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Delia and Truth: a visual confrontation between two African American women

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SHADOW

Someone wants your body.

What's the deal?
Beg, borrow, buy, or steal?
Gutter or pedestal?
That's how it is with bodies
that someone wants.

What's it worth to you?
A rose, a diamond,
a cool million, a joke, a drink?
The fiction that this one likes you?

You could bestow it, this body,
like the generous creature you are,
or blackout and have it snatched
and you'd never know.

Kiss it goodbye, the body
that was once yours.
It's off and running,
it's rolled in furs, it's dancing
or bleeding out in a meadow.

You didn't need it anyway,
it attracted too much attention.
Better with only a shadow.

Someone wants your shadow.

Margaret Atwood

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INTRODUCTION

This work was born from a personal interest in the topic of African Americans and their relationship with slavery. What intrigued me was the way in which, since their first arrival in the colonial United States, black Americans have occupied the last place in the history of the nation, despite their very well-known involvement in its development. This controversial relationship where African Americans contribution was evident and at the same time concealed, puzzled me and motivated me in wanting to discover more about it.

In addition to this, I have always been fascinated by the multilayered nature of photography, with its incredible potential of conveying a meaning in an effective and immediate way. Therefore, as soon as I first encountered Zealy's daguerreotypes, I knew that this was the occasion I had to merge these interests and to learn more about blackness, photography, and the United States. Furthermore, I was happy to dive into this topic given that this summer I had the possibility to travel to Chicago, Illinois, where I managed to visit the Chicago Public Library, Harold Washington Library Center and its section dedicated to the studies on blackness, and where I could examine some material useful for the writing of my thesis.

The first daguerreotype I saw was the one of Delia. With her eyes filled by tears, her gaze captured me. Her face marbled in the silver plate of the daguerreotype instilled in me the eagerness to know this woman, to discover her story and to learn more about the circumstances that brought her there. However, the more I studied her, the more I realized that this was not enough. I needed to find something else that could shed lights not only on Delia, but also on the social situation of the United States in the 1850s. Delia was only half of the story and in order to get a full-fledged knowledge of nineteenth century America, it was necessary to uncover and present the other side. Reading about the African American woman photographed by Zealy, I came across another black woman, whose circumstances allowed her to have a different kind of life. Abolitionist Sojourner Truth was often presented by scholars in opposition to Delia, for her lifestyle, choices, and agency in the American world. Sojourner was the other half I was looking for.

Once I gathered enough materials on the two women and their relationship with photography and nudity, I decided to base my thesis on the oppositions between them.

Delia was the passive object forced to undergo the whims of white Americans, and Truth was the black subject who succeeded and was able to fight against abolitionism and racial and social discrimination. Even their representations in the photographs chosen were proof of this confrontation: the first one forcibly naked, the second one well dressed, with books on the table.

As my research progressed, I realized that my thesis was going on a different direction than the one expected. The differences that initially appeared to be undeniable, slowly lost their evident aspect and the boundaries between the two women blurred. Delia and Sojourner Truth turned out to be both forgotten subjects and African American women essential for American society of our generation.

My intent with this thesis was not that of analyzing every possible annotation on African American women and their visual representation in the 1850s. If this was the case, a hundred-page thesis would not be enough to cover even half of the materials available on this topic. My focus had to be narrowed. Even with regard to the life and deeds of the two African Americans, in Chapter One I will not dwell long on them. Only what I considered to be strictly related and important for my thesis will be presented.

As far as Chapter Two is concerned, a more theoretical excursus is proposed with respect to the photographic representation of Delia and Truth and their being directly or indirectly disrobed in two different occasions. Even in this case, my work had to be focused only on a very tiny part of scholars' analyses on the black body and the photographic eye.

On the contrary, my major interest in this work was to create a space where I could deepen and reflect on the role of two apparently different African American women that proved to share more than what it was initially expected. This similarity between the two women will be demonstrated in Chapter Three in which I propose some revisitations of the images of Delia and Truth made by modern artists. This chapter will provide an analysis of the way in which Delia and Truth are seen by modern society and how they keep being influential even more than a century after their death.

To conclude, my goal was that of presenting them not only as examples of African American violent past in slavery, but most importantly as representatives of the critical and controversial nature of American society and history.

CHAPTER 1. DAGUERREOTYPE: A CULTURAL CHANGE

Photography traces its public debut to the joint meeting of the Academy of Science and the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, on August 19, 1839. Conventionally speaking, this can be considered the date of birth of the medium that successively evolved and became such a strong presence in our contemporary world. The aim of this chapter is to analyze primarily two different evolutions of photography: daguerreotypes and *cartes de visite*. This narrowing of the focus implies that the following study will concentrate on the tip of the iceberg, meaning that all the decades preceding 1839 with all their attempts and observations of the role and functioning of the light and lenses will be omitted, even though these years played a vital role for the final outcome which probably would not have been the same without them.

In an epoch that was undergoing technical and social changes as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, the desire for a means that could allow a reliable visual representation of reality and that might be available not only to the highest ranks of the society, but also to the newly raised middle class, was spreading mainly among the bourgeois. As a matter of fact, realist portraits were out of reach of the middle class, while what later would be known as photography was more affordable and easy making. In the years antecedent the official invention, many attempts had been made to record the visible world through the use of light. However, none of these gave a proper result. It is with the work of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre that the correct process of capturing reality as it appeared was publicly recognized. 1839 signs the watershed between two eras of photography:[1] the time before as characterized by many scattered technological attempts that led to a single result; and the time after 1839, when the constant reinvention and adjustment of the light-capturing process gave birth to many different kinds of photography together with their new uses.

The daguerreotype takes the name from its inventor Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, an artist and chemist who lived in the 18th and 19th century in France. Born in a bourgeois family, Daguerre showed his attitude toward invention and creativity with the production of the diorama,[2] a form of entertainment similar to the theater, where sounds effects, a

[1] Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, pp. 2-3.
[2] Ibid., pp.12-13.

planned shifting lightening, and transparent paintings on thin fabric gave audiences the impression of being in the scene represented. This drive to experimentation led him to the path previously mentioned of the endeavor to find how to best use the light and lenses. By 1835 his experiments with light, silver plate and iodine conducted him to the creation of a latent image, an image that chemically formed on the silver plate. This image was latent precisely because it was not permanent, and the exposure to light darkened the image making it no longer visible. It was only two years later that Daguerre succeeded in fixing the image reproduced on the silver plate generating the daguerreotype.

What is important for this analysis, is not so much the chemical and artistic evolution of the daguerreotype, but the function and role this means acquired quickly after its public authorization and circulation around the world. The idea that laid at the basis of this invention was that photography was an instrument able to capture reality as it was, not a try of the artist to render what was standing in front of the eyes. Photography was a reliable visual reproduction, as Daguerre himself put it: "The daguerreotype is not an instrument which serves to draw nature; but a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself."[3]

Through daguerreotype, nature could express itself and write its own story which is reality as it appears. It can be said that since its very beginning, the equivalence between photograph and reality was well established. The increasing popularity of photography brought with it the cultural belief that, as the human eye was completely independent from the feelings and the thoughts of the subject involved, so through daguerreotype a natural and neutral vision of the world was what to be expected. Independent from the physical talent and mental labor of the photographer, daguerreotype produced perfect images. As the American short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe said: "[daguerreotype] is a positively perfect mirror that is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands."[4]

This perfect mirror, however, is not as perfect as it may seem. It is undeniable that photographs offer solid evidence that what is represented is true and is or was physically present, yet the meaning of the object showed is not fixed and it depends on how, where, when and by whom the picture is seen. Referring to the use of photography, the American

[3] Ibid., p. 23.
[4] Ibid., p. 28.

historian Alan Trachtenberg[5] employed the word "lifelikeness", borrowing Baudelaire's lexicon: daguerreotype produced the illusion of reality, and this appeal of lifelikeness is at the heart of the huge popularity that this means had in the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that daguerreotypes were images impressed by the light on a silver plate, gave a three-dimensional quality to the final result, increasing the lifelikeness of it and so the expanding assumption that photography was a detailed mirror-like silver surface made by nature.

This notion of photography as an objective representation of the world will be essential for the discourse that will follow. In this environment, which sees daguerreotype as nature itself, it will not be hard to image how photography became the instrument utilized by science to capture and analyze human changes and differences. In particular, it was applied to the scientific field on the study of racial types which in those years became one of the central topics of scientific research. This new attention on race arose because of the changes and the accelerating globalization that the world was undergoing and that expanded the interest on human diversity. Photography allowed the scientist to take pictures of the subjects he was interested in and successively to gather and compare them. This ability to capture humans as they were, was praised even by a German professor of psychiatry, Robert Sommer, who applied this same use of photography in the medical field, saying that this is so accurate and mirror-like that it should "replace the written record because the medium is uncontaminated by the interpretive problems inherent in language."[6]

The word itself "photography" suggests a form of pictographic writing, a way to communicate through images. This etymology strengthens the belief that photography did not need an interpreter, since it was a perfect calque of the world. The apparent transparency of the medium permitted specific subjects of race study to be categorized and classified according to their physical difference or similarity to someone else, creating a closed system that revolved around a firm point. Inevitably this firm point was established by the scientist and his perspective. The closest a subject was to the center, the more normal or healthy the subject was considered. These categories and diversities soon developed into natural facts, blurring the border between what was subjective

[5] Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History – Mathew Brady to Wlaker Evans*, p.5.
[6] Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, p. 37.

knowledge and interpretation, and what was actually objective. What was previously believed to be natural fell into the classification of normal or diverse, a man-made creation and therefore inevitably partial and biased. The objective photography soon became the medium through which a subjective element was categorized.

This circumstance finds its roots in the ancient world of the Greeks that has so strongly influenced the Western thought since the very beginning. The very act of seeing was perceived as the best source of knowledge; the word "theory" derives from the Greek word θεωία, which stands for "sight" and consequently for "knowledge". To see something is to know something, and the English language keeps having this double meaning of knowing and seeing. Precisely for this, the world consists of visible objects which define themselves to our eyes by their differences and similarities of appearance.[7] Photography, as already mentioned, made the process of knowledge more straightforward and intuitive, it became the new form of reading and knowing the reality. A daguerreotype brought with itself a huge number of details that allowed the eyes and the mind of the viewer to "feel its way in the very depths of the picture"[8]. This ability of the picture to make the viewer "feel" the depths of the image is a double-edged sword: on one side the subject perceived the object represented as if it was alive in front of their eyes, allowing a direct relationship and so a deeper knowledge of the world itself; on the other side, it was exactly this straightforward relationship that justified and withstood the judgment that scientists gave to the raced subjects they wanted to study. Photography was a guarantee of truthfulness and value. The apparent objectiveness of this medium opened the way to an infinite production of meanings that fortified and passed as truth.

[7] Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History – Mathew Brady to Walker* Evans, p. 17.
[8] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

1.1. LOUIS AGASSIZ AND ZEALY'S DAGUERREOTYPES

As briefly mentioned before, photography is a form of writing with images. Daguerreotypes were like the pen for a writer through which one could write many kinds of literature. Louis Agassiz's favorite genre was scientific literature.

Born in 1807 in Switzerland, Louis Agassiz showed his interest in science since his youth when he became the star student of Baron Georges Cuvier, the dominant zoologist of those years and founder of the modern science of comparative anatomy. Following the path of his mentor, Agassiz published his first scientific treatise on a study of the ordering of more than five hundred species of fish. It was the year 1829 and he was only twenty-two years old. The following year he expanded his work on the classification of fish and published *Fresh Water Fishes of Central Europe*. The classification of species of fish was so fascinating for him that he kept analyzing them for ten more years. Before his contribution to this field, only eight types of fossil fish had been identified. This scientific approach of classification will accompany him for all his career as a scientist.

In 1846 he emigrated to the United States to take a permanent professorship at Harvard University. Before stepping foot in the United States, Agassiz had showed no real interest in racial typologies. It was the experience he had in Philadelphia right after his arrival on the Continent that opened his eyes on this topic and influenced his following studies. He was in Philadelphia, and he visited "the American Golgotha,"[9] a skull collection resulted from the activity of Samuel George Morton, an anatomist that sorted the skulls of various North American types: skulls of white, black, and Indian. The second episode that might have activated Agassiz's interest in race is his first encounter with an African American. A letter to his mother bears evidence of his reaction:

> All the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. […] Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us.[10]

Agassiz's contribution to the matter of racial typologies followed the discourse about the origin of species that was highly significant at the time, not only from a scientific

[9] https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-samuel-george-morton-cranial-collection/
[10] Wallis. "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes", pp. 42-43.

perspective, but also from a political and social one. As a matter of fact, one of the studies on the evolution of humankind that was widespread was the creationist theory. This thesis corresponds to the Bible and its belief that all humans were progeny of the one and only couple that first inhabited the Earth, Adam and Eve. Therefore, all men and women were supposed to be descendant of the same source. This idea was known as monogenism. The second theory that evolved and gained importance in the first half of the nineteenth century was polygenesis. According to it, humans were not part of the same original family, but had different sources that caused the creation and diffusion of many species. The role that Louis Agassiz had in this debate saw him supporting the polygenetic theory of the human origin and this idea was so shared among white Americans that it became to be considered the "American School" of ethnology.

In an environment where racial differences were at the basis of the economic and social system of the nation, the debate between the monogenetic and polygenetic theories did not give a possibility to racial equality. As a matter of fact, none of these theories excluded the path of a classification based on races, and the differences and discriminations that they carry. According to monogenesis, racial discrepancies were justified by the environmentalist view that believed environment and its heterogeneousness to be the cause of physical diversities; and by the miscegenetic view that blamed intermarriage and interracial sex for the spread and perpetuation of racial differences. Polygenesis, on the other hand, brought with itself the seed for discrimination.

Initially Agassiz's scientific stand did not stop him from being an abolitionist and from taking the distance from social discrimination between whites and blacks. His main interest was not social or political, but scientific. He was a man of science and as such he did not have any interest in supporting a cause rather than the other. Or at least this was his initial resolution. During the 1850 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he made a statement on race and polygenesis revealing an affinity with the Southern position on the inferiority of the black race.

After this first public declaration regarding race, however, Louis Agassiz wrote in the *Christian Examiner* for July 1850:

> It has been charged upon the views here advanced [the possibility of many sources as origin of the different races], that they tend to support slavery. […] We disclaim, however, all connections with any question involving political matters. It is simply with reference to the

> possibility of appreciating the differences existing between different men […] that we have here tried to trace some facts respecting the human races, and the animal kingdom, in all their different classes.[11]

If his position expressed in the issue of the American magazine reflects his real thoughts on the matter, it is significant to see how rooted scientific racism was. In fact, Agassiz's following case study had as goal that of classifying human races. Confronting the differences between Africans and whites and the direction this work took revealed that the attitude of that time was almost naturally inclined to support the Southern view that saw African Americans as inferior. Even though in many times and in different occasions he took the distance from political positions and expressed his disinterested engagement in scientific research, his position tended to racism.

It was 1850 when Louis Agassiz wanted to bring scientific evidence to his polygenetic theory. As his years in France and in Switzerland taught him, he started by gathering enough information on the topic so that he could compare it and create a proper classification: his methodology was comparative and relational. Daguerreotype proved to be more innovative than what was the initial motivation. It is not clear how and when he decided to take pictures of the subjects of his research, given that in North America there was no precedent of the kind of collection that he sought to build. It was probably after he discovered that in Europe there were photographic archives of human and animal types that he decided to make one of his own on the American ground. [12]

To increase the relevance and reliability of his work, the scientist needed firsthand data regarding African Americans that were born on the African soil. Given that in 1808 Thomas Jefferson had issued the Act that prohibited "the importation of slaves in any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January"[13], it was not immediate for Agassiz to find enslaved African Americans that were born in Africa. The encounter with Robert W. Gibbes proved to be functional and appropriate. The man was a scientist and collector of scientific specimens, and friend of many of the major plantation owners of the South.[14] He suggested Agassiz to start his research in Columbia.

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[11] Agassiz, Louis, "The Diversity of Human Races". *Christian Examiner*, July 1850, p. 4.
[12] Wallis. "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes", p. 45.
[13] National Archive Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves: https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/act-prohibit-importation-slaves
[14] Wallis. "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes", pp. 44-45.

It may be helpful to know that the abundance of the lush land of Carolina attracted colonizers since the first expeditions to the New World, creating without difficulties an economic system based on agriculture. English colonials established rice plantations that made them the wealthiest people in the American colonies. The strategy for this success was a slave-based economy. Charles Towne quickly became a profitable destination for slave ships so much so that in 75 years, from 1770 and 1775, 40 percent of all African slaves passed through this port making South Carolina "more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people."[15] The "fertile and pleasant province of Carolina"[16] quickly became a place of terror and fear for any African Americans.

Agassiz's tour in the South disclosed a reality that he was not acquainted with until that moment. The number of slaves in South Carolina was in excess of one thousand compared to that of white landowners.[17] Because of this disparity the living condition of African Americans was very harsh and violent. As a matter of fact, fear and discipline were essential to keep under control a population that could have easily rebelled against the few whites in charge. During this expedition to Columbia, Agassiz had the chance to find African Americans that came from the most diversified parts of Africa, and this allowed his study to have a wide sorting of 'samples'. After he chose the men and women that best fitted his work, he hired a photographer that had to make a series of daguerreotypes for his scientific research. Joseph T. Zealy was the man who at the time ran one of the first photographic studios in South Carolina and Virginia and who was asked to make the images requested.

Fifteen daguerreotypes were the result of Zealy's work. As previously explained, the aim of these photographs was to demonstrate polygenism as the only theory able to explain human's diversity. Daguerreotypes were the means through which a reliable examination and categorization was possible, considering its objective nature. A typical feature of photographic classification was the emphasis on external appearance as the main source of truth. Creating an objective catalogue was the intention, and cultural interpretation was not allowed, even if subconsciously inevitable. To best achieve this

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[15] Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth Century America*, p. 27.
[16] Archdale, *A New Description of That Fertile and Pleasant Province of Carolina; with a Brief Account of Its Discovery and Settling and the Government Thereof*. Web.
[17] Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth Century America*, p. 85.

goal, the fifteen daguerreotypes followed Agassiz's method of classification based on physiognomy and phrenology, the sciences that at the time served to analyze the exterior shape of the human body and then to compare the differences and similarities between human groups.

The African Americans chosen to be object of Agassiz's study were Renty, born in Congo, his daughter Delia born in America and enslaved at Edgehill, a plantation owned by Benjamin Franklin Taylor; Drana and her father Jack who also lived in one of B. F. Taylor's plantation in South Carolina; Alfred, originated from West Africa; Jem, a cotton slave in the Red Bank Cotton Factory in Lexington, South Carolina; and Fassena who once he became an emancipated man after the Civil War, seemed to have lived alone in Lower Richland County in South Carolina.[18]

Two groups of daguerreotypes were made: the first one conforms to the physiognomic approach that recorded body shape, posture, and proportions and therefore it represents Alfred and Jem standing in front of the camera completely naked, showing front, side, and rear views. The second group follows the phrenological approach that emphasizes the character and shape of the head, displaying the heads and the naked torsos of Drana and Jack, Fassena, Renty and Delia. Each daguerreotype recorded the name, origin and current ownership of the man or woman represented.

Soon after the daguerreotypes were commissioned and made, all track of them was lost and it is not clear whether these photographs were used to support Agassiz's research or were simply archived and forgotten. On October 10th, 1850, however, the *Tri-Weekly South Carolinian* showed that they were used as practical illustration to Agassiz's lecture:

> "We notice that Professor Agassiz is istill lecturing in Boston on the unity of the human race. On Friday last, in the course of the lecture, he pointed out the many differences between the forms of the negro and the white race, a large proportion of which have not been previously remarked; and in proof of his statements he exhibited a large number of daguerreotypes of individuals of various races of negroes. Many of these pictures were taken by that prince of daguerreotypists, our friend Zealy, the originals having been procured in this vicinity by a scientific friend of the learned professor."[19]

The newly raised interest in photography and its uses in the 1970s and 1980s brought an expansion of fascination toward archives and galleries that were specialized in this renewed medium. Furthermore, the recent emancipation of African Americans resulted

[18] Ibid. pp. xiii-xviii.
[19] Rogers, "The Slave Daguerreotypes of the Peabody Museum: Scientific Meaning and Utility", p. 45.

from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 increased the sensibility toward social matter such as racism. The manners and approaches to specific topics and historical facts that until that moment were seen from a totally white perspective, were now questioned. Museums were at the center of this change given their influential role in education and in the cultural system. The desire to reorganize and give different values to photography and American history led to the discovery of new documents and interpretative keys never considered before.

