

*HOW IS THE RACIST GAZE  
PRESENTED IN PHOTOGRAPHY,  
AND USED AS A WAY OF  
OPPRESSING THE POWERLESS?*

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'How is the Racist Gaze presented in photography, and used as a way of oppressing the powerless?'

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This essay will look at racism and matters linking to a long history of slavery that are undeniably present in photography; whether this be photography being used to justify the slave trade, based on polygenesis; something that is highlighted in Chapter One. Additionally, Chapter Two will look at the use of images to categorise/ classify individuals, then Chapter Three will look into the recovery of images from slavery that act as historical documents. This idea of photography being able to reflect a part of history, or what we deem as being historical, links to this whole concept of people only being able to believe what they know to be true; what they see at face value. Although, critical writings which I will be focusing on, reflect a more in-depth conversation about these matters; how photographs really link to their histories, and how they were used in specific periods of time.

#### Chapter 1: Photography used as evidence

The biologist and geologist, Louis Agassiz argues that different races belong to different polygenic species; believing man not to be of one singular united species. Initially, Agassiz only applied his polygenic theory to animals and marine life, but after his first interaction with a man of a different race, as portrayed by Wahl, he recalled “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 colour of the palm of their hands” (Wahl, 1996, p. 133). From this, it is easy to detect a tone of abhorrence in the way Agassiz describes this black man using descriptive words such as “grimacing”, and “livid”. Therefore, connoting a being that is almost other worldly. Agassiz distances himself from this being by describing him so negatively. This extract comes from a letter that he wrote to his mother in 1846, a time where people could only really believe what was written about; there was no other way of finding out information other than the information that was printed in both newspapers and books. Thus, making it a common occurrence for people to believe falsified information that, like Agassiz’s depiction of a black man, was completely materialised.

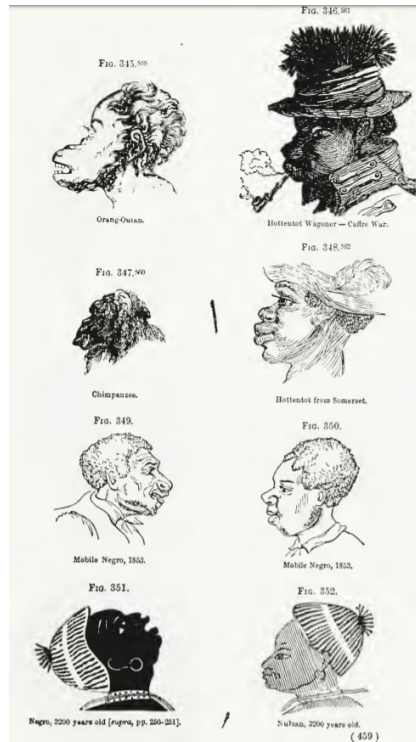


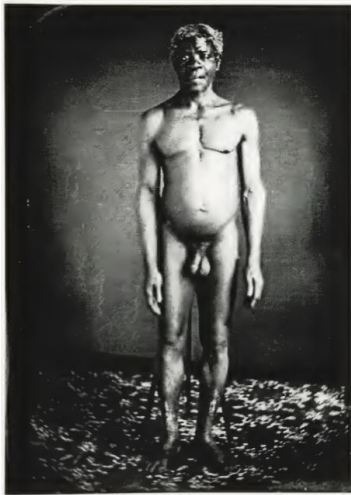
Figure 1 Nott, J. (1854) *Types of Mankind*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co, pp. 459, illus.

In order to convey this point of view, Louis Agassiz then decided to write an essay which appeared in Nott's *Types of Mankind* (1854), a book that, as seen by this image, comparatively depicts the features of an ape with the features of an African man. This comparison between man and animal completely reflects a prejudice superiority Agassiz acquired. Although Agassiz didn't actually illustrate these depictions, he did write an essay that supports this theory, and does compare the features of a black man to that of an ape, which creates a distance between the African man and what Agassiz deemed as the rest of civil society. Now that Agassiz had made his opinions very clear in this essay, he decided to work with J. T. Zealy creating daguerreotypes that displayed "African – born slaves and their first generation offspring to study their anatomic features." (Agassiz, 1996, p. 139)

