Louis Agassiz: Full Face and Profile

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"One photograph might lie, but a group of pictures can't."

— *Margaret Bourke-White*[1]

Two Views

There are two photographs of the Swiss-born naturalist Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807–1873) that I have long wished to see published side by side. They are both vignettes, images masked by oval frames to concentrate the viewer's attention upon the subject. In one Agassiz is presented full face and in the other he is in profile. At first glance the photographs appear to have been made on the same occasion, products of a single studio sitting: Agassiz's clothing appears identical and he even wears a similar expression, a smile visible more in his eyes than the corners of his mouth. Upon closer inspection, however, we can detect clues suggesting the two images were made years apart: in the profile view Agassiz's hair reaches his shoulder and appears thinner, and his skin seems less smooth. This image has printed below it the year in which it was made: 1872. The other photograph bears no date but is thought to have been made around 1859.[2]

[1] From a *New York Post* article reprinted in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, introduction by Blake Morrison (1941; London: Penguin, 2006), 401.

[2] Both images were made by August Sonrel, a Swiss lithographer and photographer who followed Agassiz to the United States when the latter emigrated in 1846. The profile of Agassiz appears as the frontispiece of volume 1 of Jules Marcou, *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1896). The full-face portrait is a carte-de-visite from my own collection.

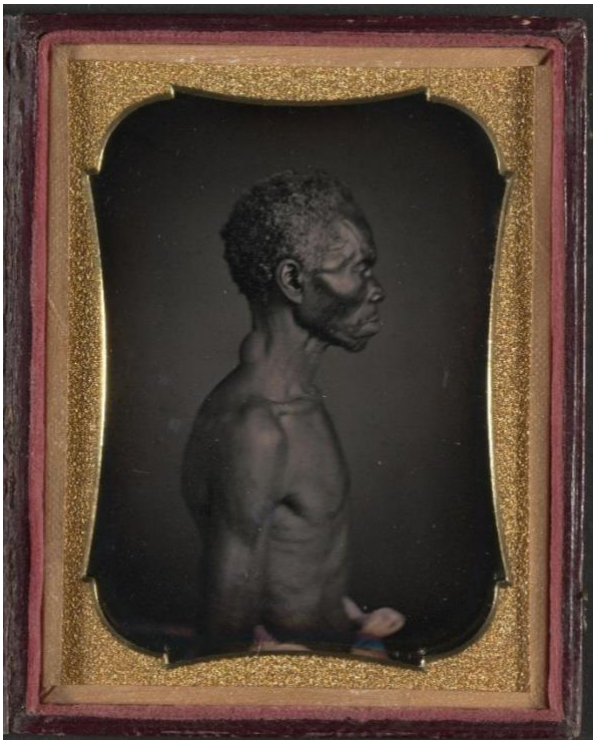
My wish to see these two photographs together is motivated by the significance of the two poses, full face and profile. By juxtaposing these portraits of Agassiz I am invoking other images utilizing the two poses, anthropological illustration. The science of Anthropology stemmed from the intersection of geographical exploration, colonialism, and natural science that reached its apotheosis in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Throughout the discipline's development, anthropologists made, collected, and shared images of people from non-European cultures. These images were thought to reveal essential truths about the person depicted, particularly to do with his or her racial "type." The juxtaposition of frontal and profile views, deriving from earlier techniques of displaying and reproducing natural specimens, was thought to provide a near complete understanding of a specimen's appearance.

In 1850, Agassiz commissioned a group of anthropological photographs. These are daguerreotypes depicting enslaved men and women in frontal and profile views and they were intended to support a scientific theory on the cause of racial diversity, a theory later called polygenesis. In the United States the study of race, called Ethnology, tended to focus on the question of how human beings had come to be so diverse.[3] Polygenesis proposed that human beings of different "racial types" did not share a common ancestor but were the product of multiple creations—in other words, there had not been one original pair, Adam and Eve, but one pair for each race of people (of which there were generally thought to be five).[4] In March 1850, following a scientific meeting at which he announced his support of polygenesis, Agassiz traveled to Columbia, South Carolina, to examine men and women from local slave populations. A local photographer later produced daguerreotypes of the people he examined. The images, fifteen of which are known, depict five African men and two African

[3] I have used capital letters when referring to specific scientific disciplines (i.e., Anthropology, Ethnology, Anthropological, Ethnological), and lowercase when using the terms more generally (i.e., anthropological). Photographs made by Ethnologists as well as those made by Anthropologists may be anthropological (lowercase) photographs, while Anthropological photographs were only made from 1860 onwards, when the discipline was formalized.

[4] Key Ethnological texts include John Bachman, *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Human Race Examined on the Principle of Science* (Charleston, South Carolina: C. Canning, 1850); Samuel George Morton, *Crania aegyptiaca, or; Observations on Egyptian ethnography, derived from anatomy, history, and the monuments* (Philadelphia: J. Pennington, 1844), and *Crania Americana; or, A comparative view of the skulls of various aboriginal nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839); Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind; or, Ethnological Researches, illustrated by selections from the inedited papers of S. G. Morton with contributions from L. Agassiz, W. Usher and H. S. Patterson* (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Grambo, 1854). Agassiz himself never published a book on the subject, but rather touched on different aspects of natural history relevant to Ethnology throughout his work. See also William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

American women; each was annotated with a handwritten label giving the name of the person depicted, the African tribe to which he or she was apparently related, and the name of his or her "owner." These are the earliest known photographs of identifiable American slaves and they are also among the earliest anthropological photographs.[5]



The daguerreotypes made for Agassiz share formal qualities with the professor's own photographs.[6] As well as holding similar poses, the subjects are carefully lit and the images are masked to focus our attention upon them, which in the case of Renty's photographs—reproduced here as examples of the group—is accomplished with a gilt frame.[7] There are also differences, the most obvious of which is that while Agassiz is smartly dressed, Renty's

[5] The daguerreotypes were discovered in the attic of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1976. It is not known precisely how the daguerreotypes came to be in the museum's attic. Elinor Reichlin, the museum's chief cataloguer, was first to conduct research on the history of the daguerreotypes, discovering the Agassiz connection. See Elinor Reichlin, "Faces of Slavery," *American Heritage* 4 (June 1977), 4–11, and the unpublished typescript "Survivors of a Painful Epoch," held in the museum's accession files for the daguerreotypes.

