

SELLING SHADOWS AND SUBSTANCE

Photographing Race in the United States, 1850–1870s*

Mandy Reid

The advent of photography in the nineteenth-century United States functioned as a new tool that racial scientists employed to illustrate their theories about racial differences. The focus in this article is on the ways in which the camera allegedly captured the ‘essence’ of blackness, as Louis Agassiz, a prominent racial scientist contended. While racial scientists rendered slaves biological specimens, stripping them of their clothing, identity and anything other than their physiognomy, the former slave Sojourner Truth refuted such a reductive understanding of race. By carefully constructing an image of black womanhood antithetical to the ‘scientific’ understandings of the vast distinctions between Anglos and those with African ancestry, Truth reconceptualized the work photography could do to help Americans make sense of race. In considering scientific slave daguerreotypes alongside the cartes-de-visite Truth commissioned and sold to support herself, this article examines the relationships between a developing visual culture, racial science and sentiment and how they worked both together and against one another literally to illustrate the meaning of blackness in the United States in the 1850s–1870s.

The mania in the United States for photographs—particularly daguerreotypes and *cartes-de-visite*—that gripped the nation in the mid-nineteenth century marked an important stage in the development of American visual culture. Considered a means of recording relationships, illustrating personal character and defining national and individual identity, early photographic images also functioned as visual evidence for certain political and scientific ideologies. While cultural historians have charted the development of photography in the United States,¹ both they and literary scholars have neglected to consider fully the ways in which nineteenth-century photographic technologies were employed by racial scientists and American blacks—most famously Sojourner Truth—to define and contest, respectively, the scientific understanding of ‘blackness’ for the American public.²

In this article, I focus on the decades of the 1850s–1870s to re-examine the ways photography was used to capture the alleged essence of blackness. While photography functioned as an important epistemological tool for scientists because it ostensibly recorded the ‘truth’ of its subjects, I consider the largely overlooked slave daguerreotypes commissioned in 1850 by Louis Agassiz, a prominent nineteenth-century racial scientist, and suggest that these images worked to construct an explicitly scientific discourse about blacks. A decade later, the enterprising former slave and orator, Sojourner Truth, repeatedly sat for her own photographs, in which she can be seen as,

paradoxically, both a lady (a title usually reserved for middle- and upper-class Anglo women) and as a market commodity (the racial objectification inherent in slavery). Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes³ and Truth's self-interested marketing of her overtly sentimental *cartes-de-visite* in the mid-1860s and 1870s illustrate how photography facilitated widely different constructions of the black body. While Truth, as she advertised on her *cartes*, 'sold the shadow to support the substance'⁴ and Agassiz 'sold the shadow' to support the scientific theory of polygenesis,⁵ pairing the two reveals how, on the one hand, photography reinforced racial scientific discourse and how, on the other hand, African Americans appropriated this medium to create a new understanding of 'blackness', one in which images, not people, were put into circulation for *black*—not white—profit.

A Swiss natural historian whose expertise in fossil fishes was widely recognized, Agassiz, the 'father of American biology', was asked to 'help raise the recognition of science in America and establish the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard (now the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology)'.⁶ Inspired by a visit to South Carolina plantations with the paleontologist Dr Robert Gibbes, Agassiz undertook his task by documenting so-called 'evidence of polygenesis' through the production of scientific daguerreotypes. Though Agassiz was 'an avid proponent of photographic data',⁷ he was not the first racial scientist to capitalize on photography in the service of ostensibly proving scientific theories of racial difference. In fact, many of the early practitioners of daguerreotypy in the United States also worked as phrenologists. While phrenology fell into scientific disrepute in mid-century,⁸ the premise behind it and the visual representation of essential racial or characterological differences evident on the body's surface allegedly manifest in Agassiz's daguerreotypes is the same: the idea that certain 'types' of bodies reflect specific characters. Commenting on how phrenologists used visual images to chart the bumps on their clients' heads, Barger and White note that:

[Phrenology] was based on both visual and tactile information about head shapes, and daguerreotypes provided records of specific 'types' that could be studied and reproduced in journals. The nearly simultaneous popularization of phrenology by [the Scottish anatomist George] Combe and the Fowler brothers [Orson and Lorenzo, who founded the American Phrenological Association and started the *American Phrenological Journal*, both in 1838] and the introduction of the daguerreotype wedded the two professions together for some practitioners.⁹

As Susan M. Barger and William B. White make clear, the imperative to classify 'types' was a foundation of nineteenth-century scientific research. In fact, more than any other text, the great ethnological tome of the nineteenth century—Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's 1854 *Types of Mankind*—demonstrates by its title, essays and accompanying illustrations charting the various 'types' of peoples, the extent to which typology structured American racial science. Given that the daguerreotype in both science and popular culture 'provid[ed] new methods of insight', over and above the previously used pencil sketches like those seen in *Types*, it is not surprising that scientists like Agassiz, as well as the American population he wanted to educate about racial differences, considered this visual image 'a manifestation of truth itself'.¹⁰ Science at this time was one of the two primary cultural epistemologies, rivaling religion. Since

these images, these visual ‘manifestation[s] of truth’, captured the ‘inferiority’ of the black ‘type’, we can see how early photography and racial science functioned as mutually authorizing epistemologies that capitalized on their implicit value-free authenticity to impute value judgments about their black subjects. The equation of (racial) science with truth, and of photography with truth, collapsed into a constellation of technologies bolstered by the high valuation American society put on one and thus the other.