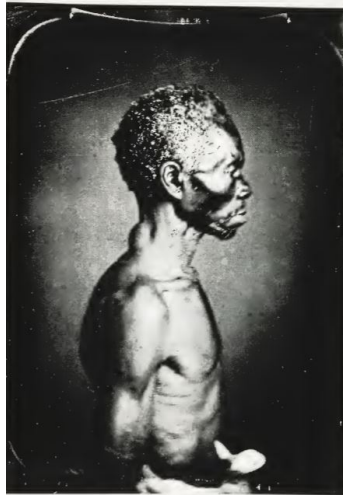
Looking at this from an outsider's perspective in the twenty-first century, it is easy to pass judgement that this is exploitation of the powerless; people who it seems have been forced into a scenario whereby they have no control. Therefore, in a way, it could be argued that through this act, and disregard for these slave's privacy, and human rights, Agassiz is establishing his power; the slaves are the ones to be observed, and he and the rest of 'civil society' are the observers. Although, Michel Foucault challenges this idea of power being possessed by certain people as he believed

power/knowledge. This idea that power is a product of knowledge. Foucault states that “Power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 63 ). Therefore, it can also be concluded that these slaves aren’t completely deprived of power as their knowledge holds power. Although, they aren’t able to utilise this knowledge, so therefore unable to utilise their power. This analogy made by Foucault is somewhat supported by John Tagg in his book ‘The Burden of Representation’. Tagg states that “Foucault’s work has shown, the production of new knowledges released new effects of power, just as new forms of the exercise of power yielded new knowledges of the social body which was to be transformed. Power and meaning thus have a reciprocal relation described in the coupled concepts of the regime of power and the regime of sense.” (Tagg, 1988, pp. 5 -6) Although, Tagg then goes onto say that “the chronology of change, which is unclear in Foucault” (Tagg, 1988, pp. 7). Therefore, although Tagg hints at the fact that he agrees with Foucault to an extent, although, he also questions certain aspects of Foucault’s analysis; how can the idea of power be so literal/linear with disregard to change, or evolution. With changing circumstances, power balance must also change to suit circumstance, or the knowledge that someone may possess.

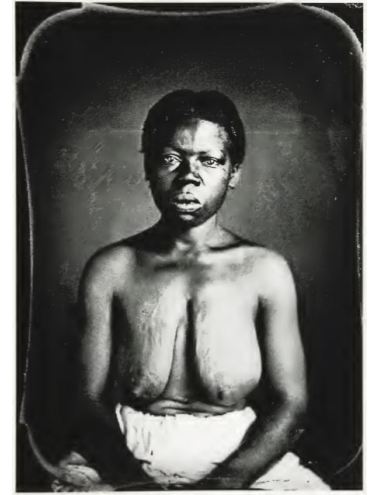
This brings forth the concept of a power imbalance, and therefore makes us question whether Agassiz’s studies linked to these photographs focusing on African slaves are used as a way of justifying the slave trade. As we already know, through his studies, he regards the African man to be on the same level as an animal, so it feels necessary to question his intentions. On the other hand, Wahl explains how “they lacked the statistical sophistication and could not have had the social prescience to conform to contemporary views on race, prejudice, and the conduction of science.”(Wahl, 1996, p. 143) He then goes on to say how for a twenty first century civilian looking at the studies of Agassiz, and those connected to him, we immediately deem his actions and words to be that of racism, “but closer examination of the political and cultural construct within which they functioned portrays the men as legitimate scientists struggling to make sense of their world through observation.” (Wahl, 1996, p. 143) So, it also can be argued that the Racist Gaze being applied to Agassiz’s daguerreotypes is something that we have constructed as a response to what is deemed acceptable in society. It could be said that Agassiz was ignorant in his approach to photographing these African slaves, and took little regard to their human rights, but at a time when this was all so common, he was conforming to a societal belief that was apparent at that time. This belief has evolved over time. It is now seen to most to be completely invalid, as a society in the twenty first century strives for racial equality and a power balance.