[6] Full-face view: Joseph T. Zealy, *Renty*, quarter-plate daguerreotype, 1850. Courtesy President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 35-5-10/53037. Profile view: Joseph T. Zealy, *Renty, Congo, B. F. Taylor Esq., Columbia SC*, quarter-plate daguerreotype, 1850. Courtesy President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 35-5-10/53038.

[7] The gilt frame was also used to protect the daguerreotype by holding a piece of glass in place over the image.

clothing has been pulled away from his body. Renty's full-face view is also rigidly frontal, whereas Agassiz is turned slightly to one side, his head looking just as subtly in the other direction, the combination of which softens the typically confrontational effect of the frontal pose. The different photographic processes used for each set of images further contribute to qualitative differences between them.

There is, of course, another difference between the images, one that bears directly upon the reasons they were made and the meanings that were found in them: the race of the people depicted. It is no accident that Agassiz, a European, is depicted in a smart suit and wearing a Mona Lisa smile, whereas Renty, born in Africa, is naked to the waist and was permitted no subtleties of posture or facial expression to convey aspects of his character. Agassiz's full-face photograph is a carte-de-visite, a variety of photograph popular after 1854, which, like a calling card, could be given as a reminder of the social bond between friends or acquaintances. His profile view was intended to serve as the model image for a commemorative medal produced by the Swiss community in which he lived and worked before settling in America.[8] In marked contrast to Agassiz's photographs, the images of Renty were intended as evidence for a racist scientific theory. On the one hand, we have images honoring a white man, and on the other, photographs intended to stereotype an African. The two sets of images could not be more different.

In this essay I want to consider what the daguerreotypes of enslaved men and women may have meant to Agassiz. Turning the camera, so to speak, upon the Swiss-born naturalist, I want to explore his motivations for making images of enslaved men and women, the meanings he may have found in them, and also consider possible reasons why he never published them. To do this I will regard Agassiz both as a type (the Naturalist) and as an individual, bringing together multiple views of the professor, though by no means presenting a complete picture of the man. First, however, I will briefly consider how images such as those of Agassiz and Renty operate, how their meaning is bound up with the conventions of nineteenth-century photography.

Early Anthropological Photographs

Putting the two portraits of Agassiz together is a contrivance: unlike Renty's photographs, they were made years apart and for different reasons, and really have no business being side by side as if they belonged together. Nevertheless, both sets of images coexist within the "double operation" of photography described by Allan Sekula. The double operation is made up on the one hand by the way a photographic portrait "extends, accelerates, popularizes, and degrades a traditional function"—that is, the veneration of individuals. In other words, a photograph is vulgar in a way that a painting never could be. Much was made of the

[8] Marcou, *Life, Letters, and Works*, 2:253.

"democratic" nature of photography upon its introduction in the 1840s, but with this accessibility and popularity the photographic portrait cannot help but be a little bit déclassé. At the same time, Sekula notes, "photographic portraiture began to . . . establish and delimit the terrain of the other . . ."[9] Photography, unlike painting or other, earlier forms of reproduction, was valuable in constructing social types, such as "the scientist" and "the slave." Even as it undermined the traditional function of portraiture, photography could be used equally for honoring or for repressing individuals.

The two images of Agassiz and the daguerreotypes of Renty thus operate similarly within this system: the camera regards both men equally, depicting the appearance of each with objective precision, yet Agassiz is presented as socially superior and Renty as socially inferior. But as Sekula makes clear it is not simply the case that photographic images operate honorifically or repressively. Rather, they are linked together inasmuch as each requires the existence of the other to make the typology of social types possible. In other words, without the slave, there would be no master; without the specimen, there would be no scientist—and the terms could just as easily be reversed, for each needs the other to confirm its status. It is because of this double operation, the mutual dependency of types, that bringing these sets of photographs together is not a contrivance after all. Indeed, the juxtaposition reveals a key to their meaning.

The differences between the two pairs of photographs may be summed up in this way: the images of Agassiz serve to venerate his social and professional status as a respected scientist, whereas those of Renty were intended to delineate all that the naturalist is not—African, slave, subjected body. The link between the two sets of images lies in the way these types constitute each other within a particular social system. Yet while this formulation is useful for examining certain applications of photography in the nineteenth century, it suggests a simple parity between the two kinds of images that was not necessarily understood at the time, and certainly was not the case with the images under discussion here. This impression of parity, the suggestion that the images function similarly, equates both kinds of images with portraits and in so doing obscures some of the ways in which early anthropological photographs actually functioned.

Photographic portraiture may be a term applicable to all photographs of identifiable people, however it does not seem appropriate to call Renty's daguerreotype a portrait because it was used repressively. Furthermore, his consent to be photographed was not sought, due to his status as a slave, and the images were linked to the experience of invasive physical examinations. These conditions surely preclude our calling his daguerreotypes portraits. In addition, as far as anyone in the nineteenth century would have been concerned, Renty's nakedness and social status prevented his images from fitting comfortably within the genre

[9] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 6–7.

of portraiture. Undoubtedly, the juxtaposition of Renty's and Agassiz's photographs with which this essay began would have caused a scandal in the nineteenth century. When Ethnologists wanted to compare races, they represented Caucasians with images from antiquity, Greek sculpture, and the like, thus saving white people from the disgrace of being rendered as a racial type.[10] This tactic underscores the fundamental conceptual difference between portraits and anthropological photographs that was understood at the time.