It was 1976 and, moved by the spirit of this social rebirth, staff members of the Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology were looking for some materials. In an attic, under a pile of forgotten items of past collections, they identified a display case dated from the nineteenth century. Once they had opened it, they remained astonished by the images that it contained. The fifteen daguerreotypes commissioned by Louis Agassiz were finally rediscovered. A new chance was given to these African Americans, not just slaves anymore, but pieces of history carrying a past which was harsh but that needed to be faced.

The result of this social and cultural change has been to demolish and recreate in a new way "the set of practices, institutions, and relationships to which nineteenth-century photography belonged"[20], adhering to a new system and classification. This event reveals that what scientists and intellectuals of any time and place think to be objective, may be so to their specific set of tools and methodology but not universally. Scientific knowledge undergoes a constant evolution, and it is "historically situated, subjectively formed and catalogued"[21], as it is with the interpretation of photographs which adapts itself to the keys used to read them, and to the object of the study. Even if official papers and eyewitnesses demonstrate that his main motivation in his research was to find the objective truth, in his daguerreotypes Agassiz was influenced by his desire to discover proof of racial diversity and inferiority and this is what he found. It is documented that his students at Harvard identified in his approach to the object under analyses, a devotion to truth so much so that it was said that there was "something Christ-like"[22] in his drive to truthfulness. He had an "unselfish desire that all should see as clearly as he saw it"[23].

[20] Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View." p. 317.
[21] Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes", p. 40.
[22] Irmscher *Louis Agassiz: Creator of American* Science. p.12.
[23] Ibid., p.12.

"I have taught men to observe"[24] is what Agassiz said about his works and it is what he tried to impart to his students: an insistent and objective gaze had to be cultivated. Despite his effort, he probably forgot to consider the cultural filter he had while gazing at his objects.

[24] Barbash, *To Make Their Own Way in the World, the Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, pp. 301-302.

1.2. CARTE DE VISITE AND ITS POPULARITY

As it has been mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the years following 1839 were characterized by a constant reinvention and adjustment of the light-capturing process. After the patenting of the daguerreotype became available to the world, photography began to propagate both as a new scientific invention and as a topic in public debate. The social and industrial changes that these years witnessed, and the increasingly rapid exchange of ideas were reflected in the medium's transformation into various forms. In an environment which was changing too fast, people needed to find a stability. Photography offered them a chance to find and fix their outward appearance and identity.[25] Soon, what was initially thought of as a lifechanging invention, became a fundamental element of Western life.

As the scientific and technical evolution of the medium proceeded, even the ways in which photographs could be used modified and adapted to its social and political context. Images were common now and studios began to attract people by exhibiting and giving photographs of famous persons in exchange for a financial compensation. This incremented the interest of common people toward politicians' and artists' likenesses and enabled the combination of entertainment and education.[26]

In 1854, the French photographer André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri invented a new form of photographs, the *carte-de-visite*, or card photograph, as it was known in the United States. Previous forms of this one, such as the stereographic camera, allowed to take two pictures at the same time, whereas the mechanism behind this new invention was made so that up to eight photos could be taken at the same time. Having been developed and produced all at once, the production of this kind of photographs was cheaper, and this explains why its consent rapidly spread. Furthermore, *cartes de visite* were even smaller than daguerreotypes and full-length or bust-length portraits were preferred. Because of the distance from the camera, careful lighting and postproduction retouching were not necessary and money was saved. By the early 1860s, card photographs became the most popular form of portrait, and the diffusion of these

[25] Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, p. 30.
[26] Ibid., p. 85.

photographic images made them a means of communication as common and recognizable as written words.

The distance from the camera implied that *cartes de visite* had another important characteristic. The subject represented was not brought to the foreground and what stood out were not his or her physical traits, but the social and cultural features of the sitter. Precisely for this reason, one could build his or her image as best desired so that the portrait did not represent their real selves but the sitter in his or her best conditions. A preparation was therefore necessary before the shooting, and the scene and the figure were arranged so that the result would correspond to the role that the photograph was meant to have. This kind of photography did not emphasize the spontaneity of the subject, and objective nature was not its main goal as scientific photography tried to have it be. Now the approach to reality is different.

Cartes de visite had many purposes, but the one for which they are still remembered is the use that celebrities made of them. As far as renowned figures are concerned, people desired to possess their likenesses and used to collect them in albums. As a response to this new vogue, persons such as President Abraham Lincoln in the United States or members of the British royal family, were willing to pose for photographers and let circulate their images. There were also those people that carried images of themselves to be sold as a handy form of publicity and as a way to financially support themselves: *cartes de visite* were a means used by people such as politicians, actors, and authors to increase their popularity or to make their name familiar to the masses. Furthermore, as our contemporary society is used to see billboards and commercials of different sorts, some of the *cartes de* visite that circulated at the time had political and social purpose and were meant to support a faction or simply to bring to the attention of the public specific situations. One example could be the circulation by abolitionists of card photographs showing African American slaves with scourged backs meant to sensibilize the citizens on the life condition of slaves in the Confederate states, or the case of white looking children that despite their white skin, had been enslaved. These images were sold to the people and fundraisings were organized so that intellectuals and artists could sustain themselves, and political factions could gain popularity.

1.3. SOJOURNER TRUTH: FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM

Sojourner Truth is the second central character I analyze in this work, and a detailed presentation of her life is worth the attention so that her deeds will give a clearer light to the second chapter in which I analyze her as a slave, as a woman, and as a public figure. This introduction of the woman centers on her use of the *cartes de visite* and her decision to publicly stand for the equality of African Americans.

Isabella Van Wegenen[27] was born in 1797 in Ulster County, New York. Slavery in New York was radically different from the one in South Carolina. New York State households usually owned one or two slaves, creating the condition for a black New Yorker to acquire a singular culture. In fact, slaves like Isabella lived and worked in farms owned by Dutch families, and they remained too isolated from other possible cultures in that they grew up speaking Dutch as their first language, being it the language of the community. Even if New York economic system was not directly based on slavery and slavery existed on a smaller scale than the southern system, masters weren't reluctant to tear apart black family through sale.

Around 1810 Isabella was sold to John Dumont and his wife, Sally, and she stayed there for almost sixteen years, until 1826. In these years, Isabella developed an ambivalent relationship with the Dumonts with whom she lived longer than with her own family, and who abused her physically and sexually. John Dumont praised her efficiency and bragged that she "could do as much work as half a dozen common white people and do it well",[28] but he did not hesitate to hardly beat her when she did something wrong. Reading these episodes from a contemporary and white privileged perspective, it may seem impossible that in her *Narrative*, Sojourner Truth will declare that what he did to her was what she deserved, it was her way to pay the price of her own mistakes; but this was ordinary life for African American slaves. John Dumont was the one who Isabella unreasonably adored

[27] Isabella's parents were James and Elizabeth Bomefree but, since all African Americans under slavery were supposed to take the last name of the family that purchased them, when an enslaved man or woman was sold to another family, he or she had to change it. Isabella's name changed few times over the course of her life. Van Wagenen was the name of the last family where she was sold as a slave. Regarding this name, reports in New York City indicate that she was also known as Isabella or Isabel "Vanwagnen" or "Vanwagner". In this work, the use of "Isabella Van Wagenen" will be preferred, adapting to the analyzes of professor of American History at Princeton University and expert in Sojourner Truth, Nell Irvin Painter and especially her book *"Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*".

[28] Painter. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*. p. 15.

and who she felt the "absurd"[29] need to please. Sally Dumont was the one that she despised. Isabella's hard work and consistency were diminished by Sally's judgements that saw Isabella an inept leaving things half done. However, the reason why the young girl had such strong feelings for her mistress, grew from the sexual abuses that Isabella was subjected to by Sally Dumont.

The Dumont family oppressed her with various forms of violence that forged Isabella's character in her adolescence, weakening her self-esteem and distorting reality, yet she became attached to them as her real family and attended them in their death beds even when she had already left that family years before.

In the years at the Dumonts', she married Thomas and had five children. Her first public act was in 1826, when her son Peter was sold into perpetual slavery in Alabama, act that was illegal in New York. In fact, in 1799, New York approved the Gradual Emancipation Act[30] of slave children born after 4, July 1799, indenturing them until they were 28 for male African Americans and 25 for female African Americans. Isabella with the help of some Quakers found a lawyer and recovered her son.

According to the law, for all the African American slaves born before 1799, emancipation was established for the Fourth of July 1827. Toward the end of November 1826, Isabella took her youngest daughter Sophia, and decided to leave Dumont. She reached a Quaker couple not far away from her previous house, Isaac and Maria Van Wegenen who, unlike the Dumonts, opposed slavery. When John Dumont found her, the Van Wegenen paid him for keeping Isabella and Sophia who was legally destined to remain an enslaved African American until 1851.

The religious education that Isabella received as a child was minimal and during the years with the Dutch family, her religious sensibility became syncretic, typical of country people living in New York with Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church influences and habits from animist West Africa. By the end of 1826, Isabella approached the Methodist church that soon became the reason for her religious and human conversion. For all her life, the day of Pentecost has always been a joyful celebration where the community of black New Yorkers gathered for a secularized carnival week. Pentecost of 1827 fell on June 4, a month before Isabella's official emancipation, a fact that increased

[29] Ibid p. 17.
[30] https://www.nyhistory.org/community/slavery-end-new-york-state

the expectations toward this festivity. It was around this holiday that she reported to have undergone an overwhelming religious experience where God appeared to her as a flash of lightning, revealing His love for her and therefore changing her life completely. This episode opened the way for her conversion and her subsequent baptism in the Methodist church, that in our time would be known as Pentecostal.

Experiencing this dialogue with God, she had been born for a second time with an awareness of being loved despite and because of her past as a slave. This gave her the strength and the self-confidence that she was lacking before to speak up for herself and poor and unwanted people as she was. Born a slave, Isabella was deprived of her parents, beaten, sexually abused and disregarded. These events caused in her the growth of a deeply rooted sense of worthlessness which strengthened the wall that society and the slave system built between whites, such as those for whom she had been working her whole life, and blacks like her. The idea that God loved her and was always beside her bestowed a new power and strength in Isabella, who was finally freed from the conviction that she was worth nothing.

In 1843, Isabella decided to leave New York which appeared to her as "one great system of robbery and wrong"[31] and set out to preach love and brotherhood in the United States. This determination came on June 1, 1843, the day of Pentecost in which she baptized her as "Sojourner Truth". This new name willingly carried a great number of meanings.

The first immediate meaning of Sojourner is its idea of a visitor who stays temporarily; in her case, the idea of an itinerant preacher who does not have a fixed home and who moves around places to impart the truth. This was her mission as an African American woman: to sojourn all over the United States and preach people the Truth of God and social equality. The idea of being a sojourner is probably linked even to the desire that she had of owing a house with her husband, and the awareness that this was something very hard to achieve for her as a woman. With her *Narrative*, she openly declared that her hope was to raise enough money to buy a house where she could live in her advancing age. A further meaning of this name comes from Sojourner's long-standing controversy with truth. As an enslaved woman, her word had always been questioned and

[31] Painter. *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, p. 73.

underestimated, so much so that she grew up with the certainty that she was not worthy enough, as pointed out before. In addition, by 1843 she stood more than once in front of a court over important matters such as the liberation of his son Peter. In these occasions, she had to find the words to convince the judge that, even if she was an African American enslaved woman, she was telling the truth and, in her son's case, that Peter was her son and had to be brought back to her. These episodes might have fortified her concern and anxiety over the truth and the integrity of her word.

The choice of giving herself a new name comes from her renewed consideration of herself as capable and worthy, originated from her conversion. Choosing her own name was a strong act of self-designation that must be included among those moments in her life in which she stood for herself and actively mastered her faith. Tenacity was a personal trait that had always accompanied her life, even before the religious conversion. Examples of this are the times in which she stood in front of a judge fighting against slavery, and the stubbornness which made her escape from her master just a few months before her official emancipation. Other similar episodes that will highlight her character and her agency in the world are significant to understand Sojourner Truth and the kind of person that will be analyzed in the second chapter through her *cartes de visite*.

Sojourner Truth was a "self-made woman"[32] so much so that she was determined to write a biography of her life despite her inability to write and read. In fact, as a slave young girl, Isabella never went to school and once she was emancipated, several people tried to teach her, however she never showed any real interest and even disdained "the print-based culture"[33] which people were trying to tutor her. Opposing the relevance that even in the nineteenth century people gave to literacy, Sojourner Truth believed that in order to know, she did not need to learn how to read and write. As it is consistent with her personality, illiteracy did not isolate her nor separate her from wisdom.

The day of Pentecost that was so cherished by Sojourner, commemorates the day when the Holy Spirit gave to the disciples the power to speak different languages and preach to strangers. As a preacher, she travelled and spoke in front of many people despite her analphabetism and her lack of education on rhetoric. In the Northampton Association

[32] Ibid., p. 4.
[33] Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known.", p.466.

of Education and Industry in Massachusetts[34], Truth met Frederick Douglass who in those years was just starting his career as a journalist and activist. As many other emancipated African Americans and fugitive slaves, Douglass associated illiteracy with enslavement and put much effort in learning how to write and read fluently, and he recalled that Sojourner Truth "cared very little for elegance of speech or refinement of manners"[35].

Life for an enslaved and then emancipated African American woman was not easy in nineteenth century America, but Sojourner Truth learnt at her own expense how to swim in such turbid sea. After Frederick Douglass' economic success with the publication of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Truth saw in autobiographies a way to gain money and buy a long desired house of her own. Nothing could have stopped her from that, not even illiteracy and around 1845 she began dictating her autobiography to Olive Gilbert, who was also part of the Northampton Association in those years. This collaboration resulted with the biography entitled *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. This work is a turning point in Truth's life; it marked the first step into the deliberate representation of herself that will have its peak in her *cartes de visite.*

Sojourner Truth always tried to present herself simply as she was, and schooling was perceived as a means of altering her personally, creating someone that she was not. She had a magnetic personality that is not possible to completely grasp today, because of her spontaneity that conquered the audiences, and her physical approach to the people that stood in front of her. All these elements were not easy to write down and so to pass on to the following generations. In fact, to capture and hold the audience, she added non-verbal messages to her clever comments. As Frederick Douglass put it, Sojourner was a "strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm and flint-like common sense" who "seemed to please herself and others best when she put her ideas in the oddest forms", adding that "her quaint speeches easily gave her an audience"[36]. A reporter for the Boston

[34] The Northampton Association of Education and Industry was a utopian community founded in 1841-42 by the collaboration of William Lloyd Garrison and his brother-in-law George W. Benson. This place was organized around the production and manufacturing of silk. However, the mission of this association was also to create a place in which people could feel free and indiscriminate, no matter the sex, color, or social condition. The main issue was abolition of slavery, which was the reason why this community attracted many activists and abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass. Sojourner Truth came here for the first time in 1843 and through the people she met here, she was introduced to a wider world of reforms and activism.

[35] Painter, Nell Irvin. "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known." p. 98.

[36] Painter. *Sojourner Truth. A Life, a Symbol*. p. 98.

Liberator wrote that "Sojourner Truth spoke in her own peculiar style" and then said that "the power and wit of this remarkable woman convulsed the audience with laughter"[37].

One of the reasons why she was never the featured speaker at women's rights or abolitionist meetings, was probably because of her manners and her apparent superficiality compared to others like Frederick Douglass, who devoted their life to education. Truth was considered a speaker that was brief, peculiar, and entertaining. Her speeches were rarely reported completely in the newspaper and documents, as if her message was already known. This fact leads to the second possible reason of her being put in the background: she was a woman and even if she was advocating women's or Afro Americans rights, critics, for the majority white men, opposed the idea of women speaking publicly.

Her use of various verbal and visual means of communication went over the widely preached use of good English and artificial rhetoric and helped her to reach many sorts of people, not only white American critics and member of abolitionists associations. The body was her language, and she did not hesitate to use it to reach as many people as possible. Sojourner had the ability and the tenacity of creating and marketing herself as the persona that she was, a charismatic emancipated woman who learnt how to handle the world to fulfill her ambition. Despite her illiteracy, she utilized the means she had, the informational system available in those years that soon became her favorite medium: photography.

Sojourner Truth needed an instrument that could represent herself without the mediation of anyone else, as it happened with her autobiography, something that she could have been able to control and decide for. Once available also in the United States, the *carte de visite* became the cheapest and fastest way to get a self-representation that could be used in various situations. As explained earlier in this chapter, this kind of photographs widely circulated with propagandistic intentions, for example within the Union as anti-Confederate promotion. These were found-raising cards that inevitably influenced Sojourner who had a past as a slave and could have taken advantage of this to gain easy money from abolitionists. However, Truth aimed at a self-representation that best suited her as the full-fledged woman she was, not simply as an ex-slave.

[37] Ibid p. 128.

Her favorite photographs, dated 1864, show her with expertly tailored clothing of good quality for the time, standard props such as knitting, a book, flowers and sometimes she is wearing eyeglasses. The style of her clothes changes according to the pictures. In earlier photos, she follows the Quaker style, which was a simple dress preferred by antislavery and feminist activists that distinguished them from the less reputable actresses who were the other only women in the public sphere. In later *cartes de visite* taken after the end of the Civil War, Truth has a more fashionable and mature style, which identified her with middle-class African Americans. In all her representations, Sojourner Truth presented herself as a respectable middle-class woman; her skin color and her past as a slave were secondary, essential for her development as a woman, but not central. She was a black woman who claimed womanhood and refused to define herself by her past enslavement.

In the mid-nineteenth century, it was rare to see images of blacks who willingly stood in front of a camera. It was very common though, to see photographs of African Americans which were not taken at the instigation of the subject. Around the 1840s, photography became an instrument of law enforcement and photos of colored men were the most seen images in the files of metropolitan police. The other branch in which African Americans were present against their own will, was anthropology, where they were studied as types. This specific kind of images has already been examined at the beginning of this chapter. In all these genres, African American men and women were usually naked, staring directly into the eye of the camera, as examples of otherness. In Sojourner Truth's *carte de visite*, the woman is well dressed and looks beyond the camera as if to see her audience in front of her, adding a sense of seriousness and an awareness of being present and active in the world.

Photographs gave Truth a new means of communication, something that was more direct than writing and that could give an instant idea of her. She was an independent woman and as such she had to economically provide for herself. When she begun selling her *cartes de visite*, Sojourner was concerned by the idea that people might have thought that she was asking for their charity. However, she believed that selling books as her *Narrative* and her images, did not compromise her independence, because she was giving something in exchange for something else. Her *carte de visite* was valuable and money was the way to compensate this price. Referring to sheets printed with her original song

lyrics that she used to sell at antislavery meetings, she said "I was selling songs; for I always had something to pay my way with. Nobody paid me, for I was a free agent, to go and come when I pleased"[38]. And the same was with her photographs. She asked her audience to purchase these images, her shadow, to sustain the substance of her persona. In her *cartes de visite*, it was openly reported "I sell the shadow to support the substance. Sojourner Truth."

As already said, Sojourner Truth was one of the few African American women who willingly decided to take pictures of herself as a means of self-representation and independence. It may be for this reason that Truth stands out in the scene of nineteenth century women. Her photographs were not simply a means of financial and physical support, but they inserted her into history, and it is probably thanks to them that her name is known and remembered today.

Nell Irvin Painter, at the beginning of her book *Sojourner Truth: a Life, a Symbol* highlights something that readers might take for granted and not meditate enough on. From our perspective, the experience of Sojourner, her life as a slave and then as a preacher and an abolitionist, may appear natural and automatic. However, as Painter said:

> No other woman who had been through the ordeal of slavery managed to survive with sufficient strength, poise, and self-confidence to become a public presence over the long term. […] Only Truth had the ability to go on speaking, year after year for thirty years, to make herself into a force in several American reform movements.[39]

Slavery was a traumatic experience that followed the person years after his or her emancipation and it needed a deep work on oneself to overcome. Sojourner Truth was one of the few who succeeded and had the power to make it public.