*Figure 2 Zealy, J. T. (1850) Jem Gullah, belonging to F. N. Green, Columbia, South Carolina [Daggeureotype] ?*



*Figure 3 Zealy, J. T. (1850) Rentu. Congo. On plantation of B.F. Taylor, Columbia South Carolina. [Daggeureotype] ?*



*Figure 4 Zealy, J. T. (1850) Drana, Country born daughter of Jack, Guinea. Plantation of B.F. Taylor, Columbia, South Carolina. [Daggeureotype] ?*

## Chapter 2: Photography used for classification

Photography being used to categorise human kind is present in some photographic works. Most notably, Edward Curtis focused his photographic studies on Native Americans, but photographed them in a way that conforms to many stereotyped views of Native Americans; in the traditional tribal attire. He labelled them as “the vanishing race”; a phrase that made people believe that they were a race that would completely disappear over a short amount of time. Although, this is not the case. In a way, it could be argued that Curtis did not mean for this phrase to be received so literally, but instead, just meant that the possible values that this group of people held were slowly becoming less valid. It is understood, by some that Curtis’ photographs were staged, as they potentially show a perceived idea of what a Native American should appear like.



Figure 5 Curtis, E. (1907) Esipermi - Comanche. Christie's Images/ Bridgeman Images. [Sepia Photogravure]



Figure 6 Curtis, E. (c. 1905) Black Hair, Indian. PVDE/ Bridgeman Images. [?]

The idea that these photographs were “romanticized” lends itself to the marginalisation of this race; almost as if Curtis has staged these photographs purposefully as a way of categorising these beings. Curtis adopts a manner in his photographs whereby, he is seeing them for what they are, not who they are. This is supported in these photographs through not using their birth names in the captions. Instead Curtis labels them as “Esipermi – Comanche” and “Black Hair, Indian”; Comanche being a Native American plain, so therefore Curtis denies them of a true identification, but rather labels them with aspects linking to their heritage. In a way, much like Agassiz’s daguerreotypes of African slaves, there is an emotional distance present between both photographer and subject. Both Agassiz and Curtis photograph their subjects as if they are solely to be observed; as if they were documents. This is due to the sole focus being on the subject, the blank space used as a background, and the direct gaze the subject has with the lens. The subjects are being observed, and know that they are being observed. So, the direct gaze straight at the audience makes it seem as if the observed are observing the observers.

Challenging the work of Edward Curtis is Maria Sturm, a modern photographer who is currently creating a project titled “*You don’t look native to me*”. This project focuses on young Native Americans within North Carolina, “where 89% of the cities population identifies as Native American”



Sturm (2011). Sturm reflects the concept of self - representation in her work; how this preconceived idea of the Native American, is in some ways invalid in modern times. For instance, the way in which Curtis portrays the Native American community is one of tradition; he tries his utmost to match a stereotyped view of how a Native American is meant to look, and appear. This was supported through his construction of images; introducing traditional attire, and props. On the other hand, Maria Sturm's photographs reflect a community that aren't just defined by tradition, or by the past. They are a community of people who are evolving at the same rate as the rest of society. Therefore, Curtis' initial categorisation of Native Americans, defining them as the "vanishing race"; as if they were slowly disappearing from existence, is a theory that is proven to be wrong. Sturm shows us how their traditions have evolved over time; how they may seem different to look at, but this does not sever them from their Native American heritage. They have only merely changed with the evolution of time.



Figure 7 Sturm, M. (2011) You Don't Look Native To Me. Available at: [www.mariasturm.com/you-don't-look-native-to-me/maria\\_sturm14-jpg](http://www.mariasturm.com/you-don't-look-native-to-me/maria_sturm14-jpg)



Figure 8 Sturm, M. (2011) You Don't Look Native To Me. Available at: [www.mariasturm.com/you-don't-look-native-to-me/maria\\_sturm24-jpg](http://www.mariasturm.com/you-don't-look-native-to-me/maria_sturm24-jpg)