A ‘culture of imaging’¹¹

Daguerreotypy was the most popular and practical form of portrait photography in the United States between 1840 and 1860, after which it was supplanted by other forms of developing visual media, including tin-types and *cartes-de-visite*.¹² As cultural historians Barger and White note, the popularity of daguerreotypy was in fact a veritable American obsession: ‘[A]s many as 30 [*sic*] million daguerreotypes’ were produced during the heyday of the ‘daguerreian era from 1839 to 1860’.¹³ Contemporary newspapers labeled this phenomenon ‘Daguerreotypomania’, an apt description, according to Richard Rudisill, who states: ‘[W]e can cautiously assess the daguerreotype trade in America at eight to twelve million dollars a year by 1850 for the direct purchase of pictures alone, or about fifty cents per person for everyone in the United States.’¹⁴ The widespread appeal of daguerreotypes both facilitated and reflected the cultural work nineteenth-century photography was able to do in the first two decades following its introduction in America in 1839. The availability of inexpensive daguerreotypes, which ranged in size from 1? x 1? inches to 15 x 17 inches,¹⁵ and cost anywhere from 25 cents to \$2.50 depending on the size of the image and prestige of the studio,¹⁶ transformed developing visual technologies from a tool of the elite and professional into a truly democratic, cultural experience for those who purchased their own photographs.

The democratization of visual representation was but one element of the cultural work nineteenth-century photography did for individuals, ideologies and the nation. According to Rudisill:

As a basically informational and symbolic tool, daguerreotypy becomes, second, a didactic medium. If the facts in a portrait are clear enough and complete enough, a viewer learns something of the personality of the sitter. If the sitter is a nationally symbolic figure, the viewer can learn something about the character of the nation.
...

What made the medium still more valuable in terms of American ideas of the nineteenth century than either its utility or its didactic qualities was its universal application and impact. Photographs were conceived of as being scientifically accurate, and science was viewed as truth. ... Thus, if photographs were truthful, presumably they would not be subject to variation of effect from one viewer to another so that all the lessons learned would be the same.¹⁷

This universal interpretation of daguerreotypes functioned not only to ideologically codify the ‘truth’ of science, but also specifically to illustrate what abstract notions like ‘nation’, ‘race’ and ‘character’ might mean. As we shall see in Agassiz’s

daguerreotypes, this tool was a particularly useful means through which Americans could visualize the meaning(s) of perhaps the most contested and emotionally charged 'nationally symbolic figure' of the century: the black slave. While racial science did not consider the 'personality' of slaves relevant except as another marker of their difference from Anglos, photographs were, scientists contended, indices of the racial character of Africans and African Americans. Equally significant, the universality of daguerreotypes—both as material objects and as tools that explained scientific theories to the general population—solidified the mutually informing relationship between nineteenth-century racial science and visual culture. As Alan Trachtenberg notes in *Reading American Photographs* (1989), the developing visual technology of photography taught Americans a new way of seeing themselves and the world around them.

The near universality of the experience of sitting for one's daguerreotype circulated throughout America a new regard for visibility, for one's own image as a medium of self-presentation. The millions of surviving daguerreotypes ... show people learning a new way of seeing themselves in the eyes of others, seeing oneself as an image. A new form of social identity begins to emerge, to take shape and body, in these earliest photographs.¹⁸

Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes were intended to instruct Americans how to visualize blackness, how to see in the musculature and physiognomy of African and African American slaves essential differences that rendered them both distinct from and inferior to Anglo Americans. Thus, Agassiz's images function to educate Anglo Americans about themselves by showing them how different they are from black slaves. This method of (self-)definition operated at both the individual and the national levels. In fact, new visual technologies shaped both ways of seeing as well as nineteenth-century American culture. While Anglo Americans could define themselves in relation to what they were not (black and enslaved), the nation could, through the vast numbers of images put in circulation by 1850, define itself in terms of tangible representations of abstract ideals. Rudisill notes:

[Daguerreotypes] aided in developing an iconological definition of American character within the context of the nineteenth century. Even as individuals interpreted their lives in new ways because of the daguerreotype images they experienced, the nation also developed a novel awareness of itself because of the presence of millions of daguerreotypes as affective symbols each contributing its fragment of responsive awareness or feeling to the total.¹⁹

While many Americans capitalized on the new phenomenon, both as a market venture²⁰ and as a new cultural fad, their embrace of new visual technologies was, for the most part, not grounded on a scientific understanding of the photographic process. Rather, like many individuals today, most nineteenth-century Americans were intrigued by the images themselves, but largely ignorant of how they were produced. This lack of knowledge, however, did not decrease the popularity of photography. Before 1842, when photographers employed colour tinting to retouch images, vanity was the primary obstacle to making this 'mechanical technology acceptable in nearly

every household in America'.²¹ Average Americans' lack of comprehension, in fact, elevated the status of the photographic process from the realm of magic (for many, but not all) to that of 'pure' science. Thus, Rudisill remarks that: 'In general, the feeling prevailed that the mechanical nature of the process guaranteed its freedom from human fallibility. A common ground of trust was soon established which equated a picture made by the camera with the truth of a direct perception.'²²

The uses to which racial scientists put photographs, however, belied the 'truth' and lack of 'human fallibility' ascribed to the developing technologies of nineteenth-century photography. Initially daguerreotypy was considered a scientific breakthrough, a new means by which scientists could better understand the natural world around them. According to Samuel F.B. Morse, the first American to see and write about Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre's new technological invention, daguerreotypes functioned as improved, mobile microscopes. In his account to Americans published in the *New York Observer* on 20 April 1839, Morse wrote in reference to a daguerreotype of a spider that:

[T]his discovery is, therefore, about to open a new field of research in the depths of microscopic Nature. We are soon to see if the minute has discoverable limits. The naturalist is to have a new kingdom to explore, as much beyond the microscope as the microscope is beyond the naked eye.²³

This early recognition of the possible scientific applications of daguerreotypy gains even more resonance when we consider the work that arguably the most famous nineteenth-century naturalist, Agassiz, utilized daguerreotypes to do. The 'new kingdom' that photography opened up for 'the naturalist ... to explore' was not Agassiz's field of expertise (i.e., ichthyology), but rather the highly contested issue that defined nineteenth-century American culture: the question of racial differences.