[38] Painter. *Sojourner Truth. A Life, a Symbol*, p. 197.
[39] Nell Irvin, Painter. *Sojourner Truth. A Life, a Symbol*. W W Norton & Co Inc. 1997, p. 4.

CHAPTER 2. A VISUAL CONFRONTATION BETWEEN DELIA AND TRUTH

This second chapter will dive into the core of this paper, and it will present the two major themes that characterize the figures introduced in the previous chapter, nudity and photography. In this new section, we will see how these two topics will take a specific shape and meaning according to the woman to whom I am referring, the slave Delia and Sojourner Truth. The visual confrontation between the two women will focus on their being passive or active as photographic subject/object. In my use of the expressions "being passive" and "being active" I avoid any moral judgements nor implicit categorization which presumes a superiority or inferiority. My job here is to try to be the more objective and partial as it is in my possibilities, even if, as we have seen in the first section, objectivity is something that is almost impossible to reach given the constant and inevitable influences and inputs that govern our society and lives.

In this way I will analyz the roles that these two women had in the history of African American womanhood and widely, in the development of the United States as a nation.

This first part of this chapter will be centered on nudity. A brief theoretic excurses on nudity and the role of clothing will be essential to understand better the function that this them has in the two women, and how it conjugates first with Delia and then with Truth. The same approach will be utilized in the second part on photography and the positioning of the subject in front of the lens. A theoretical discussion on photography will be added to the short one presented in the first chapter in order to see in detail the various aspects which define its nature; the democratic promise which initially it brought with itself and how it trembled with its subsequent and almost immediate possession of the tool by white Americans. The ways in which photographs were utilized show the various functions that they could have and the differences in the looks given to one subject and then to the other, leading to an inevitable objectification of the figures in the images. This and more will be then applied to the daguerreotype of Delia and to the *cartes de visite* of Sojourner Truth.

2.1. NUDITY AND AFROAMERICANS

Nakedness plays an essential role in the understanding of this work, and it is functional for the comprehension of the comparison between Delia and Truth, two apparently opposite women who, however, shared more than expected. These two women can be considered as two epilogues of the same history: Delia is the woman that through her inexplicable torture ensures a nation to become wealthy at her own expense; Truth represents the black agency that found and raised her voice travelling across the United States, who although laying her roots in slavery, simultaneously released black womanhood from it and teared away the muzzle that the white hand forced on them, freeing black Americans from the muteness that white history imposed to them. In a sense, as slave and ex-slave, Delia and Truth complete each other.

Seeing the images of these two women together, encourages the viewer to identify elements that go beyond the single images, recognizing factors which might create a new meaning and influence the way one interprets them. As a matter of fact, pictures assume new significance according to their displacement and the new group in which they are positioned. This phenomenon must be traced back to the Russian cinematographer Lev Kulešov, who studying the value and the relevance of the editing process in the making of a film, identified the so called "Kulešov effect". Positioning a series of images next to each other, the meaning these images take on changes based on the order of the series itself. The feeling that a frame triggers is strongly influenced by the sequence of images that precedes or comes after it. This happens because the mind of the spectator does not see the single image, but the whole structure which originates a new message. [40]

A similar phenomenon is justified even by the Gestalt psychology, one of the main European schools of psychology developed in the same years, the early twentieth century. The motto of this German school was: "*Das Ganze unterscheidet sich von der Summe seiner Teile*" ("The whole is more than the sum of its parts"). Based on the ways human thought and visual perception work, the combination of each elements adds a further meaning to the single images involved.[41]

[40] Carrluccio, et al. *Il cinema*, p. 58.
[41] Legrenzi, *Fondamenti di psicologia generale*, pp. 19-44.

The aim of reading Delia's daguerreotype together with Truth's *cartes de visite* is that of adding a new meaning to the two representations, given by the various perceptions their combination arouses. This association provides Delia with a different value than the univocal image of her as a slave and oppressed woman. Seen together the two women create a sequence of women in history, from bondage to freedom. Here, Delia is not anymore simply one of the seven slaves daguerreotyped by Agassiz for scientific purpose, but she is an African American slave woman with the hope of freedom embodied by Sojourner.

To give a moral evaluation, finding the one who was better, stronger, or more heroic than the other is not the intent here. As a matter of fact, both belong to the same historical period. What was different is the geographical collocation of the two. One from the South, the second one from the North. We are dealing with two different environments with a completely dissimilar mindset and background. The geographical conditions of Sojourner Truth slowly led to the maturation of a specific awareness and therefore of a new open-mindedness. Even though it was far from being immediately welcomed and widely shared among white Americans, they led to an economic and, with more difficulty and needing much more time, even social changeover that eventually will reach even the extreme coast of the South. There are circumstances that necessitate more time to reach their complete growth. This is an additional proof of the complexity of creating a neutral and objective reality where a universal truth can be imposed.

Talking about photography is like dealing with a topic such as nudity and being dressed or half-dressed: it has many uses, functions, and meanings. What will be analyzed here is the role of nudity among African American women both slave and free, in the middle of the nineteen. If it is enlarged the view, in fact, and different years or places are taken into consideration, the function of clothing and the idea of being naked change. Even in the same period being naked assumed various meanings, as it will be studied more in detail later in this chapter, when focusing and confronting Delia and Truth.

Among African American slaves, being half naked was something common, as clothing was perceived as a privilege for whites, a means that differentiated slaves from white people. The use of cloths for slaves was a concern in South Carolina since 1690, for example, when the first law which governed the use of clothes among African

American slaves was promulgated. The "Act for the Bettering Ordering of Slaves"[42] included one of the first general directive regulating the supply of attire for every slave by the colonial proprietors of Carolina. In the decades that followed, new interventions were deemed necessary in the handling of slaves and what was perceived to be a suitable dress code for them. In 1735 and 1740 new Acts legislated a specific dress code for slaves. Both these two acts aimed at remedy the situation that was spreading within the borders of Carolina: the used of apparel by slaves was considered to be much above their social and racial condition. Therefore, these two rules established an upper limit of fabric permitted for them. Slaves could not wear anything that was "finer, other, or greater value than Negro cloth, duffels, kerseys, osnabrigs, blue linen, check linen or coarse garlix, or calicoes, checked cottons, or Scotch plaids."[43]

The perception that white Americans had of African American slaves and their clothes which were perceived to be beyond their social and human status, can be seen in a representation of Yarrow Mamout made by the artist Charles Willson Peale in 1819. Mamout was a man who after around 40 years of slavery, gained his freedom and enough money to possess his own land and home. Charles Willson decided to have him painted not only for his wealth, but also because he wanted to document his age which was the reason for his popularity; in fact, he was believed to be 134 years old.[44] Despite the fact that the aim of this oil on canvas was not to depict racial inferiority, it is hard not to see the bewildering abundance of ill-fitting clothing of this African American man, especially if it is compared with any portraits of white Americans made by the same artist.[45] The number and thickness of the jackets he is wearing are unusual, the button which is not fasten to the coat does not escape from the sight of the viewer, the collar of the same jacket is askew, with one tip pointing upward as to sign a lack of attention and care.

Nothing about this painting explicitly referred to the inferiority of black subjects; however, all the before mentioned details attest the opposite. The overabundance of Yarrow Mamout's clothing leaves an uncomfortable feeling which highlights that there might be something wrong in what the viewer is seeing. It is as if the painter implicitly

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[42] Robson, *Beyond Sumptuary: Constitutionalism, Clothes, and Bodies in Anglo-American Law*, 1215-1789, pp. 498-499.
[43] Ibid., p. 499
[44] https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/319114 accessed on September 30, 2022.
[45] Barbash, *To Make Their Own Way in the World, the Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, *p*. 308.

and maybe unconsciously, wanted to demonstrate how African Americans, no matter if they were free or slave, rich or poor, were not able to properly use clothing and garments of a higher fabric and quality, socially meant for whites.

Figure 1 - Yarrow Mamout, 1819.

The painting made by Harriet Cany Peale, *Her Mistress's Clothes*, is another example of how the match of African Americanness and clothes was detected as odd and funny, somehow childish. In this oil on panel, the white mistress dresses a black woman, probably her personal handmaid, with what seemed like her clothes: an elaborate style characterized the choices of the garments. Earrings, armband, and necklace in gold accentuate her black figure, and a refined hairstyle highlights the resemblance with her white mistress. This representation, besides helping to sustain the ideology of racial hierarchies and alluding to black captivity and the violence toward them, as it will be discussed later on this chapter, emphasizes how rich clothing was believed to be something for the white dominance or as a practice to control and subjugate the black slaves. Attire on the black body is like dressing up a doll: you know the doll does not need clothes, but it is something entertaining to do.

In this case, the black subject is transformed into an object without needs nor desires.

Figure 2 - Her Mistress's Clothes 1848.

These two portraits were made about one hundred years later the first Acts against the free use of clothing by African Americans entered into force. However, things had not changed considerably since then. According to the white elite, clothes were a tool too powerful to be handled without instructions by African Americans, who were considered inferior to whites.

With the end of the Civil War and the emancipation from slavery, the black Codes continued to regulate the use of clothing and, so of black bodies. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands,[46] was established in the War Department by the Congress in 1865 and it managed and supervised everything related to the freedmen, the lands abandoned or seized during the Civil War. The main mission of this document was to help formerly enslaved men and women become self-sufficient, assisting them with

[46] https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau accessed on July 7, 2022.

labor contracts, in disputes, issuing rations and clothing, in the legalization of marriages and the likes.

The Freedmen's Bureau's records contain huge number of data concerning African Americans and their experiences as enslaved people and as free men and women. The archive from 1865 and 1872 brings to light the extent to which the practice of withholding clothing became a form of punishment for the previously enslaved. The report made on September 2nd, 1865, by Thuresa Duffies is a clear example of how white landowners, previously the masters of African American slaves, used cloths as a mortification for black people who became free and expect to be treated as such. The Freedmen's Bureau made available online quotes:

> "Thuresa Duffies, col'd, testifies that in 1863 she was held as a slave by ?George Williams about one mile from Frederick City. That he beat and braised her severely, and the Provost Marshal to whom she applied for protection told her to go back to her master. She then went to the Major who committed her to jail. Her former master came and released her and told her if she wanted to go back she could, otherwise she must leave Maryland. So she came to Georgetown, and a year ago she went back for her children who were given her but her former master kept all her clothes and household goods worth about $120."[47]

Thuresa Duffies's testimony is a proof of the coercion made by white Americans who were against the emancipation of African Americans. Her request of taking back her children who even the law now considered belonging to her, was turned against herself and she was punished through the restraining of her own goods and clothes. This act of holding her personal items can be read as an indirect way of proving that despite what the legislation declared, black Americans were not humans and did not deserve nor need clothes.

Once again, the black subject is transformed into an object without needs nor desires.

In these same years, when legal regulation of clothing aimed at controlling and regulating the black body, nakedness and the state of partial undress, were becoming a compositional device used to turn images and bodies into scientific data.[48] When dealing with African American bodies, and more generally, with the black figure, the process of disrobing was increasingly gaining popularity as a signal of discovery of what was seen

[47] http://freedmensbureau.com/washingtondc/outrages2.htm accessed on July 7, 2022.
[48] Barbash, *To Make Their Own Way in the World, the Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, p. 305.

as different from whiteness. The same gesture of unveiling the black body, was clearly banned for the white ones. In fact, it was during the nineteenth century that many of the statues of white politicians, leaders, and especially white women who were only half dressed or completely naked, were cloaked for the sake of propriety. For example, the 1841 marbled statue of George Washington was becoming to be thought as not suitable for American taste. As a matter of fact, the statue of Washington had a toga covering only his inferior part of the body and showing his naked torso, and it was considered to be inappropriately dressed for a white American politician.[49] Clothing assumed the role of a symbol to signal and register the various and racial societal and human stratification.

The naked black body not only was becoming the object of scientific studies, but the process of removal of the clothing from them, particularly from the black female body, was another violent and inhuman form of punishment. Different from the form of punishment previously discussed, this barbaric gesture of partially stripping off clothes, and savagely throwing it above the women's heads or waists was the uncivilized practice which white landowners did as a punishment for black women who rebelled against the men, and therefore asserted their agency in the fight against sexual violence.

This inexcusable abuse was widely shared in the slavery based society of those years. The spread of such bestial practice was justified and strengthened by the effort of naturalizing the idea that the black body was a property, a tool to produce other goods necessary for the enrichment of the landlord and the nation. Furthermore, this sexual harassment helped to get accustom with the belief that the black body was a possession of the white hand, and this implied that African American's reproductive potential was part of their duty and labor as enslaved.[50]

The black female body was used by the white slaveowners, not only to guarantee a natural and self-maintaining system of slavery, but it also served an ideological function. Through the appropriation of the reproductive black female body, white masters "inscribed enslaved women as racially and culturally different while creating an economic and moral environment in which the appropriation of a woman's children as well as her childbearing potential became rational and indeed, natural."[51] This appropriation of the

[49] Ibid., p. 304-305.
[50] Ibid., p. 312.
[51] Morgan, *Laboring Women*, p. 7.

most intimate and personal part of a human being signed the most brutal act of power made by the slavery system intentionally responsible for the weakening of African American women and blood relationships that therefore were nearly inexistent.

Yet again the black body is turned into an object meant for the fulfillment of pleasures and needs of white Americans.

2.2. A FIRST CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGEOVER

In these same years in which the black female body was thought as a possession of the whites, and clothing and being naked was a status submitted to the white dominance and whims, the use of cloths and nudity acquired a different function and meaning.

In the context of American abolition, the naked and in particular the half-dressed black body started to be utilized as a means of affirming agency. Displaying the naked black body became a way to state an active presence in the society. Images of various forms of nudity transformed into a conceptual challenge: the same nudity that in different circumstances exercised a violent coercion of the black body and proof for racial science, became an argument to respect and value the full extent of the human body. The idea of the naked black body changed: from as a sign of racial inferiority and dominance, it turned into an awareness of nakedness as symbol of a conscious presence in the social environment with needs and desires, and as an emblem of human equality. Examples of this new use of nudity can be seen in the images of half-cloaked African American slaves who showed their backs tortured by the whips of the slaveowners, which were shared among abolitionists to raise awareness against slavery as a cruel and inhuman practice.[52] Other examples of nakedness as a condemnation of racial inferiority will be analyzed later when focusing on the figure of Sojourner Truth.

The same changeover can be seen in the use of clothing. While slaveowners took advantage of clothes as an instrument to control and decide over the black body, in the history of slavery abolition, the choice of one's own garments became an instrument to assert black's independence and control in the fight for authenticity and selfhood.[53] Attire allowed African Americans to assert their own individuality and humanity through an independent choice of what would fit them better.

These changing symbolisms are a key factor to understand and be aware of the fact that what might appear as normal and objective, once again, obeys to the specific place and time of the subjects involved. The reversals of the meaning of the connection between nakedness and clothing is a further proof of what was mentioned in the previous chapter

[52] See the "scourged back" photo of African American enslaved Gordon.
[53]Barbash, *To Make Their Own Way in the World, the Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, *p.* 300.

about the non-objective nature of photography. This same idea will be analyzed even more in the following pages.

When talking about African American women and how they decided to dress, it is important to consider that many variables influenced the personal choices which led each one of them to a final decision. Of course, macro groups can be found which gather various women together according to specific characteristics. Shared interests, similar backgrounds, analogous personality, religious beliefs, education, and social status are the elements which deeply distinguished these women and brought to consider something appropriate or improper. Nevertheless, each black women developed distinct and personal understandings of dress which helped them to add a further meaning to their dress choices. Garments assisted black women on the shape that they thought to best suit their bodies and their selves. The possibility to choose a dress did not necessarily make black women wanting excess and ostentation. On the contrary, African American Methodist women for example, committed themselves to modesty in dress, "to wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, or ruffles"[54], employing modesty as a weapon in their fight against the stereotype of the black body as a sexual tool, which opposed them to virtuous white women. Furthermore, in the middle of the nineteenth century, white, middle-class fashion was characterized by an idealistic approach to the women body in which clothing needed to mirror the woman's soul and so did her skin and its light shades which reflect her sensibility. Some African American women who knew that they were automatically excluded from this canon of respectability because of their skin color, did not even try to fit in and elaborated alternative ways to reach integrity. [55]

Regardless of the kind of dress selected, black women, especially abolitionist and preacher women, continued to use dresses mainly as a communicative tool, necessary for the circulation of egalitarian views and their relations of power in the society. In fact, they knew that in a reality in which the only truth was a white truth, and whiteness was the parameter for universality, their blackness would always hide whatever they wished to show. For this reason, they preferred to focus more on the richness of their voices, of what concerned their lives, rather than on appearances.

[54] Klassen, *The Robes of Womanhood*, p. 48.
[55] Ibid., p. 52.

In addition to this, what is essential for this work to highlight is the possibility that African American women had to choose independently whatever they desired. Clothes were a symbolic device which permitted black women to challenge racial and oppressive hierarchies. Dresses functioned as a practical tool in racist America of the nineteenth century and as grounds for protesting against social constructions based on race and gender. Garments opened a way for women to claim public voices and to assert themselves as virtuous and worthy women in a cultural environment in which black women's body and even more their opinion were perceived as suspicious. All these traits assumed a deeper meaning if confronted with the situation previously described where African American women were treated as mere and powerless objects. The possibility of selecting which dress was more appropriate is an important success which foregrounds a social change which was taking place in the America of those years. A simple cloth allowed African American women to actively participle in the society, to state their agency, their ability of deciding for themselves and a self-positioning in the society which until then did not even believe them to be as human as white Americans.

2.3. PHOTOGRAPHY: A BROKEN DEMOCRATIC PROMISE

As previously mentioned, the second element which might help us in the development of this work and in the analysis of Delia and Truth, is photography. This instrument which initially came into the world as a light capturing process, quickly evolved into a multifaced technique which opened the world to a deeper study of the reality and humanity. The versatility of the device makes it necessary to narrow the focus of my analysis only to the relationship between photography and African Americans. Even with this restriction it will not be possible to cover all the studies and research which have been made on this topic. The topic is in fact so extensive that antithetical views are possible and present in the history of photography's theory. For this reason, only the approaches and the opinions which more resemble my thought and which I found more appropriate and beneficial to understand the daguerreotype of Delia and the *Cartes de visite* of Sojourner Truth will be taken into consideration.

As soon as the photographic tool entered the world, it brought with itself an ideal of democracy which nineteenth century the America praised as a typical trait of the country, where class lines were less established and rooted in society compared to the Old World. Photography was the democratic art *par excellence* since it made available to a wider majority to possess one's own painting, not a privilege of the richest anymore.[56] As Frederick Douglass[57] put it: "what was once the special and exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now the privilege of all. The humblest servant girl may now possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years ago."[58] Further to this, the portrait marked the individual's place in society, which is why many early photographs depicted men and women with tools which best suited their characteristics and trade, so that one could know by seeing the pictures the role he or she had in the society.

[56] Marien, *Photography and its Critics*, p. 74.
[57] Frederick Douglass's thought and theory on photography is very ample. In this work I will inevitably mention some ideas coming from his writings relating to photography, but I will not dwell long on his studies which would deserve much more attention and a deeper analysis than the one I will be able to do in this occasion. In fact, even if Frederick Douglass did not focus specifically on the relation between photography and the black female body, he is a figure whose reflections contributed crucially to the extension and improvement of the study on photography and the black body.
[58] Faisst, *Degree of Exposure*, p. 78.

This democratic aspect could operate not only as a class leveler, but also as a demolisher of racial hierarchies. Most significantly, this egalitarian potential was a new hope for the African Americans who now could have representations of themselves more impartial than earlier paintings. In addition, free African Americans could portray themselves not only as blacks, but as members of the human race. Photography, as already pointed out, became a means in the fight for abolition and racial equality.[59]

Soon, this democratic promise which the advent of photography spread, faded away. This happened in particular regarding African Americans who believed to have finally found a channel through which raise their voices and be heard. Even though, as it will be explained later, not all African Americans did lose hope, the democratic potential of photography was shadowed by its distortion into an instrument to control and strengthen racial discrimination and class surveillance.

2.3.1. PHOTOGRAPHY: A MEANS TO TAME THE UNKNOWN

The urge to give meanings to things generally comes from the existence of differences. The process of naming and giving meanings is a way to reach knowledge of a specific element and so to possess it.[60] This is the same procedure which white Americans followed: African Americans were considered too different from whites and as it is for the unknown and what differs too much from the established center, they were perceived as a threat to social and human order. White American society felt the need to strengthen the order of society to be able to control it better. They did so by creating specific categories where they could ascribe African Americans to and classify them. The discriminating factor in understanding the clear cut distinction between the various Americans of that century was race.

