



CHICAGO JOURNALS



Smithsonian
American Art Museum

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *American Art*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 38-61

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109184>

Accessed: 29/02/2012 12:18

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Black Bodies, White Science

Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes

Brian Wallis

Recent discussions of multiculturalism, ethnicity, identity, and race have raised many new questions about the nature of cultural difference. Some critics have derided “political correctness” and challenges to Western canons of culture, while others have struggled to trace the genealogies of cultural oppression and to challenge normative structures of identity formation. In its methodology, this second group of critics has shifted the analysis away from essentialist or biological versions of race by trying to determine how fluctuant ethnic roles are constructed and articulated through a variety of positions, languages, institutions, and apparatuses. When race has been subjected to the critical gaze of these practices, it has inevitably been reinscribed as a complex and discursive category that cannot be separated from other formative components of identity.

In other words, these debates have made clear that “race” is a political issue, a product of subjective choices made around issues of power, a function less of physical repression than of constructions of knowledge. Who determines what counts as knowledge? Who represents and who is represented? Whose voice will be heard? Whose stories will be remembered? Such questions go to the heart of how history is written and validated by

society—through negotiations fraught with silent conflicts and profound implications. For this reason, it is important to historicize not only the concept of race but also the institutions and power-knowledge conjunctions that have fostered it.

Museums are central to the ways our culture is constructed. Despite the attention they now pay to spectacle and display, museums—like libraries, historical societies, and archives—are principally concerned with sorting and classifying knowledge. It is significant, then, that over the past few decades a great sea-change has swept over all these institutions. In the wake of the photography boom of the 1970s, information once stored in the form of photographs and photographically illustrated books has been wrenched from its previous organizational and institutional contexts and reclassified according to its medium. As critic Rosalind Krauss has noted, the effect of this change has been “to dismantle the photographic archive—the set of practices, institutions, and relationships to which nineteenth-century photography belonged—and to reassemble it within the categories previously constituted by art and its history.”¹

Thus, in recent museum exhibitions of daguerreotypes, images once intended for

“Renty, Congo. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esq.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University



personal, scientific, topographic, medical, or legal reasons have been reclassified, reunited under the ruling category of the “daguerrean aesthetic.” Once-anonymous camera operators have been given names and accorded the status of artists. And works that formerly circulated in file cabinets, desk drawers, family albums, and local archives have now been displaced to the autonomous, unifying context of the art museum. If nothing else, this process proves that these putatively objective records are anything but, and that the notion of an autonomous image is a fiction. Moreover, this process also suggests that the classificatory systems of nineteenth-century objectivity may have a great deal to do with the formation of modernist versions of knowledge. This dual shift in seeing suggests that all knowledge is relative, historically situated, subjectively formed and catalogued, and bound to interests that color its meanings. But what is signaled by this shift in meaning? How has this reorientation of photographic knowledge actually produced new meanings and new insights? What is the relationship between changing attitudes toward race and simultaneous transformations in museum collection practices?

Louis Agassiz and Racial Typologies

A particularly revelatory case is that of the so-called slave daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz, discovered at Harvard’s Peabody Museum in 1975 and justifiably celebrated in the exhibition “Nineteenth-Century Photography” organized by the Amon Carter Museum in 1992. This extraordinary series consists of fifteen highly detailed images on silver daguerreotype plates, which show front and side views of seven southern slaves, men and women, largely naked.² The individuals sit or stand facing the camera with a directness and forthrightness that is

at once familiar and utterly strange. If it is a shock to see full frontal nudity in early American photography, it is even more surprising to see it without the trappings of shame or sexual fantasy. Here, the seated women calmly reveal their breasts, and the standing men are stark naked. But their attitudes are detached, unemotional, and workmanlike. In what seems to be a deliberate refusal to engage with the camera or its operator, they stare into the lens, their faces like masks, eyes glazed, jaws clenched. Fascinating and disturbing, these pictures raise compelling questions about the construction of—and the social investments in—the categories of “race,” “science,” “photography,” and “the museum.”

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

The classificatory project that led to the production of the slave daguerreotypes was something of a departure for Agassiz, who, in 1850, was the most famous scientist in America (fig. 1).³ Before coming to the United States, he had shown no interest in the growing American debates over slavery or the division of mankind into separate species. Born in Switzerland, Agassiz (1807–1873) had



1 Carleton Watkins, portrait of Professor Louis Agassiz, ca. 1874. Albumen silver print cabinet card, 14.9 x 5.1 cm (5 7/8 x 4 in.). California Historical Society, San Francisco

achieved his first success in Paris as the star student of the legendary Baron Georges Cuvier, the leading zoologist of his day and the founder of the modern science of comparative anatomy. Cuvier was so impressed with Agassiz that he turned over to him his own research on fossil fish. In 1829, when he was just

twenty-two, Agassiz published his first scientific treatise, a mammoth, ground-breaking study of the fish of Brazil. This volume consisted of the meticulous drawing, classification, and ordering of more than five hundred species of fish found principally along the Amazon River.

Continuing his studies of fish, in 1830 Agassiz published the comprehensive catalogue *Fresh Water Fishes of Central Europe* and, from 1833 to 1844, the

Such questions go to the heart of how history is written and validated by society—through negotiations fraught with silent conflicts and profound implications.

multipart publication *Research on Fossil Fish*. Previous to this project, only eight generic types of fossil fish had been identified; Agassiz's five-volume work catalogued more than 340 new genera. The methodology Agassiz used was comparative and relational: individual images or specimens held far less meaning for him than the cumulative consequence of a series properly ordered. Sorting and classifying were the bases of Agassiz's method. As a result, he was one of the principal collectors and archivists of natural history specimens in the nineteenth century. In the United States, he founded prominent natural history museums in Charleston, South Carolina, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and established the fundamental rules for cataloguing and classifying. Indeed, the modern museum combines two

2 Detail of Louis Agassiz's "Tableau" to accompany his introduction to Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854)

nineteenth-century traditions—the organization schemes of Agassiz and the showmanship of P. T. Barnum.

When he emigrated to the United States in December 1846 to take a post at Harvard University, Agassiz's first stop was in Philadelphia to see "the American Golgotha," the famous skull collection of Dr. Samuel Morton. An eminent physician and anatomist, Morton had recently published two skull compendia, *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), works that had profound influ-

Works that formerly circulated in file cabinets, desk drawers, family albums, and local archives have now been displaced to the autonomous, unifying context of the art museum.

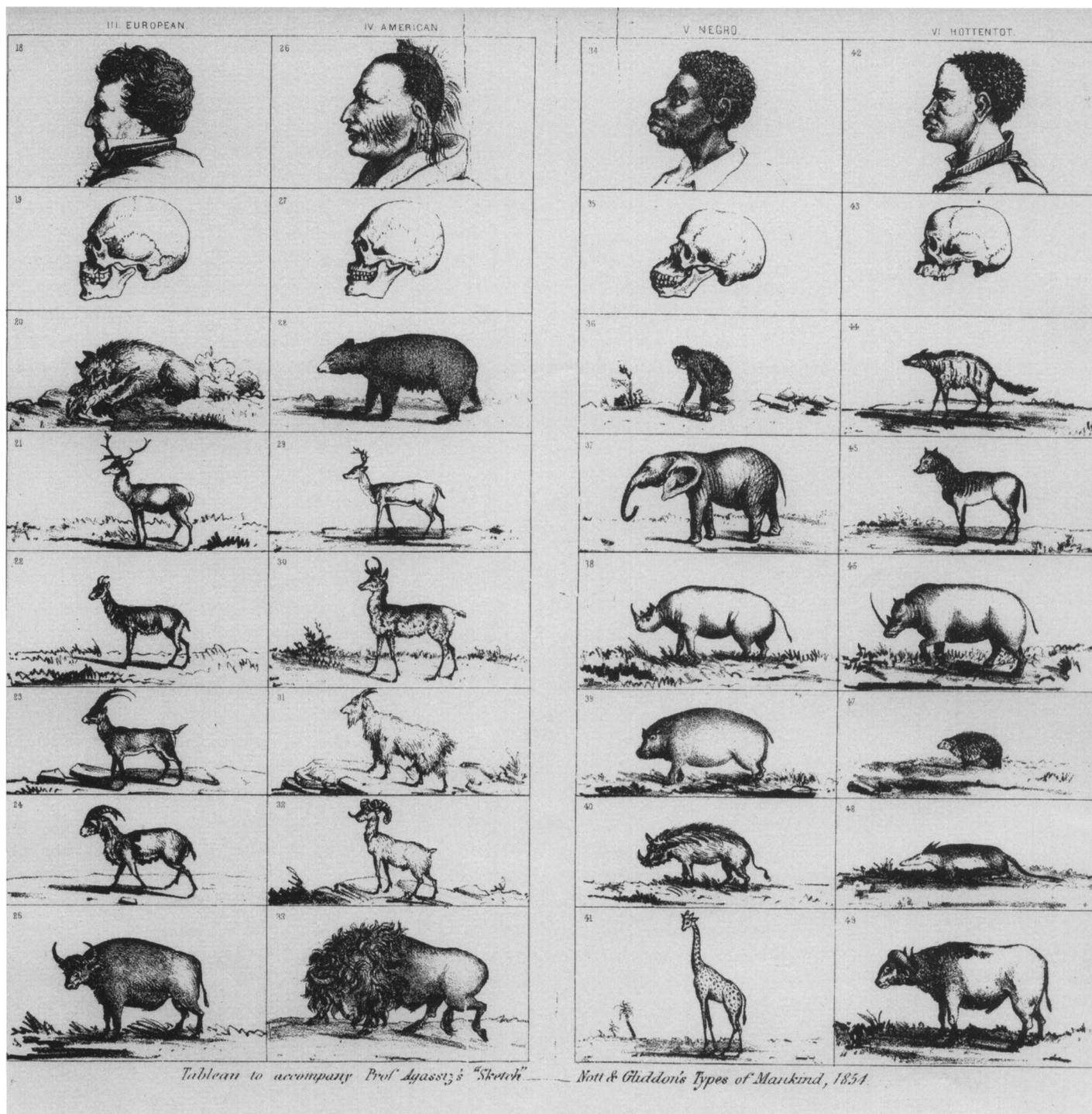
ence on the understanding of race in America. Morton's first book collected data on the shape and capacity of the skulls of various North American types, classified as white, Indian, Eskimo, and Negro. Judging that the ancient skulls he had collected from Indian burials and other sites did not differ markedly from modern skulls of the same race, Morton concluded that the races always had the same physical and mental characteristics. In other words, he believed that racial factors were static rather than evolutionary. Moreover, from a comparison among skulls, Morton deduced that the races of mankind had been separately created as distinct and unequal species (fig. 2).⁴