What a spectacle! ... Ah! What tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech! (Walt Whitman)²⁴

Agassiz was fascinated by the slaves he saw on his plantation tour with Gibbes, as Gibbes makes clear in two letters he wrote to Samuel Morton. In the first, dated immediately following this tour, he wrote: 'Agassiz was delighted with his examination of Ebo, Foulah, Gullah, Guinea, Coromantee, Mandrigo and Congo Negroes', and found enough evidence to 'satisfy him they have differences from other races'.²⁵ In the second letter, penned after Zealy finished the daguerreotypes, Gibbes wrote: 'I have just finished the daguerreotypes for Agassiz of native Africans of various tribes. I wish you could see them.'²⁶ It is not surprising that Gibbes corresponded with Morton, whom he admired,²⁷ about Agassiz's work, for as Brian Wallis has provocatively suggested, Morton may have been the inspiration for Agassiz's interest in employing the 'new role of the camera as an adjunct of science'.²⁸ As Wallis notes, Morton 'had given Agassiz a daguerreotype of a young African boy he had exhibited before the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia'.²⁹ Given the scientists' overlapping ethnological interests, it is entirely plausible that Agassiz followed Morton's lead in trying to construct a racial typology with the help of a camera.

While the Morton daguerreotype of ‘the eighteen-year-old Bushman’ San, taken by Wilhelm and Friedrich Langenheim in Philadelphia in 1848, depicts a very youthful boy, eyes downcast and sporting an eight-button dress coat (see Figure 1), Agassiz’s daguerreotypes feature a far different construction of the black body.³⁰ In fact, although both Morton and Agassiz’s images worked to illustrate blacks’ allegedly lesser evolutionary development, the daguerreotypes are antithetical to each other in many respects. San is depicted in classic sentimental, upper-middle-class fashion: in fancy attire, with a posed expression and eyes averted from the camera lens. The slaves Zealy photographed, however, are stark naked (or naked to the waist) and, in the frontal shots, stare directly into the camera. The incongruity between their expressions and the overt purposes to which their typological images would be used is striking, for their clenched jaws and steely, level stares belie the hypothesis that the ‘type’ they represent is intellectually, emotionally and physically stunted in comparison to the Anglo ‘type’. Unlike San’s image, which could be placed in any nineteenth-century daguerreotype album alongside comparable individual and family photographs, the slaves’ images circumscribe them to the ‘place’ of the enslaved and disenfranchised. These daguerreotypes were not suitable for their own family photograph albums, for both family, save in the pre-eugenic concerns of Agassiz’s work, and the money by which to sentimentally document such relationships were denied them. Nor were the images suitable material for the albums of the Anglo families the slaves served for nude ‘typological’ images were far outside the scope of the usual purpose to which average Americans employed daguerreotypes. Rather, these images mark the slaves as, to borrow John Haller’s terminology, ‘outcasts’³¹ from the familial realm for they were neither individuals whose relationships by blood and marriage were recognized by society nor were they members of the Anglo family of humankind, as Agassiz’s espousal of polygenesis makes



Figure 1 © 2006 Harvard University, Peabody Museum Photo 35-5-10/53069 T1898.

clear. The slaves' subjectivity, ironically penned on the daguerreotypes in Gibbes' hand, re-inscribes their lack of status, for alongside their American-given slave names, Gibbes noted their owners' names and the African tribes from which they were taken and enslaved.

While the number of slaves in South Carolina in the 1850s numbered over 100,000,³² Agassiz was very explicit about the subjects he wanted photographed. Commenting on Agassiz's selection process, Reichlin notes that:

Agassiz concentrated exclusively on African-born slaves and their first-generation offspring. By means of this restricted sample he hoped both to define the anatomical variations unique to 'the African race' in its original form and to establish a standard against which to measure the permanence of racial characteristics among American-born slaves of more remote African ancestry who had been exposed to a temperate climate for several generations.³³

It is important to note that Agassiz's visual experiment was not a true comparison between Africans and their African American offspring (implicitly) with generations of 'normative' Anglo Americans for Agassiz never bothered to find representatives of the Anglo 'type' for Zealy to photograph.³⁴ Instead, Agassiz relied on both his audience's presumed shared beliefs about racial differences and the visual impact of stark images of slaves in various states of dishabille—from bared breasts and torsos to complete nudity—in order to prove the unspoken assumption of the daguerreotypes: vast biological differences between the white and black races evince their separate creations. The information Agassiz hoped to glean from these visual comparisons would show that essential biological differences and not an environmental factor such as climate, which was often used by monogenesists to reconcile visible epidermal variations with the Biblical story of creation, differentiated the white from the black race.

As Brian Wallis notes, the fifteen daguerreotypes Agassiz commissioned can be divided into two series, which he, borrowing from Alan Sekula's discussion in 'The Body and the Archive' (1986), labels the 'physiognomic approach' and the 'phrenological approach'.³⁵ While both series include frontal, side and rear views of the slaves, the 'physiognomic approach', which we see in the full-body images of Alfred and Jem, foregrounds the subjects' 'body shape, proportions, and posture'.³⁶ Posed in front of the photographer's standard headrest, Alfred and Jem were photographed in complete nudity and, like the others, stand on a lush, patterned carpet in Zealy's studio.³⁷ By contrast, the 'phrenological approach', which we see in the daguerreotypes of Jack, Delia, Renty, Drana and Fassena, focuses on head and torso shots (see Figure 2 of Jack and Figure 3 of Delia). According to Sekula, the 'comparative, taxonomic disciplines' of physiognomy and phrenology operated from the premise that 'the surface of the body, and especially the face and head, bore the outward signs of inner character'. As we see in the Agassiz daguerreotypes, the interpretation of the 'characterological significance' of the body 'required that distinctive individual features be read in conformity to type'.³⁸ In these images, as in much nineteenth-century racial science, the 'type' against which the monolithic construction of 'the black' or 'the African' was created and interpreted was the presumed normative Anglo 'type'. It is important to note that, as in much nineteenth-century work on racial typologies, the subjects' identities are subsumed under the 'type' they represent. Thus, although Gibbes carefully