Before 19th century, none of the various forms of classification, prejudice and subjugation were based solely on race. As a matter of fact, racism emerged in this century as a belief which found its justification in biology and used science to create a hierarchical distinction in which not only scientific but also moral evaluations were given, signing the inferiority of one group in relation to another.[61] This new approach to human differences

[59] Ibid., p.77.
[60] Hall, *The Spectacle of the Other*, p. 236.
[61] Wallis, *Black Bodies, White Science*, p. 57 and note number 27.

has its cornerstone on the belief of the existence of a pure race. This pure race distinguishes itself from the other races by meaningful biological variations which make it biologically superior with positive consequences on all the aspects of human life: social, psychological, cultural, and spiritual. This superiority which elevates the pure race explains and legitimizes the privilege and the dominance over the races which are inferior.[62]

Photography served as a disciplinary tool, it assumed a social and political value necessary to define and regulate social and human differences. It became an instrument through which white Americans reduced to a close category African Americans who were believed to be biologically, socially, and morally inferior to white. The process of race and social ranking which photography made systematic, established a specific standard and everything which drifted away from it was considered deviant and had to be isolated.

These photographs, taken to highlight racial and social dissimilarities, gained meaning only when they were read in the specific context of racist American society in the 19th century. This is because these images do not carry the meaning of racial differences when looked at singularly. As a matter of fact, photographs do signify on their own, but the meaning which white Americans wanted to convey of evidence for racial inferiority or superiority can be seen only when scanned together. The broader meaning of these images floats, it isn't finally fixed. In fact, if the context of these photographs was unknown, many assumptions could have been made, and the specific meaning of racial diversities could have been missed because it is not inscribed in the image itself.[63]

The photographs made to designate differences were inevitably not impartial and this attitude was even denounced by Americans who, even if they were soaked in those years and circumstances, were able to see and speak out about such injustice. One example is the African American Frederick Douglass, who in the address delivered in Huston, Ohio on July 12, 1854, *The Claims of The Negro, Ethnologically Considered* pointed out:

> "It is fashionable now, in our land, to exaggerate the differences between the negro and the European. If, for instance, a phrenologist, or naturalist undertakes to represent in portraits,

[62] Memmi, *Racism*, pp. 5-6.
[63] Hall, *The Spectacle of the Other*, pp. 228-232.

> the differences between the two races – the Negro and the European – he will invariably present the *highest* type of the European, and the *lowest* type of the Negro."[64]

And he gave more details making a comparison between the most common types of representations:

> "The European face is drawn in harmony with the highest ideas of beauty, dignity and intellect. […] The Negro, on the other hand, appears with features distorted, lips exaggerated, forehead depressed – and the whole expression of the countenance made to harmonize with the popular idea of negro imbecility and degradation."[65]

This address is a further proof that these photographs, were not objective and did not represent reality exactly as it was, but they found strength in the shared prejudices and popular ideas about how black and white Americans should look in order to maintain the social and moral division and establishment of power created by whites.

Frederick Douglass concluded this parenthesis on racial representations with a strong recommendation on what could be a more neutral and honest way of depicting African and European Americans: "If the very best type of the European is always presented, I insist that *justice*, in all such works, demands that the very best type of the negro should also be taken."[66] In fact, it was standard practice to portrait white Americans in their best suits coming from the highest ranks of society, while black Americans were taken from slave plantations where life conditions were inhumane and the lack of any kind of education deeply marked their bodies.

This disparity of physical and environmental circumstances due to a precise social and political choice reinforced the appearance of distance between black and white Americans. This, among others, was one of the reasons why the new pseudoscientific racism gained consistency and was strongly structured around a binary opposition between the two groups: civilization and savagery.[67] The white race was associated with intellectual advancement characterized by a belief in reason, the ability to learn and to develop a stable society based on institutions and laws, and a civilized restraint in their sexual and civil life. On the other hand, the black race was linked to whatever was instinctual, implying a loose firmness in their emotional and bodily desires, with no restrain in their sexual impulses. A lack of a mature intellect impeded them from the

[64] Douglass, *The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered*, p. 20.
[65] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[66] Ibid. P. 21.
[67] Hall, *The Spectacle of the Other*. P. 243.

establishment of a durable and solid society based on laws and institutions, rather a propensity to rituals and customs. In this human made binary opposition between civilization and savagery a moral evaluation is given in which from a white perspective, culture wins over nature and the two are completely opposed and incompatible. For African Americans, instead, culture coincided with nature and the two were interchangeable.[68] The following sections will show how, this structure of oppositions collapses and does not stand anymore.

The status of inferiority of black Americans was regarded as biologically fixed, therefore the socio-cultural contrasts became to be perceived as dependent on hereditary characteristics which were evidently inscribed on the human body. Because this moral discrimination between whites and blacks was physically reliant, the body became the center and the proof of this racial division. The body in fact, "became the totemic object, and its very visibility the evident articulation of nature and culture."[69] Photographs rendered this reliance on the body stronger and even more evident, providing further evidence for a naturalization of racial diversities.

The binary opposition between civilization and savagery, normal and deviant, white and black, laid the ground for stereotyping as a process which aims at maintaining social and symbolic order. This order, however, was not given by a peaceful coexistence of diversities, rather by a hierarchy violently forced to one category by the other. Stereotyped representation of these categories symbolically implied a preservation of power which for all intents and purposes was a symbolic violence.

Regarding racial discrimination, photographs were gathered in catalogues with the attempt to establish differences or similarities across a spatial dimension, or in archives aiming at identifying physical variations across time. As it has already been mentioned, these systems of organization implied a hierarchical ordering in which images were arranged following the binary oppositions between the two races so that the distinction between "them and us", normal and pathological, culture and nature was reinforced. In so doing, the presumed objectivity of photography transformed cultural ideas in natural facts, subjective knowledge in objective data.

[68] Ibid. P. 244.
[69] Ibid., p. 244.

2.3.2. PHOTOGRAPHY: LENS FOR A RACIAL GAZE

These methods of comparative anatomy had consequences on the act of viewing so much so that photograph fortified the process of observation, establishing the gaze at the center of racial discourses. In those same years, in 1850, the Congress passed The Fugitive Slave Act[70] which required that fugitive slaves be sent back to their owners even if they were escaped in a free state.[71] This law regularized and legalized the act of looking for diversity; it made the gaze a weapon able to detect bodily traits of enslaved status on black Americans. Through a quick glance at one's physical characteristics, the looker could recognize their inner characters. This increasingly ocular time led to a new dynamic in which the process of looking became a tactic to secure racial hierarchies.

At this point, it is important for this work further briefly analyze the topic of looking, distinguishing between visuality and the right to look.[72] This theoretical excursus will be resumed later when it will be applied to the specific cases of Delia and Sojourner Truth.

The term *visuality* does not consist of the totality of all visual images and processes, but it is a specific practice which stands in opposition with the concept of the *right to look*.[73] Visuality is a procedure which can exclude the actual seeing because it exists when a set of factors such as personal ideas, cultural information and social influences creates a specific image. This process of assembly demonstrates the fundamental role and the authority of the visualizer. Slave plantations were one of the first areas in which the phenomenon of visuality came into being. These were places where the constant monitoring of the slaves rendered them objects with precise characteristics and functions. Soon, visuality sought to depict itself as self-evident and natural, forgetting about the social and cultural nature which brought it to existence. Visuality is in fact, a manufactured process composed of a series of operations, the same that have already been analyzed in the previous pages: first, a classification through naming and categorizing;

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[70] https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/compromise-of-1850 accessed on July 20, 2022

[71] In 1820 - 1821 American legislation admitted the admission of Missouri, a slave state, and Maine a non-slave state, into the Union. The 1820 Missouri Compromise established that the balance between slave and free states had to remain stable, and Missouri defined the boundary line for the states that wanted to enter the Union: those southern could permit slavery, those northers could not. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/missouri-compromise accessed on July 20, 2022.

[72] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, pp. 3-25.

[73] Ibid.

secondly, a separation into groups as a means of social organization; finally, a naturalization and normalization of those aesthetic and social categories.

Even the *right to look* is more than a simple seeing. The right to look is a look which must be mutual, it starts at a personal level with the look at someone else's eyes. This kind of look claims subjectivity and therefore autonomy. The subject who looks allows another to return that look and in doing so, the subject finds both the other and the self. The right to look rejects the authority that is in visuality. The right to look frees itself from that authority and it demands a right to the real, to subjectivity and autonomy. The right to look implies and employs agency. This agency is the element that differentiates the right to look from visuality which instead, requires a form of passivity on behalf of the one who is looked.

2.3.3. PHOTOGRAPH: A CAGE OR A WINDOW

One last theme that will be useful in the confrontation between Delia and Truth and which will shade a clearer light on these two women and their representations, is the topic of self-possession.

The trait of photograph that has caught scholars and photographers' interests since its very origin, is its capacity to capture the perfect image of a specific figure. This capture raised various questions concerning the nature of this action and different, often contradictory answers have been given, but they are not incompatible, as it will be demonstrated from the very existence of the apparent opposite Delia's and Truth's pictures. The two main ideas related to this act, point out, on one side, photograph as an instant in which the image of a person is taken and seized, as a process of entrapment; and on the other side as the first step of a procedure which aims at the liberation of the subjects from social, racial and gender based prejudices which used to imprison them; this is the initial moment which releases them from the visuality previously mentioned.

As far as the first idea of photograph is concerned, any claims stand on the shoulders of critical thinking about photography mainly made by Susan Sontag in her work *On Photography*.[74] In her analyses, the camera is seen as a "predatory weapon"[75] which

[74] Sontag, *On Photography*.
[75] Ibid., p. 10

captures images. Its predatory potential is so determinant that it becomes the "camera/gun"[76]. The gun and its capacity to kill sublimate into the camera, reason for which when someone takes a picture, she[77] is a sublimated murderer. Taking a photo does not directly kill the subject involved, but it is an act of violence: "There is something predatory in the act of taking 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."[78]

When someone photographs a person without this person's consent, she is capturing the image of that person and becomes her own possession. The subjects photographed lose their autonomy, their agency, because they are possessed by someone else. In the case of Delia, we will see that this possession will not be only symbolical. Even if Sontag's work does not refer directly and solely to slaves, for the sake of this work, this first approach has to be applied on slaves as subjects of the camera's eye, considered as those subjects who could not express their will and whose agency was denied and stifled. This idea of being possessed by the author of the photos will be clearer in this following part in which the topic of self-possession will be explained.

The main idea around which the second view of photography is built, is the one of self-possession. As Frederick Douglass said in his lecture "Pictures and Progress" delivered in Boston on December 3, 1861, photography allowed anyone to "see themselves as others see them."[79] This discourse on photography concerned primarily former slaves who could now deflect the reifying gaze back upon the oppressor.[80] This phenomenon gave the possibility to the sitters to reach a deeper knowledge of themselves, since they could have an external view of themselves. More importantly, when a former slave decided to be photographed, she could become her own master and the owner of her own image, body, and self. To be self-possessed is not simply to show one's own image, but it requires a full recognition from the others who look. To reach this recognition, the former slave must accept to enter a new process of objectification of the

[76] Ibid., p. 19.
[77] From this moment on the use of the feminine pronoun will be preferred when talking about general subjects. This decision has been made because the subjects to whom this theoretical excursus will be applied are two women.
[78] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 19.
[79] Grigsby, *Enduring Truth*, *p*. 12.
[80] Wallace, Smith, *Pictures and Progress*, *p*. 29.

self, becoming the object of scrutiny of the others who look and of herself.[81] This implies an active positioning in front of the camera in order to obtain a full perception and validation of the self, not passively defined by the unidirectional eyes of the slaveowner. This unidirectionality is what happened with slaves: the gaze of the slaveowner defined the sitter who became a specimen, an object who deprived of agency, was not allowed to send the gaze back and possess her own image.

The impartial gaze of the camera could unify the real image of African Americans who sought to refashion their selves and to impose a racially unbiased view of themselves negating the segmentation to which they became accustomed during slavery.

[81] Grigsby, *Enduring Truth*, p. 12.

2.4. DELIA

Now I will show how this theory about nudity and photography presented above, can be applied to Delia and her daguerreotype. She was a slave at Edgehill, a plantation located right outside Columbia in South Carolina and owned by Benjamin Franklin Taylor. Not much is known about her life, but it seems that she worked with the blacksmith at the plantation. After Taylor's death, it appears that all the slaves in his possession passed to his wife. Delia was one of those slaves.[82]

Figure 3 - Delia, 1850.

[82] Rogers, *Delia's Tears,* p. xiv.

Right after the invention of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the natural process of capturing reality widely shared among Americans. Sitters took advantage of the means to create an image of themselves which could best represent their own essence and at the same time which could better it: through posture and dresses, one could influence the representation of their own identity. In these circumstances in which "being daguerreotyped was about putting on your Sunday best and looking as composed and respectable as possible",[83] Delia's daguerreotypes caught the immediate interest of scholars of the following century who tried to give sense to the subject involved and to her being half naked. Among the numerous portraits made in the nineteenth century, very few were of African Americans and even fewer were of disrobed subjects.

In Delia's daguerreotype it is evident the intent of photography to foreground the body as a form of corporeal reveal in which the physical appearance was necessary to read not only external traits but also inner characteristics. In her case, the fact that she is half naked is clear evidence of an act of violence which had been inflected on her right before Zealy took a picture of her. The gesture of her disrobing was not guided by anger or revenge, at least not to our knowledge, but it may have been a natural practice necessary for scientific research, which Delia had to accept given that she was a scientific item. The status of partial undress of Delia is different from the one of the other slaves who have been photographed during her same occasion. This is the reason why it is likely to think that each one of them received an individualized order that was issued immediately before the performance. They were all subjects forcibly stripped. Regulating Delia's use of clothing and being partially undress was becoming a compositional device to turn human bodies into scientific data. With Delia's daguerreotype, it is apparent how being stripped off the clothes for African American slaves was a violence which acquired natural shades so much so that it became an automatic practice. Violent approach of white Americans on black Americans became so radicalized that it assumed the form of a natural and obvious habit.

Through this photo, Delia was divested not only of her clothes, but more importantly of her agency. As soon as her dress was taken off her body, a muzzle has

[83] Ibid., p. 7.

been stitched on her mouth. Deprived of her agency, Delia was completely silenced, and her body turned into a thing, a specimen, an object.

Bereaved of her agency, she could not resist white supremacy, she could not react, she could not act. She was violently subjected to Agassiz and Zealy who chose her and arranged her in front of the camera to be the passive object of their work.

This daguerreotype shows Delia facing the camera, looking at the audience. In the standard rhetoric of photography, when a subject look towards the lens a sense of solemnity is perceived because the essence of the sitter is disclosed to the viewers. Even in Delia's case, her essence is revealed; however, there is no solemnity, it has been done against her will. Her autonomy has been supplanted and her essence has been violated, forcefully taken from her, and displayed for everyone to see it.

In Zealy's daguerreotype, Delia is captured in a frame. She is imprisoned in the cage of visuality where the white eyes inspect her outer appearance in the effort of individualizing features and sings which would give body to their theory of different races and white supremacy.

In this situation, Delia becomes an object possessed by her white master. Not only she was a slave and as such she was legally owned by someone else other than herself, but once pictures have been made of her, her body was violated, and her shadow became an object physically possessed by Agassiz. Furthermore, in this daguerreotype there is no reciprocity of gazes. In fact, it is not Delia the one who looks at the camera in order to be recognized by the external viewer who subsequently sends her gaze back to her. Delia here is completely deprived of any agency, and it is the white camera who stares at her. The gaze of Agassiz and Zealy defined Delia who became a specimen; she was turned into an object who was not allowed to hold the look and send it back to her superiors and therefore, she was not authorized to be the owner of her body and image.

Delia as well as being silenced, was also blinded. In fact, her view was not permitted nor considered worth the existence. She was not allowed to return the look. She was a slave, and "slavery is the removal of the right to look."[84] Delia's case is the most unmistakable proof of how the democratic promise of photography fall apart almost immediately by hand of Agassiz and Zealy.

[84] Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 481.

The intent that moved Agassiz's analysis was the search for tangible proof which could sustain the polygenetic theory and the difference between the white and the black race. Delia was the proof. Her body was exploited by the scientist in the effort to identify physical evidence of white racial superiority. Daguerreotypes were believed to be nature's handwriting of the world and reality as it appeared. Delia's body and her physical features were visible for all to see, and therefore provided an indisputable proof for a naturalization of racial diversity.[85] The daguerreotype and nudity of Delia supported the white approach that saw white Americans as the holder of culture and civilization, whereas black Americans as the savage and instinctual animals not worth of any piece of cloth. Delia's daguerreotype became the touchable demonstration of black inferiority because Delia was reduced to the signifier of her physical difference.[86]

The type of materials utilized to create daguerreotypes emphasized the figure represented. In Delia's daguerreotype the wrinkles of her body stood on the silver plate as if the viewer could touch the actual body, as if the picture was not simply a hard copy of how Delia's body may have appeared, but a miniature of Delia herself standing there forever for the spectator's amusement and interest. The captured image was very realistic at the time not only to the sight, but also to the touch. The final result of Zealy's work mirrors the initial motivation: Delia's black body was the proof for black inferiority and in her daguerreotype her naked black body stands out. It is the center of both Agassiz's scientific research and the photographic representation. Nothing else mattered and was taken into consideration.

According to nineteenth century's custom, Delia's nakedness was very unusual; furthermore, this was a centralized component on the daguerreotype and by the daguerreotype itself. Her nudity was even more emphasized, therefore, even more disturbing. The members of the Peabody Museum who in 1976 found the fourteen daguerreotypes recall that the image of Delia had something different from the other representations which was hard to identify and explain:

> "She was both there and not there. Physically, she was fully exposed, every detail of her upper body on display and minutely recorded by the camera, but at the same time there was a complete lack of emotional presence in the picture, as if the woman had put on a mask to

[85] Hall, *The Spectacle of the Other*, p. 244.
[86] Ibid., p. 249.

> conceal her identity. […] It was this combination of precision and ambiguity, presence and absence, that made the image utterly fascinating." [87]

What Delia was experiencing in the moment in which Zealy was taking a picture of her against her will, was a traumatic event. Based on the work of Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, a traumatic event "is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occurred."[88] Considering that it is very likely that she was living a traumatic event, it should not amaze the perception that the viewer has of Delia wearing a mask. Being deprived of her clothes, the woman tried to protect herself how she could, to hide in a safe place, and withdrawal was the path she followed in order to reduce to the minimum the damages. As a matter of fact, when someone is undergoing an event which is perceived as too violent or unbearable, this episode is rejected and pushed away. In this way, the subject involved experienced a withdrawal from the world, focusing on her inner self so that she can feel to be in a safe place and not living that specific event. This dissociation between the event her body was living and what her mind was undergoing, may have happened because of what Caruth defined as the "incomprehensibility"[89] of the traumatic event: the violence she suffered was not fully known and understood by Delia who in that moment found in the escape in herself a protection.[90]

However, despite her effort to isolate and protect herself, tears wet her eyes and reveal her real mood and nature. Sadness, anger, discouragement, disappointment, skepticism. These are all the feelings that she might have felt. These are the feelings that unmask more than anything else, her real nature as human being, as woman.

Delia's tears are the evidence that denounces the violence she is subjected to, her tears are the proof of her being a woman, forced to slavery against her will, kept in bondage for the presumed commonwealth; for fear of cohabiting with the other and the unknown; for economic growth; for money, the only real authority that guided the actions of those who happened to be in the highest ranks of society, as much in the past as in the present. This proof, however, was decided to be ignored for almost a century because

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[87] Rogers, *Delia's Tears*. P. 6.
[88] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*. P. 91.
[89] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.
[90] Ramadanovic, *"You Your Best Thing, Sethe": Trauma's Narcissism*. P. 178.

white scientists preferred to support another one, the one that they considered more convenient for them.