The daguerreotypes are therefore not portraits, but they are nevertheless portrait-like. The daguerreotypist's visual vocabulary, his professional perceptions, beliefs, and the tools of his trade all dictated his approach to photographing Renty and the other men and women such that the commission was carried out no differently from his other work. The photographer had no alternative but to employ the same lighting, framing, and studio furniture used for his other clients. Likewise, the resulting images were sealed in the same protective cases made of tooled leather and red velvet that contained the portraits of Columbia's free citizens. Renty's daguerreotypes thus display some of the conventions that underscore individuality and identity, even as they convey opposing meaning within a typology of humankind.

The daguerreotypes are perhaps more correctly understood as scientific objects. Yet here we have another problem in that the use of photography for anthropological purposes was still very new in 1850. To be considered scientific, an object must meet four criteria: it must possess a certain salience by which it could be apprehended as bearing scientific meaning; it must emerge within a particular institutional context; it must sit within a broad field of material scientific culture and practice; and it must function productively as a scientific tool.[11] Only after 1860 did Anthropology emerge as an organized scientific enterprise, one closely resembling the discipline as it is practiced today, and within this institutional framework develop its own visual conventions.[12] Prior to 1860, both scientists and the general public recognized Ethnology—precursor to Anthropology—as bearing scientific meaning, but it was controversial and lacked much of the formalized institutional contexts and practices that would later develop around Anthropology. Without an institutional framework in which to work, Ethnologists were ever mindful of their lack of scientific legitimacy, a problem that photography helped to rectify. At the same time, Ethnologists were isolated and this made it difficult for the discipline to develop a coherent visual language. Consequently, anthropological photographs made in the decades before 1860 do not conform to a single generic type but rather evidence a wide range of visual conventions

[10] See for example the illustrations used throughout Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind*.

[11] Lorrain Daston, "The Coming into Being of Scientific Objects," introduction to her edited volume *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1–14.

[12] For approaches to the history of Anthropology, see George W. Stocking Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968) and Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

borrowed from numerous sources. This was particularly the case in the United States.[13] While geologists, astronomers, and other groups of scientists quickly embraced the new medium, American Ethnologists were slow to make use of photography in their work. As a result, early anthropological photographs made in the United States are both limited in number and lacking in formal coherence.[14]

In the absence of a framework in which the images could be understood exclusively or even primarily as scientific objects, Renty's daguerreotypes possessed ambiguous meaning. Certainly they resemble eighteenth-century anthropological drawings and lithographs employing the conventions of frontal and profile views. For those people who understood these conventions, the daguerreotypes may have readily been understood as scientific images. Yet at the same time the daguerreotypes also have much in common with traditional portraiture. Renty's daguerreotypes are thus similar to portraits and at the same time could also function as scientific objects, but they did not do so explicitly or necessarily. Their meaning in the nineteenth century was ambiguous in a way that Agassiz's portraits were not.[15]

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[13] Matters were different in France, where the work of daguerreotypist E. Thiesson caught the attention of Antoine Serres, professor of comparative anatomy and embryology at the Jardines des Plantes and president of the Academy of Sciences. Serres was so struck by the scientific potential of Thiesson's images of South Africans, blacks in Lisbon, and natives of Sofala, Mozambique, that in 1845 he called for the establishment of a museum of photographs of the human race. In the 1850s, under his care, the project got under way. See Janet E. Buerger, *French Daguerreotypes* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 91.

[14] This is not to say that American Ethnologists were uninterested in photography. There was a desire to find new ways of illustrating the principles of Ethnology and photography did figure in this search. See Molly Rogers, "The Slave Daguerreotypes of the Peabody Museum: Scientific Meaning and Utility," *History of Photography* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 42.

[15] The absence of a truly collective scientific enterprise until the late nineteenth century is key to understanding the significance of early anthropological photographs and how such images contributed to the development of Anthropology as a formal discipline. In their study of the emergence of objectivity in the eighteenth century, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison examine the necessity of "collective empiricism" for the acceptance of normative images—that is, the need for scientists across continents and generations to agree upon common objects of study, whether these are images, specimens, or practices. More than simply tools employed for the purpose of acquiring further knowledge, these objects help to shape science itself: by constituting the field in which an individual investigator may make his or her discoveries, they help to define the broader episteme of a given scientific discipline, and in so doing make a virtue of objectivity, thereby reinforcing the value of the methods employed. Collective empiricism is precisely what characterized Anthropology from 1860 onwards, when scientific methods accommodated the representational limitations of photography—most notably the inability to take measurements from them and their resemblance to portraits. This adjustment helped to facilitate the formation of a cohesive discipline, one that championed professional standards and shared conventions. This essay considers that period before the advent of collective empiricism when practices were varied and standards not yet agreed upon—when, indeed, anthropologists first encountered the limitations of photography as a tool in their research. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007).

The meaning and utility of the daguerreotypes relied greatly on the circumstances in which they were shown and the experience of individual viewers. They could even potentially function in a manner exactly opposite of that which Agassiz intended. What one saw in the images had everything to do with who was looking and why. For this reason I want to spend the remainder of this essay taking a biographical approach to the daguerreotypes, considering them through the perspective of a particular viewer—Agassiz—in order to explore how subjective experience plays a role in the production of meaning.