It could be argued that Sturm subverts the idea of images being used to categorise, define or marginalise a race of people; in her documentation of a Native American community, she is trying to show how the community consists of many different people of different ages, different aspirations, different appearances, but they all still identify as being Native American, and also members of a progressive and evolving community. This idea of people being categorised or classified as a particular 'type' of person is supported in the works of Francis Galton, the pioneer of Eugenics; a study of people; their characteristics. Various characteristics were found to match a certain race of person, therefore, it could be argued that the act of 'racism' or marginalising a specific race of being was not created from this point onwards, but was most certainly more discussed in general society, possibly leading onto the 'Racist Gaze' being present in society decades after Galton's research. Galton believed that his exploration into eugenics was completely justified by stating that, "My aim [...] is to show cause for a different opinion. Indeed I hope to induce anthropologists to regard human improvement as a subject that should be kept openly and squarely in view, not only on account of its transcendent importance, but also because it affords excellent but neglected fields for investigation." (Galton, 1909, pp. 7).

This suggests that at the time of Galton writing this, he felt that not enough attention was particularly being focused on human nature, and the evolvement of human kind; why do people have different characteristics, and what features acquired by beings match that of racial depiction? Additionally, the inclusion of the word "improvement" definitely makes it feel as if Galton undermines the capabilities of human kind, and believes the state of humanity either needs to change or be improved. Whether this involves the concept of Race is yet to be revealed. Although, historically we do know that race plays a huge part in the theory of eugenics; how the features possessed by certain races are seen to be undesirable, whereas characteristics possessed by other races were deemed to be hugely desirable. Therefore, this leads on to racial supremacy; the idea that a particular race, in many cases, white beings believing that they have a superiority over other races such as, people from African descent. It could be argued that the theory of eugenics is one that almost promotes the idea of playing God; being somebody who possesses the power to change aspects of humanity for, what they believe, to be the better. Although, through the failings of generations, as a twenty first century society, we know this to be completely immoral and inhumane. No matter the difference in characteristics one human might possess to another being, all people have souls and human rights. So, therefore, Galton's exploration into eugenics could be seen as the starting point for many immoral acts that historically have taken place; although is not

the sole influence. It is important to understand that Galton initially looked at specific physiognomies possessed by convicts, London Jews, and inmates at a psychiatric hospital. Although, for his exploration to not cross over into the concept of race would be extremely unlikely, as he even shows signs of this interest in race early on in his exploration, looking at the Jewish community.

### Chapter 3: Citizenship and the deprivation of citizenship in photography

The work of photographer, Karl Ohiri, looks at the concept of racial depiction, and how these different characteristics between races can often make people feel as if they do not belong. In a way, it could be said that the Racist Gaze is something that has derived from the development of eugenics, so therefore, Ohiri's work almost looks at the fallout of Galton's explorations into race.



Figure 9 Ohiri, K (2018) A Year in Protest. Available at: [karlohiri.com/a%20year%20in%20protest.htm](http://karlohiri.com/a%20year%20in%20protest.htm)



Figure 10 Ohiri, K (2018) A Year in Protest. Available at: [karlohiri.com/a%20year%20in%20protest.htm](http://karlohiri.com/a%20year%20in%20protest.htm)

As you can see from these photographs, Ohiri challenges the whole idea of racial belonging, and how humans can be so quick to marginalise those who are different from themselves. The sign that reads "Send Them Back To Africa" is an example of races being distanced from one another through power imbalance; the need for one race to be supreme to another; to have ultimate control. This series of images by Karl Ohiri hones in on "the protest as a form of self-expression" Ohiri (2018) and how the form of protesting has changed drastically in recent times with the inclusion of social media. Therefore, it can most definitely be argued that the Racist Gaze can now be projected onto another

platform, rather than just being spoken; the words written are now permanent. Humanity passing judgement on other beings is something that will now remain in the online world, and potentially is left as evidence for generations after us, showing them the closed mind sets of many people in twenty first century society. Although, additionally, it could be true that different races having an instrumental impact on the way in which society works will also be projected onto the generations after us. For instance, the work of Maria Sturm reflects a community of people who previously had been labelled as the 'Vanishing Race', but yet they live progressive and unified lives; they also belong to the wider community of North Carolina. Ariella Azoulay discussed the "citenry of photography" (Photography and Culture, 2010, pp. 345) and how people can be marginalised, or even eradicated through photography. Azoulay's theory touches on this concept of belonging; something so evident in the work of Ohiri, and something that has been even more evident throughout this essay. Azoulay believes that photography can give people the power to be reflected as citizens; as belonging to a wider community, but also how photography can either misrepresent or deny them of any citizenship whatsoever.