Prior scientific theory about evolution was almost universally creationist; that is, it conformed to the Bible in its belief in the unity of all peoples as descendants of

Adam and Eve. This theory, called monogenism, asserted origin from a single source. Racial discrepancies were explained by subscribing to one of two views: one, the environmentalist, which said that separate races evolved into different body types and skin pigmentation because of climate, locale, and other physical effects; and two, miscegenist, which held that separate races were the result of intermarriage. But it was polygenesis, the theory of multiple, separate creations for each race as distinct species, that became the hallmark of the American School of Ethnology. For a brief time around 1850, the American theory of polygenesis, with Morton as its leader, enjoyed wide credence in international scientific circles.

Whether or not Morton and Agassiz discussed racial theory at their first meeting is unclear. Until that point, Agassiz had shown little interest in racial typologies and had not yet embraced the theory of separate creation. He was impressed by the skulls, though. For a collector like Agassiz, the effect was dramatic, and he wrote to his mother at once: "Imagine a series of 600 skulls, most of Indians from all tribes who inhabit or once inhabited North America. Nothing like it exists anywhere else. This collection, by itself, is worth a trip to America." However, in the same letter to his mother, Agassiz recorded another event that may have either reflected his conversations with Morton or simply jolted him into a confrontation with the issue of race. He wrote of his encounter, for the first time in his life, with a black man:

All the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. . . . Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that



they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their

large curved nails, and especially the livid color of their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away.⁵

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

This “scientific” issue came to a head at the third meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science held in Charleston in March 1850. The central theme of the conference was the question of the unity or diversity of species, and the featured speaker was Agassiz. His comments to the Charleston audience, his first public statement regarding separate creation, were circumspect. But he made it clear that he sided with the southern view of polygenesis and accepted the inferior status of blacks. The various races of mankind, he stated, were “well marked and distinct” and did not originate “from a common center . . . nor a common pair.”⁶

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

originated and evolved in unique ways. Regarding slavery, Agassiz tried specifically to divorce himself from any political implications (or intentions) of his project:

*We disclaim, however, all connection with any question involving political matters. It is simply with reference to the possibility of appreciating the differences existing between different men, and of eventually determining whether they have originated all over the world and under what circumstances, that we have tried to trace some facts representing the human races.*⁷

Yet, following his visit to Charleston in March 1850, Agassiz was motivated to gather specific evidence for his theory in relation to Africans. That Agassiz would employ science in a project that implicitly supported the southern view of slavery is significant because it demonstrates how the pose of disinterested empiricism actually fortified preexisting, though unstated, political views. Even the mode of statistical analysis had an ideological basis characteristic of increasing modernization. The mania for the collection and quantification of natural specimens coincided with other statistical projects, such as the beginning of the annual census, statistics for crime and health, and the mapping and surveying of new lands, exemplifying a new way of seeing the world.⁸ Certainly, such scientific enumerations reduced individuals to statistics and involved depersonalization, but, its proponents argued, modern quantification would improve social organization by helping to catalogue the needs of citizens.

In attempting to organize his data regarding Africans, Agassiz sought firsthand evidence. Since the importation of Africans had been outlawed in 1808, Agassiz was doubtful about finding “pure” examples of the race in America. But Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, who had given two papers in Charleston, encouraged Agassiz to visit the plantations around Columbia. Gibbes, the son of a prominent South

Carolina family, was a close friend of many of the leading plantation owners, including such families as the Hamptons, the Hammonds, and the Taylors. He was also Columbia's foremost authority on science and culture. He was a nationally recognized expert on American paleontology and, like Agassiz, an obsessive collector of scientific specimens.⁹

Whatever Agassiz may have thought about the racial status of Africans as he wrote out his lectures in Boston, his attitude was radically transformed once he witnessed the real-life situation of African-American slaves in Columbia, South Carolina. There, he encountered a tiny caste of aristocratic white slaveowners who commanded vast plantations (Wade Hampton's alone was more than eighteen thousand acres) and owned as many as three thousand slaves. In 1850, the white population of Columbia was just over six thousand, whereas the slave population was in excess of a hundred thousand. Given this huge disparity, upcountry plantation owners were justifiably fearful of slave uprisings and used a variety of fear-inducing tactics to insure docility. Thus, if attitudes toward slaves were more tolerant, even paternalistic, in Massachusetts or even Virginia, in South Carolina discipline was deemed necessary, and the need for discipline seemed to encourage an attitude of contempt toward slaves.¹⁰

How Agassiz hit upon the idea of photographing the slaves is not fully known. The idea may have come from Morton, who had given Agassiz a daguerreotype of a young African boy he had exhibited before the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.¹¹ Or Agassiz may have been familiar with various calls in contemporary European scientific journals for the creation of a photographic archive of human specimens, or types. For instance, Agassiz's colleague Étienne-Reynaud-Augustin Serres, a professor of comparative anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes and the president of the Academy of Sciences in

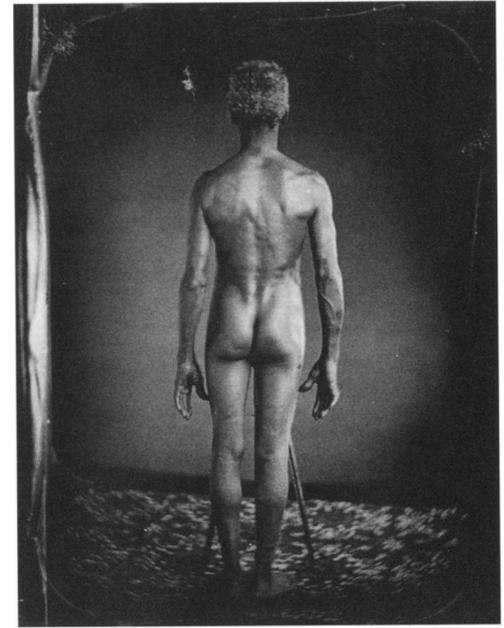
Paris, had proposed the establishment of a museum of photographs of the races of mankind. And, in 1845, a French daguerreotypist named E. Thiesson had taken studies of Brazilians and Portuguese Africans in Lisbon.¹² But there was no precedent in America for the type of photographic collection that Agassiz sought to build.