The Scientist-Traveler

As a young naturalist, Agassiz had longed to lead a scientific expedition in the manner of his mentor, Alexander von Humboldt. Despite his many accomplishments, he believed that only an expedition could confirm his professional standing and until he could satisfy this ambition, a chapter of his professional life was missing.[16] His voyage to the United States in 1846 at first seemed to fulfill this desire, as the New World was considered an especially vast and wild continent by Europeans. But from the day he arrived he had little opportunity to lead a serious expedition, and much of his time was claimed by high society and American scientists eager to make his acquaintance. Agassiz would have preferred hiking across frontier terrain to attending dinners in his honor, but initially, at least, this was not possible. He would eventually have his expedition, to Brazil in 1865, but until that time he pined for exotic lands.[17]

South Carolina was exotic. The climate, geology, flora, and fauna were different from that found elsewhere and therefore worthy of study. The continued existence of slavery in the South also contributed to the exoticism of the place. Visitors from the North and from Europe who ventured to the southern states usually made a point of passing through South Carolina, which had a reputation as the exemplar slave state. Not only had Charleston been the main port of entry in America for slave ships until the Atlantic slave trade was brought to a halt in 1808, but South Carolina was well known for taking drastic measures to safeguard its institutions, slavery first of all. The state was the first to assert its States' Rights by nullifying trade tariffs passed by Congress in 1828 and it was later the first to secede from the Union. That black people outnumbered whites in many locations only added to the exoticism

[16] Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 73.
[17] Agassiz also oversaw the production of anthropological photographs while in Brazil; these, too, are held by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. For studies of the Brazilian photographs, see Gwyniera Isaac, "Louis Agassiz's Photographs in Brazil: Separate Creation," *History of Photography* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 3–11, and Helena P. T. Machado and Sasha Huber, (eds.), *(T)races of Louis Agassiz: Photography, Body and Science, Yesterday and Today* (São Paulo: Capacete Entretenimentos, 2010).

of the South. "Looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people," remarked one visitor to Charleston.[18]

For Agassiz, the South was a country within a country, a place set apart by its peculiar natural history and "peculiar institution." His first visit to South Carolina was in 1847, the year following his arrival in America. At the time he was, as his biographer writes, "more than politely curious about the character of plantation society; he walked through the fields, watching the slaves at work, and observing them carefully."[19] In subsequent years Agassiz returned to South Carolina regularly, visiting the plantations of scientific colleagues and touring the countryside around Charleston. His first visit to Columbia, however, was not until 1850. In March of 1850 Agassiz attended a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Charleston and on the fourth day stood before the crowd to announce his support for polygenesis. Following the meeting he accepted an invitation to visit Columbia, where, in addition to paying social calls and giving lectures, he examined Africans and their "country-born" daughters. It was a rare opportunity to study such "specimens" and Agassiz canceled lucrative lecture dates in order to make the trip.[20]

The daguerreotypes of the enslaved men and women Agassiz had examined were, I suggest, a kind of souvenir, a record or memento of a variety of experience that could be called "scientific tourism." Geographical exploration and scientific research were separate activities that reinforced each other and together played a significant part in colonial expansion. Objects brought back from a foreign land were not only scientific specimens to be examined in the comfort of the laboratory; they were also proof that the distant land existed and proof that by virtue of his travels the scientist was legitimate. So, too, did specimens confirm the status of the scientist-traveler as conqueror of other places and other peoples through the acquisition of knowledge. For the scientist-traveler the souvenir represented his position in the world as much as a site he had visited.

The souvenir is an unusual object, one invested with an aura of actuality even as its meaning is constructed by elements unrelated to the original experience. The souvenir is a visual record of a singular experience yet it is not evidence of what one saw; it does not encapsulate the experience of an event but, rather, its meaning. This meaning is determined principally by what one expected to see. There is a dual time frame operating here, one cobbled together as a particular form of narrative: the forward-looking time of expectation coupled with the backward glance of nostalgia to form a memory trace related to but not actually representative of the original experience. The photograph, as an object of nostalgia,

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[18] Quoted in David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* (New York: Random House, 1999), 18.

[19] Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 143.

[20] Louis Agassiz to John Fries Frazer, March 27, 1850, American Philosophical Society.

particularly lends itself to the role of souvenir. A souvenir photograph depicting the pyramids of Giza, for example, signifies a site of meaning—the Egypt-ness of Egypt—more than an actual location. The subject of the souvenir photograph becomes imprisoned in an idea, forced to play a part imposed upon it.[21]

The daguerreotypes of slaves were souvenirs of a visit to South Carolina, but they were also souvenirs of a particular worldview and of one man's career. Agassiz engaged the various disciplines and practices of science with the goal of finding an overarching "Plan of Creation," an epic narrative of nature that revealed the meaning and purpose of God's creation. Everything had to fit into this all-encompassing worldview; no one specimen or concept proved the general theory but each part contributed to the overall design. Consequently, Agassiz always looked ahead to what he would find, his expectations shaped by his ideas, and his every undertaking led to the same conclusion—indeed, his investigations invariably supported his theories regardless of what he actually found.[22] In Columbia Agassiz sought evidence that would fit humans securely into God's plan like a jigsaw puzzle piece. He sought the essence of racial difference—the African-ness of Africans—and this was precisely what he found, not because it was there but because he was looking for it. The daguerreotypes of slaves did not prove the theory of polygenesis, for it would take much more than a few photographs to do this, especially given the controversial nature of the theory. Rather, they proved science itself by conforming to—and therefore appearing to confirm—Agassiz's ideas. They also legitimized his professional standing insofar as without the specimen, there is no scientist.

The Fiancé

At the scientific meeting in Charleston, Agassiz had stood before the delegation and said that he wished "to correct some mis-statements, or at least misapprehensions of his views, on the subject of the Unity of the Human Race." Although in lectures given earlier both to northern and southern audiences he had touched on the subject, his position was apparently unclear and he felt the need to reassert his views publicly. Agassiz announced that:

> As a general proposition he would side with those who maintain the doctrine of the unity of the race, if by the unity of the race be meant nothing more than that all mankind were endowed with one common nature, intellectual and physical, derived from the Creator of all men, were under the same moral government of the universe, sustained similar relations to the Deity, and were

[21] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 138; Peter D. Osborne, *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 22.

[22] Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 206. See also Isaac, "Louis Agassiz's Photographs in Brazil," 6–7.

> alike appointed to retribution and immortality beyond the grave. Under these aspects, he was ready to maintain the doctrine of the unity of the race. It was quite a different question, whether the different races were derived from the same common human ancestors. For his own part, after giving to this question much consideration, he was ready to maintain that the different races of men were descended from different stocks, and he regarded this position as fully sustained by divine revelation.