In 'The Civil Contract of Photography', Azoulay consistently comments on the writings of Sontag, who believed that images often are "teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notion of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe" (Photography and Culture, 2010, pp. 346) This definitely could be seen as true in the sense that the subject can now be presented in another time / context from the one in which they exist. Although, now everyone is enabled to have some sort of opinion on the subject, whether this would link to contextual truth, or an opinion that is formed based on the way in which things seem. Thus, truth may not always be fully reflected through the photographic image. This then leads on to Azoulay, who really looks into the truth of representations in photography; how photography acts in the cizenry of human kind. "For Azoulay, photography ("taking photographs, being photographed, and disseminating and looking at photographs") provides a way to understand better the complex nature of citizenship with its benefits and impairments." (Photography and Culture, 2010, pp.?) Azoulay, therefore, emphasises the sheer complexity of representing the citizen; her opinions on the way in which certain photographers reflect certain groups of people could not simply be biased towards the way in which we think as a twenty first century society, but would need to be conscious of the era in which each photograph was taken. From this, we can then see how the works of photographers such as Agassiz, Curtis, Sturm, and Ohiri all take quite different positions when it comes to the reflection of citizenship, and the morals that surround the reflection of humanities cizenry; who reflects the truth behind the subject?

Similarly to Azoulay, John Tagg looks at the concept of representation in photography, and slightly incorporates Azoulay's citizen/non – citizen theory into his own explorations. Tagg additionally comments on the idea of categorising and classifying in images, and states that "What I go on to argue is that the coupling of evidence and photography in the second half of the nineteenth century was bound up with the emergence of new institutions and new practices of observation and record – keeping: that is, those new techniques of representation and regulation which were so central to the restructuring of the local and national state in industrialised societies ..." (Tagg, 1988, pp. 5). It is definitely evident in the way in which this is worded that the photography in the nineteenth century was more often than not used as a way of observing and "record – keeping"; it was used as a way of classification when it came to looking at representations of beings. For instance; the criminal, the mentally ill, races etc. For someone of modern times, looking through this lens in a time where people were so segregated by difference, it is easy to see that these observations of beings would often lend themselves to the categorising of beings, and even more so would dictate as to whether someone was classed as a true citizen or not.

#### Chapter 4: The recovery of images from slavery

It can be understood that there is a correlation between slavery being shown in photographic images, and the historical evolution of race; how Western civilisation regards race. Although, in modern society, there are still remnants/evidence of the slavery that was so present in society at various points in time. The recovery of images from slavery has acted instrumental in the development of knowledge in regards to history, and these images also influence many works created by artists nowadays. For instance, the work of Carrie Mae Weems focuses on "family relationships, cultural identity, sexism, class, political systems, and the consequences of power." Weems (2019). Weems is an artist who is of African descent, and highlights how a power imbalance, and the consequences of the misuse of power have affected not only people of the same race, but her ancestors; those who she holds close to her heart. Carrie Mae Weems' project 'From here I Saw What Happened and I Cried' is a project that incorporates archival imagery; some images coming from Agassiz and Zealy's explorations, with powerful and emotive words. These words support this reflection on slavery, and really establish this link between Carrie Mae Weems and her own racial heritage. Therefore, this is a clear example of an artist who is utilising the work of someone else, which has very negative connotations. Weems instead is making others aware of the deep suffering that many African born people had to endure as a result of white supremacy. This body of work

shows how the Racist Gaze evolves over time, as it can now be used as a way of educating others, and teaching people about the mistakes of the past. It could be argued that this work has so much more instrumental value in the development of the Gaze on human kind, as Weems has repossessed control. She is now able to depict her heritage; her history in the way in which she wants to, instead of an 'outsider' photographing her community through a lens that is so tainted by traditional Western beliefs and ideas. Therefore, it could be said that Carrie Mae Weems changes the Gaze of these archival photographs from being Racist, to being very much a powerful and sympathetic view of African culture.