What makes the viewer detect a form of detachment of Delia from the moment in which she was photographed, it is caused both by the gravity of the event she is undergoing and by the very nature of photography itself. In fact, this ambivalence towards Delia's presence or absence in the picture is also supported by Sontag's approach: "a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."[91] A photograph captures a specific moment in time, making it last forever, but the real duration of that same moment is only an instant that goes as fast as it came. Delia's daguerreotype depicts a scene passed more than 170 years ago, and what remains of that moment is the photography itself. Delia's image is, therefore, a token of absence. Furthermore, Delia's traumatic event which lasted just a few seconds, has been frozen in time by Zealy's photography who made it persist until nowadays, intensifying even more the brutality of Zealy's and Agassiz's actions towards her.

Delia was born in America, of African descendent, she was a woman, a daughter, a slave, a scientific body. This daguerreotype captured and froze Delia's tension in the effort of keeping all these pieces together, fighting against the ideas of the white powers who aimed at annihilating her identity, her subjectivity, reducing her to a body, a slave, a skin color.

As already pointed out, Delia's body is not an indisputable proof of racial inferiority, but her body has been transformed into it by the scientist Agassiz and by the daguerreotypist Zealy who specifically looked for it in order to give value to their work. Therefore, their reading of Delia's body is an emblem of a specific world view of scientific white men, who would have never stopped until they found what they needed for their career. Delia's image does not represent only a specific concept, but a whole approach to the natural world.[92]

One of the reasons why this daguerreotype did not cause indignation and a consequent refusal of those practice of violence, was certainly slavery, perceived as a stable and naturalized institution, but mainly because these practices have been labeled with a specific name. As Susan Sontag wrote: "there can be no evidence, photographic or

[91] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 21.
[92] Rogers, "The Slave Daguerreotypes of the Peabody Musem: Scientific Meaning and Utility", p. 51.

otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterized."[93] To Delia's daguerreotype was given the name of science, of progress, and social betterment, conveying an idea of justice and social wellness for whites and future generations. However, if Zealy's photos were categorized under the name of violence and racist exploitation, there would have been clear evidence of violent practices at the expense of black Americans. The same logic that guided the process of cataloguing mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter, can be identified in this daguerreotype in which the real nature of things has been concealed under a wrong name, and violent actions have been justified by the choice of a specific name: scientific progress. "It is still ideology (in the broadest sense) that determines what constitutes an event".[94] It was the ideology of races that constituted a society in which barbarities against African Americans were accepted and normalized. Furthermore, it is important to consider that "photographs shock insofar as they show something novel."[95] Nothing new was showed in Delia's daguerreotype to the white audience of the nineteenth century who was not shocked by Delia's image.

In the following section, I will deal with the experience of another woman, who different circumstances and social possibilities allowed her to face a different destiny and to become her own master. I switch therefore, from the account of a woman who was reduced to a scientific type, to the depiction of a woman who became an independent subject.

[93] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.
[94] Ibid., p.23.
[95] Ibid., p.23.

2.5. SOJOURNER TRUHT

After her conversion to the Methodist Church and her freedom from slavery, Isabella revolutionized her life, she took on a new name and travelled across North America as a preacher, abolitionist, and feminist.

Figure 4 - Sojourner Truth, 1864.

As a free woman, Sojourner Truth had on herself the possibility to choose what to do and what to wear. Even if this might appear as a trivial conquest, the power to decide her personal clothes assumed a deeper meaning in a society in which white Americans had the legal authority to control and regularize African American's clothing. In fact, as

it has been previously pointed out, American legislation felt the need to codify the slaves' dresses, so that any sides of African American lives were left out of white control.

However, being free does not mean being wild and without rules. As a matter of fact, the luxury of independence and free choice was handled by Truth with proper care, respecting social decency and recognizing as valuable the directions of her religious faith. Attire played a significant function in Sojourner's life as a free woman, and she employed it as a weapon against those who doubted African American women's decency, civilization, and agency. The possibility of choosing, brought with itself the promise of creating an image which could best represent the woman's inner character and her all-around persona. These elements gave her the opportunity to employ her potential as a woman, being able to take her own decisions and to live the life that was forbid to slave women. Through her clothes, Truth became the master of herself, and they contributed to place on the foreground African American women's ability to act for themselves. She had the agency to earn a position in the public sphere of American society.

Sojourner Truth may not be thought of as the universal example of free African American women's relationship with and use of clothing. In fact, each one of them had a specific and personal approach to the matter, it is very hard to individuate a fixed feminine dress code, given the class differences and the opposite ideas of femininity. Nevertheless, Sojourner is a good representative of a Methodist and abolitionist woman preacher. She opted for proper clothes which could mirror her virtuous soul, in line with the religious woman she was. In addition to this, as time went by and her name acquired visibility, she was also well aware of her status as a public figure, and she looked at clothes as a means to distance herself from the female lower classes. In any case, Truth's mantra was respectability and decency. As a matter of fact, she preferred dresses which did not display flesh, rejecting the new reform on clothing that was spreading among middle-class white women which saw a more licentiousness in cloth. In fact, the short skirts characteristic of this new movement, were spurned by Truth who was reminded of the inadequate and uncomfortable clothes typical of slavery. [96]

In an environment in which African American women were even more marginalized and their bodies were seen with suspicion as sexual objects, choosing what

[96] Klassen, *The Robes of Womanhood*, p. 12-30.

to wear was a delicate matter which could be easily turned against themselves. However, what really mattered for Sojourner Truth was not only to dress according to the current trend or taking the distance from stereotypes on blacks. Her real concern was to convey a message of racial and gender equality, social freedom, and faith on God. To do so, she had to represent herself as a respectable woman, a woman who was reliable, virtuous, authentic, and independent. Clothing was one of the tools she decided to employ, which were essential for her to make her voice be regarded worth of being heard. Through her agency and clothing, Sojourner sent a clear message efficient for all African American women like her: as woman, she was independent and valuable. Being listened was vital for Truth and her mission as a preaching and abolitionist woman.

Sojourner Truth stood in a society which rejected her body and her color and precisely this environment pushed her to assume a role of confrontation necessary to the disclosures of white Americans towards discourses on race and gender. She assigned to her body a power which had always been negated to black American women, to establish and normalize new ways of existing in her contemporaneity. Sojourner moved from being a slave, a body subjected to the will and whims of whites, to a black free woman who transformed her body into a challenger of racist and sexist discourses, and of their dehumanizing social norms.

The same agency which guided her in the decision of specific clothes leading her to actively take a role in her community, helped her becoming aware of herself and her intellectual capacity. Precisely for this, she was able to recognize what was proper to do, what was necessary to avoid, and even when it was important for her own sake to act against the common norms of decency.

In 1858, Truth was in Indiana, she was attending a meeting, the third of many which saw her as main speaker. Her speech was on abolition and at the end of it, a group of Democrats, who were supposed to be softer on slavery, led by Dr. T. W. Strain, questioned Sojourner's authenticity, claiming that she was not a woman, but a man in disguise based to the sound of her voice: "Your voice is not the voice of a woman, it is the voice of a man, and we believe you are a man."[97] This intrusion was irrelevant to the issue of slavery presented in that occasion. What the opponents were aiming at was trying

[97] The Liberator, 15 October 1858.

to degrade her performance, focalizing the attention on her gender. It is no news that women speaking, especially in public occasion, were not looked kindly upon and the denial of the femininity of the woman speaking in public was something Sojourner Truth was used to experience. This challenge to her authenticity as a woman did not shock Truth, given that she was conscious of her value and her womanliness.

The audience split in two factions: those who demanded a clear proof of the woman's truth which could be given after the examination by the women at the meeting of Truth's breast; and those, mainly the women there, who were "surprised and indignant at such ruffianly surmise and treatment."[98] Chaos erupted and finally Sojourner took the floor:

> "Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many white a babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man's estate; that, although they had sucked her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck! In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame."[99]

Worth of notice in this comment, it is not only Truth's audacity and being plainspoken in front of a crowd of mainly white men in nineteenth century America, which still should deserve much more attention, but the use of her body. Whereas the audience was demanding her disrobing in front of other women to prove her womanhood, Truth took the reins of the situation and willingly positioned herself centerstage. The woman did not let the others choose for herself and become object of the audience's eyes, but actively decided to make her body subject for interpretation. In addition to this, Sojourner behaved to change the roles between oppressor and oppressed; she inverted the dynamics that were usually expected in situation like the one that was about to take place. Truth disrobed her bosom and asked the man gathered if they wished to suck. In that kind of situation, the woman should have felt ashamed of showing her nudity, but she decided to change the terms midway and to make the others feel ashamed of their requests and actions. Truth's use of her body was meant not only to shame the people standing in front of her, but it was a protest to the whole system which rendered natural for a black woman to expose her nudity on request, to make herself available to the demand of the white man.

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

More than turning the challenge upside down, Sojourner took advantage of the situation to fool her audience who dared to question her authenticity. While referring to the white children that she breastfed and how these babies became man's estate, men worth of that name, she claimed that these men who were nursed by a colored bosom, were much more valuable than the one that stood in front of her. Through this confrontation and by inviting her audience to suck, Truth unmanned them. This practice of infantilizing adults was very common on behalf of white men towards African American men who were used to undergo constantly to belittling comments and boyish nicknames.

As she decided to take up the discourse on breastfeeding to underestimate her white audience, she accepted the risk of opening the floor to a stereotype very common at the time that is the one of the black mammy. Sojourner embraced the idea of her being a mammy of white children because she had to convey a specific image of herself, even if this image did not really adapt to her history as a slave. As a matter of fact, in her *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* there are no mentions to her as a nurse of white babies, furthermore when she was enslaved at the Dumonts, she and the Dumonts's daughter were around the same age which makes it impossible that Isabella could breastfeed her. In addition to this, the figure of the mammy was much more prevalent in the South than in the North where she was born and lived. These facts could make one doubt of Sojourner's truth and authenticity of her words, however, here Truth is making herself representative of a whole community of African American women who were forced to renounce to their own offspring in order to feed and nurse white children. As an African American mother herself and member of the black people, Sojourner evoked her symbolic history as mammy and slave rather than her personal past.

Sojourner Truth was an authentic African American woman who grew up as a slave and now that she was free and could be her own master, she chose to adjust her image to the situation, and to refashion herself as she thought best.

Truth did not hesitate to exhibit her body even though it was a sensitive part of her figure. In fact, black female body has always been used to the pleasure and needs of white men, acquiring through time a clear sexual connotation which made the woman's body always available. This rendered them categorized as degraded and lascivious, sexualized objects. Even among abolitionists, the display of an undressed black body evoked slave

auctions where black bodies were disrobed to be seen and then bought by slaveowners. However, in this description of the event concerning Truth, it is never hinted openly at her sexuality. Her breast is the center of the conversation, but it is linked to motherhood and breastfeeding. Her audience is not thought by Truth as a group of rapists, but as babies in need of a good mother.

The power of her self-positioning is rendered by the balance between these elements of her speech. As it has been explained in the previous chapter, her strength laid not only on the vigor of her words, but also on her attitude and the use of her body as a means to amplify value and meaning. The replay of her audience to her performance has not been written down probably because *The Liberator* was an anti-slavery journal who therefore, aimed at preserving Sojourner's image. There is only a short sentence shout by a young man who prosecuted in the effort of sexualizing the woman: "Why, it does look like an old sow's teat."[100] This comment however, clearly a childish attempt to counterattack a much more mature intervention, did not spoil the rhetoric triumph which will become central to Truth's image.

This ability that Sojourner had in staging herself at the center was fed also by her interest in *cartes de visite* and her desire to be known by Americans. Sojourner Truth was part of those African Americans who believed that the invention of photography was a powerful tool to make their voice be listened, that the lens of the camera was able to capture the real nature of humans and that photography implied democracy and a chance to egalitarianism. Images were a more direct and clear way to communicate and to deliver messages, while writing and reading were inadequate in an epoch in which blacks were forbidden to learn and whites were culturally inclined to distrust African American words. Many black intellectuals of those years were well aware of it. As a matter of fact, even Frederick Douglass favored images over written words in order to convey a message:

> "African American writing becomes something that its adversaries could trample upon. In order to reach the widest audience possible in his search not only for freedom but also for black equality […], Douglass needed pictures to inform and supplement his writings."[101]

The same can be applied to Truth, who felt that photographs were more effective and immediate in their meanings, and that could travel across the Country easily and fast.

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Faisst, *Degree of Exposure*, p. 75.

Despite the use of photography to certificate the inferiority of the black race, Sojourner believed in the democratic promise of it. She was certain that the instrument could have helped her in her mission, and "she was determined to author and profit from her representation of self."[102] Not only did the preacher authored and handled the making of her *cartes de visite* by deciding her clothes, her posture, and the props of the scene, but she was also determined to gain money from her actions. Truth was improvising new ways to economically sustain herself and the rights of African Americans who were about to be foreground in the Civil War.

Even if Sojourner was not the photographer of her *cartes de visite*, the one who actually focused the lens or calculated the shutter speed, it can be proper to say that she practiced photography and can be considered as those early African American practitioners and theorists of photography.[103] Truth was aware that while her words were destined to end as soon as her speeches were over, her photographs remained long after her exhibition and she could be easily remembered by Americans. In addition to this, Sojourner made use of the copyright conventions which she probably became familiar with from previous publications of her images, so that she could protect her works and maximize the profit. As a matter of fact, while it was the photographer who held the copyright over the images, Sojourner wittingly subverted it and informally print on the *cartes de visite* her slogan "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance. Sojourner Truth".[104] In so doing, she indirectly called attention to her ownership.

This relationship that Sojourner had with her signed *cartes de visite* is a further element which highlights her knowledge of her society, and so her being present in American society. In fact, it was 1862 when coins were replaced with paper greenbacks, which appeared in American society as the first banknotes issued by the government. In these greenbacks, so called because of the green backs on the majority of these bills, familiar faces, mostly of politicians, were stamped on one side so that people could recognize the validity and function of that piece of paper. This new form of payment was not immediately understood by everybody who was used to the various coins and may not have recognized their value. Furthermore, initially greenbacks were easily

[102] Grigsby, *Enduring Truth*, p. 16.
[103] Wallace, *Pictures and Progress*, pp.4-5.
[104] Ibid., p. 90.

counterfeited therefore many people believed that any piece of paper with a sign on it was money. Only one year later, Truth precociously welcomed the new means and decided to sign her photographs. This fact has a double meaning: on one side it demonstrates how Truth was well aware and active in her social and historical environment so much so that she readily recognized and understood a new social convention; on the other side, deciding to actively use this same innovative process of combining paper, photographs, mass productions and circulation to her own advantage and sustenance, shows her positive reaction and responsiveness to social inputs.[105]

Sojourner positioned herself in front of the camera to be seen by Americans and especially by herself. Through her photos, she sought to look and get to know herself. As it happened with clothes, she wanted to become owner of her actions. In order to reach a complete autonomy, she had to position herself in front of the lens and objectify her image. She was aware of the importance of the gaze, and of the necessity of appropriating her image reclaiming her right to look. Slavery is the removal of the right to look, and Truth as a free woman, had to take it back. She could do that only after a self-objectification in which the look of the others was required to be able to recognize herself. Her images made it possible for her to resituate the gaze which with slavery became an extension of white lookers and to gain the autonomy to represent herself in many ways and to affix complexity and completeness to her person.

This recognition by herself and the others, acquired a social value allowing Sojourner to be recognized by the public eye not only as an African American, but also as an abolitionist preacher. The *cartes de visite* gave her the possibility to share a clear image of herself, not as a slave anymore, but as a free woman fighting for her independence. The woman sought to appropriate her image as a free individual and as a public human being, who could raise her voice and actively participate in society. For African Americans who obtained freedom photography became a tool to fully know themselves.

Her self-objectification and her desire to reach deeper and deeper knowledge of herself, led her to challenge once again white American's imaginary of African Americans. In 1867, Truth asked a phrenologist to read her skull. This practice was very

[105] Grigsby, *Enduring Truths*, pp. 143-145.

common among white scientists who were studying and looking for proof of black's physical inferiority. As it has been presented in the section dedicated to Delia, Zealy's image of the woman had a phrenologist approach, meaning there was focalized interest especially on the head, its shape, size, and character, as an external evidence which could speak of internal characteristics and inner workings of the mind and the spirit.[106]

Truth decided to be analyzed by a white scientist, taking the risk of being subjected to racist categorizations. Her examiner was Nelson Sizer, an abolitionist who tried to read Sojourner's skull in the most neutral way possible. In his work there are no racial reference with any indications of the woman's skin color. In Seizer's phrenological reading there is only an interpretation of what Truth's personhood could be. She is described as a woman of "good character," someone who is "upright by nature," and who "never give[s] up"[107].

Even if this measurement does not bear any scientific value nor reliability, what Truth dared to do was something that highlights her self-confidence and her desire to be recognized, first and foremost by herself, as valuable. This phrenological interpretation shows how much she was willing to pay the price of independency, and that she would have done anything to prove her autonomy and authenticity, even being reduced once again to a scientific type.

The effort of knowing herself and share an image of her which was complete and wise, enabled Sojourner to reflect a vision of herself different from the hermetically sealed division of races made by white Americans. Truth was a proof of the inconsistency of the binary opposition between African and European Americans, savagery and civilization. In her *cartes de visite*, the woman transmitted an idea of herself as a woman of culture, with an austere and confident look, well dress and wealthy enough but without appearing lavish. Truth demonstrated that being black does not mean being savage, but that racial inferiority has nothing to do with scientific and biological discussions.

Truth used her body to demonstrate equality between black and white Americans, and also between men and women. In her famous speech in 1851, when she performed at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, she drew on her black female body for strength in her speech about gender equality. According to Francis Gage's version, one

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[106] Wallis, *Black Bodies, White Science*, p 49.
[107] Grigsby, *Enduring Truth*, p. 13.

of the presiders at the Convention,[108] in that occasion Truth held up her arm to show the strength of her muscles to challenge cultural discourses on female weakness. Sojourner decided to present herself as a strong woman, able to handle physical tasks and social responsibilities as much as white men were able to do.

[108] Minister, *Female, Black and Able*, p. 9.

CHAPTER 3: RAISING AWARENESS

This chapter opens to a further discussion regarding memory. After having dealt with the history and the meaning of Delia's daguerreotype and Truth's *cartes de visite* had, my focus now is to see how these photographic items apply in a contemporary setting.

It is widely known the role and the essential function that remembering the past has. This recognition of the past is important not only as a way to honor that specific past, but also, and most importantly, it is the key to learn and live in the present consciously, with the awareness of the threats that human life brings. However, commemorating something from the past bears various obstacles and questions regarding the nature of the events to remember and the adequate approach necessary to handle those episodes. As a matter of fact, while it is clear that mostly good comes from remembering specific anecdotes or figures, as it may be the case with Sojourner Truth's life and images, things get more complicated when talking about men, women or facts that marked history with death and corruption, as it is the case of Agassiz and his daguerreotypes of African Americans.

Whereas on one side, thinking back to those figures and deeds stained as negative experiences, helps preventing history from repeating itself and living with eyes wide open to new possible dangers; on the other side, remembering is a slippery floor, where one could glide on commemoration of what happened, reading it as a way to pay a somehow flattering tribute to someone or something. Devoting time to the research and analyses of specific historical persons implies giving them space and time that might be perceived as much more than what they deserve based on the character of their deeds during their lifetimes. Furthermore, remembering certain kind of people, is only the result of a specific history. The many aspects that made life in the past, together with their people, have been shadowed by the single reality that reached front stage in official history as a consequence of the people in power who decided what and who was worthy of being remembered. In this case, remembering the people and facts coming from that official but partial history, might cause indignation and resentment in modern society. As a matter of fact, these persons would be the outcome of their being relevant figures in a univocal view of history which suppressed representatives of other histories who might have been more valuable and could have deserved more attention by modern society.

Dealing with the past as a category to be remembered, therefore, implies a wide number of disclaimers which would make us lose track of the real point here discussed.

Furthermore, seen the complexity and the layered nature of this topic, it is essential to reflect on it to consider the various ways that might be more suitable in the process of remembering. In this chapter I will analyze how persons living in our generation, decided to bring Delia and Truth in our times and how they tried to give them a new life and a new voice. In addition to this, the section that follows will shed some light on the possible ways of remembering in an alert and productive manner: tapping into traumatic events from the past in order to revolutionize them into moments of reflection necessary to bring awareness and progress in the present.