noted the information that defined each slave's status as chattel, these daguerreotypes are not by any means equivalent to the personal daguerreotypes of Anglo Americans taken during the daguerrean era. For individuals such as Alfred, Drana, Delia, Fassena, Jack, Jem and Renty, the experience was anything but democratic: the expressions on their faces, as well as their various states of undress, illustrate that their participation in the photographic enterprise was not voluntary. The slaves' nudity, which Wallis likens to contemporaneous European photographic pornography, removes them from the realm of subject to that of object at the same time that the lush, upper-middle-class trappings of Zealy's gallery create what I am calling a 'shadow framing' of Agassiz's construction of blackness.



Figure 2 © 2006 Harvard University, Peabody Museum Photo 35-5-10/53040 T1870.



Figure 3 © 2006 Harvard University, Peabody Museum Photo 35-5-10/53044 T1874.

This shadow framing foregrounds the contemporaneous cultural project of sentimentality—a project that is nationalized, gendered and classed in interesting ways. As any examination of nineteenth-century photographs illustrates, the ‘look’ many subjects strove to represent in their personal daguerreotypes or *cartes* was their national identity—we see children holding small American flags, for example. Other images reflect the sitter’s gender identity—mothers breastfeeding, men bearing rifles and other such props of rugged masculinity, and children with baby dolls.³⁹ The use of other props like books,

flowers in vases, jewelry, marble columns and clocks, in addition to the sitter's usually dressy attire, lends the sitter's image the illusion of a class status that was in many cases higher than his or her actual class.⁴⁰ Popular studios lured potential customers with these props and, in fact, many, including Zealy, built their reputations on the basis of the ways in which they employed props to create sentimental images at the very same time as they marketed themselves as the capturers of 'nature' and 'truth'. According to the December 1851 edition of the *Photographic Art-Journal*, Zealy's reputation was well-deserved:

So life-like his creations seem
So true to nature every smile,
My cheated heart could almost dream
Thou wert before me all the while.
Let Zealy's magic art portray
The face I loved in days of yore.⁴¹

As Melissa Banta notes: 'Zealy's beautifully lit and remarkably detailed portraits [were] composed with an art he had perfected on the ladies of Columbia.'⁴² Given that Zealy's expertise was in *creating* through the use of props and soft, romantic lighting sentimental images that rendered his clients beautiful and lifelike (a significant talent, given the contemporary high demand for postmortem photographs), it is useful to read Agassiz's slave images within the contexts of sentimentality and nineteenth-century racial science. In this shadow framing, we see how the sentimental props of nineteenth-century photography, when used as a literal background against which 'evidence' of scientific theories of racial typologies were constructed by Agassiz and developed by the camera, subvert the project of sentimentality. Sentimentality was enormously popular at this time, and while its basic tenets were pervasive in society's ideas about gender and the domestic realm, it was most emblematic in nineteenth-century literature—particularly reform and 'women's' literature.

Literary sentimentality, as others have ably discussed,⁴³ relied on shared sentiment in order to develop connections between people widely separated by power, class, gender, race and even physical existence (as much of this sentiment was directed toward fictional characters). Agassiz's daguerreotypes, by contrast, employ some of the accoutrements of the sentimental visual image (e.g., soft lighting and thick carpets) while positing a reading of black inferiority that is antithetical to sentimentality's political enterprise: to ameliorate social conditions *through* recognition of commonality. While historian Alan Trachtenberg does not make the connection between nineteenth-century sentimentality and Agassiz's daguerreotypes, he does suggest that the slaves' visual expressions work to create a sense of connection with the viewers of their images.⁴⁴ He writes:

The illustrations are trapped within a system of representation as firmly as the sitters are trapped within a system of chattel slavery. . . . The Zealy pictures reveal the social convention which ranks blacks as inferior beings, which violates civilized decorum, which strips men and women of the right to cover their genitalia. And yet the pictures shatter that mold by allowing the eyes of Delia and the others [Alfred, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem and Renty] to speak directly to ours, in an appeal to a shared humanity. This represents an extraordinary achievement. Zealy allowed the camera and the silver plate simply to show the event.⁴⁵

Trachtenberg's interesting construction—'Zealy *allowed* the camera ... to *show* the *event*' (emphasis added)—removes both the camera operator and, implicitly, a nascent visual culture from complicity in such scientific experiments. While Trachtenberg's expertise in the field of the history of photography is well known, such comments reveal the limitations of his analysis here. Trachtenberg sees the unspoken sentimental urgings in these daguerreotypes, but he does not question the ways in which the overlapping of sentiment and science work against one another, both in these images and as nineteenth-century epistemologies about the relationship between the presumed white self and the black racial other. The complex nature of this relationship, as I am suggesting, is strikingly evident in the multiple framing strategies of Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes: the 'white' sentimental background, meant to soften the expressions and elevate the observable class status of Zealy's paying customers, here engages in entirely different construction work. In the Agassiz slave daguerreotypes, the framing of naked black bodies seen from almost every angle and meant to be interpreted through the lens of nineteenth-century racial science is itself framed by the 'white' shadow lens of contemporary sentimental photography. This double framing destabilizes the meanings of the images and shows how both science and visual culture worked to construct images of blackness, although the former was more overt about both the project and the ways in which it defined racial differences. As we see in Trachtenberg's analysis, it is easy to conceptualize the camera (and, by extension, visual culture) as an unwitting tool put to use by self-interested parties. While we cannot know for certain if that was the case in the Agassiz-Zealy relationship, these images leave no question that both photography and racial science here worked to depict a specific understanding of blackness. In the process, individuals such as Delia and Jack were used in much the same fashion as—and were as unable to voice dissent as—the photographer's sentimental props.