In short, Agassiz stated that the differences between the races were "primitive," that they "did not originate from a common [center], nor from a single pair." He did not explicitly claim that men of different races constituted separate species, though within a few months he would do just that; it was nevertheless clear to the audience that he advocated original diversity—polygenesis—and not unity.[23]

The courtroom in which the meeting was held erupted into chaos. Members of the clergy, incensed by the challenge of polygenesis to biblical doctrine, attacked Agassiz, causing him to later protest, "Why, there is no freedom for a scientific man in America!"[24] Agassiz had tried to forestall just such a misunderstanding by pointing out that the Bible supported his views, but to no avail. A lively discussion ensued, one not recorded by the association because "the remarks at the close of the meeting were altogether too popular a cast to require their printing."[25] The news, however, quickly spread. Members of the press had been invited to the meeting to publicize the good work of America's scientists and Agassiz's widespread popularity saw to it that his statement was reported.

"Our readers will be startled, probably, at the declaration made by Professor Agassiz, of his disbelief in the unity of the human race!" So began an editorial in the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, published shortly after the AAAS meeting. The editors then boldly articulated the professor's position: "He avowed his readiness to maintain, in opposition to the authority of Scripture, that all the nations of the earth were not made of one blood, but that the different races of men are descended from different stocks." Readers were startled.

The *Traveller* received numerous letters from readers who were clearly familiar with Agassiz as a man of intelligence and integrity, and who did not expect him to hold such views.[26]

Among those who read of Agassiz's controversial remarks was a young woman with more than a passing interest in natural history. "I see," Elizabeth Cabot Cary wrote to her fiancé,

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[23] American Association for the Advancement of Science, *Proceedings of the Third Meeting, Held at Charleston, S. C., March 1850* (Charleston, 1850), 106–107; W., "Fifth Day's Proceedings of the Scientific Association at Charleston," *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, March 25, 1850 (Charleston, 1850), 106–107.

[24] Louis Agassiz, quoted in William Dallam Armes, ed., *The Autobiography of Joseph Le Conte* (New York: Appleton, 1903), 140.

[25] Alexander Bache to Lewis Gibbes, quoted in Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots*, 154.

[26] "The Scientific Meeting at Charleston, SC," *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, March 25, 1850.

"that some of the church people are out upon you in the papers for your disrespect to Adam as the common father of mankind."[27] Miss Cary and Professor Agassiz had announced their engagement at the New Year.

Lizzie, as her friends and family called her, first set eyes upon Agassiz in October 1846, not long after he first arrived in Boston. It was in church—he was in the next pew. Lizzie's mother, too, could not help but notice Agassiz, and she quickly concluded he would make an excellent match for her daughter. Yet, with the discovery that the professor had a wife and three children in Switzerland, the matter was dropped.

Lizzie was from a close, cultured Boston family, one in which education and the arts, commerce, and perhaps, above all, manners were held in high regard. Descended from good English stock, both of her grandfathers had held business interests in the West Indies. Her paternal grandfather, Samuel Cary, had prospered as a sugar planter in Grenada—at least until 1791, when a series of slave uprisings forced the family to flee to Massachusetts. Thomas Handasyd Perkins, the more successful of Elizabeth's grandfathers, also had business in the West Indies: he owned a number of ships that transported sugar, coffee, and slaves to their respective markets. Both the Cary and Perkins families were "cotton whigs," for whom slavery was thought a necessary part of life and commerce, a fact that perhaps accounted for Lizzie's "rather taciturn" response to the abolitionist Charles Sumner when he made gestures of courtship. By that time, however, she had fallen for the Swiss naturalist.[28]

Lizzie's sister was married to the Harvard professor Cornelius Felton, and it was at the Felton house that Lizzie first met Agassiz. Felton and Agassiz had become fast friends and often spent time together with the Cary sisters. Over the years this afforded Lizzie and Agassiz an opportunity to develop a close relationship, one unburdened by the expectations of society but perhaps not without its frustrations. When Agassiz's first wife, Cécile, died in 1848, the situation changed. A year later it was socially acceptable for Agassiz to remarry and in December 1849 Lizzie's father gave his consent. The New Year in Boston was greeted joyously with the news of their engagement.[29]

When in the spring of 1850 Agassiz set off for the AAAS meeting in Charleston, it was the first time the two lovers had been apart since discovering their deep affection for one another. This separation magnified the fears and anxieties that new couples often experience and Lizzie felt these intensely. The problem, it seems, lay in stark differences of opinion

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[27] Elizabeth Cabot Cary to Louis Agassiz, undated letter [March 1850?] (A.A26.1849-50.2), Elizabeth Cabot Cary Agassiz Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
[28] Louise Hall Tharp, *Adventurous Alliance: The Story of the Agassiz Family of Boston* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 16–18, 24–25, 40.
[29] Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 153–160.

between the two, particularly, as she wrote to him, "about the subject on which we have differed so often." The identity of this subject is not known, for Lizzie did not wish "that the confidence between us should be shared by a third person"—with delicate matters, even writing to a lover can sometimes feel like a public display. Yet while the subject of their disagreement is not known for certain, it is possible that it was related to Agassiz's "disrespect to Adam as the common father of mankind."[30]

Since their engagement, Lizzie and Agassiz had often disagreed, or, as she put it, "I have often been so unwilling to yield to your judgment." This she partly ascribed to the awkward position of one betrothed but not yet married: to defer to a man who was not your husband simply felt wrong. But she also made it clear to Agassiz that she should be entitled to her own opinions, that indeed it was not possible for them to always agree. "To have courage to express fully my difference from you on any point, even to the utmost degree, and yet to let the decision rest always with you, I am convinced is the only course which can satisfy us both." As his wife she would defer to him in all things, but she would still voice her opinion and have it be acknowledged. As she wrote to him while he was away in South Carolina, "We have such opposite views on some essential points, that it is not probable we shall in all be able to agree, even after the most deliberate discussion. In such cases one must yield, and it is surely from me that the concession ought to come, for you have already seen how ignorant I am of all that belongs to the life that is before me."[31]