In a letter to Morton, Gibbes explained that during a tour of plantations around

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Columbia, Agassiz had selected various slaves to be photographed: "Agassiz was delighted with his examination of Ebo, Foulah, Gullah, Guinea, Coromantee, Mandrigo and Congo Negroes. He found enough to satisfy him that they have differences from the other races." After Agassiz departed, Gibbes had the slaves brought to the local daguerreotypist, Joseph T. Zealy, and photographed. Gibbes carefully recorded the names, African origins, and current ownership of the slaves. In June 1850, Gibbes wrote to Morton, saying, "I have just finished the daguerreotypes for Agassiz of native Africans of various tribes. I wish you could see them."¹³

The fifteen daguerreotypes are divided into two series. The first consists of standing, fully nude images showing front, side, and rear views. This practice reflected a physiognomic approach, an attempt to record body shape, proportions, and posture. Two slaves were photographed in this manner—Alfred



3, 4 "Alfred, Foulah, belonging to I. Lomas, Columbia, S.C." Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University

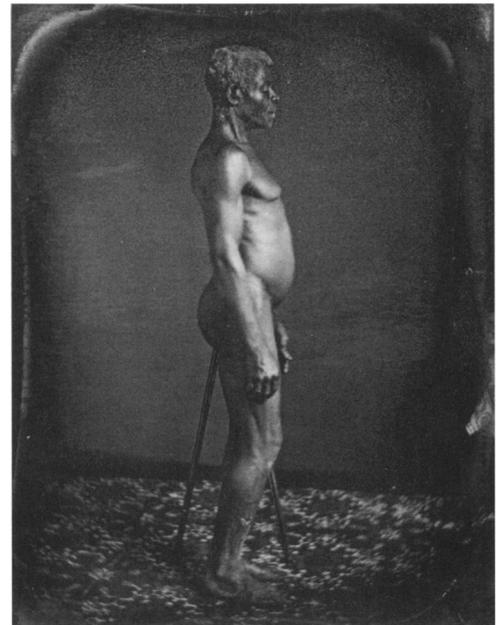
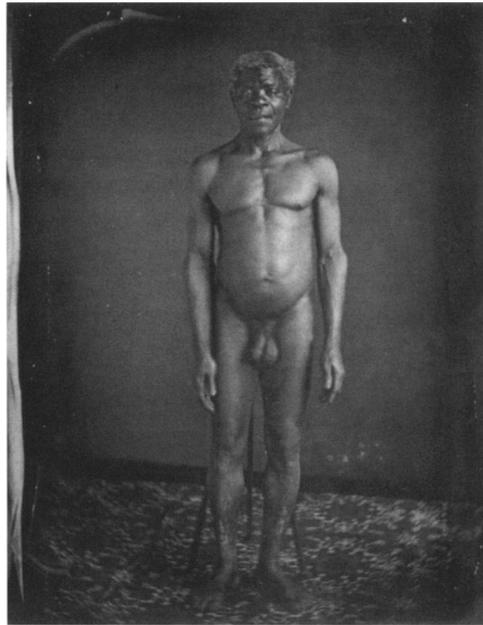
(side and back views; figs. 3, 4), from the Foulah tribe before his enslavement to I. Lomas; and Jem (front, side, and back views; figs. 5–7), from the Gullah and now the property of F. W. Green. The second series was more tightly focused, showing the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women. This series adhered to a phrenological approach, emphasizing the character and shape of the head. The daguerreotypes include front and side views of five slaves: Jack (figs. 8, 9), from the Guinea tribe, a slave driver on Edgehill, the plantation of Benjamin F. Taylor; Drana (figs. 10, 11),

Jack's American-born daughter who lived on the Taylor estate; Renty (figs. 12, 13), from the Congo tribe, who also worked at Taylor's estate; Delia (figs. 14, 15), Renty's American-born daughter, who also lived on the Taylor estate; and Fassena (figs. 16, 17), from the Mandingo tribe, a carpenter at the plantation of Wade Hampton II.

Typological Systems

The efforts by Gibbes and Agassiz to systematize the slave daguerreotypes represent an early attempt not only to apply photography to anthropology, but also to form a coherent photographic archive. As critic Allan Sekula has pointed out in his landmark article "The Body and the Archive," almost from its inception the photograph was perceived as a form of currency within a closed system. As currency, the photograph ascribed value by both quantifying things and placing them in a circulating system that emphasized their similarity to or difference from other things. This system, generally perceived as an archive, attempts

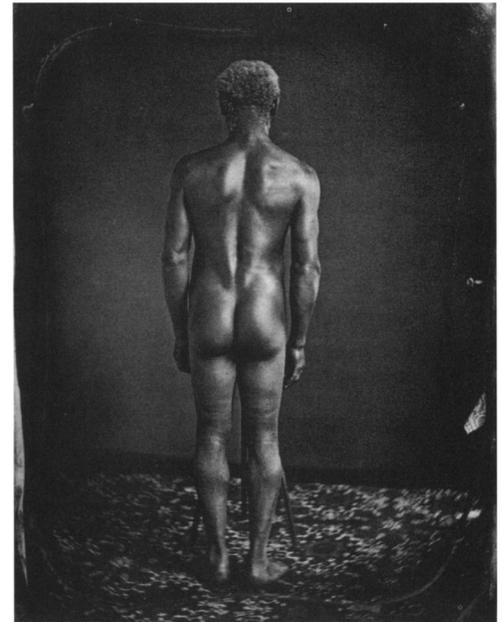
5-7 "Jem, Gullah, belonging to F. N. Green." Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University



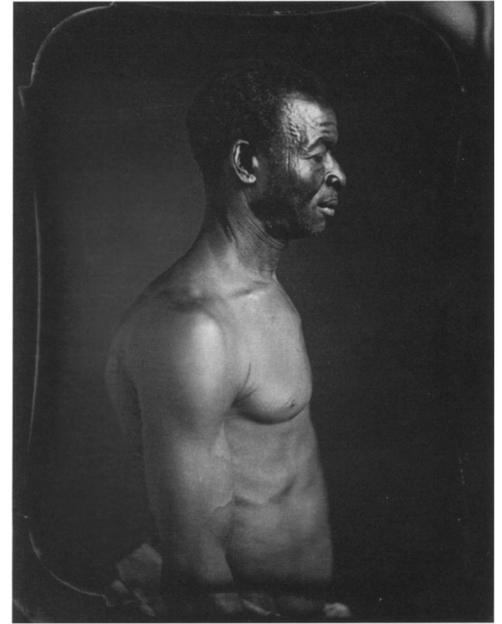
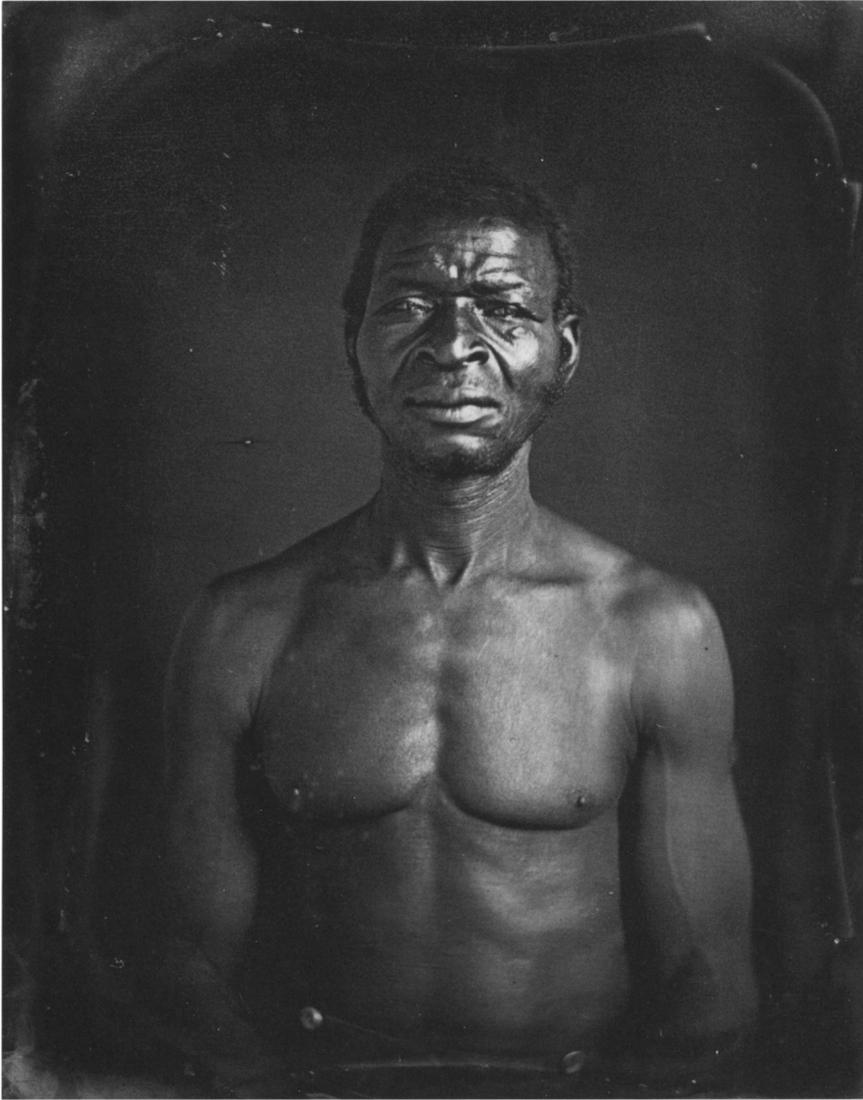
to give coherence and meaning to seemingly random components. Every photograph, Sekula says, takes its place in a "shadow archive," that ultimate, imaginary ranking and organizing of information implied by the very selective and classificatory nature of photography.¹⁴