The question of voicing dissent, Trachtenberg goes on to suggest, is a moot one. The slaves do not need to dissent, and in fact it behooves both them and the viewer of their images that they neither pose nor protest. According to Trachtenberg, the imagined interplay between the slaves' expressions and those of the viewer turns into a redemptive, cathartic merging—an effect Agassiz surely did not anticipate. Trachtenberg explains:

The photographer takes no pains to 'portray' them or to elicit an expression. By obeying his commission to present them as bodies rather than persons, as biological specimens, Zealy allows them to be as they are: black slaves constrained to perform the role of specimen before the camera. ...

By stripping these figures of all but their bodies (and eyes), the pictures depict the base degradation of such relations. They also encompass the possibility of imaginative liberation, for if we reciprocate their look, we have acknowledged what the pictures most overtly deny: the universal humanness we share with them. Their gaze in our eyes, we can say, frees them. And frees the viewer as well.⁴⁶

Trachtenberg's contention that the viewer's recognition of the slaves' gazes 'frees them [a]nd ... frees the viewer as well' is deeply problematic. While this line of thinking may assuage modern viewers' discomfort at viewing such 'scientific' photographs, it by no stretch of the imagination 'frees' Jack, Jem, Alfred, Renty, Fassena, Dahlia and Drana, despite the 'possibl[e] ... liberation' Trachtenberg extols. What we see in these images

compellingly illustrates Susan Sontag's comment that: 'There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera. This is as evident in the 1840s and 1850s, photography's glorious first two decades, as in all the succeeding decades.'⁴⁷ We also see the ways in which Agassiz's agenda—and by extension, that of most nineteenth-century racial science—objectified those identified as racial others and in turn capitalized on that objectification in order to 'prove' scientific theories of racial difference. The modern viewer's visceral response to the look in the slaves' eyes—pity, outrage, disgust and/or sympathy—may elicit an identification, albeit from the safe remove of time, power and place. This moment of shared humanity, of which Trachtenberg is overly laudatory, perhaps as a means of compensation or as an attempt at psychic amelioration, however, is ultimately not redemptive—not for us, and certainly not for the suffering and 'base degradation' of Alfred, Jem, Jack, Renty, Fassena, Delia and Drana.

I sell the shadow to support the substance. (Sojourner Truth)

The meanings of photographs are uncertain, fluid and multiple, and one's interpretation of visual images is mediated through one's own personal experiences and knowledge about the images' production. As Trachtenberg notes: 'Like money and other commodities, photographs shift and slide in meaning. They may seem to offer solid evidence that objects and people exist, but do they guarantee what such things *mean*?'⁴⁸ While no one can 'guarantee' the meaning of a particular photograph, as we have seen with Agassiz, individuals in the nineteenth century did try to create both images and their significance. In the case of Sojourner Truth's *cartes-de-visite*, we see a multilayered self-representation that depicts a vastly different construction of blackness (blackness as selfhood, not pathology) than that imaged in Agassiz's daguerreotypes. Truth's visual self-representation through the medium of photography can be seen as an appropriated form of self-commodification that attempts both to prove her existence as a lady and to codify the meanings of blackness in the 1860s and 1870s.

While Truth was and remains a popular nineteenth-century personality, she is more widely recognized as an image, or feminist icon, than either as an author or as a former slave.⁴⁹ The familiar tale, spun by Frances Gage, who chaired the women's rights meeting in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, about a strapping black woman who chastised white men for denying women their rights while baring her bicep relies on visual imagery for its power, as does the appellation, 'the Libyan Sibyl', bestowed on Truth by another popular nineteenth-century figure: Harriet Beecher Stowe. The truth about Truth, however, is to be found neither in Gage's tale nor in Stowe's colourful but largely inaccurate 1863 account: 'Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl'.⁵⁰ While we may be tempted to turn to Truth's own photographs to discover the 'real' Sojourner, photographs and their significance, as we have seen in Agassiz's case, are constructed. I suggest that what Truth hoped her images would reveal was a different understanding of blackness than contemporary racial scientific accounts and the pernicious racialized stereotypes in American culture and literature circulating during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

While Truth had been peddling her *Narrative* at women's rights, abolitionist and religious meetings since its publication in 1850, she did not pose for photographs until the early 1860s. Although photography was immensely popular and relatively inexpensive, Truth did not capitalize on the medium as another form of self-representation until

she saw how others had begun to exploit the image of her that they themselves designed. After two well-known artists, Harriet Beecher Stowe and her friend, the artist William Wetmore Story, conceptualized their own renderings of Truth's image in 'Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl' published in 1863 and a sculpture entitled 'The Libyan Sibyl' showcased in the London 1862 World's Fair, respectively, Truth decided to sell her photographs in 1863.⁵¹

By the 1860s *cartes-de-visite* had supplanted daguerreotypes as the most popular and affordable type of photograph. This shift was due in large part to technological advancements that enabled photographers to produce multiple, albeit smaller, images (roughly $2\frac{1}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ inches) on one whole plate $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ inches in size.⁵² Unlike the daguerreotypes, which could only be produced one image at a time, the multiple printings of *cartes* allowed for both multiplicity and difference: depending on the kind of camera used and when the operator opened the camera lenses, one sitter could have multiple copies of the same image or several images with different expressions or poses during the same sitting. The production of a negative also enabled a sitter to reprint images at any future time he or she so desired. Inspired by the Duke of Parma's instructions to his photographer, Ferrier of Nice, in 1857 to produce small photographs that he could use as calling cards, *cartes* were introduced in Paris by Disderi, Napoleon III's court photographer.⁵³ In America, however, *cartes* were used not as calling cards, but rather as a means of providing and cataloging visual information.⁵⁴ Their small size, sturdy mountings and cheap cost quickly transformed these images into collectibles, which, like daguerreotypes before them, could be stored in special photograph albums.