This is the reason why I chose to dedicate a whole chapter to the theme of "rememory".[109] I firmly believe that dismissing something from common mind because of its negative character is never the answer and the proper path to follow. No matter the seriousness of the situation, it is vital to remember, and so to learn from the past. Events and people that took place and lived in the past have no real meaning nor value if they remain figures marbled in History; they start to assume importance and effectiveness only once their presence is recognized by others and by future generations. Through this recognition, future generations have the tools necessary to live their contemporaneity consciously and more inclined to avoid mistakes that marked times and places that precede them.

Once again, the first one to be presented will be Delia who is also the one who raises more concerns. First, Delia's daguerreotype and the one of her peers, represent real people who have been stripped off their clothes and forced to face the camera.

Is it appropriate to show these pictures publicly? How to proper manage them? Once acknowledged the reason of their being, shouldn't everybody see them as an instrument which might help to understand racism? Do we know who the descendants of the sitters are? If so, who is the owner of these daguerreotypes? How could we respect their ancestors? How can these photos reach a more central position in history? How might we restore the humanity that has been deprived from them? Should scholars censor the bodies, or would it be an alteration of historical relics?

These are just a few of the questions that these daguerreotypes raise, and only some of them have found an answer in the work of the artists and scholars that will be presented

[109] Word borrowed by the studies of the author Toni Morrison and her book *Beloved*.

in this chapter. As it has been explained in the previous chapter of this work, the process of looking is in itself an action which might imprison or free the sitter, as Douglass pointed out "the meaning of representations is governed not only by who makes the image but also by who looks."[110] Responsible for Delia's bondage were not only Agassiz and Zealy, who surely played a huge part in this, but all those who looked and still look at her with a superior gaze. The label applied to these photographs at the beginning of their existence has the possibility to change based on the new look that is given to them by modern scholars and artists. However, rather than completely rejecting the significance they had before, running the risk of forgetting, "it is important to critically […] recognize that their versions of history are not absolute" and that "their meaning extends well beyond the empirical proof that Louis Agassiz sought."[111]

[110] White Science p. 57.
[111] Ibid., p. 58.

3.1. DEALIA'S TEARS, MOLLY ROGERS

The first example presented in this chapter is Molly Rogers, with her book *Delia's Tears: Race, Science and Photography in Nineteenth- Century America*. Rogers is now Associate Director of the NYU Center for the Humanities and has an interest in the theory and history of photography which she has pursued since the beginning of her formal education, getting a degree in Film studies, and later a master's in Art History.[112] Her second passion is writing which led her to write and then produce a short play, a short story titled "House of Secrets" published in 2021, and in 2010 to the publication of her first book *Delia's Tears*, followed by *To Make their Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes* in 2020, a work she co-edited and for which she wrote the introduction.

As enthusiast of photography, Molly Rogers could not have avoided coming across Alan Trachtenberg's studies in the matter, and it was precisely when she read his *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (1989) that she first found out about Zealy's daguerreotypes. 1989 was the moment in which the fifteen daguerreotypes were first featured after their discover at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. Although this small collection is regarded now as one of the most historically significant sets of photographs from the nineteenth century, Trachtenberg's work did not give it extensive scrutiny which Rogers's work instead does by allowing the reader to dive into these images and to know something more about them.

Molly Rogers's methodology in handling the material is very persuasive and essential, specifically meant for a wider audience, readers who desire to know more about American discourse on race and photography of the nineteenth century but that do not expect to be fulfilled with every detail and more on the matter. The accessibility of *Delia's Tears* allows everybody with a basic historical knowledge to discover the context in which Agassiz's research took place. There are not many interviews to the author that could clarify it, but the potential use of this work is evident: thanks to its easy approachability, Molly allowed Delia's story to be read and known by a vast number of people, opening itself to the public and not only to scholars and experts.

[112] Piasecki, "An Interview with Molly Rogers, Author of 'House of Secrets' Spring 2021".

As it will be clarified further in this section, the writer's approach to the daguerreotypes has not been immediately clear to her. The questions concerning Delia's daguerreotypes proposed in the previous section, revealed themselves to her as soon as she got the material. How to proper manage the images, how these photos can reach a more central position in history and how we can restore the humanity that has been deprived from them, are just a few of the points that made her think.

In her work, her main focus is historical and social. She gives space to the issue of race in the middle of the nineteenth century and how it spread and developed among politicians, scholars and also plantation owners. Particular emphasis is laid on Agassiz's personal scientific and historical background and progress, including his research on African Americans and all his interest which resulted in the commission to Joseph Thomas Zealy to take the photographs. The fifteen daguerreotypes are placed at the center of the book. Each chapter starts with the picture of one of the African Americans photographed by Zealy, and it is followed by an excursus on a specific matter so that the context of the photos is clearer and clearer to the reader.

The mystery that surrounds these daguerreotypes pushed Molly Rogers to dedicate enough time to reflect on them and to find sufficient material to answer to some of the queries of the viewer. At the basis of this work, in fact, there is the attempt to find a response to the issue that characterized not only nineteenth century scholars, but also men and women from any generation: what it means to be human.[113] This book deals with the representations of men and women who have been photographed for the exact same reason, to clarify and establish scientifically the differences among humans and their nature, which increasingly became the core of the national debate between not only naturalists and politicians, but also ordinary citizens before and after the Civil War. Through Delia and her peers the majority of white Americans aimed at finding proof able to support their side of the discussion: African Americans were less human than white ones.

Delia's Tears is an account of Jack and Delia, Renty and Drana, Jem, Alfred and Fassena. However, their presence is only certified by their daguerreotypes: they are present and once again, their presence is a token of their absence. These daguerreotypes

[113] Rogers, *Delia's Tears*, p. xxi.

are the very definition given by Susan Sontag of what a photograph is: "a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence."[114] Their absence is justified not only by the very meaning of photography itself, but even by the social label that was put on them in those years. African American slaves were not worthy of attention, let alone of being remembered by historians. As a matter of fact, social and historical archives are updated by those in power, who have open access to them. These people are also the ones who decide what is important to be known and to be commemorated. For this reason, "keepers of history"[115] have decided to forget Delia, making her invisible.

The only evidence that documents the presence of these slaves in American history is provided by these daguerreotypes, representations that inevitably confer a very clear and fixed idea of them. Their nakedness is exacerbated by the status of their clothes, pulled down on their waist revealing a condition of exploitation of their bodies which would not have been there had their clothes being completely absent from the scene. Their being half naked symbolizes the "unnatural and humiliating aspect of their condition."[116]

Furthermore, these daguerreotypes are scarred by the outspoken life condition that these African Americans were forced to undergo. These characteristics are all elements that surely testify for the history of slavery in nineteenth century America and its inhuman nature, but on the other side, they cannot be taken as proof of their being humans. These are factors that spoil the representation of them as black men and women. Based on these images, it is not possible to give an evaluation of them as persons. Their inner selves, their personalities and their personal attitudes are hidden by their condition of slaves. Their being slaves ruined their outer appearance and inevitably even their inner aspect. These photographs spoil the idea that we as readers and viewers have of them as African Americans. We are influenced by these daguerreotypes in our idea of what being African American looks like and is.

These fifteen daguerreotypes are not sufficient nor reliable proof to rebuild the story of these black Americans. However, to write their history is one way which might contribute to make them more visible and present in historic and social archives.

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[114] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 21.
[115] Rogers, *Delia's Tears*, p. xxi-xxii.
[116] Lewis, *To Make Their Own Way into the World*, p. 299.

At this point another issue interfered Molly Rogers's work: how is it possible to write about Delia? What is the proper way to handle Zealy's daguerreotypes? As a matter of fact, there is little history about them and, moreover, the few testimonies come from slaveowners and politicians which inevitably overshadow a huge piece of their lives and do not contemplate their point of view. More importantly, talking about Delia and the others implies adopting the same repressive act which originated the pictures: the sitters remain an object of the external eye which tries to stitch an additional image of what they might have been, which is very likely to not correspond to the original version of their lives.

> "How, then, can we depict Delia as something more than an object of scientific or historical scrutiny? How can we give her a more central place in the story – her story – and so to write a more complete history, one that is inclusive rather than exclusive, a history that is more balanced, even if only marginally so?"[117]

Molly Rogers found one possible solution in her initial motive: the acknowledgment of the humanity of these African Americans. As a matter of fact, since their very existence, these people have been regarded as scientific specimen, as racial sitters and as property. Never their being humans has been taken into a serious acknowledgement, therefore a way to allow these persons a social and human liberation is through the reestablishment of their humanity which had always been denied to them. Alan Trachtenberg refers to this process as an "imaginative liberation", a phenomenon in which the gaze the viewer gives them set them free. As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the nature of the look that the observer sends, defines the condition of the person observed. Delia has always been looked at as an object of various meanings, what the new generation viewer should do and what Trachtenberg believed was the way to freedom, is to resituate the gaze and recognize their humanity: "we have acknowledged what the pictures most overtly deny: the universal humanness we share with them. Their gaze in our eyes […] frees them."[118]

The idea that a simple look posed in the proper way may redeem these African American slaves from the pain and suffering they had to undergo, makes the modern viewer surely feel comforted and compensated for the unpleasant feeling these images

[117] Rogers, *Delia's Tears*, preface xxii.
[118] Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, pp. 59–60.

arise. However, many critics have regarded this method as not really redemptive nor sufficient. Even Molly Rogers did not consider this principle suitable nor adequate for the liberation of Delia and so as a method on which her book could be built.

When in the second chapter of this thesis I have presented the issue of visuality and the right to look, I have explained that what allowed the first one to change into the second, was the look that the subject photographed gave to herself; it was a liberation which originated from the same eyes which had initially been denied looking back. This process demonstrates the impossibility to free someone unless it is this same someone who sets herself free. The imaginative liberation presented by Trachtenberg is possible only when it is performed by the subject involved. Furthermore, when dealing with enslaved people, only the individual's escape or a universal and institutionalized release could emancipate these persons. This being said, it does not mean that the way in which the viewer looks at these daguerreotypes is irrelevant, but that this is not enough, and that the nature of our gaze can only in part mitigate the objectification to which these African Americans have been subjected.

Discarded this approach, Rogers tried to opt for another technique which could represent and talk about these people in the best and more respectful way possible. Given that it is quite challenging to completely rebuild Delia's life and thoughts both for the impossibility of recovering her feelings and reflections, and because history almost completely delayed her presence from official archives, the author turned to what Norman Mailer wrote in his novel *The Armies of the Night* (1968). Mailer believed that because of the impossibility to reach every angle and fold of history, any writer that desired to create something historically truthful and humanly reliable, should resort to fiction.

However, Rogers soon discovered the problems that this means implied. A fictional representation which detached itself too much from the original point of view, is a further way of misrepresenting the truth. Again, this approach moves the reader and the writer away from the real image of these African Americans.

Almost hopeless, Rogers decided to take a step back and thought of letting the daguerreotypes talk for themselves. The bewildered violence they embody and the shocking silence that arises from them should be enough to represent their lack of voice in the historical records and what they were thinking, experiencing, and physically

enduring.[119] Even so, this was not enough. Previously I have pointed out how these images cannot be regarded as a real depiction of Delia, Fassena, Jack and the others. These photos are not objective documentation of their actual state of being. For this reason, even this last option could not provide an honest and trustworthy idea of who they were.

Eventually, the author solved this representational problem by looking at the work of the one who first was able to create a reliable reconstruction of enslaved African Americans and to do it successfully: Toni Morrison. In her masterpiece *Beloved* (1987), Morrison wrote a narration of slave experience drawing from historical events, personal and familial memories, and testimonies orally bequeathed to her and other African Americans. What made *Beloved* a full-fledged reconstruction of what slavery was and how it was lived by African Americans, was the act of imagination which allowed Morrison to create a more complete representation. The resulting narration was able to include the various perspectives of slavery, depicting through her characters the depths and shades which characterized such a dramatic and multifaced experience, without the presumption of writing a complete and final account of it.

Once the model has been identified and the theory to build a proper portrayal of the persons depicted in the daguerreotypes was found, Molly Rogers started to lay down the basis for *Delia's Tears*. In this book, the writer consulted historical archives and accounts made by authoritative scholars and writers on various topics concerning American history and African American experiences during slavery. In order to reach the places that have been forgotten by history, she followed Morrison's example and tried to imagine what the characters involved might have thought or experienced in that specific situation. This is precisely the motivation that moved her when she decided to start each chapter with the daguerreotypes of each African Americans, followed by a brief fictional excursus in which the man or woman represented in the photo is the main character.

These short vignettes focus on their points of view in different circumstances, not only figuring them in front of the camera, as it is the case of Delia,[120] but also in other situations, for example Renty who after rising early, recalls a conversation with his "Old

[119] Rogers, *Delia's Tears*, p. xxiv.
[120] Ibid., pp. 3-4

Man"[121] about his struggle with insomnia, or Fassena who admiring the wooden table he just finished making, is interrupted by a young boy who delivers a message to him by the "master"[122] who asks for him. The proximity which these imaginative episodes create, allows us to fill the gaps left by historians, to get closer to the enslaved black Americans and to get to know them somehow more fully in a situation in which they become the main actor of their own lives:

> "Through an act of imagination Delia thus becomes someone in her own story – not because she has been 'liberated' but because our own imaginations are freed to consider the possibilities of her experience."[123]

In *Delia's Tears*, what allows the African American men and women in the daguerreotypes to become main agent of their actions, therefore, what makes them fully human is the viewer's recognition and awareness of the sitters' elusiveness: the people in the images standing in front of them are individuals whose lives cannot be fully grasped nor understood if we take into consideration only the single image given to us by history.

To complete such challenge required a lot of work, much time and research. However, the aspiration is so high, and the matter of the book is so delicate that despite the effort, the final result might still find negative critics. In *Delia's Tears*'s case, some reviews pointed out the complexity of Rogers's intent and highlighted some problems which prevent the book from totally fulfilling its initial motivation. Object of major critiques has been the fictional part of the work.

Amy Louis Wood, a faculty member of the Illinois State University, specialized in U.S cultural history of the late 19th century and early 20th century, referring to the sections dedicated to the fictional parts, declared:

> "[…] unfortunately, Rogers' prose, which is otherwise lucid, comes across as strained and self-conscious in these sections. Furthermore, because she imbues all of the characters with the same tone and voice, these vignettes tend to flatten them as historical figures."[124]

To this, Wood added that in order to give some more consistency to these sections, Rogers could have used some testimonies and other documents such as speeches, to deepen their

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[121] Ibid. p. 23.
[122] Ibid. p. 111.
[123] Ibid. p. xxv.
[124] Wood. "Review of *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History"*, p. 661.

experiences as slaves and to balance them with the rest of the narrative which appears formally stronger and physically longer.

Professor Ann Fabian of The State University of New Jersey, specialized in history and American Studies, also focalized her critiques to Rogers's work mainly on the matter of the fictional vignettes, highlighting a different concern:

> "A reader will have to decide whether these efforts to voice experiences make the figures in the pictures more than the "objects" they appeared to the photographer and the scientist. Does Rogers's evocative prose in fact absolve us from complicity in the "repressive acts" of those who made these pictures?"[125]

In Ann Fabian's review, Molly Rogers's initial concern appeared to be unsolved, and her effort to avoid the risk of dehumanization and objectification was not fully successful.

[125] Fabian. "Review of *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America"*, p.544.

3.2. FROM HERE I SAW WHAT HAPPENED AND I CRIED, CARRIE MAE WEEMS

The second important effort to giving a new voice to Zealy's daguerreotypes is the photograph exhibition realized by the artist Carrie Mae Weems in the middle of the 1990s. Even in this case, the woman, born in Oregon in 1953, shows an unusual interest for visual arts since a very young age, and all that has to with the body and its relationship to the outer space. During her teenage years, she started taking dancing class, something that would teach her how to handle her body and the space around it. Together with this, during her first jobs she developed an attraction for socialist and feminist organizations and thought.[126]

At the age of eighteen, she first encountered the periodical *Black Photographers Annual* which opens the way to the world of photography. As a matter of fact, in those years she started working for the first time with photographers, getting her first camera and beginning her education on photography and design at San Francisco City College which will last two years. In 1981, Weems organized her first exhibition "Family Pictures and Stories" (1981-82) which will make her consider the idea of continuing her education in visual arts at the University of California in San Diego where she gets her MFA. Her insatiable need of knowledge brings her to participate in the graduate program in folklore at the University of California, Berkeley.[127]

In most of all her exhibitions, Weems localizes at its center the black body as a racialized figure and as an ideological concept derived from years of slavery and segregation in the United States. This interest also allows her to bring to light and to give a new voice to Delia's daguerreotypes.

During the early years of the 1990s, Weems wanted to deepen this interest on race and history of African Americans and began to work on representations from the past which appear so triggering that the artist felt the urge to show them to the modern audience. Her research which would find its acme in her exhibition "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried", started with a visit to the University of Harvard and its Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. During this time, the artist encountered

[126] Murray, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried: Carrie Mae Weems' Challenge to the Harvard Archive", pp. 16-20.
[127] http://carriemaeweems.net/ accessed on September 7, 2022.

for the first time fifteen daguerreotypes depicting seven African American men and women half or completely naked. Even though in her previous studies Weems got to know Agassiz's work and his research on races, she had never seen these daguerreotypes before.

After this shocking encounter, Carrie Mae Weems realized that what she saw could not remain hidden in a dusty archive and closed in her always ruminating mind. As an artist, she felt the thrust to transform what she witnessed into something that everybody could use and learn from, as a way to take a traumatic event from the past and make it new. This was an opportunity that Weems felt as essential in order to grab and evoke American history of slavery not as something dead in the past, but as a moment to reflect on the present time, and as a warning for present and future generations.

This moment of reflection and awareness that she desired to create implied the use of these daguerreotypes and their display. However, before entering the Peabody Museum of Harvard, the woman was asked to sign a restrictive contract where she had to legally guarantee that she would not make use of any of the images present in that place and owned by the university, without permission of the university itself. The power of Zealy's daguerreotypes, however, was so compelling that this legal accord did not stop her from photographing them and making them the main subject of her future exhibition.

Around five years later, once the artist rendered public her work on these and other images, Harvard threatened to sue her for violation of the contract and for having divulged their property without an official permission. At this point, Carrie Mae Weems realized that one of the richest universities in the world was about to sue her for something that she did and could not hide. Furthermore, there was a legal document which she signed, that testified against her. In this one-way path from which she would not have been able to escape, the artist found a parallel route which might have helped her out:

> "I thought Harvard is going to sue me for using these images of black people in their collection. […] I think I don't have a legal case, but maybe I have a moral case that could be made that might be really useful to carry out in public. […] I called them up and I said: 'I think actually your suing me would be a good thing. You should, and we should have this conversation in court.'"[128]

[128] Fragments of Weems' interview at the "Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5: Compassion" available at http://www.art21.org/videos/segment-carrie-mae-weems-in-compassion accessed on September 7, 2022.

She believed that discussing such a topic publicly would have been helpful for many people who wanted to work with items coming from the past and as an opportunity to openly deal with stories and events which have always occupied the last seat in history and have been consciously hidden from official archives. At this response, aware that such a process would have disclosed Pandora's box, which not even the richest university in the world would have been able to control, Harvard decided not to open a legal process against her. The condition that Harvard established for her use of the daguerreotypes was that she should have sent them a percentage of the sale of each piece of her collection. Carrie Mae Weems' use of these daguerreotypes was so great and effective that eventually Harvard bought the photographs from her for their own collection.

The withdrawal of the contract from Harvard side, however, did not stop scholars from discussing the matter. In fact, it was precisely this contractual agreement that raised interest on the question of property.

Is Harvard the real owner of these fifteen daguerreotypes? Are there documents that certificate Agassiz's decision to send or donate them to the University? Has Agassiz ever been the actual owner of these forcefully taken photos? Or was it Joseph T. Zealy the holder, having been the photographer? And even if the photographer could claim ownership of the images over Agassiz, what about the sitters? Who is the owner of a photo: the photographer or the photographed? No matter who the real titleholder is, should the university donate these daguerreotypes to the descendants of the men and women represented or should they be displayed and made available to everyone as a token from a violent past?

The questions about these daguerreotypes are many and the possible answers may be potentially endless. Research on the matter brought to many conclusions, some of which also passed through the cataloguing of the legal contracts that Agassiz and Harvard may or may not have signed. My job here does not want to be so specific, furthermore I do not have the competence nor the space to dwell longer on this topic which is surely interesting in relation to the daguerreotypes but that will not add any strictly useful information to my work.