In fact, primitive archival systems were immediately characteristic of the daguerrean era. The "shadow archive" of early photographs can be divided along two general organizational principles—the laterally organized catalogue or the vertically organized genealogy. The catalogue attempted to establish similarity or difference across a spatial dimension. This concept thus included group portraits, panoramic views, and collections of portraits of famous people. The genealogy, on the other hand, assembled likeness or diversity across time. This category embraced family photographs (often assembled in frames or, later, in albums), postmortem or memorial photographs, records of changing scenes, or changes in an individual over time.

Within the "shadow archive," both of these systems for organizing photographs—and they often overlapped—implied a



hierarchical ordering.¹⁵ Individual images were linked comparatively and organized dichotomously, thus creating and enforcing divisions between self and other, healthy and diseased, normal and pathological. Strengthened by the seeming transparency of photographic realism, these categories and the divisions between them soon took on the authority of



8, 9 “Jack (driver), Guinea. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esq., Columbia, S.C.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University

natural “facts.” Supplying either too much or too little information, photographs soon muddled the easy distinctions between subjective knowledge and what was called “objective.” Owing to its indexical properties—that is, that a photograph retains a “trace” of an actual existence, as does, say, a footprint—photography seemed to be entirely objective. But the very literalness of photographs produces an uncontrollable multiplication of meanings in even the most banal images. And the equally complex acts of taking, reading, or organizing photographs animate all the

trajectories of power and desire, mastery and projection, self and other that triangulate the visual field and govern reception.

By supplying an overabundance of information, photography confuses and problematizes its message; it creates what author Roland Barthes calls a “reality effect,” a semblance of realism bound to detail. In nineteenth-century parlance, two technical words gained a certain currency to describe how “reality” was construed: the word *daguerreotype* was distinguished from the word *stereotype*.¹⁶ Stereotypes were originally molds for creating multiple copies of printing type; the word, therefore, came to connote generalized replication. The daguerreotype, on the other hand, was characterized by miniaturization, infinitesimal precision, and detail. These contrasting characteristics—the general category and the specific case—are precisely those poles that govern the logic of the archive.

The early ethnographic research conducted by Morton, Agassiz, and other members of the American School of Ethnology depended on the collapse of the specific and the generic into “type.”

- 10, 11 *(overleaf, top left)* “Drana, country born, daughter of Jack Guinea. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esq.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University
- 12, 13 *(overleaf, bottom left)* “Renty, Congo. Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esq.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University
- 14, 15 *(overleaf, top right)* “Delia, country born of African parents, daughter of Renty, Congo.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University
- 16, 17 *(overleaf, bottom right)* “Fassena (carpenter), Mandingo. Plantation of Col. Wade Hampton, near Columbia, S.C.” Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy, Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University

The type represented an average example of a racial group, an abstraction, though not necessarily the ideal, that defined the general form or character of individuals within the group; it subsumed individuality. As Herbert H. Odom explains, “The term *type* roughly implies that the observed, apparently disordered phenomena are best explained as deviations from certain determinate norms. . . . The function of classification is then to decide which observed creature may be considered as deviations from each set norm and, of course, how many norms exist.”¹⁷ Photography strengthened the seeming reality of the type by objectifying the individual and by using props and other details to accentuate the “truth” of the depiction. Typological photographs—particularly those that became popular in the 1860s and 1870s—were assumed to be self-evident, to speak for themselves, and, at the same time, to be generic. Typically, natives were identified only by their country, tribe, or some other generic label (for example, “A Burmese Beauty”).

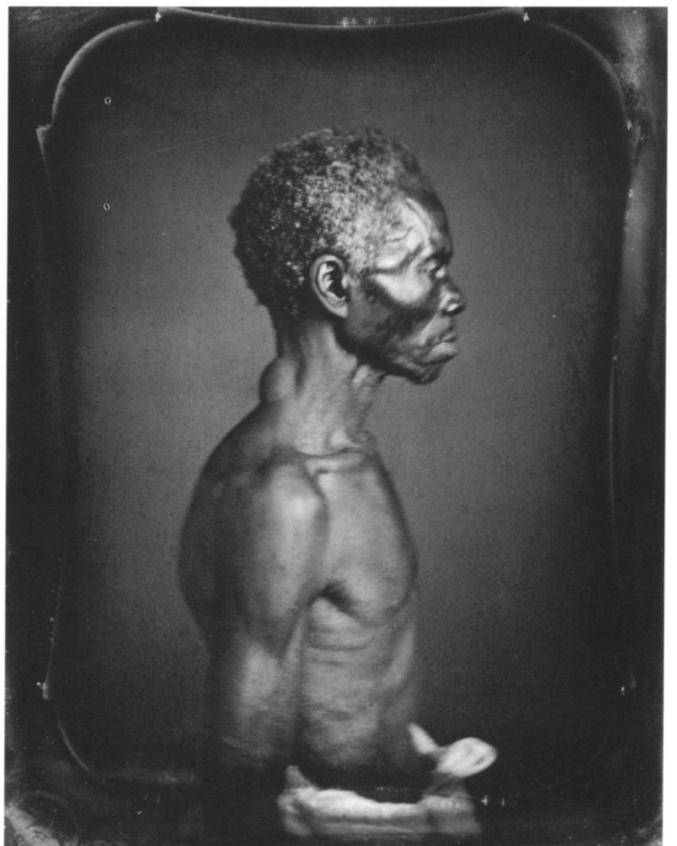
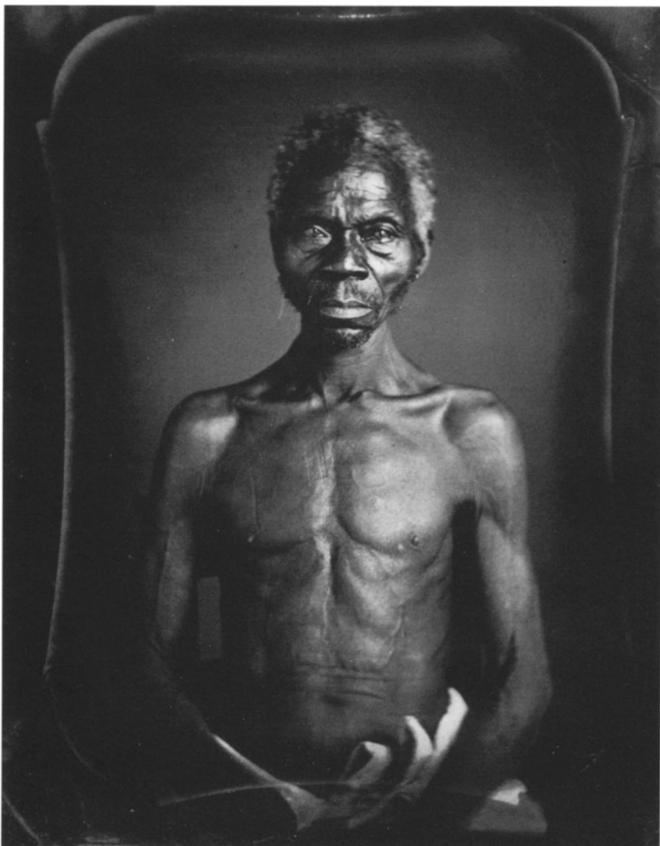
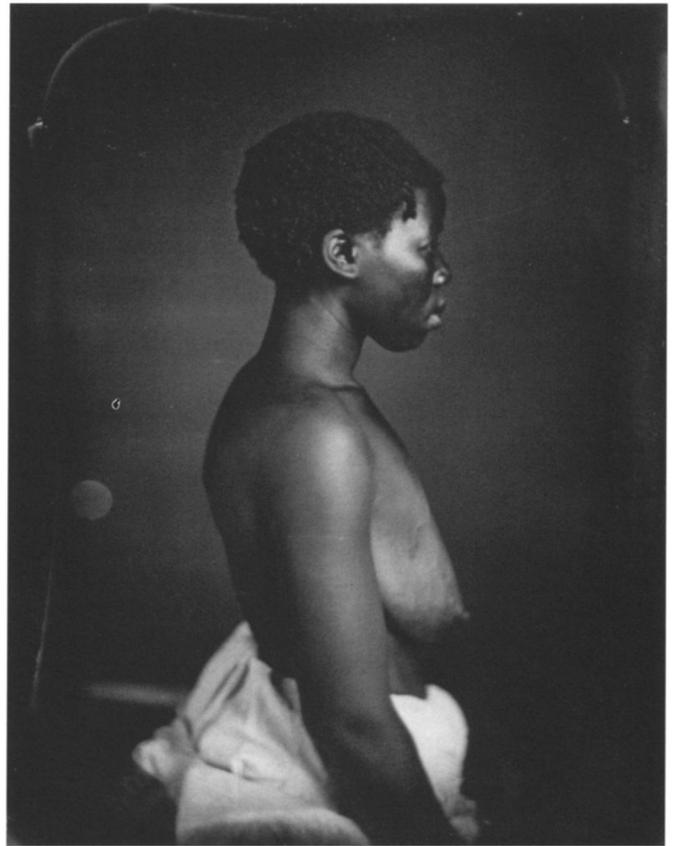
Another feature of type classification and the typological photograph was the emphasis on external appearance, on the measurement and observation of the human form (that is, the skeletons and skulls), rather than on cultural forms. This practice conformed to Agassiz’s method as well. He had worked principally with fossils and other “hard” evidence to determine his classification of fish types. This objectifying method was allied with physiognomy and phrenology, the early-nineteenth-century sciences that analyzed the exterior form of the human body in an attempt to understand connections between different human groups as well as the inner workings of the mind and spirit. As Agassiz said, “The material form is the cover of the spirit”; this he regarded as “fundamental and self-evident.” The discourse on slavery and abolitionism was typified by such external views of the body. Two images keyed to