Cartes, however, were more than popular collectibles: they became a new form of communication. As Painter notes, *cartes* were used in the 1860s as 'a handy form of publicity for authors (like Harriet Beecher Stowe), politicians (like Abraham Lincoln, whose 1860 *carte* by Mathew Brady was a campaign token), actors, and lecturers (like Francis Dana Gage), who used them as a combination of business card and baseball card, distributing them at personal appearances and through other outlets'.⁵⁵ As both commodity and visual communication, *cartes* were a logical tool Truth could use to supplement her income and, at the same time, support her reform work. Unlike her *Narrative*, which Truth sold for 25 cents, photographs did not require literacy skills and thus widened her possible consumer base. Selling her images for 33 and 50 cents each, for photographs measuring $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ inches and $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ inches, respectively, Truth reconstructed the narrative of her body as a material object; one that, unlike her slave body or the exotic, strapping bodies that represent her in Stowe's and Gage's accounts, remained fully within her autonomous control.⁵⁶

It is, in fact, in response to such a lack of control that Truth commissioned her photographs. I would like to suggest that we can see Truth's *cartes* as responding to several different constructions of black identity: racial scientific theories of black inferiority, questions about her own gender identity, Harriet Beecher Stowe's characterization of her as an exotic racial other, and the scantily clad black bodies displayed at slave auctions, one of which was more recently visually translated in the *carte* entitled 'The Scourged Back', published by McAllister & Bros. in Philadelphia, 1863 (see Figure 4).⁵⁷ By cloaking herself in the garb of Quakers and positioning herself among sentimental props, Truth employed photography to illustrate a different understanding of blackness and racialized womanhood. By distinguishing between the 'shadow' and the 'substance' in the visual iconography of her *cartes* and in the captions she appended to them, Truth



Figure 4 Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

implicitly countered the scientific theories of race that constructed African Americans as lacking in substance—in intelligence, aptitude and evolutionary development—and in the contemporaneous gender iconography that idealized Anglo women as the paragon of American womanhood.

According to Painter, Truth ‘sat for at least fourteen photographic portraits in seven sittings between 1863 and about 1875’.⁵⁸ These images, which are fairly homogeneous, depict Truth standing or sitting, clad in demure clothing and surrounded by certain props like knitting needles, books, vases or her cane. Some of the larger photographs are in fact enlarged copies of Truth’s earlier *cartes*, which suggests that she had copies reprinted from the original negatives due to high customer demand.⁵⁹ What Collins calls the ‘relatively plain and dignified backgrounds’⁶⁰ of Truth’s *cartes* are quite similar to the sentimental trappings of nineteenth-century photographic studios I discussed above. Reflecting Truth’s appropriation of the visual iconography of feminine domesticity, photographs featuring china cabinets, patterned carpets, a sturdy rocking chair, vases, knitting, books and spectacles show Truth as a matronly woman of means (see Figure 5). No markers of slavery, like the naked bodies we see in Agassiz’s daguerreotypes and in the ‘Scourged Back’ *carte*, label Truth as a former slave; in fact, as Collins notes, Truth took pains to conceal the stub of her amputated right index finger, which was cut off by a scythe during her last year in bondage.⁶¹

In all of her images, Truth is completely covered in stiff dresses with pleated material, stiff collars and what appears to be hand-knitted shawls, with only her hands and face visible. This choice of costume contrasts directly with both stereotyped images of lascivious black women and the partially clad Truth in Gage’s tale, whose bared bicep recalls both the story of when Truth bared her bosom to hecklers at one of her speeches who suggested publicly that she was really a man as well as the countless experiences of nude slaves on the auction blocks. In these photographs, black womanhood is discernable not through exposed flesh, but rather through sentimental props that simultaneously foreground and conceal Truth’s body. The sentimental props and heavy clothing also depict Truth more in the register of class rather than of racial identity, given the paucity of African Americans in nineteenth-century iconography outside of abolitionist circles. By presenting herself as first and foremost a lady, albeit one who is forced to, as the *cartes* themselves announced, ‘Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance’, Truth implicitly refutes the racialized caricature of herself in Stowe’s article, ‘Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl’. In this account of her first meeting with Truth, Stowe wrote:

She was dressed in some stout, grayish stuff, neat and clean, though dusty from travel. On her head she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban, after the manner of her race. ... No princess could have received a drawing-room with more composed dignity than Sojourner her audience. She stood among them, calm and erect, as one of her own native palm-trees waving alone in the desert.⁶²

In contrast to Stowe’s racialization of Truth, what Truth attempts to convey in her photographs is not African heritage or ex-slave status. Instead, she strives to represent herself as emblematic of what largely was considered an oxymoron in the nineteenth-century: a black lady. This assertion in the face of an American culture drawn along racial and class lines is significant, for in these images Truth challenges not merely ‘the



Figure 5 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

racial stereotype embedded in her nation's language',⁶³ as reflected in Stowe's account of headscarves and palm trees, but also and more importantly the scientific rationale for such stereotypes: theories like those propounded by Agassiz that relegate Africans and African Americans to a lower level of human development. By visually showing the nation what black womanhood looks like, through her prim and proper dress, demure gaze and position within a quaint domestic space, Truth gives voice to and provides redress for the speechless slaves like Gordon, whose lacerated back is featured in 'The Scourged Back' *carte*, as well as Jack and Renty, Drana and Delia, Jem, Alfred and Fassena.