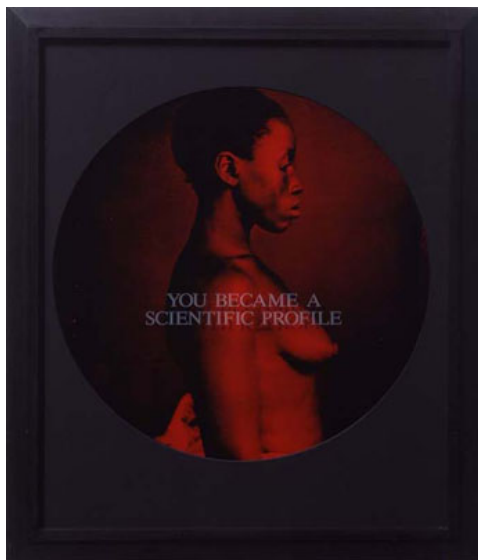


Figure 11 Weems, C (1995 - 1996) From *Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. Available at: [carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html)



Figure 12 Weems, C (1995 - 1996) From *Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. Available at: [carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html](http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html)

Linking to this body of work created by Carrie Mae Weems, Joan Fontcuberta looks in depth at the concept of eugenics, and matters that stem from this. In Fontcuberta's book 'Pandora's Camera', Fontcuberta goes on to say that "Equating political prisoners with antisocial psychopaths and justifying ethnic cleansing are just two of the aberrations that resulted from the over – zealous application of some of the dubious notions implicit in Darwinism. The denouncing of these practices has been the work not only of historians but also of many contemporary artists who have engaged in critical deconstruction of the graphic methodologies of eugenics." (Fontcuberta, 2013, pp. 9) This whole idea of present society; both historians and artists being able to deconstruct these concepts is something that is so present in the work of Weems, Sturm, and Ohiri. All of these artists really look at the way in which communities have been misrepresented through time, and they go on to develop their work from there. They are able to give a voice to various races of people, both past generations and present generations, that have been oppressed historically, or have in some ways been misrepresented by those who just simply do not understand. The fact that Fontcuberta

believes these past methodologies to be “dubious” highlights how, as a photographer in the twenty first century, he is able to regard these explorations by anthropologists as being nothing more than unreliable, and in many cases, completely fabricated. He is able to remark on something in hindsight. Although, in ‘Pandora’s Camera’, Fontcuberta does look at the work of others such as Petrus Camper, who was a physician in the nineteenth century, and “drew a series of skulls ordered according to what he regarded as a regular succession: apes, orangutans, Africans, a Hottentot, a native of Madagascar, a Chinese, a Kalmyk and various Europeans”. (Fontcuberta, 2013, pp. 4) This clear division that Camper created between different kinds of beings shows how a lot of the exploration into eugenics relied so much so on this idea that races of people were so different; that they derived from different beginnings possibly. Therefore, the views of Camper definitely challenge that of Fontcuberta as at the time, he believed his studies to be justified through the “evidence” seen in his research. Although, it’s evident to us that these are merely unjustified experiments when it comes to looking at the physiognomy of human kind. Camper merely looks at the physical traits of people, and doesn’t delve into the psyche of people; who people truly are; what they stand for. Therefore, just by looking physically at someone of African descent, how can you justify slavery based on the grounds of them simply appearing differently to what you consider to be the ‘norm’? I should hope that most people nowadays would simply answer, you cannot.

The contents of this debate show how complex this idea of the Racist Gaze really is, as it evolves with time; aspects in society that are suitable at one point in time will not always be accepted by mainstream society decades later. This essay clearly focuses on how the Racist Gaze is presented in historical images, but also how this idea of racism has completely been flipped in modern day photography; photographs that challenge the Racist Gaze. This essay really challenges the views of twenty first century society when looking at these images of slavery; how these innocent people were subject to a society that had little regard to their rights as humans; they focused more so on the physical differences, that segregated them from the rest of what they deemed to be ‘civil society’.

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