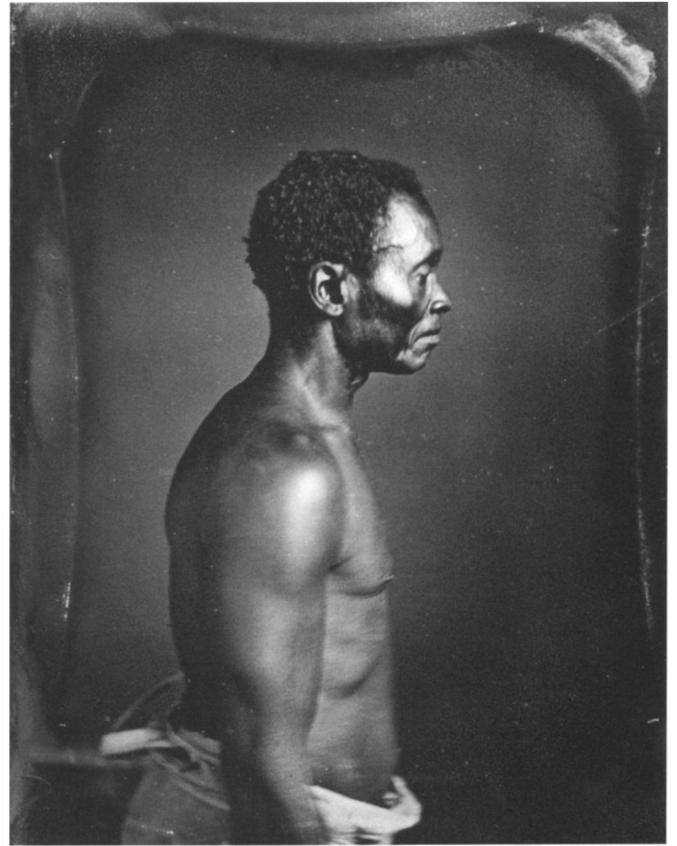
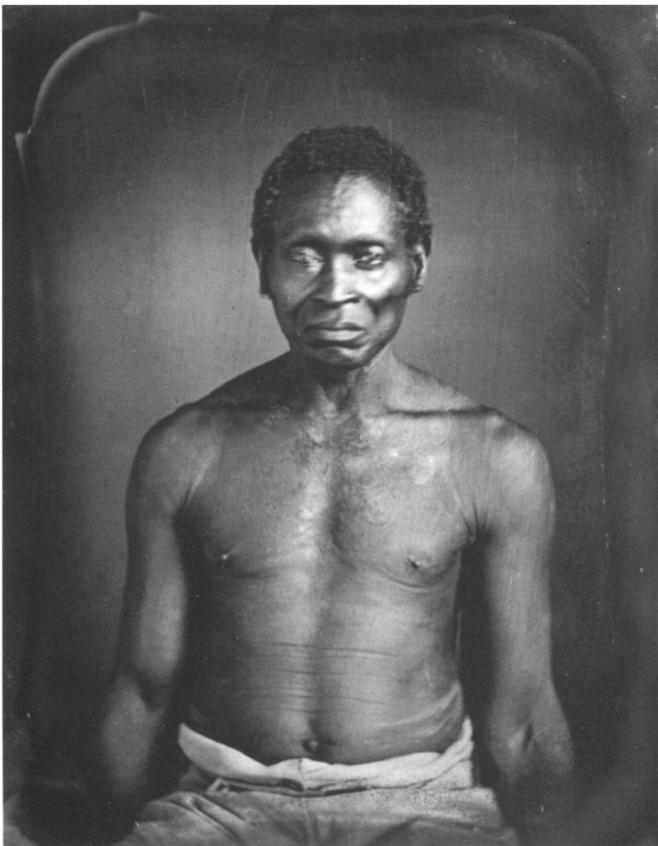
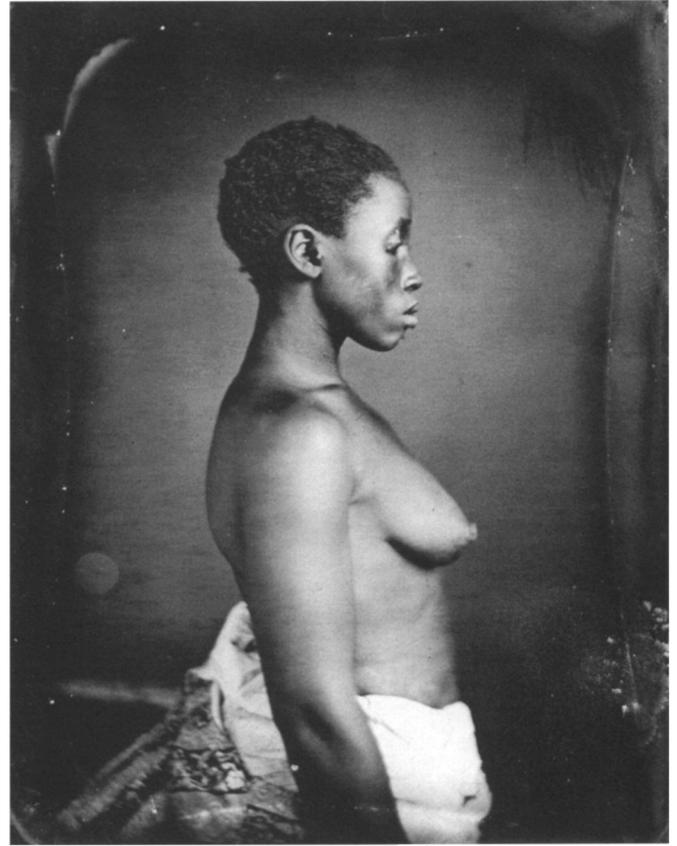
outward markings received wide circulation in mid-nineteenth-century popular culture—the Branded Hand (1844) and the Scourged Back (1863), showing, respectively, a punished slave liberator and a slave’s lash-scarred back (figs. 18, 19).¹⁸

Typological systems depended on the widespread contemporary interest in the body, especially the head. Silhouettes, portrait daguerreotypes, and phrenology all directed special attention to the shape, size, or character of the head as a record of individuality. The polygenesists, by contrast, were interested in defining

The very literalness of photographs produces an uncontrollable multiplication of meanings in even the most banal images.

separate racial types. Their charts, derived from phrenological models, often showed crude rankings from the primate head to the African to the classical Greek (fig. 20). This thinly disguised racism was also reflected in their field research, which involved not only the physical measurement of the body, but an assessment of the moral character, manner, and social habits of each racial type. For instance, Morton wrote that the African Hottentots were the “nearest approximation to the lower animals. . . . Their complexion is yellowish brown, compared by travelers to the peculiar hue of Europeans in the last stages of jaundice. . . . The women are represented as even more repulsive in appearance than the men.”¹⁹ Needless to say, such observations were often casual and rarely dependent on what would today be called fieldwork. But as scientific description, such views were legitimized.