By controlling the commodification of her image, Truth destabilizes the meaning of blackness in nineteenth-century American culture. In comparing her image to that of the South Carolina slaves Agassiz had photographed, we see how crucial the project of visually charting the meanings of blackness was to both American racial science and culture in the mid-nineteenth century. We also see how the new technology of visual representation was not the ultimate decoder of 'race', for, as Trachtenberg notes: 'All photographs have the effect of making their subjects seem at least momentarily strange, capable of meaning several things at once, or nothing at all.'⁶⁴ Reading the contrasting images of these slaves and the ex-slave Truth, we see how the brutality of racism is captured on film in the Agassiz daguerreotypes. We recognize the sentimental framework and understand race as a construct, not some biological essence that could be visually captured in photographs, and thus we as modern viewers recoil from seeing human subjects through the lens of racial science, as Agassiz wanted his fellow scientists and all Americans to do. The 'aggression', to borrow Sontag's term, inherent in photography is heightened, it seems to me, in the images Agassiz commissioned to 'prove' the theory of polygenesis. By stripping the slaves of their clothing and rendering them objects for scientific study, Agassiz, Zealy and the camera performed an act of violence—violence that itself is foregrounded by the sentimental framework of nineteenth-century photography. The disparity between the dual frameworks of racial science and sentimentality, as I have shown, undermines the meaning of blackness Agassiz hoped to document through visual images. This idea of documentation, or of visually representing the racial other, as opposed to the deliberate self-representation we see in Truth's images, reveals the import of what Sontag called the 'predatory' violence of photography. She writes: 'Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.'⁶⁵

Retaining 'symbolic possession' of herself in her self-commissioned and self-marketed *cartes*, Truth contests images of blackness that depicted blacks only as slaves and those with African heritage only as heathens. In looking at the images of Truth, who quite enterprisingly refuted racial theories and stereotypes such as those Agassiz and Stowe posited, we see how in 'selling the shadow' she employs the same visual technologies as Agassiz to differentiate between the 'shadow' of a pathologized blackness and the representation of race that sought to 'support' black subjectivity rather than objectify black bodies. What we, as modern viewers, see in these nineteenth-century images is not merely the fascination with a new visual technology nor an attempt to codify the meanings of blackness; we see how the camera lens captures not the truth, but rather the protean nature of the 'reality' of blackness in a very dark time in American culture.

Note on contributor

Mandy Reid is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English of Indiana State University. Address: Assistant Professor, Department of English, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809, USA. [email: mreid4@isugw.indstate.edu]

Notes and references

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1. Marien, Mary Warner (2002) *Photography: A Cultural History*, Harry N. Abrams, New York; Trachtenberg, Alan (1989) *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Hill & Wang, New York; Taft, Robert (1964 [1938]) *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889*, Dover, New York.
 2. One notable exception is Brian Wallis, whose 1995 essay ('Black bodies, white science: Louis Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes', *American Art*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 39–61) insightfully addresses these slave daguerreotypes and Agassiz's work within the context of how museums construct American culture.
 3. Given that Agassiz ordered the daguerreotypes to be taken and informed J.T. Zealy, through Dr Robert Gibbes, about what kind of information he hoped to visually record through the images, I will refer to these photographs as Agassiz's, not Zealy's. While most other historians of visual culture define authorship through the photographer, I do not think that is appropriate in this specific case. According to Mary Warner Marien, my position is not unwarranted: 'Today, Zealy's name is appended to the images, because in contemporary law and ethics photographers are understood to be the originators of their work. But in nineteenth-century terms, Zealy was, in this instance, an operator, that is, a person who exposed and/or developed photographs for those who conceived the pictures. The images were sent to Agassiz; they were not Zealy's property to keep, copy, or distribute' (Marien, *Photography*, p. 41).
 4. Sojourner Truth had this phrase printed on the bottom of her *cartes*. While 'shadow' was a contemporary term for nineteenth-century photographic images, it can also be read as a racial metaphor: the 'blackness' Sojourner sold was only an image, a representation, of her person. It is important to note the ironic reversals of this metaphor: a black woman is peddling 'blackness' to support both her daily existence ('I sell the shadow to support the substance') and her reform work, part of which entailed working for abolition and the rights of emancipated slaves. Finally, by distinguishing between the 'shadow' and the 'substance', Truth implicitly counters the scientific theories of race that constructed blackness as lacking in substance, as African-Americans were allegedly 'lacking' in intelligence, aptitude and evolutionary development.
 5. Polygenesis, also known as polygenism, posits that different ethnic groups were created at different times. This theory counters monogenesis, or monogenism, which

- adheres to the Biblical interpretation of creation in Genesis. Not surprisingly, many contended that polygenesis was blasphemous. For scientists (such as Agassiz) seeking biological differences which helped to justify slavery and the racial hierarchy of nineteenth-century America, polygenesis worked by contending that Africans and Anglos constituted different species.
6. Barger, M. Susan, and White, William B. (1991) *The Daguerreotype: Nineteenth-century Technology and Modern Science*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC/London, p. 80.
 7. Marien, *Photography*, p. 40.
 8. Stanton, William (1960) *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815–1859*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, p. 29.
 9. Barger and White, *The Daguerreotype*, p. 79.
 10. Rudisill, Richard (1971) *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM, p. 76.
 11. Banta, Melissa, and Hinsley, Curtis M. (1986) *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography and the Power of Imagery*, Peabody Museum Press, distributed by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, p. 11.
 12. Barger and White, *The Daguerreotype*, p. 2.
 13. Barger and White, *The Daguerreotype*, p. 2.
 14. Barger and White, *The Daguerreotype*, p. 2; Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 198.
 15. Banta, Melissa (2000) *A Curious and Ingenious Art: Reflections on Daguerreotypes at Harvard*, published for the Harvard University Library by the University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, IA, pp. 15, 17.
 16. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 294, fn 19.
 17. Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 181.
 18. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 29.
 19. Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 199.
 20. We see this fictionally depicted in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1851).
 21. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 25; Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 231.
 22. Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 231.
 23. Quoted in Prime, Samuel I. (1875) *The Life of Samuel F.B. Morse*, D. Appleton & Co., New York, p. 401; Rudisill, *Mirror Image*, p. 77.
 24. Whitman, Walt (1920) *The Gathering of the Forces*, eds Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, 2 vols, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, vol. 2, p. 114.
 25. Gibbes to Morton, 31 March 1850, Library Company of Philadelphia.
 26. Gibbes to Morton, June 1850, Library Company of Philadelphia; quoted in Wallis, 'Black bodies, white science', p. 45 and in Reichlin, Elinor (1977) 'Faces of slavery', *American Heritage*, vol. 28, pp. 4–8, esp. 4–5.
 27. Reichlin, 'Faces of slavery', p. 4.
 28. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xv.
 29. Wallis, 'Black bodies, white science', p. 45.
 30. Banta and Hinsley, *From Site to Sight*, p. 34.
 31. Haller, John (1971) *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859–1900*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.
 32. Fredrickson, George M. (1988) *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism and Social Inequality*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, pp. 15ff; quoted in Wallis, 'Black bodies, white science', p. 45.
 33. Reichlin, 'Faces of slavery', p. 5.

