by Messrs. Stahl and Wahnschaffe."[8] None of the prints appeared as woodcuts in the first edition of *A Journey in Brazil*, although a few pictures of fully clothed *mameluco* (Indian-white mestizo) women were circulated in subsequent editions. But Agassiz never fulfilled his wish, and this collection settled into obscurity in a forgotten corner of the Peabody Museum, as Maria Helena P. T. Machado shows in her essay posted on this website. Even the main manuals of Brazilian photography fail to reproduce any of these images, while dedicating a few lines to Walter Hunnewell as a pioneering photographer. New information and insights on this unusual collection have come to light only recently, in studies by Nancy Stepan, who places the images within the context of picturing tropical nature, and Maria Helena P. T. Machado, who views the pictures through the eyes of William James, a most perspicacious member of the Thayer Expedition.[9]

While in Rio de Janeiro, between April and July 1865, Agassiz began to put together his photographic collection, with the services offered by German photographer Augusto Stahl, of the Stahl & Wahnschaffe photographic establishment. During that same period, Agassiz instructed one of the student collectors on the expedition, Walter Hunnewell, to learn

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[7] Agassiz, Louis, "Permanence of Characteristics in Different Human Species" in Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* Appendix V, 529.

[8] Agassiz, Louis, "Permanence of Characteristics in Different Human Species" in Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* Appendix V, 529.

[9] Stepan, Nancy Leys, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), especially Chapter 3; and Machado, Maria Helena P. T. ed., *Brazil through the Eyes of William James: Letters, Diaries, and Drawings*, 1865–1866, bilingual edition, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2006), especially the introduction, "An American Adam in the Amazonian Garden of Eden."

photography and, according to Elizabeth Agassiz, he became "quite expert to taking likenesses."[10] While the mixed-race collection includes only photographs taken in the improvised studio in Manaus, it seems reasonable to assume that Hunnewell also took photographs in other places. On August 26, 1865, when the expedition called at Santarém, on the Amazon between Belém and Manaus, Elizabeth Agassiz mentioned that Hunnewell had to stay on "to attend to the repairs of his photographing apparatus, which has met with some disasters."[11] Any other photographs, if they were indeed taken, have since been lost, although the Peabody staff recently recovered a few glass plates taken in Manaus that had strayed from the others in the collection and may well find more in the future.

Beyond the information about his participation in Agassiz's scientific journey, little has been sketched of Walter Hunnewell's biographical background.[12] Born in Boston in 1844, Hunnewell belonged to a prestigious and wealthy New England family, as his father, Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, was a prominent entrepreneur in the financial sector, with important investments in railroads. Hunnewell's father had strong business ties with Nathaniel Thayer, principal backer of Agassiz's Brazil expedition, which became known as the Thayer Expedition. Walter entered Harvard College in 1861 and along with fellow Harvard students William James and Stephen "Ren" Thayer, son of the expedition's patron, set off on this great South American adventure as a volunteer collector. As Maria Helena P. T. Machado has persuasively shown in her study of William James's participation in the expedition, the "decision to undertake a lengthy, risky, and uncomfortable journey to the tropics" constituted an important stage in the unfolding of Victorian manhood, especially among these New Englanders who had been spared the terrible battlefield experiences of the Civil War.[13]

In early November 1865, Agassiz set up his "photographic saloon" in a run-down public building in Manaus, which had served as the provincial treasury and more recently as lodgings for Professor and Mrs. Agassiz, until they were invited to install themselves in the more comfortable setting of a private home. "[H]ere Mr. Agassiz is at work half the day with his young friend Mr. Hunnewell," taking photographs of a wide array of local inhabitants.[14] From the surviving record of over one hundred images, it is easy to surmise that most of the subjects portrayed were women, although some men and a few children also participated in

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[10] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 276. Nancy Stepan attributes Hunnewell's training to the Leuzinger photographic establishment in Rio de Janeiro (*Picturing Tropical Nature*, p. 100).

[11] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 168-69.

[12] The biographical information in this paragraph and throughout the chapter has been gleaned from Horatio Hollis Hunnewell, ed., *Life, Letters, and Diary of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell*, ebook consulted July 18, 2010.

[13] Machado, "An American Adam in the Amazonian Garden of Eden," *Brazil through the Eyes of William James*, 38–39.