The life before her was that of a naturalist's wife, a world-famous naturalist at that, and her ignorance of science was then fairly absolute. Were their "opposing views on some essential points" to do with science? If so, it seems unlikely that Lizzie would have been bothered by any of his theories other than the theory of polygenesis. This was the one area where someone lacking in training as a naturalist but raised under Christianity could stand up and say, "I am unwilling to yield to your judgement." No one, after all, wrote to the newspapers to say they disagreed with the professor's ideas on geology or paleontology, or even that his ideas on race were objectionable insofar as they were unfairly discriminatory. The nerve that Agassiz touched had to do with neither science nor race, but religion. Lizzie's upbringing would not have prepared her to easily support a radical new interpretation of the Bible. Years later she attended a lecture Agassiz gave "upon man," which she called his "heathen views." Of this lecture she said, "I have never heard him so eloquent and so clear on that subject, so I suppose the listeners were as much pleased or displeased, as they had expected to

[30] Elizabeth Cabot Cary to Louis Agassiz, undated letter [March 1850?] (A.A26.1849-50.4), Elizabeth Cabot Cary Agassiz Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
[31] Elizabeth Cabot Cary to Louis Agassiz, undated letter [March 1850?] (A.A26.1849-50.6), Elizabeth Cabot Cary Agassiz Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

be." Her characterization of his views as "heathen" and the emphasis on "displeased" suggest that perhaps she, too, was displeased with what she heard.[32]

The deep, mutual affection that existed between Lizzie and Agassiz, however, could enable them to set their differences aside. "I know that if there is anything not absolutely important, to which I cannot reconcile myself," she wrote to him, "you have too much tenderness for me to urge it—and I trust too much to our mutual devotion, not to believe that there is nothing essential to the happiness of either which we shall not, in the end, win from each other." Lizzie added a caveat to this vision in which love conquered all: "But let us only, so far as we understand it, bring our lives into accordance with God's will, and pray always for his light and blessing on our way."[33]

The wedding was due to take place upon Agassiz's return from the AAAS meeting, yet it was delayed somewhat as the professor changed his itinerary. He had been invited to travel to Columbia for the purpose of examining Africans, and this was an opportunity he did not want to miss. If the subject of their premarital disagreement, their "opposite views on some essential points," had been his unorthodox ideas on the cause of racial diversity, the matter was never again alluded to between them, at least not in writing. Perhaps they simply agreed to disagree, for the issue itself did not go away.

The Professor

Around the time of his wedding Agassiz was busy lecturing and writing on the subject of human diversity. The press storm over his announcement in Charleston had served to bring the theory of multiple creations to widespread public attention and he, personally, was under attack. His fame had made an old idea seem new, almost as if he had been the first to propose it. "Agassiz's theory," as polygenesis came to be known, was now a topic of general discussion and increasingly a national controversy.[34]

After his return from Charleston, Agassiz wrote three articles on the subject of diversity in nature for which he drew on his experiences in Columbia. The second article, published in July 1850, was devoted to the problem of humans. There was not one homogeneous "African type," he wrote; this was a misconception due to the color of their skin. "We generally

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[32] Elizabeth Cary Agassiz to [Mrs. Thomas Cary?], April 15, 1851–2 [?], Elizabeth Cabot Cary Agassiz Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
[33] Elizabeth Cabot Cary to Louis Agassiz, undated letter [March 1850?] (A.A26.1849-50.6), Elizabeth Cabot Cary Agassiz Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
[34] John Torrey to Asa Gray, August 27, 1850, Asa Gray Papers, Archives of the Gray Herbarium, Harvard University. Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences* (Boston: Houghton, 1904), 1:88.

consider the Africans as one, because they are chiefly black." Look closer and differences abound:

> The negro of Senegal differs as much from the negro of Congo or of Guinea. The writer has of late devoted special attention to this subject, and has examined closely many native Africans belonging to different tribes, and has learned readily to distinguish their nations, without being told whence they came; and even when they attempted to deceive him, he could determine their origin from their physical features.[35]

The value for Agassiz of his newfound expertise was made clear in a subsequent publication to which he contributed. Here he maintained, "The differences between distinct races [of human beings] are often greater than those distinguishing species of animals from one another." He then gave an example using two of the people photographed, Fassena and Jack, though not by name: "The chimpanzee and gorilla do not differ more from one another than the Mandingo and the Guinea Negro: they together do not differ more from the orang than the Malay or white man differs from the Negro." Differences among humans, Agassiz maintained, were significant, more so than differences between animals belonging to separate species. "Whether the natural groups which can be recognized in the human family are called races, varieties, or species, is of no great importance, as soon as it is understood that they present the extreme development of a peculiar diversity."[36]

What Agassiz had found satisfying about his examinations of Columbia slaves was not their collective difference when compared to other races, but the differences between the people he examined. It was an idea he had long held to be true but now he could support it with his own observations. He also now had evidence—the daguerreotypes—to support his claims.

While Agassiz did not reproduce the daguerreotypes with his ethnological writings, he did show them to members of the Cambridge Scientific Club on September 27, 1850. Six Harvard professors had founded the club in 1842, and it had since grown to a membership of fifteen. Its purpose was to provide members with a regular opportunity to discuss subjects thought sufficiently important that men of varied academic disciplines should be familiar with them, including the properties of electrical fish, the discovery of Neptune (then called Leverrier's Planet), and assorted questions in physics. Whether all members attended the meeting on the

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[35] Louis Agassiz, "The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races," *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, vol. XLIX (July 1850), 125.

[36] Louis Agassiz, "Sketch of the Natural Provinces of the Animal World and the Relation to the Different Types of Man," in Nott and Gliddon, eds., *Types of Mankind*, lxxiv-lxxv. The value of examining the women is less obvious, but is generally understood to have been for the purpose of determining whether being born on a different continent affected the indicators of original type.

night of September 27 is not known. No notes were kept and indeed it is not mentioned at all in the club's surviving documentation, although given the informality of the club's activities, this is perhaps not unusual.[37] The only indication that the meeting took place comes from the press, both in Boston and in South Carolina, which reported on the event after the fact.

