

**(Em)bodying the Frame, Enframing the Captive Body: Louis Agassiz's
Daguerreotypes, the Scientific Observer and circum-Atlantic Modernity in the mid-
Nineteenth Century**

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In this paper I intend to critically revisit the “Slave Daguerreotypes” commissioned by Swiss-born naturalist Louis Agassiz and taken by daguerreotypist J.T. Zealy in South Carolina in 1850. Already a prominent figure in the fields of geology and zoology when he arrived to the United States in 1846, Agassiz undertook an interest in the study of the evolution of races, disseminating a theory of “polygenism” which held that each race had evolved from a discrete origin. Moreover, these theories would play a leading role in the development of various forms of scientific racism during the immediate emancipation era. Constituting a central part of these discussions on natural history and race, the daguerreotypes in question require reexamination due to their historical embeddedness in the transnational history of “racist science” as well as the photographs’ signal role in the larger, contested history of black representation in the post-emancipation era. In addition, I will examine how Louis Agassiz’s commissioned daguerreotypes are the product of a transatlantic exchange structured by the confluence of modern scientific inquiry, imperialism, and a plantation-based visuality in the mid-nineteenth century. Pursuing this research agenda, this paper will argue that the “originary violence” of the photographic event that produced the enslaved subjects within Agassiz’s frame, as well as the ensuing material reality of the photographs themselves, may help destabilize established narratives of modernist science as well as of so-called Anglo-American modernity itself.

Keywords: Louis Agassiz, Race, Photography, Science, Slavery, Archive, Materiality

*Please note that this paper is part of a larger panel entitled "Critiques of Power: Gender, Race, and Capital." The panel will consist of Margaret Luddy, Nikita Rumsey, and Janna Nunziato from SUNY Geneseo. We would like Professor Tze-ki Hon from SUNY Geneseo to serve as the panel chairman and Professor Todd Goehle to serve as the panel commentator.