[14] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 276.

the sessions. While Agassiz intended to produce a homogeneous series of mixed-race types that could be compared scientifically, he and Hunnewell failed to establish a clear pattern. Some subjects were portrayed standing, others seated; some were fully nude, others only partially. Here Hunnewell's lack of technical resources stood in stark contrast to the photographs taken by Augusto Stahl in Rio de Janeiro, who used artifices such as the vignette, to remove the figure from his or her background surroundings. The racial triptychs of Africans, for example, place the focus exclusively on the subject's naked body, which was one of the objectives of scientific racial photography.[15] The Manaus photographs include a great many background distractions, from the crumbling walls to scattered clothing and even to the presence of other people inadvertently captured by the lens. Hunnewell was also unable to emulate Stahl's creation of montages of the triptychs on single contact sheets, so what remained was individual photographs sequenced in frontal, rear, and profile poses. Over time, the sequences became disordered in the repository, and since the corresponding keys to the numbers painted on each glass plate have been lost, it is difficult to reassemble these sequences.

But the difficulties that Agassiz and Hunnewell faced also had to do with the kinds of relations established with their photographic models, especially the women. In his private diary, William James recorded his encounter with the photographic saloon in a depiction charged with an erotic aura and significantly devoid of any scientific content, except for the mocking comment by one of Brazil's most prominent statesmen, who dubbed this run-down building Agassiz's "Bureau d'Anthropologie":

I then went to the photographic establishment and was cautiously admitted by Hunnewell with his black hands. On entering the room found Prof. engaged in cajoling 3 mo[ç]as whom he called pure indians but who, I thought as afterward appeared, had white blood. They were very nicely dressed in white muslin & jewelry with flowers in their hair & an excellent smell of priprioca. Apparently refined, at all events not sluttish, they consented to the utmost liberties being taken with them and two without much trouble were induced to strip and pose naked. While we were there Sr. Tavares Bastos came in and asked me mockingly if I was attached to the Bureau d'Anthropologie.[16]

James's observations provide an interesting key to the dark side of this pioneering photographic endeavor. Hunnewell's caution in admitting James and allowing him to see what was really going on in the studio indicates that the whole operation was shrouded in

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[15] On the use of vignettes in early racial and ethnographic photography, see James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 141–42.
[16] James, William, "Brazilian Diary," Nov. 10, 1865, in Machado, ed., *Brazil through the Eyes of William James,* 23.

secrecy, in contrast to Agassiz's boasts of compiling a valuable series of scientific images for serious study. While some of the subjects indeed appear completely naked in positioned poses, most of the women in the mixed-race series are only partially undressed, and it would seem that the very act of the women undressing before the camera, with their tops turned down, or with their disheveled dresses lying at their feet, implied a very different intention than the depiction of nude ethnic types for the purpose of somatic comparison. Curiously, Professor Agassiz insisted that the young women (*moças*) whom he was cajoling were "pure Indians," as if this would justify their nudity as well as the licentious liberties to which they consented. In his study of early photography in another ethnographic setting, namely Australia, Nicolas Peterson calls attention to "the asymmetrical and racialized power relations between photographers and their Aboriginal subjects" encoded in nineteenth-century photography. One important indication of these relations was encoded "in women's turned-down dress tops to reveal the breasts."[17] In Australia and in the Amazon, these images bear ambiguous meanings: they fall somewhere between the women's negotiation of consent and the photographer's voyeuristic intent.

Given the suspicious atmosphere surrounding the photography sessions, it would appear as if Elizabeth Agassiz turned a blind eye to the situation. Her comments in *A Journey to Brazil* also point to the issue of consent, but rather than recognizing the problem inherent in Professor Agassiz's objective of obtaining a series of racial types stripped naked, she preferred to invoke the widespread notion about native superstitions with respect to the "magic" of photography. She wrote: "There is a prevalent superstition among the Indians and the Negroes that a portrait absorbs into itself something of the vitality of the sitter, and that any one is liable to die shortly after his picture is taken."[18]

However, the Manaus photographic series includes very few examples of either "pure" Indians or Africans. At one point in the journey, a Munduruku chief and his wife came to Manaus and were to be photographed as examples of "pure" Indians with their bodies covered in body paint and tattoos. For some reason that remains unclear, rather than having their portraits made by Hunnewell, they were photographed by a certain Dr. Gustavo, whose images were reproduced as woodcuts in the first edition of *A Journey in Brazil*. Most of the photographs portray mixed-race subjects, many of whom, following James, "had white blood" and were "nicely dressed."