"At the meeting of the Cambridge Scientific Association [sic] on Friday evening last," the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller* reported, "Professor Agassiz delivered a lecture upon the Unity of the Human Race." The *Tri-Weekly South Carolinian* was slightly more to the point: "We notice that Professor Agassiz is still lecturing in Boston on the unity of the human race." Both newspapers, however, reported on Agassiz's use of the daguerreotypes with precisely the same language: "In the course of the lecture he pointed out many differences between the forms of the negro and the white race, a large proportion of which have not been previously remarked, and in proof of his statements he exhibited a large number of daguerreotypes of individuals of various races of negroes."[38] Everyone present had seen a daguerreotype before, but none had seen any like these.

As Agassiz pronounced his ideas and referred to the pictures of Renty, Fassena, and the others, he treated the images as evidence, as if the proof of his ideas could be seen plainly in each photograph. But what did they actually show? For Agassiz they showed what he had seen in Columbia: they proved what he believed to be the truth about variation among human beings. But did they do this for other people? What did the daguerreotypes of slaves mean to the men who gathered together that night?

In speaking to the Cambridge Scientific Club about "the negro of Congo," Agassiz may have given an ethnological description of Renty to explain what he considered to be his "specific" character. He then could have passed around the daguerreotypes to make what he said clear, pointing out the anatomical features that for him signified "Congo." In this way he could do more than simply describe Renty—he could share a particular "vision" of the Congo and its people with his audience. No measurable scientific data could be obtained from the images, but even so, in this context, the daguerreotypes could function as scientific objects. Agassiz's

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[37] Two weeks earlier, on September 12, Agassiz apparently hosted the group, though no subject is recorded, so it may be that this meeting had been postponed. On the night previous, however, the club was "With Dr Beck "—this was Charles Beck, a professor of Latin—but again no subject is noted, so possibly this meeting was moved back a day. Cambridge Scientific Club, 1842–1985. Records of meetings. Typescript of Meeting Notes, 1842; September 1846–March 1909; Subjects of Papers Read at Meetings: Whose Papers and When They Were Read; Meeting Notes, September 10, 1846–April 28, 1859; Meeting Notes, March 14, 1867–April 23, 1868 (Mr. Lovering). HUD 3257 Box 1. Harvard University Archives. Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives. See also Records of Cambridge Scientific Club, 1842–1985. General information about the Cambridge Scientific Club. Notes on the history of the club compiled by Nathan Pusey, 1969. HUD 3257 Box 1. Harvard University Archives. Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

[38] "The Unity of the Human Race," *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, October 2, 1850; "Daguerreotypes and Anatomy," *Tri-Weekly South Carolinian*, October 10, 1850.

status as an internationally renowned naturalist, and thus his role as interpreter of scientific "evidence," contributed to a framework in which scientific meaning could be attached to the daguerreotypes. This meaning was not stable; it did not derive from a close association between photography and anthropological science, nor did it arise from conventions specifically born of interests common to both disciplines. Rather, it emerged from Agassiz's authority as a scientist. The daguerreotype thus functioned as evidence of a theory because the professor related it to a matrix of ideas and a tradition of scientific education.

But perhaps members of the club did not see what Agassiz saw in the photographs, for they did not have the benefit of having examined Renty in person. The mechanical precision of the daguerreotype image could have mitigated this circumstance somewhat. The "reality effect" of the photograph lends itself to the conflation of appearance with truth, and so when Agassiz sought to link his ideas with the daguerreotype images, his audience could at least see Renty in crisp and fine detail, and this would have facilitated the acceptance of Agassiz's ideas as truthful.[39] There were, however, almost certainly members of the club who did not agree with Agassiz's theories. For those people the daguerreotypes were not evidence of the original diversity of human beings—they could not prove the theory because for them the theory was not true. What other meanings might they therefore have found in the photographs?

A photograph can only ever show what something looks like, what it resembles—there is no significance to an image unless the viewer has an understanding of its object, of what the image refers to, even if that knowledge comes from another image. A photograph can show something "new" but the novel object must in some way relate to something familiar, otherwise it will not be "visible." The meaning of a photograph is therefore not located in the image; meaning is contingent on the experience, knowledge, and beliefs a viewer brings to the act of looking. This after all is the definition of evidence—one thing that confirms another. We look to photographs to confirm—to prove—what we already believe to be true.

Although unusual, the daguerreotypes of slaves did not exist in a representational vacuum. They related visually to other kinds of images, but particularly portraits, as discussed earlier. Agassiz commissioned his images from a commercial daguerreotypist and for this reason the daguerreotypes of slaves bear some resemblance to typical photographic portraits, images of white Americans as well as African Americans. The daguerreotypes were related to other images, too. They were, for example, like the pictures of "white slaves," meant to aid the abolitionist cause by exposing race as a slippery concept and slavery as a diabolical practice, though these images, too, are portrait-like.[40] The nakedness of the subjects also links the

[39] David Green, "Veins of Resemblance: Photography and Eugenics," *Oxford Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (1985), 4.
[40] "A White Slave from Virginia," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 9 and 16, 1855. *Provincial Freeman*, Toronto, Canada, April 15, 1854.

daguerreotypes with erotic and pornographic images. Whether one saw in Renty's photograph evidence of racial inferiority or an individual forced to pose naked for the camera depended largely on the viewer: the meaning of the images lay not in the light and dark tones of the photograph's surface, but in the eyes of the beholder.

A New Era

The daguerreotypes of slaves were completed in mid-June 1850, providing too little time for reproductions to be included with the articles Agassiz published that year.[41] He was, however, rumored to have been writing "a book on the races," which would have been just the place to publish reproductions of the daguerreotypes. No such publication materialized. Nor did Agassiz publish the images in an Ethnological compendium, published in 1854, to which he contributed. Indeed, Agassiz subsequently refrained from paying the matter particular attention, instead viewing the conundrum of human diversity as one piece of the great puzzle involving all creation, rather than a problem to be solved in isolation.[42] The images of Renty and the other people photographed in 1850 were therefore never reproduced in Agassiz's lifetime and indeed were "lost" until discovered in the attic of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1976.