18 Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, *Captain Jonathan W. Walker's Branded Hand*, 1845. Sixth plate daguerreotype, 6.2 x 8.3 cm (2 3/4 x 3 1/4 in.). Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston



The construction of racial types, their ranking in a hierarchy of intellect, and the analysis of the meaning of their physiognomy in the general scheme of things all required the presence of a standard. Although these scientists argued that their studies were made without prejudice or without models, there is ample evidence that a standard was in place to characterize the Caucasian ideal. As historian George Mosse has argued, this view emerged from the appropriation by prerevolutionary Enlightenment anthropology of the classicist idealism of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, best remembered as the founder of art history. Winckelmann argued that the “physical beauty of the ancient Greeks accounted for the excellence of their art.” The ancient Egyptians and Africans, by

comparison, had been handicapped by their own physical appearance, “which lacked the features that could stimulate the artist through an ideal of higher beauty.”²⁰

This aesthetic standard underlay every classificatory system in the polygenetic program, guaranteeing that the races would be considered not only separate but unequal. The embodiment of the classical ideal in America, the standard against which all the derogatory images of African Americans were judged, was the neoclassical statue in white marble, typified by Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* (fig. 21). Various versions of this life-size standing nude sculpture, ostensibly representing a modern Greek woman captured by Turks, were wildly popular among American audiences from the time of its creation in



19 McAllister & Brothers, *The Scourged Back*, 1863. Albumen silver print carte-de-visite. Collection of Nicholas M. Graver

1844 until its triumph at the London Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851. Critics praised its chaste purity and its classical proportions; male and female viewers swooned. Rather than suggesting violence,

the slight chains on the *Greek Slave's* wrists only accentuated the work's mildly erotic and highly sentimentalized view of slavery and the body. But the irony that the model of purity and ideal beauty is depicted as a slave was not lost on the sculpture's earliest audiences, and the statue was embraced by the abolitionist cause. More pointed, however, was the cartoon in *Punch* that depicted the anti-ideal—an image of a black slave on a pedestal (fig. 22).²¹

In nineteenth-century anthropology, blacks were often situated along the evolutionary ladder midway between a classical ideal and the orangutan. From these pseudoscientific studies a Negro type emerged that was highly distorted and almost unique to ethnographic illustration. In comparing various skulls, taxonomists often relied on the device of the facial angle. This technique, invented by the eighteenth-century Dutch taxonomist Peter Camper, involved the systematic evaluation of the profile measurement from the tip of the forehead to the greatest protrusion of the lips. For Camper and others, the mathematical capability of scientifically classifying such information offered a new tool for the investigation of evolution, or linear development. Camper described his project: "I observed that a line drawn along the forehead and upper lip indicated a difference in national physiognomy. . . . When I made these lines incline forwards, I obtained the face of an antique; backwards of a negroe; still more backwards, the lines which mark an ape, a dog, a snipe, &c."²² Representations of the facial angle of the Negro skull almost always showed an abnormally pronounced brow, protruding lips and teeth, and a back-sloping forehead. Curiously, these "scientific" representations preceded most of the more familiar stereotypes and derogatory images of African Americans in popular culture. The popular images

built on the scientific ones and enhanced or exaggerated distortions of the black body. The subject's clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded, or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor. Moreover, many of the exposed and attacked bodies were shown in explicitly erotic poses, raising the question of how these largely proslavery images functioned as a type of pornography.

It is perhaps not coincidental that by their unprecedented nudity, the slave

This aesthetic standard underlay every classificatory system in the polygenetic program.

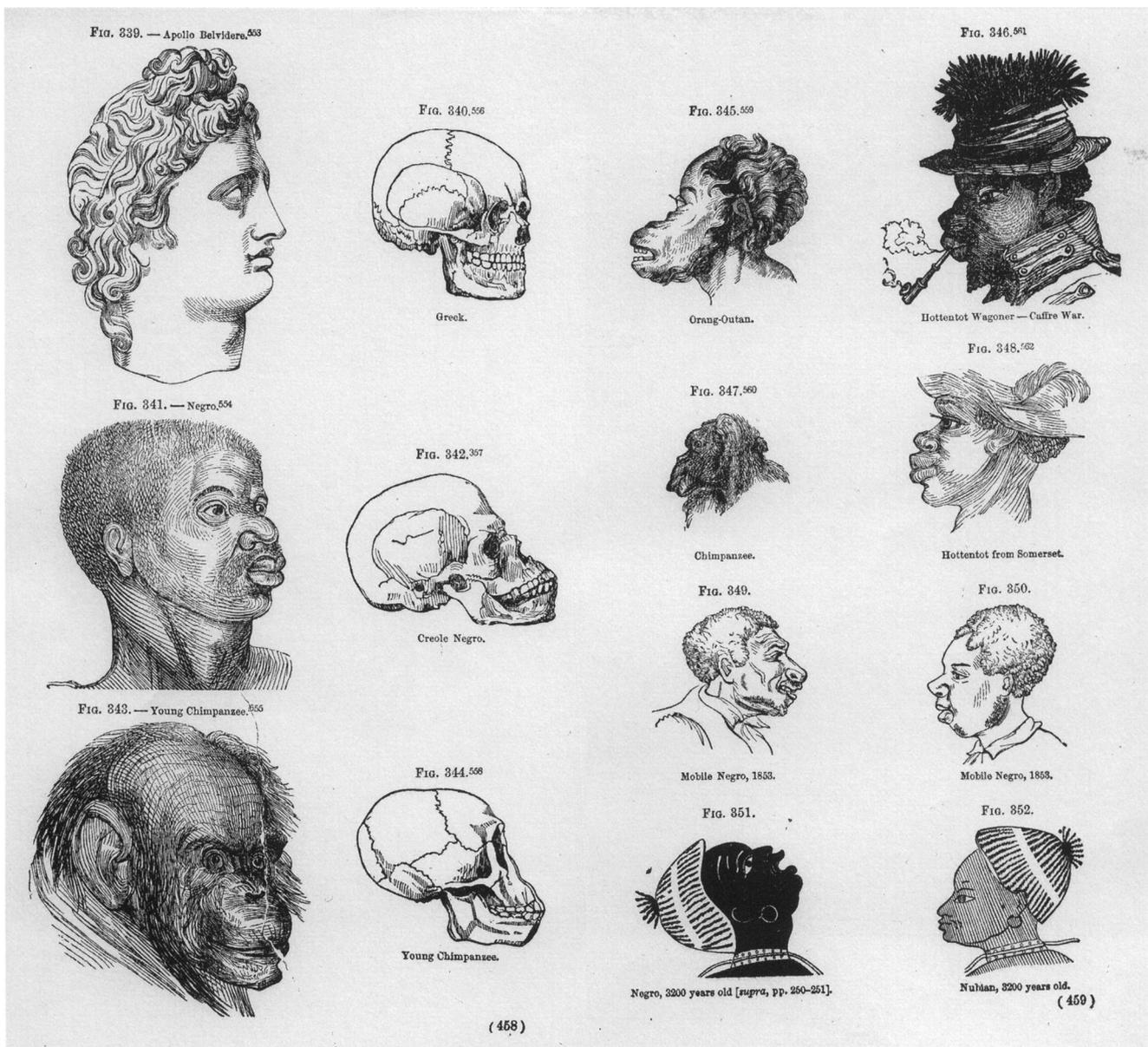
daguerreotypes intersect with pornography, that other regime of photography so central to the 1850s (at least in Europe) and so exclusively concerned with the representation of the tactile surface of the human body. While there is no absolute connection between photographs of the nude body and pornography, the vaguely eroticized nature of the slave daguerreotypes derives from the unwavering, voyeuristic manner with which they indiscriminately survey the bodies of the Africans, irrespective of the subjects' lives.

Agassiz was undoubtedly influenced in this regard by his great mentor, Baron Cuvier, who took a particular—if not perverse—interest in the Hottentot Venus, an African woman who was exhibited naked as a curiosity in Europe because of her unusually prominent posterior. After her death, Cuvier conducted an autopsy of her body and published a text about its distinguishing

features.²³ The case of the Hottentot Venus marked the collapse of scientific investigation of the racial other into the realm of the pornographic. This sort of elision of the exotic and the sexually illicit explains in part the mid-nineteenth-century fascination with distorting the features of blacks in popular representations. In many texts (including Agassiz's letter to his mother), blacks were made not only animal-like or simian, but also vulgar and overtly seductive.

