

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

The First Photos of Enslaved People Raise Many Questions About the Ethics of Viewing

By Parul Sehgal

Sept. 29, 2020

For a century, they languished in a museum attic. Fifteen wooden cases, palm-size and lined with velvet. Cocooned within are some of history's cruelest, most contentious images — the first photographs, it is believed, of enslaved human beings.

Alfred, Fassena and Jem. Renty and his daughter Delia. Jack and his daughter Drana. They face us directly in one image and stand in profile in the next, bodies held fixed by an iron brace. The Zealy daguerreotypes, as the pictures are known, were taken in 1850 at the behest of the Harvard zoologist Louis Agassiz. A proponent of polygenesis — the idea that the races descended from different origins, a notion challenged in its own time and refuted by Darwin — he had the pictures taken to furnish proof of this theory.

Agassiz wanted images of barbarity, and he got them — implicating only himself. He had hand-selected his subjects in South Carolina, seeking types — “specimens,” as he put it — but each daguerreotype reveals an individual, deeply dignified and expressive. Their hurt, contempt, fatigue, utter refusal are unequivocal. The photographer, Joseph T. Zealy, who specialized in society portraits, did not alter his method for the shoot; he carried on as usual, using the same light, the same angles, giving the images their unsettling, formal perfection.

Agassiz showed the pictures only once. They were then tucked away at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Rediscovered in 1976, they have been at the center of urgent debates about photography ever since.

Is there a correct way to regard these images? Should one view them, or any coerced image, at all? To whom do they belong? Do they quicken or numb the conscience? Does displaying them traumatize the living? Is it care or cowardice to keep them concealed? What do we owe the dead?

I am looking at the pictures now, in a handsome recently published volume; the deep crimson of its cover matches the plush interior of the portrait cases. “To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes,” edited by Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers and Deborah Willis, convenes a group of scholars of slavery, American history, memory, photography and science. Their aim is to tell “more fully the complex story of the people in these iconic images.”

The specialists attend to their own sections, like the far corners of an immense puzzle. Slowly the era is pieced together in lavish detail, through histories of the daguerreotype and reconstructions of the daily lives of the subjects. The artist Carrie Mae Weems discusses her famous reinterpretation of the photographs. The novelist Harlan Greene delves into the racist history of South Carolina, where 165 years to the day after Zealy completed the series, a white teenager named Dylann Roof posted snippets of 19th-century racist pseudoscience on social media, and killed nine Black congregants of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Do these essays — so rich in context — assist us in seeing the photographs any better? Perhaps a better question is: Do they provide the *necessary* context? Do they resolve that tension I feel as I look at Drana and register both the appeal in her eyes and the absolute certainty (for she is proud — I feel it in the set of her chin) that she would hate being in this book, perhaps even hate being invoked in this essay — unclothed, stared at, opined upon? And yet the notion that she be forgotten, unseen, is also intolerable. It is the tension of “sitting in the room with history,” as the poet Dionne Brand has written.

It is the tension and the buried irony in the title “To Make Their Own Way in the World,” plucked from an essay by Frederick Douglass. Douglass, the most photographed American of the 19th century, is a recurrent character in this book. There’s no evidence that he knew of the daguerreotypes, but he spoke publicly against pseudoscience, and, like Sojourner Truth, cannily publicized his image as a counternarrative to racist portrayals. In “Lecture on Pictures,” he lauded the democratization of the daguerreotype. He wrote: “Pictures, like songs, should be left to make their own way in the world. All they can reasonably ask of us is that we place them on the wall, in the best light, and for the rest allow them to speak for themselves.”

At first glance, it’s an unimpeachable sentiment. The editors clearly want to give the viewer ample background information and then trust her and the photograph. Compare it to, say, the recent furor over four museums canceling a retrospective of the work of Philip Guston, worried that his depictions of the Ku Klux Klan lacked sufficient framing.

What’s curious about the title is that the story of the Zealy daguerreotypes is one of fraught and contested possession. Harvard, which owns the photographs, long zealously guarded the copyright, threatening to sue Weems, who duplicated the images in her 1995 series “From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried.” After deciding that she had a moral if not a legal case, Weems encouraged the lawsuit: “I think actually your suing me would be a really good thing,” she has remembered telling Harvard. “You *should*. And we should have this conversation in court. I think it would be really instructive for any number of reasons.” Harvard ended up acquiring the series.

In 2019, Tamara Lanier, a retired probation officer living in Connecticut, claimed to be a direct descendant of Renty. Her family had long passed down stories about “Papa Renty,” and Lanier devoted herself to finding him, combing census and death records and slave inventories, finally locating him in South Carolina.

Lanier’s findings have been verified by genealogists, including Toni Carrier, a contributor to the PBS series “African-American Lives,” hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who writes the introduction to this book. Lanier’s revelation arrives in the midst of decolonial movements around the world, calls for museums to repatriate stolen relics and universities examining their ties to slavery. She has found popular support. Forty-three descendants of Agassiz signed a letter to Harvard University President Lawrence S. Bacow asking the school to turn over the photographs. This month, the Harvard Undergraduate Council unanimously voted to pass a statement condemning the university’s ownership of the daguerreotypes, writing: “Imagine your great-grandparents were enslaved, exploited, forced to strip naked, photographed against their will, those photographs are publicly shared today ... and there was nothing you could do about it.”

A few contributors to this book have expressed skepticism about Lanier’s lineage — although only Gates mentions her directly. Rogers, one of the editors and the author of a previous book about the images, “Delia’s Tears,” maintains that tracing heredity under slavery is complex. “It’s not necessarily by blood,” she has said of family records. “It could be people who take responsibility for each other.” In his introduction, Gates downplays Lanier’s

connection to Renty. “In a larger sense, can any one person be the heir of these photographs, or does the responsibility for them fall to all of us to protect them as archival relics of history, to be studied, pondered and reckoned with?”

It’s an odd statement. Why would Lanier’s claim threaten the “pondering” and protection of the pictures? What does he imagine Lanier has in mind for them? Already some writers have taken to approaching her directly, to symbolically ask for her permission to use the images — Thomas A. Foster, for example, author of “Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men.” Lanier encouraged him, he has said, because “she believes that the story of the daguerreotypes and of exploitation under slavery, need to be told.” Lanier’s own lawyer has stated that one ideal use of the pictures could be a traveling exhibit.

But in one respect, Gates is absolutely correct. If Lanier has a claim, the photographs will no longer be known only as “archival relics.” Renty and Delia are not relics to Lanier — they are family. Renty is known not as an object of study but a source of comfort and pride, the star of the family bedtime stories, a man who secretly taught himself and others to read. In Lanier’s accounts, he was never invisible, never lost, never in need of “discovery.” What kind of scholarship, what kind of criticism will he prompt if seen this way — not as a figure in need of reclamation or object of fascination but as an ancestor deserving of protection, whose memory has been improbably preserved?

Daguerreotypes, as is often noted, are sensitive, mirrored surfaces. You need to find the precise angle that blocks out your own reflection. Everything you see depends on where you stand.

Follow Parul Sehgal on Twitter: [@parul_sehgal](https://twitter.com/parul_sehgal).

To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes

Edited by Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers and Deborah Willis

Illustrated. 485 pages. Peabody Museum Press/Aperture. \$60.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Giving Old Images New Power