Four of the fifteen daguerreotypes have been included in "From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried" which first became public in 1995-96, as a commission of the J. Paul Getty Museum. This exhibition follows the structure of other collections realized

previously and successively, such as "Ain't Jokin'" (1987-88) and "Not Manet's Type" (1997). The exposition includes thirty-four photographs that Weems recovered from various archives, museums and universities of the United States. The first four images are those of Delia, Jack, Renty and Drana. After them, there are other pictures of African Americans from the mid-nineteenth century, such as the famous silver *carte de visite* of the black man with the scourged back, to the '60s of the previous century when African Americans lived under segregation and constant racial stereotyping resulted in the civil rights movements.

These photographs do not appear as their original versions, because the artist decided to modify them a little, without altering their real nature. All these pictures are enlarged and shaped in a circular form, tinted in red. Each one of them has a text on the surface which addresses the subjects of the image. This sequence of images and their texts create a short poem which starts and ends with the same picture of a Nubian woman[129] who faces the series from both sides. This first woman acts as the main observer of the collection, the one who witnesses the whole sequence of images and so the whole history of African Americans from the ante bellum period to the civil rights movement. This woman is the one who is looking at the events of black history and she is also the one who at the end of this historical excursus, cries at the brutality and social injustices that her people had to go through. The whole text that sentences after sentence marks the single portrait, reads:

> "From Here I Saw What Happened / You Became a Scientific Profile / A Negroid Type / An Anthropological Debate / & A Photographic Subject / You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother & Then, Yes, Confidant – Ha / Descending the Throne You Became Footsoldier & Cook/House/Yard/Field/Kitchen / You Became Tom John & Clemens' Jim / Drivers / Riders & Men Of Letters / You Became a Whisper A Symbol of a Mighty Voyage & By The Sweat Of Your Brow You Laboured For Self Family & Others / For Your Names You Took Hope & Humble / Black and Tanned Your Whipped Wind of Change Howled Low Blowing Itself – Ha – Smack Into the Middle of Ellington's Orchestra Billie Heard It Too & Cried Strange Fruit Tears / Born With a Veil You Became Root Worker Juju Mama Voodoo Queen Hoodoo Doctor / Some Said You Were The Spitting Image of Evil / You Became A Playmate To The Patriarch / And Their Daughter / You Became An Accomplice / You Became The Joker's Joke & / Anything But What You Were Ha / Some Laughed Long & Hard & Loud / Others Said 'Only Thing A Niggah Could Do Was Shine My Shoes' / You Became Boots, Spades

[129] A Nubian queen or woman is a female ruler of Nubia, a kingdom located in southern Egypt and northern Sudan, along the Nile. The woman depicted in this photograph is also part of the exploited and misused black female figures that western colonialist used. This specifically dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century (1926) photographed by explorer George Specht. Recently, this figure has been reappropriated by African Americans and used to refer to any woman with African origins.

> & Coons / Restless After The Longest Winter You Marched & Marched & Marched / In Your Sing Song Prayer You Asked Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel? / And I Cried."[130]

Through this short poem and the presentation of the images, Carrie Mae Weems was determined to find a new and fresh model to talk about African American history. At the same time, using preexisting images, her goal was to recreate the history of photography and the way in which black Americans have been represented through and within American photography. These pictures are constructed from the point of view of white America and the way in which it saw itself in relationship to the black subject. In this collection, the images reveal how black Americans have always been shaped according to the ideas and whims of whites, and that over the years, this vision of blackness remained, and it became part and parcel of American culture and ideology.

However, the presence of the Nubian woman at the beginning is functional. As a matter of fact, the artist wanted to change things: she intervened in this long lasting phenomenon of subjugation by giving a new voice to those who did not have one, or to those whose voice was altered by the perception that white Americans had of them. Through Weems' use of words, this collection of images bears witness to the way in which crimes against African Americans happened, and it triggers disturbing feelings necessary to make the viewer realize that the present which may seem distant and clean from such crimes, is actually haunted by this violent past.

Furthermore, the fact that Carrie Mae Weems stole Zealy's daguerreotypes from the University of Harvard can be seen as an act of liberation of those men and women who remained trapped in the Peabody Museum for more than a century. This appropriation allowed modern audience to directly witness a violent history which official archives have always tried to keep hidden. When asked about it, the artist declared:

> "I wanted to uplift them out of their original context and make them into something more than they have been. To give them a different kind of status first and foremost, and to heighten their beauty and their pain and sadness, too, from the ordeal of being photographed."[131]

Weems's provocative act aimed at transforming the daguerreotypes, not only through her appropriation of them, but also through the way in which she decided to make them new,

[130] Murray, "From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried", p. 3.
[131] Ibid., p. 24.

changing them from proof of racial inferiority to relics from the past that cannot be forgotten. Delia's daguerreotypes are invested with her point of view and a new meaning.

In fact, the artist enlarged[132] the images so that the viewer could focus directly on the subject of the pictures, and so that the clothes of the first four daguerreotypes, the one of Delia, Jack, Renty and Drana, do not appear in the frame. It is not fully known the reason behind this decision; however, many can be the assumptions. What I like to believe is that hiding their stripped clothes which stand for a very disrespectful violence against them, might be a way that the artist chose to give them back the respect that they missed to receive when they were alive.

She also decided to tint all the images blood red, as to diminish the documentary authority of the pictures and as a means of pointing to a long history of violence and death. The only images which are not in red, are the first and the last one representing the Nubian woman. Her photograph is in blue, a color that signifies the confessional thoughts of the Nubian observer.[133]

Weems' photos are positioned in round mats because she wanted to recreate the shape of the camera lens, which is a round surface, so that the viewer could have the perception of looking through a real photographic lens, as the subjects involved in the photographs have originally been looked at. Placed in the perspective of the photographer, the viewer has the possibility to watch black history through the same lens of those white men who forced these sitters to be disrobed and violated. At the same time, with this particular framing, the artist aims at interrogating the viewers which might be confused on the nature of the roles which reveals an ambiguity on who is looking at whom: is it the modern viewer or the women and men in the pictures that do the looking? In this collection, the possibility that the sitters become the agents and main subjects is allowed and intentionally encouraged by Carrie Mae Weems who referring to this work, stated:

> "I used this idea of '**I**[134] saw **you**' and '**you** became' as a way of both speaking out of the image and to the subject of the image. […] I am trying to hide a kind of critical awareness around the way in which these photographs were intended and then of course, the way in

[132] Interview to Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45579?artist_id=7177&page=1&sov_referrer=artist accessed on September 8, 2022.
[133] Murray, p.20.
[134] Orally stressed by the artist in her interview.

> which they are ultimately used by me. A strategy that I hope gives the subject another level of humanity and another level of dignity that was originally missing in the photograph."[135]

This idea of possibility and interchangeability of roles between the subjects that can be the agents is reinforced even by the decision to include the text that stands out in white against the red background of the image.

Through various devices, Weems created a relationship between the viewer and the viewed who is asked to be agents from the title itself in which the act of witnessing is suggested in the first-person pronoun used as first word and subject of the action. The use of the pronoun "you" contributes to establish a stronger and almost personal tie between the African Americans in the photographs and the observer. The adoption of the informal "you" helps the viewer to consider the sitters as friends rather than outsiders who arouse anger and rejection of that violent past.[136]

In addition to this, because the mats that contain the images are covered by a safety glass, each time that the viewer stops to look at each photograph, the reflection of her figure may appear in the round glass, as if she herself was the sitter of the portrait. This effect, even though it might have been accidental and not deliberately developed by the artist, provides a further way to establish a connection between the sitters and the audience.

Even if Weems' altering of the original photographs did not bring to a completely distortion of the images themselves, the decision to modify them must have not been taken lightly. In fact, as it has been pointed out previously, to edit a historical proof might be perceived as an unnecessary invasion which instead of adding a further meaning useful to the understanding of the proof itself, leads to a misrepresentation and annihilation of its value. However, in "From Here I Saw What Happened" the alteration is evident, yet it does not spoil its original meaning. On the contrary it adds new ones and allows the modern public to reflect on black and white American history and its complexity toward the issue of race and "the consequences of unchecked power."[137]

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[135] Carrie Mae Weems' own explanation of her exhibitionhttps://www.moma.org/audio/3175 from 1:16 – 1:56 min. Accessed on September 8, 2022.

[136] https://afterlivesofslavery.wordpress.com/2017/11/22/from-here-i-saw-what-happened-and-i-cried/ accessed on September 8, 2022.

[137] Interview to Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45579?artist_id=7177&page=1&sov_referrer=artist accessed on September 8, 2022.

This new interpretation of the images represented in the collection enables the viewer to ponder on the way in which this racial past arrived to us and to become aware of how at the time, this practice of racial subjugation was ordinary and socially accepted. Furthermore, thanks to Weems' alteration and interpretation, these photos can transform our approach to our modern societies, challenging our perception and awareness towards modern conventions, such as the still existing discrepancy between the representation in today's media and news of black criminals versus white criminals. This is the same phenomenon that characterized the critique made more than hundred years ago by Frederick Douglass in one of his lessons, previously encountered in this thesis.

This photographic exhibition found a worldwide interest which naturally divided itself into two main streams: on the one side there were those who believed that through her appropriation, Weems gave the opportunity to the audience to reflect on the problematic and violent representation of African Americans in history; on the other side, there were critics who questioned the artist's use of the images, perceived as a further violation of the men and women in the pictures who were, once again, forced to be displayed in front of paying customers, therefore being re-victimized.

Regarding the second group, they find critical points even in the question concerning Harvard University and the artist's decision of making sensitive materials available to the public despite the University's attempt of keeping them. To this point, however, it may be useful to remember that Harvard itself, once they saw Weems' final revisitation of the images, decided to pay for the collection and to hang it on the walls of their museum, which seems a clear sign denoting the University's appreciation of Carrie Mae Weems' work. However, the question of plagiarism does not find a happy ending in this. As a matter of fact, when the woman took the decision to make use of the daguerreotypes without a legal permission or an eventual dispensation by the University, she set a precedent that might be responsible for future appropriations of other delicate relics. Even if the majority thought that Weems' work was a successful one, her adoption of the daguerreotypes was a huge risk that might have had a different result with negative consequences. She opened the way to a phenomenon that might be dangerous if handled by wrong hands.

Both of these factions present critical points worth of our attention and that make it hard to take an unquestionable position. However, to conclude this section dedicated to

"From Here I Saw What Happened" I want to use Carrie Mae Weems' words on the thrust that moved her to create this photographic collection which undoubtedly is a place in which the modern man and woman can stop and reflect, and whose normality is questioned:

> "'From Here I Saw What Happened' is perhaps one of the more painful pieces that I've made. When I look at it, when I study it, I cry. It is a very sad piece and at the same time of course, there's always hope that's located within sadness as well. The hope that in the end, our mutual humanity would be understood and embraced."[138]

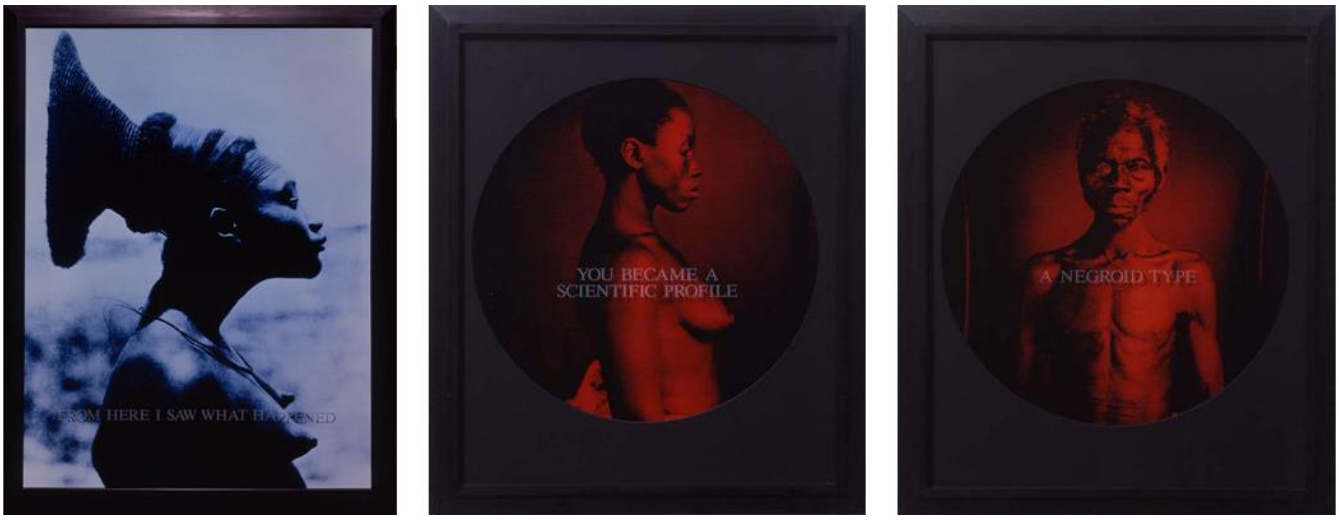

Figure 5 - From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried, 1995-1996.

[138] Carrie Mae Weems' own explanation of her exhibition https://www.moma.org/audio/3175 from 1:57 to 2:24 min. Accessed on September 8, 2022.

3.3. SASHA HUBER, TAILORING FREEDOM

The third and last visual ‘rememory’ of Delia’s daguerreotypes is Swiss-Haitian artist, Sasha Huber’s current exhibition “Tailoring Freedom”. This last example is the only among the ones previously mentioned, which is still in the process of being exposed to the public around the world.

Born in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1975, Sasha Huber now lives in Helsinki, Finland where she is primarily interested in the relationship between past and present, how the first is strictly related to the second one and specifically how the strength of the colonial past looms over the present world. Her needs of spreading awareness on today’s reality finds its way through her art: videos, photography, collaborations, and personal involvement in social events are her way to convey her message.

This attention toward what might be thought of as social issues, probably derives from her own origin and the history of her family. Her mother was a Haitian woman whose family had to flee from the island to escape the dictatorship of François Duvalier, also known as Papa Doc, who became president of Haiti in 1957 and then dictator from 1964 until his death in 1971. His was a totalitarianism characterized by the promotion of a cult of his person as a semidivine incarnation of Haiti itself. Throughout her life, Huber travelled to New York to visit the rest of her family now settled there and, growing up, she found herself interested in the history and politics of Haiti. By means of her visual art, she aims at honoring her family’s commitment to freedom. Furthermore, it was this strong link that her family has with the past that arose in her the necessity to find a language that could better convey the constant influence of the past in our present and to increase awareness about it.

Her formal career helped her to improve her passion for the arts. She studied Graphic Design at Zurich University of the Arts, where she obtained her Bachelor’s degree in 1996. She then continued with a master on Visual Culture at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, Finland in 2006, and a PhD at the Department of Art and Media at the Zurich University of the Arts and Media, began in 2017 and still in progress. Her professional career is marked by numerous exhibitions both as single artist such as the 56th Biennale di Venezia in 2015, and as collaborations with international committees, and by her presence as co-editor of books such as *Agassiz: Photography, Body, and Science, Yesterday and Today* published in 2010. In 2018, Sasha Huber was the winner

of the State Art Award in the category of visual arts promoted by the Arts Promotion Center Finland.

As it can be seen by the title of her co-edited book, Huber was particularly stricken by the figure of scientist Louis Agassiz, who happened to share half of her same roots and whose controversial nature as a scientist is object of many studies in Huber's life as an artist. In 2007, it was the 200th celebration of his birth and Huber first got to know the existence of Agassiz. The following year, she became part of the Demounting Louis Agassiz Committee,[139] founded by Swiss activist and professor, Hans Fässler with the aim of renaming the Agassizhorn, a mountain in the Swiss Alps named after the contributions of the glaciologist Agassiz, with the new "Rentyhorn" in honor of the enslaved African Americans photographed against their will. Her participation at the Committee helped her create consciousness on the figure of Agassiz not only as naturalist and glaciologist, which were and still are the major fields of his success and his popularity, but mainly as an influential scientist responsible for the development of racist theories and an advocate of segregations, sides of his life and career which were less known. From this experience, in 2010 the artist decided to publish a book, *Rentyhorn*,[140] where she documented the artistic project which bears the same name, and in which are included texts and photographs by curators and scholars from the Americas and Europe.

Her collaboration with the Committee gave her the possibility to participate in her first solo show in North America, a visual exhibition organized by The Power Plant in Toronto, and by Autograph APB in London, where all the work achieved in The Demounting Louis Agassiz commission and more, is presented, gathered under the name of "YOU NAME IT".[141] This international exhibit was presented at the Kunstinstituut Melly, in Rotterdam in 2021 and it is now travelling the world: this year it is in London, in 2023 it will be displayed at the Turku Art Museum in Finland.

In "YOU NAME IT", two unpublished pieces are presented to the public, which are part of the work "Tailoring Freedom" in which Sasha Huber took the daguerreotype of Delia and the one of her father Renty, and she uses her art in the effort to heal colonial trauma.

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[139] https://autograph.org.uk/exhibitions/sasha-huber-you-name-it accessed on September 13, 2022.
[140] http://sashahuber.com/?cat=38&lang=fi&mstr=37 accessed on September 13, 2022.
[141] https://www.miamiherald.com/detour/article263414683.html accessed on September 13, 2022.

In “Tailoring Freedom”, the artist combines two instruments together: after she reproduced the two photographs of the enslaved African Americans onto two boards made of wood, she uses the staple gun in order to create a dress that covers their naked bodies. The final result shows the man in an outfit which willingly reminds the one typically worn by Frederick Douglass, while the woman wears a dress which evokes the one of the abolitionist and activist Harriet Tubman. The use of the staple gun allows the artist to convey a series of messages, which together enable the subjects in the pictures to acquire the humanity and value which they were deprived of when they were alive. The effect created by the mix of dark wood and the shiny metal of the stapples evokes the sacredness of religious icons and at the same time it suggests a form of royalty. Sasha Huber made use of the staple gun as a symbolic way of stitching together the wounds that marked their lives and donating them a shield which is meant to protect them but also as a recognition of these man and woman as warriors of their epoch.[142]

The title of this section of the exhibition “YOU NAME IT” suggests a further meaning and intention in this work made by Sasha Huber. The metal clothes which have been stitched on the two bodies, allow Delia and Renty to gain the freedom that these two daguerreotypes forbid them to get. When these African Americans were forced to stand naked in front of the camera, their dignity as human beings was stripped off together with their clothes. This act of violence remained frozen in history in Zealy’s daguerreotypes. Despite their eventual freedom at the end of their lives, their shadows, meaning their daguerreotypes, remained imprisoned and did not correspond to the status of their substances, meaning their bodies which were set free. The moment in which Huber provided them with new clothes, Renty and Delia’s shadows in the photographs acquired the dignity and value that were stolen from them. Their shadows finally matched the nature of their substances.

Huber’s work of art presents her strategy in which the modern public can refute the damage brought from the past and still haunting our society, and her desire to heal historic traumas is evident in her exhibition.

[142] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFUTAtwrVMw&t=153s From 2:20 to 2:55 min. Accessed on September 13, 2022.

When the artist got involved for the first time in the effort of bringing to life the complete scientific research of Louis Agassiz, she met for the first time Tamara Lanier, the African American woman who affirms to be Renty and Delia's descendent.