The Type and the Portrait

Given this history of the distortions wrought by typologies, it is particularly ironic that historian Alan Trachtenberg, in writing of the Agassiz slave daguerreotypes, refers to them as portraits and even likens them to classical Roman busts.²⁴ Here, it is necessary to draw the fundamental distinctions between the type and the portrait. Formally, the type discourages style and composition, seeking to present the information as plainly and straightforwardly as possible. Thus, the images are frequently organized around a clear central axis with a minimum of external information that could distract from the principal focus. Since objectivity is the goal, the typological image appears to have no author. (In the case of the slave daguerreotypes, authorship is irrelevant, though it clearly pertains more to Agassiz than to the photographer Zealy.) And, finally, the type is clearly situated within a system that denies its subject even as it establishes overt relations between its mute subjects. The emphasis on the body occurs at the expense of speech; the subject as already positioned, known, owned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as silent; in short, it is ignored. In other words, the typological photograph is a form of representational colonialism. Fundamentally nonreciprocal, it masks its subjective distortions

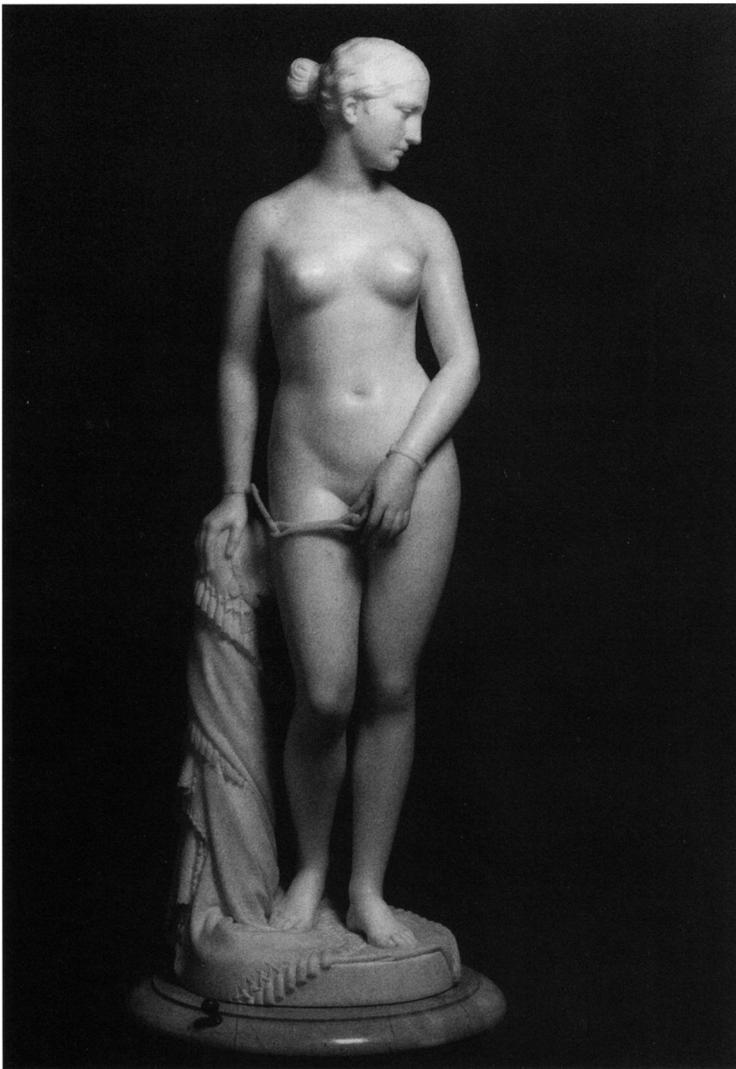


20 Pages from Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (1854)

in the guise of logic and organization. Its formations are deformations.

The portrait, on the other hand, is of value principally because of the viewer's relationship to the sitter, the ability to recognize the subject when he or she is absent. In this sense, the portrait is like a caricature that accents the telling features of an individual. Generally, the nineteenth-century photographic portrait was designed to affirm or underscore the white middle-class individual's right to

personhood, a fact underlined by legal and social structures as well. Further, the portrait signaled an individual's place in society, which explains why so many daguerreotypes feature sitters posed with the tools of their trade or other attributes. As Sekula makes clear, "Every portrait implicitly took its place within a social and moral hierarchy. The *private* moment of sentimental individuation, the look at the frozen gaze-of-the-loved-one, was shadowed by two other more *public* looks:



21 Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, 1869. Marble, 11.7 x 35.5 x 34.2 cm (44 x 14 x 13 ½ in.). National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mrs. Benjamin H. Warder

22 "The Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Powers' 'Greek Slave.'" Engraving published in *Punch* 20 (1851): 236

a look up, at one's 'betters,' and a look down, at one's 'inferiors.'"²⁵ Few slaves, however, had the luxury of projecting any look at all. That slaves were denied individual identity in the antebellum South is merely underscored by the near-total absence of photographs depicting them.

This process of social ranking was most apparent in the work of early criminologists, ethnologists, and medical photographers. In such fields, it was necessary to construct a standard, or mean, to establish deviance and thus identify and isolate the ultimate threat to the ideal. Trachtenberg has astutely noted the similarity between

the slave daguerreotypes and a slightly earlier project (ca. 1846) by Mathew Brady to record images of inmates at mental institutions.²⁶ These images, now lost, are preserved in the line engravings published as illustrations (fig. 23) to the American edition of Marmaduke Sampson's *Rationale of Crime* (1846), edited by penal reformer Eliza Farnham. Brady's images fortified Farnham's argument that criminals and cretins could be recognized by their outward appearance, that the mark of deviance was presumed to be emblazoned across the head and body like a stigmata. With the rise of urbanism and industrialization in

the mid-nineteenth century, such typological readings were deemed practical to protect oneself from strangers by immediately assessing their character.

This process of identifying another person by superficial physical characteristics structured the logic of racial classification. Surprisingly, such distinctions did not really exist before the nineteenth century. To be sure, various forms of prejudice and subjugation had existed in many societies, but prior to 1800, none of the variety of discriminatory terms and attitudes employed were based on race. Racism, as it emerged in the early nineteenth century, was a heavily encoded and naturalized belief that racial characteristics

The typological photograph is a form of representational colonialism. Fundamentally nonreciprocal, it masks its subjective distortions in the guise of logic and organization. Its formations are deformations.

and behaviors were grounded in biology and conformed to a qualitative hierarchy.²⁷ But, as historian George M. Fredrickson has argued, “for its full growth, intellectual and ideological, racism required a body of ‘scientific’ and cultural thought which would give credence to the notion that the blacks were for unalterable reasons of race, morally and intellectually inferior to whites.”²⁸ Agassiz’s slave photographs constitute a perfect example of the conjunction of scientific and cultural thought in the formation of racist ideology.

In attempting to understand the origins of racism, it is important to avoid removing it to a historical past or displac-

ing its sources onto the oppressed. Any investigation of representations of African-American blackness, then, must actually take a critical look at Euro-American whiteness to understand the construction of race as a category. As critic Coco Fusco has insisted, “To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it.”²⁹ In this regard, it is crucial to understand the arsenal of institutional means geared toward the enforcement of white male superiority. Photography, typologies, archives, and museums serve as disciplinary structures, socially constructed means of defining and regulating difference.

Like all representations of difference, Louis Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes exploit the familiar ethnographic convention of introducing the comfortable white viewer to that which is not only exotic and safely distant, but also generally and deliberately invisible. But not all designations of difference are the same. As Frederick Douglass noted in a review of the work of the American School of Ethnology in 1854:

It is fashionable now, in our land, to exaggerate the differences between the negro and the European. If, for instance, a phrenologist or naturalist undertakes to represent in portraits, the difference between the two races—the negro and the European—he will invariably present the highest type of the European, and the lowest type of the negro. . . . If the very best type of the European is always presented, I insist that justice, in all such works, demands that the very best type of the negro should be taken. The importance of this criticism may not be apparent to all;—to the black man it is very apparent.³⁰

As Douglass so pointedly noted, the meaning of representations is governed not only by who makes the image but also by who looks. If this view accords with much recent critical theory that acknowledges the role of the observer in constructing knowledge, it also points to the part that muse-

23 "S. S., a vagrant, formerly a prize-fighter sent to the State Prison for five years for assault and battery, with intent to kill." Engraving by Tudor Horton, after lost daguerreotype by Mathew Brady, ca. 1846. Published in Marmaduke Sampson, *Rationale of Crime*, ed. Eliza Farnham (New York: Appleton's, 1846)



S. S

S. S. is a vagrant, and inmate of what is termed the Luna House, on Blackwell's Island. He is an Irishman; was formerly a prize-fighter; was sent to the State Prison for five years for assault and battery, with intent to kill, and since his liberation, a period of some six or eight years, has spent most of his time in the city and county prisons of New-York. Before his mind became deranged, he exhibited great energy of passion and purpose, but they were all of a low character, their sole bearing being to prove his own superiority as an animal. He was both vain and selfish.