34. Marien (*Photography*, pp. 40–41) also makes this point. These daguerreotypes, a far cry from the contemporary sentimental and nationalist images Mathew Brady produced in his 1850 *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, were, on Agassiz's orders, taken by J.T. Zealy in his local South Carolina studio. Zealy handed over the final daguerreotypes to Gibbes, who in turn mailed them to Agassiz at Harvard, where they resided in the Museum of Comparative Zoology until the 1930s. At that point, they were transferred to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology where Elinor Reichlin, an employee, discovered them in the attic in 1976 (Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, p. 23, Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 53, Reichlin, 'Faces of slavery', p. 4).
35. Sekula, Allan (1986) 'The body and the archive', *October*, vol. 39, pp. 3–64; Wallis, 'Black bodies, white science', pp. 45–46.
36. Wallis, 'Black bodies, white science', p. 45.
37. The Peabody Museum at Harvard no longer sells these full frontal or full rear nude images for research and/or reproduction, although they are available for viewing on their website and are included in Brian Wallis' 1995 essay.
38. Sekula, 'The body and the archive', pp. 12, 11.
39. For illustrations of such examples, see Wood, John, ed. (1991) *America and the Daguerreotype*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, IA.
40. On props, see Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, pp. 19–21.
41. Anonymous (1851) *Photographic Art-Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6, pp. 376–377. As Trachtenberg notes, Zealy's reputation was good enough to transcend geographical boundaries. 'Zealy was apparently well known in New York. In 1852 Henry Snelling published a six-stanza poem by "M.M." dated August 18, 1851, titled "To Mr. Zealy, the Distinguished Artist, in Return for the Present of my Husband's Daguerreotype": "My husband's picture to life, / O bless the art to which I owe it," etc. Snelling comments: "Our friend, Zealy, of Columbia, S.C. [sic], is peculiarly favored of the Muses" *Photographic Art-Journal* 3 (April 1852), 257' (Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 297, fn 74).
42. Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, p. 51.
43. See, among others, the essays included in Samuels, Shirley (1992) *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-century America*, Oxford University Press, New York.
44. Obviously, one cannot impute intention to those whose circumstances left them unable to communicate their thoughts and feelings. While Trachtenberg's analysis registers as sentimental, his assumption of the slaves' intentions is and can be nothing but unsubstantiated.
45. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 56.
46. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 59–60.
47. Sontag, Susan (2001 [1973]) *On Photography*, Picador, New York, p. 7.
48. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. 19.
49. While Truth's autobiography, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time*, first published in 1850, has been 'neglected ... in the corpus of American ex-slave narratives', both Nell Irvin Painter, her most careful and prolific critic, and Kathleen Collins have examined the ways in which Truth employed photography as a means of self-representation (Painter, Nell Irvin, ed. (1998 [1850]) 'Introduction' to Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from her 'Book of Life'; Also, A Memorial Chapter*, Penguin, New York, p. vii.

50. Francis Dana Gage's account of Sojourner Truth's speech at the 1851 women's rights meeting was published in the New York *Independent* on 23 April 1863, and as Painter notes, Gage's radical feminism and the twelve-year lapse between the time of Truth's speech and the publication of Gage's account of it (which, interestingly, was published a month after Stowe's article on Truth), raise questions about the accuracy of Gage's recollections (Painter, Nell Irvin (1994) 'Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's knowing and becoming known', *Journal of American History*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 461–492). Stowe erroneously contends that Truth is a native African and that she has died (she died in 1883, a full twenty years later) (Stowe, Harriet Beecher (1863) 'Sojourner Truth, the Libyan sibyl', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 11, no. 66, pp. 473–481). The racial essentialism so characteristic of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* black characters is evident here as well:

[Sojourner] sang with the strong barbaric accent of the native African, and with those indescribable upward turns and those deep gutturals which give such a wild, peculiar power to the negro singing

Sojourner, singing this hymn, seemed to impersonate the fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, hunted of all nations, but burning after God in her tropic heart, and stretching her scarred hands toward the glory to be revealed. (Stowe, 'Sibyl', p. 477)

51. Collins, Kathleen (1983) 'Shadow and substance: Sojourner Truth', *History of Photography*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 183–205, esp. p. 188; see also Painter, 'Representing Truth'.
52. Darrah, William C. (1981) *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth-century Photography*, W.C. Darrah, Gettysburg, PA, p. 4
53. Taft, *Photography and the American Scene*, p. 139.
54. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite*, p. 4.
55. Painter, Nell Irvin (1996) *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, W.W. Norton, New York, p. 186.
56. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, p. 198.
57. See Collins, 'Shadow and substance', pp. 188, 204, fn 22; Darrah, *Cartes de Visite*, pp. 147–148.
58. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, p. 198.
59. Collins, 'Shadow and substance', p. 189.
60. Collins, 'Shadow and substance', p. 198.
61. Collins, 'Shadow and substance', p. 193.
62. Stowe, 'Sibyl', pp. 473, 474.
63. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, p. 198.
64. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xvi.
65. Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.