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[17] Peterson, Nicolas, "The Changing Photographic Contract: Aborigines and Image Ethics," in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 124–25.

[18] Agassiz, Professor and Mrs. Louis, *A Journey in Brazil,* 276-77.

Louis Agassiz Photographic Collection. Mixed Race Series. Portrait of a racial type, unidentified woman. Photographer: Walter Hunnewell. Manaus, 1865–1866. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

Louis Agassiz Photographic Collection. Mixed Race Series. Phrenological portrait, unidentified woman. Photographer: Walter Hunnewell. Manaus, 1865–1866. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

One of the most eloquent sequences begins with the image of a *mestiça*(woman of mixed descent) sitting in an elegant Victorian dress, with a bonnet, lace collar and cuffs, and what appears to be a wedding band on one finger along with another ring on her right index finger. In the second picture, she stands in front of the chair, wearing only shoes and a petticoat, her dress carelessly tossed on the ground beside the chair. In this picture, the wedding band is absent, although she keeps her other ring on her index finger.

While there is little evidence other than James's brief diary entry (other pages of the journal appear to be missing, possibly censored by his descendants), it seems hard to believe that the Bureau d'Anthropologie did not cause a stir in Manaus society. Well-dressed wives and mothers consented to pose partially clothed or fully nude for the "learned scholar" and his apparently embarrassed assistant Hunnewell. Nancy Stepan suggests that a scandal possibly developed and was played down, perhaps contributing to William James's early departure from the expedition.[19] The Manaus press from this period is curiously silent about Professor Agassiz's activities, and other members of the expedition, including Maj. João Martins da Silva Coutinho, an army engineer with an interest in ethnography, left no written record of the photographic studio. Even Walter Hunnewell probably gave up photography after returning to the United States in March 1866, as he was immediately employed in his father's railroad projects. He seemed to have left this Brazilian experience behind. In 1876, when Emperor Dom Pedro had lunch in Wellesley, Massachusetts, with Hunnewell's father, there is no evidence that Walter was present.[20] Summoned, in 1918, to identify members of the group in a photograph taken at the beginning of the expedition, Hunnewell answered in a most dispassionate tone, as if he had little to do with the matter.[21]

Whether it was his intention or not, William James's mention of Hunnewell's "black hands" suggests a double meaning, in light of the photographs that have only recently been subjected to a more critical scrutiny. Stained by developing chemicals, Hunnewell's hands also participated in the creation of a photographic series that no one seems to want to remember. Probably not intended for the public eye, the "anthropological" photographs effectively produced by Walter Hunnewell for Louis Agassiz in mid-nineteenth-century Manaus are now partially available to remind us, paraphrasing the title of Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson's book, of photography's other histories. Maybe when the full collection is brought to light, we will know something more about the women, men, and children "cajoled" by Professor Agassiz into posing in such an undignified setting as the infamous Bureau d'Anthropologie during its short-lived existence.

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[19] Stepan, Nancy Leys, *Picturing Tropical Nature*, 111–112.

[20] Hunnewell, Horatio Hollis, ed., *Life, Letters, and Diary of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell*, journal entry for June 13, 1876.

[21] *Walter Hunnewell to Samuel Henshaw*, September 19, 1918. Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (consulted online July 18, 2010).

About the Author

John Manuel Monteiro holds a PhD in history (University of Chicago, 1985) and currently teaches social anthropology at UNICAMP in Brazil, where he is a full professor. He is a specialist in colonial history, with a particular focus on indigenous peoples in the Lusophone world. His major publications include the book *Negros da Terra (Companhia das Letras,* 1994) as well as chapters in the *Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* and the *Cambridge Economic History of Latin America*. He has contributed to the Oxford Bibliographies Online (Atlantic History), with articles on The Portuguese Atlantic World and on Brazil. His webpage Os Índios na História do Brasil (contents in Portuguese) provides information on indigenous peoples in Brazilian history. His current research focuses on mixed marriages and intercultural alliances in Portuguese America, Africa, and Asia.