The drawing shows a broad, low head, corresponding with such a character. The moral organs are exceedingly deficient, especially benevolence, and the intellect only moderately developed. The whole organization, indeed, indicates a total want of every thing like refined and elevated sentiment. If the higher capacities and endowments of humanity were ever found coupled with such a head as this, it would be a phenomenon as inexplicable as that of seeing without the eye, or hearing without the ear.

ums and archives play in fixing meanings. By adhering to immutable versions of historical truth, such institutions structure information according to ideologically inflected principles. But rather than dismissing or rejecting these institutions, it is important to critically examine their

practices and to recognize that their versions of history are not absolute. Such critical methods will help foster multiplicity, subjectivity, and relativity in the construction of histories.

In the case of the slave daguerreotypes, this suggests that their meaning extends



24 Carrie Mae Weems, *Sea Island Series*, 1992. Three color prints: two panels, 50.8 cm in diameter (20 in. in diameter), one panel, 40.6 x 50.8 cm (16 x 20 in.). P.P.O.W., New York

well beyond the empirical proof that Louis Agassiz sought. Quite different—but no less valid—histories and personal meanings can be connected with these images. If colonialism and ethnographic exploitation depend on appropriation, one must acknowledge that what is taken can always be taken back. In 1991, for example, the African-American artist and photographer Carrie Mae Weems journeyed to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina to record the remnants of the culture of the Gullah, the survivors of slaves from Africa. Weems photographed brick shelters and other surviving records of the Gullah, producing a series of works

that combined texts, narratives, photographs, and plates. Among the images incorporated into Weems's works were old pictures of several slaves who had come from Africa—reproductions of Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes (fig. 24).³¹ She did not alter or transform the images; she only selected, enlarged, and recontextualized them. By placing them beside pictures of remnants of the African culture the Gullah brought to America, Weems viewed their lives empathetically from a black point of view. She saw these men and women not as representatives of some typology but as living, breathing ancestors. She made them portraits.

Notes

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," *Art Journal* 42 (winter 1982): 311–19. See also Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," *Parachute* 22 (spring 1981): 32–37; and Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *Massachusetts Review* 19 (winter 1978): 859–83.
- 2 See Martha A. Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1991). One of the slave daguerreotypes was also featured on the cover of the catalogue for the exhibition "From Site to Sight," organized by the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, and circulated by the Smithsonian Institution in 1986.
Agassiz's fifteen slave daguerreotypes are published here in their entirety for the first time.
- 3 On Louis Agassiz, see Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960).
- 4 For the best discussion of Morton and the American School of Ethnology, see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960). See also Stephen Jay Gould's classic *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), pp. 50ff. Gould restaged many of Morton's cranial measurements and discovered important discrepancies that demonstrated that there is little difference in the size of the cranial cavity of different individuals, regardless of race.
The culminating document of the anti-Darwinist American School of Ethnology was J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia, 1854), which featured an introduction by Agassiz. Nott and Gliddon, though distinguished scientists, were both rabid segregationists who distorted art historical and archeological evidence (mainly from Egyptian tombs) to promote their view that blacks were historically inferior to other races.
- 5 Agassiz to his mother, December 1846 (Houghton Library, Harvard University), quoted in Gould, pp. 50, 44–45.
- 6 Agassiz, quoted in Elinor Reichlin, "Faces of Slavery: A Historical Find," *American Heritage* 28 (June 1977): 4.
- 7 Agassiz, "The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races," *Christian Examiner* 49 (1850): 113.
- 8 See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).
- 9 For more on Gibbs and the plantation owners around Columbia, see Carol Bleser, ed., *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 10 See George M. Frederickson, "Masters and Mudsills: The Role of Race in the Planter Ideology of South Carolina," *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), pp. 15–27.
- 11 This daguerreotype, taken by W. & J. Langenheim, is reproduced in Melissa Banta and George Hinsley, *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography, and the Power of Imagery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 34.
- 12 For more on French attempts to use daguerreotypes for anthropological study, see Étienne-Reynaud-Augustin Serres, "Observations sur l'application de la photographie à l'étude des races humaines," *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l'Académie des Sciences* 21 (1845): 242–46; Hartmut Krech, "Lichtbilder vom Menschen: Vom Typenbild zur anthropologischen Fotografie," *Fotogeschichte* 4 (1984): pp. 3–15; and "Anwendung der Photographie zum Studium der Menschenrassen," *Dingler's Polytechnisches Journal* (Stuttgart) 97 (1845): 400. On Theisson, in particular, see Janet E. Buerger, *French Daguerreotypes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 90–91, 229.
- 13 Robert W. Gibbs to Samuel G. Morton, 31 March and June 1850, Library Company of Philadelphia. Although little is known about Joseph T. Zealy, we can imagine the slaves' shock upon entering his gallery. The local newspaper editor wrote that Zealy's gallery was "fitted up with great taste. . . . The room where he takes his pictures is handsomely furnished, and we notice therein an elegant piano, for the accommodation of his lady visitors. Immediately off this is an ante-room, for the proper adjustment of toilette, etc., by his visitors. It is magnificently lighted, having, besides numerous windows, a large skylight adjusted and constructed for the purposes of his art, and will undoubtedly insure a most perfect finish to his pictures." *Photographic Art-Journal* 2 (December 1891): 376–77.
- 14 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (winter 1986): 3–64.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 16 See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 141–48. For the etymology of the word *stereotype*, see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotype of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 15–35; on the uses of the word *daguerreotype*, see Alan Trachtenberg, "Photography: The Emergence of a Keyword," in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, Sandweiss, ed., pp. 13–47.
- 17 Herbert H. Odom, "Generalizations on Race in Nineteenth-Century America," *Isis* 58 (spring 1967): 5–18. See also Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographic 'Types': The Pursuit of Method," *Visual Anthropology* 3 (1990): 235–58. Edwards notes that the Société d'Ethnographie in Paris had initiated a master archival project recording "human types" as early as 1866.
- 18 Agassiz, quoted in *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 120. For information on the Branded Hand and the Scourged Back, see, respectively, Robert Sobieszek and Odette M. Appel, *The Spirit of Fact: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes, 1843–1862* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), p. 23; and Kathleen Collins, "The Scourged Back," *History of Photography* 9, no. 1 (January–March 1985): 43–45.
- 19 Morton, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia: John Pennington, 1839), p. 90.
- 20 Winckelmann, paraphrased in Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), p. 14.

- 21 See Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens & Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 22 Peter Camper, quoted in Honour, p. 14.
- 23 See Sander L. Gilman's important but controversial treatment of this history in "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Stephen Jay Gould, "The Hottentot Venus," *Natural History* 19 (1982): 20–27.
- 24 See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), pp. 54–56.
- 25 Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," p. 10.
- 26 See Madeleine B. Stern, "Mathew Brady and the *Rationale of Crime*: A Discovery in Daguerreotypes," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 31 (July 1974): 127–35. This series is also discussed in Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," p. 20; and in Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 57–58.
- 27 Literary theorist Anthony Appiah makes a distinction between what he calls "racialist" and "racist" discourses. The first involves a distinction of difference that may have no moral or evaluative distinction attributed to it; the second involves the application of that distinction to a hierarchical evaluation that signals the inferiority of one group in relation to another. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. Gary David Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 4–5.
- 28 George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), p. 2.
- 29 Coco Fusco, "Fantasies of Oppositionality," *Afterimage* 16 (December 1988): 6–9.
- 30 Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, on 12 July 1854," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blessingame, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 510, 514.
- 31 See Andrea Kirsh and Susan Fisher Sterling, *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), pp. 102–9.
- In conjunction with the Getty Museum's "Hidden Witness" exhibition (28 February–18 June 1995) of early photography of African-American subjects, Weems was invited to produce her own installation, "Carrie Mae Weems Reacts to 'Hidden Witness'," in an adjacent gallery. Using the format of her Sea Islands work, she rephotographed older images and added texts to comment on the photographs' hidden information and the changing representations of black subjects.