Why were the daguerreotypes never published when the debates on human diversity were current? And why were they not collected together with Agassiz's other anthropological photographs—why were they "lost" for so long?

Agassiz was well known for his impetuousness. He would frequently embark on a project only to abandon it later, having been distracted by some other, more interesting prospect, or because he was burdened with too many obligations to fulfill them all. It may simply have been that Agassiz was too busy with other concerns and consequently the images were cast aside due to other, more pressing matters. Perhaps for this reason they were put into a drawer and forgotten.[43]

Here is another hypothesis: perhaps Agassiz did not find in the daguerreotypes the proof that he originally sought in them. With anthropological photography not yet established, and with members of the public, colleagues, and possibly even his new wife voicing opposition to

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[41] Robert W. Gibbes to Samuel G. Morton, June 17, 1850, Morton Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
[42] Josiah C. Nott to Samuel G. Morton, May 4, 1850, Morton Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.
[43] Louis Rodolphe Agassiz to Louis Agassiz, February 21, 1828, in Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, two vols. (Boston, 1885), 1:65. Josiah C. Nott to Samuel George Morton, May 4, 1850, Samuel George Morton Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia; Josiah C. Nott to Ephraim G. Squier, May 4, 1850, Ephraim G. Squier Papers, Library of Congress. Ann Shelby Blum, *Picturing Nature: American Nineteenth-Century Zoological Illustration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6–8.

polygenesis, perhaps the images did not in the end function as they were supposed to. As the art historian E. H. Gombrich noted, "The test of an image is not its lifelikeness, but its efficacy within a given context of action."[44] The meaning of the daguerreotypes was neither obvious nor stable, but required an explanatory narrative for the intended meaning to be apparent. They also related to other kinds of images, and so when Agassiz showed them at the scientific club meeting he had to tell his audience what they were seeing, what it was exactly that the daguerreotypes proved. If a person did not agree with his views, then he or she would not see in them the same "evidence" Agassiz claimed to see. For those people the daguerreotypes proved nothing scientifically, and so failed in their intended purpose.

This failure, however, may not have been due entirely to different opinions on the cause of human diversity, but also to the fact that the medium of photography, having close associations with portraiture, reinforced the individual character of the sitter and therefore worked against the ethnologist's purpose. Later in the century the anthropologist W. H. Wesley opined that photography was not a suitable medium for his work. "It does not appear probable to me that photography will ever supersede drawing, for scientific purposes," he wrote. The problem was "that the photographer renders every minute detail with absolutely certain fidelity." This at first had been what made the daguerreotype so highly prized, but absolute fidelity to nature did not aid the ethnologist. The camera depicted what was actually there, not what the scientist saw or wanted to see.[45]

Consider also that Agassiz had actually met the men and women in the photographs, he had spoken to Renty, Delia, Jem, and the others—how could he not see them as individuals? Agassiz wanted types but the camera produced individuals. Sitting there with the daguerreotypes laid out before him, he may have found that the human-shaped piece in the Plan of Creation did not quite fit—not, at least, when it was also a photograph.

Conclusion

I began this essay by pairing two portraits of Agassiz with the daguerreotypes of Renty in order to consider the connection between these two sets of images apropos of photography's "double operation." This double paring also served to raise the matter of meaning and utility, and more specifically the way the specter of portraiture haunts the daguerreotypes' intended scientific meaning, undermining their function as scientific objects. To explore these ideas I have turned the camera on Agassiz, so to speak, focusing on his professional and personal life in the period when the daguerreotypes were made, for the purpose of better understanding

[44] Agassiz, "Sketch of the Natural Provinces," lxxiv-lxxv. E. H. Gombrich in Blum, *Picturing Nature*, 12.

[45] W. H. Wesley, "On the Iconography of the Skull," *Memoires Read Before the Anthropological Society of London* 2 (1865/6), 193–194.

how he may have related to them. They were, on the one hand, souvenirs, proof not only of his excursion to Columbia for the purpose of examining slaves, but also of his ideas on "God's plan." In this sense, and because they also showed "specimens," objects of scientific value, they legitimized Agassiz's status as a naturalist. At the same time, the daguerreotypes may also have been symbols of his isolation insofar as Agassiz's views on human diversity caused him no end of trouble with the clergy, his colleagues, the general public, and possibly even his wife. Then there is the fact that photographs, but especially early photographs, did not particularly lend themselves to the Ethnologist's project: in the absence of a framework in which the images could be understood exclusively or even primarily as scientific objects, the images could be interpreted in diverse ways. To someone who did not hold the theory of polygenesis to be true, Renty's daguerreotype might have had more to say about the barbarity of slavery than the cause of human difference. Indeed, Agassiz himself may have come to hold this view, which could explain why the daguerreotypes were never published in his lifetime and instead were placed in a museum cabinet.

I hope that in the course of this essay I have also succeeded in suggesting, although perhaps implicitly, that just as Agassiz's two photographs do not in fact make a pair, the conjoining of Renty's two daguerreotypes is no less contrived. The link between Renty's images is based on the idea that the two views together form a complete picture and reveal something "true" about him. Equally, the two views were together thought to convey scientific information about the diversity of human beings. Scientific convention dictated that one image was not enough, but that two would provide sufficient information to make meaning self-evident, to render the image into proof. And yet while these differing yet related views of Renty do provide a kind of composite picture, the images fail to provide the promised information. The contemporary significance of Renty's two images leaves much unsaid and this, in turn, gives us much to consider.

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About the Author

Molly Rogers is a writer and independent scholar of American history and the history and theory of photography. She is the author of *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (2010), on the Peabody Museum's daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Rogers is associate director of the Center for the Humanities at New York University.