It might be useful to know that in 2010, Tamara Lanier decided to document the story orally transmitted by her family about Papa Renty and how their ancestors were brought from Africa and enslaved in southern plantations. After some investigation on the internet, she found the daguerreotypes discovered by Harvard in the '70s, depicting a man and her daughter, Renty and Delia. The woman declared that the moment when she saw the photos, the oral stories that she had been hearing since she was a child and the man standing in front of her matched:

> "When I looked at that image, I knew that was the Papa Renty that I had heard about for my entire life. Our eyes connected, and I knew immediately this was the man that so many generations of his children talked about. […] I'm seeing the family resemblances. I'm remembering the stories. I'm remembering the things that my mom would share about who he was."[143]

Once the enthusiasm for the discovery faded away, she realized the "horrific" circumstances in which these daguerreotypes had been taken, and she felt "heartbroken".[144] In March 2019, Tamara Lanier launched a lawsuit against Harvard University to obtain the rights of the daguerreotypes of her ancestors, declaring that it was time that the University released the man and the woman once for all: "For years, Papa Renty's slave owners profited from our suffering. It's time for Harvard to stop doing the same to our family."[145] The court denied her request and even when on November 1, 2021, Lanier appealed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court to ask for the title of the daguerreotypes, once again, the court negated the woman's demand to obtain the images. Tamara Lanier's lawyers declared that they will not stop suing the University until they will have repaired "the damage and degradation that they have caused Tamara Lanier, her ancestors, and all other people of color exploited by Harvard."[146]

The news of this woman trying to gain the ownership of her ancestors' photographs travelled the world and reached Sasha Huber. The visual artist, remained positively

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[143] Interview to Tamara Lanier: https://hyperallergic.com/726156/tamara-laniers-fight-for-the-photographs-of-her-enslaved-ancestors-at-harvard/ accessed on September 13, 2022.
[144] Ibid., accessed on September 13, 2022.
[145] Ibid., accessed on September 13, 2022.
[146] https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/06/23/tamara-lanier-renty-harvard-decision/ accessed on September 13, 2022.

touched by the story of Tamara and by her desire of providing freedom to her great-great-great grandfather Renty and his daughter Delia, so much so that seeing a connection with her art, Huber decided to gift "Tailoring Freedom" to Lanier, as a sign of regained symbolical freedom: "I have been thinking about Tamara, who's fighting for the freedom of her ancestors, literally a 'freedom suit'. One of the ways to gain freedom is on behalf of somebody else."[147]

Sasha Huber declared that her revisitation of Delia and Renty's daguerreotypes was not only a way to release the man and woman from bondage, which was surely what primarily motivated her in her activity, but the artist also stated that her artistic creations are her way to gain "some sort of understanding of the world".[148] These events that come from the past with all their traumatic violence, still have an impact and a resonance on today's world, and through her work, Huber aims at raising awareness on the consequences of actions that apparently have no durable relevance, as it is the case of Zealy and his taking the daguerreotypes.

According to the visual artist's statement, "Tailoring Freedom" is her last engagement in any issue related to Louis Agassiz, even if she is still considering the idea of enlarging the collection. The intent is to apply the same staple gun technique used with Delia and Renty to Drana, the other woman daguerreotyped by Zealy. Huber is planning on sewing an iron dress on the woman's body:

> "One woman will be in Sojourner Truth's dress. And so it becomes a kind of a celebration of people who were able in their lifetimes to become free. They are symbolic, standing in as those who represent the freedom we would wish for everybody."[149]

[147] https://www.miamiherald.com/detour/article263414683.html accessed on September 13, 2022.
[148] Interview to Sasha Huber: https://arterritory.com/en/visual_arts/interviews/25667-doing_art_has_helped_me_make_sense_of_the_world_we_live_in/ accessed on September 14, 2022.
[149] Ibid.

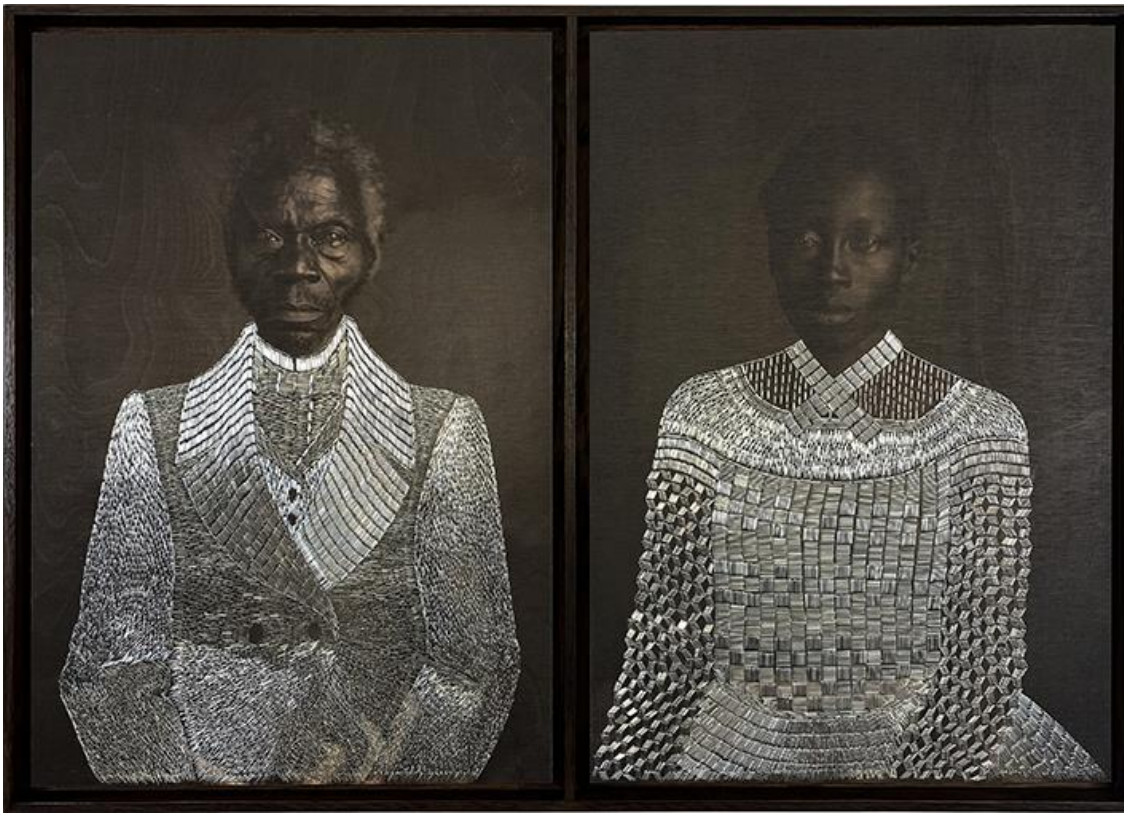

Figure 6 - Tailoring Freedom, 2021.

3.4. SOJOURNER TRUTH'S REMEMORY: BARBARA ALLEN

The process of remembering takes a different turn when talking about the figure of Sojourner Truth, both because her most widespread image was consciously and willingly shared by the woman, and because the events happened in her life and the resonance that these actions had on American history allowed her to be remembered. More importantly, her life already provided her the opportunity to grant herself freedom, dignity, and humanity. All things that were not possible nor thinkable in Delia's case. In this last part of this work, I will present episodes, inaugurations and visual representations of Truth which try to give her the importance in history and society that she deserved even during her lifetime, but that she was not guaranteed because of her being an African American woman.

A public recognition of this black woman is functional not only for her specific case as abolitionist and preacher, but more widely for all African Americans and their history in the United States. This open acceptance of a part of America's past that only recently ceased to be overlooked implies a form of appreciation by the whole nation of African Americans' involvement in the development and enrichment of the United States.

Once the past is made available to everyone, through representations open to the public such as statues, books, or murals, it becomes possible to start a dialogue among the numerous groups that create the society. Talking about African American past allows everyone to become aware of it, to learn it and to learn from it, so that the gap of time and ignorance is filled and a stronger and clearer relationship between past and present is made possible. Remembering Sojourner Truth acquires social relevance since she becomes symbol of a whole and complete history of the United States.

As a child, Barbara Allen longed for bedtime when her mother used to tell her stories about their great grandma, a formidable woman who accomplished exceptional actions, making her something closer to a superhero than an ordinary grandmother. Growing up, she discovered that these stories about this relative of her were also popular among other people, and that the superhero she recognized as her great grandmother, was known by others as the activist and preacher Sojourner Truth.

Barbara Allen lived her life knowing that she was Truth's sixth generation granddaughter, but not fully aware of what that might have meant for her and others around her. She studied and accomplished a post-graduate degree in Human Resources, and only in 1999 the bound that Allen had with Truth felt more real and deep. In fact, in 1999, the city of Battle Creek erected a 12 feet tall sculpture of Sojourner Truth, designed by Tina Allen, a Californian artist who wanted to create this statue as a reminder for everybody walking in the park of the woman's achievements and speeches against slavery and gender or race based discriminations.[150] In this occasion, Barbara realized that her kinship with her ancestor was something special that the people around her were able to recognize more than she could do: "It was the way people in the crowd looked at me, and there were 3,000 people in that crowd. The respect they showed, and the way they talked about how her life inspired them, it was a little overwhelming."[151]

Local historian Michael John Martich helped her fill the gaps between the stories she knew, and the historical events that really happened in Sojourner's life, included the genealogy which linked Barbara with Truth. The episode that really moved Allen was knowing that once Sojourner decided to escape slavery and run away from the household, she turned around and took her daughter Sophia with her.

> "We don't know why she turned around exactly. Had she not turned around and got her daughter Sophia, I [Barbara Allen] would not be here today. That's why I honor her, because I am living now today because she had the courage to go back to her place of oppression."[152]

Historian Martich found Sophia's certificate of death and thanks to this an exact line could be drawn from her to Allen, establishing a direct descendancy from Truth to Barbara. The fact that Truth decided to settle in Battle Creek allowed her family to remain united and stable in a specific area without losing contacts and the bond of the family. Once Allen discovered all these details and facts about Sojourner and her family, she realized that as the descendant of a great woman, she had the responsibility to honor her legacy and spread her story.

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[150] https://www.battlecreekvisitors.org/member-detail/sojourner-truth-monument/ accessed on September 15, 2022.

[151] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/sojourner-truth-battle-cry-still-resonates-170-years-later accessed on September 15, 2022.

[152] https://eu.battlecreekenquirer.com/story/news/2021/03/29/sojourner-truth-descendant-pens-childrens-book-great-grandma/6999309002/ accessed on September 15, 2022.

For this reason, during this time of her life, the idea of creating something that could maintain alive the memory of her great grandmother started to take shape in her mind. Furthermore, before publishing the book, Barbara Allen was aware that it was the perfect historical time for her to make public the life and actions of Sojourner. She wanted to create something that could lay emphasis on the historical impact that African American women had in building American history and nation, especially considered the social turmoil on racism that in the years preceding the publication was filling American streets.

> "I wanted to get it out to children, especially African American children, and right now with the diversity causes and things going on now, I wanted to make sure they could relate to someone who looked like them who was powerful in a time that was very unforgiving, that she shouldn't have been able to be that powerful."[153]

Therefore, during Black History Month, on January 18th, 2021, her first children's book came out with the title of *Remembering Great Grandma Sojourner Truth*. This book focuses mainly on the earlier life of Sojourner, when she was still Isabella, and she was living as an enslaved girl in New York. It represents a woman with a strong desire for freedom and determined to survive all the adversities that life was putting in her way. This story also covers Sojourner's self-emancipation and following rise as an activist and most importantly as Methodist preacher. At the end of the same year, the author gathered more material and published her second children's book dedicated to her great grandmother: *Journey with Great Grandma Sojourner Truth*.

In 1861, Sojourner travelled the State of Indiana to deliver her speeches on freedom, dignity, and respect. That was a time when the Indiana Constitution forbad African Americans from entering the State and speak in front of a public audience. This did not prevent the woman from starting and completing her tour in the country, despite the numerous arrests that tried to stop her. On June 6th, 2021, the city of Angola celebrated the anniversary of Truth's speech given on that same date in 1861 and unveiled the life-size statue of the abolitionist. The sculpture was created by Colorado artist Jim Haire, and it was located in the exact same spot in the corner of the Steuben County Courthouse Courtyard, where the woman had talked 160 years before.[154]

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[153] Ibid.

[154] https://www.kpcnews.com/heraldrepublican/article_1c42a7cd-2a21-53a0-852a-b78d0212f46d.html accessed on September 15, 2022.

Barbara Allen was invited to this event that signed the first time the Indiana State commemorated the life and actions of a woman as part of their community's history. Allen recognized the value of that moment and it strengthened the relationship that she had with her ancestor, despite their distance in time. Furthermore, the fact that 160 years before she could not even have laid foot on that ground and her voice would not have been deemed worthy of attention, made her realize the importance of her work. As an author and as a descendant, Barbara tries to participate in as many events as possible related to Sojourner, in order to keep her memory alive and raise awareness on the possibility to make changes, a feature that characterizes every human being and therefore every society: "we can use our voices to make changes, that's why I think she's being recognized so much right now. Her life shows that you can help change history by that spoken word."[155]

Even at the inauguration of the "Sojourner State Park" in New York on April 23, 2022,[156] Barbara Allen laid emphasis on the value of Sojourner Truth, not only as an enslaved African American, but also as a woman who stood up for what she cared and thought to be relevant to be acknowledged by the whole society.

The reason why lately Sojourner Truth's story and actions have become so relevant in American society is because she is one of those people who through her speeches spread a message of equality and freedom in a world that was going in the opposite direction. Truth's life is being recognized as a presence which positively influenced the history of the United States, and it is now made available for everyone.

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[155] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/sojourner-truth-battle-cry-still-resonates-170-years-later accessed on September 15, 2022.

[156] https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-new-state-park-named-sojourner-truth accessed on September 15, 2022.

3.5. WOMEN'S RIGHTS PIONEERS MONUMENT, NYC

In August 2020, a new statue was installed in Central Park after more than 50 years. The monument was meant as a reply to the request of the nation's desire for public signs that could honor other faces of America and its history, and that could see more than the already much represented white history. The *Women's Rights Pioneers Monument*[157] consists of three bronze figures: Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, each one sculptured in the activity that best represents their careers: in order, speaking, writing, and organizing. This bronze memorial was erected on the centennial anniversary of the approval of the 19th Amendment, a decision which for the first time in American history gave women the right to vote.

Figure 7 - Women's Right Pioneers Monument, 2020.

To better understand the value and relevance that this monument has for New York and in general, for the United States, it might be useful to learn more about the past of Central Park, its initial mission, and the role that statues played in the dynamics of the city.

[157] https://www.centralparknyc.org/locations/womens-rights-pioneers-monument accessed on September 15, 2022.

When towards the middle of the 19th century the city of New York decided to purchase Seneca Village,[158] an autonomous community inhabited mostly by free African Americans who also owned that land, the desire was that of creating a space where New Yorkers could escape from the smoggy and polluted center of the city. The project of the park was assigned to the landscape designers and architects Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted[159] who believed that a park where citizens could experience a bit of countryside life was essential for the wellness and health of the city and its inhabitants. In order to create a space in which people could forget the worries of the city life and find relief in nature and the landscape, the architects felt it was important to remove from the park any kinds of reminders of urban life. Commemorative monuments were thus avoided.

In addition to this, in the 1840s, the population of New York increased rapidly, and diverse groups started to physically divide the structure of the city, so much so that parks and other public spaces became private, and the entrance was allowed only to specific categories of residents, for the most part to the wealthy. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux felt the necessity to organize a public park that could reflect American values of democracy, where everybody was welcomed. The idea that it had to be recognized to each citizen the possibility to enter a place in which there were no social layers nor reminder of them, was at the basis of the architects' plan.

So strong was this intention that even when it came to name the gates of Central Park, they opted for a 'more universal' scheme. Instead of dedicating each entry to persons who stood out in history for whatever reason, they decided to choose names which could raise a more democratic feeling. The best way to do so was involving every possible person of New York: women, children, artists, farmers, scholars, strangers, pioneers, and many others are the names of Central Park's gates, still effective nowadays, such as the Scholar's Gate at Fifth Avenue, Artist's Gate at Sixth Avenue, and Women's Gate at West 72nd Street.

Having explained this, it should be clear that the introduction in the Park of monuments dedicated to specific individuals, went against the ideology at the base of the

[158] https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/seneca-village accessed on September 16, 2022.
[159] https://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/calvert-vaux-and-olmsted-sr accessed on September 16, 2022.

project. Once inside the park, everybody was worthy of the same value as anybody else, and nothing should have reminded the contrary.

However, this idea of democracy soon proved to be utopic and unable to reflect the desire and humanity of the people of New York. As soon as the Park opened and became popular, citizens started donating pieces of art or valuable objects to be displayed in that public space. With the end of the Civil War, when the exhibition of commemorative monuments became more popular, many city groups began proposing statues that could represent their role and presence in the city. This was their way of rendering Central Park a familiar place where their presence was recognized, and in which they could feel that they too contributed towards the creation of the city's park.

In 1873,[160] a new policy guided the decision to include monuments to avoid eventual overabundance of statues. Initially, these were limited to the gates and the Mall,[161] a space in the Park inspired by European public places such as St Mark's Square in Venice and specifically meant for social gatherings. By the beginning of the 1930s, however, the Commission in charge of the monuments was becoming more lavish and it started accepting donation of any kinds of figures, such as animals and fairy tales' characters.

In the 1960s, the spirit of Americans changed, and New Yorkers felt it was time to celebrate the Park as it was originally planned, willing to go back to its real nature: an escape in the wilderness. In 1965, Central Park became a National Historic Landmark,[162] therefore, the process for installing new monuments became longer and more monitored, and the level of scrutiny raised. One of the two new statues which was considered significant and chosen to be positioned somewhere near the park, was the representation of Frederick Douglass, which, however, was located outside Central Park, in front of one of the main entrances.

In 2020, the *Women's Rights Pioneers Monument* was installed inside the park, after more than 50 years since Central Park became a national landmark and it was taken the decision to reduce to the minimum new additions. This decision came as a consequence of the City's desire for a sign that could commemorate the women's suffrage

[160] https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/woman-suffrage-monument accessed on September 16, 2022.
[161] https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/peoples-park-design accessed on September 16, 2022.
[162] https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/monuments-history accessed on September 16, 2022.

movement in the most famous and representative place of the United States, and as an acknowledgement in honor of more than a half of the population of New York City.

In 2018, artist Meredith Bergmann was chosen as the sculptor of the new monument, the first one to depict real women. The expectations were high and the controversy even higher, not only for the way in which this piece of art should have looked like once it was over, but also on the position it should have taken eventually. Initially, it was proposed to be positioned on the perimeter, following the policy of the park. Later, the Mall was identified as the most suitable place for a monument that was deeply felt by New Yorkers. The Mall was the traditional location for commemorations, and it was also the most famous path, crossed by the greatest number of people.

The original idea proposed for this monument, included only two figures: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.[163] Even if these women were two of the main leaders of the women's suffrage movement in the 19th century, critics, journalists, and other people involved perceived it as a partial way of depicting history, giving relevance once again, to white people. Additionally, these two activists were also known for their strong racist and sometimes classist position on the role of women in society. Their major concern was that of becoming part of the decision of the nation. However, their ambition excluded black men and women, no matter their status. The two women never really took the distance from white supremacy, fighting for an "openly racist defense of women's suffrage".[164]

When the news about the establishment of this monument spread in the United States, people did not really accept the idea that New York City would have perpetuated a restricted view of women, rejecting once again the presence and role of African Americans. New York judged essential for its city and citizens to pay more attention to and acknowledge the lives and deeds of people of color, after a too long time of forced silence. The project of the monument then changed. The two women remained with the addition of a long scroll on which several names of women activists were inscribed, included many African Americans. Even this proposal, however, was seen as a restricted and racist way of depicting history, since it seemed that Stanton was writing those African

[163] https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/womens-rights-pioneers-a-new-addition accessed on September 16, 2022.
[164] https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/03/22/how-new-yorks-new-monument-whitewashes-womens-rights-movement/ accessed on September 17, 2022.

American women into existence.[165] Once again, the white power was in charge and responsible for black existence.

After a long time of controversy, the commission in charge of the project of the *Women's Rights Pioneers Monument*, finally decided to add a third figure to the plan, Sojourner Truth. She was a woman who lived and operated in New York to allow future generations a different social scenario, where African American women were permitted to be fully involved and part of the society. Sojourner was the example of a woman who stood up for the rights of women of any color, status, and origins.

The role of Sojourner in this monument can be read following three levels of analyses. The first one sees the figure of Truth as emblematic of all those African American women who lived under slavery and were forced to adjust themselves to a specific set of rules that white masters and society imposed on them. Sojourner Truth is represented as the symbol of resilience, of strength to speak up, and stubbornness against her white master, against court of law, prison and an overheated crowd who was doubting her womanhood.

On a second level, Sojourner's skin color and her past as an enslaved person disappear. Her skills as preacher, activist, and abolitionist are praised for the role they had in her times and for the consequences and social changes they brought.

Finally, the figure of Sojourner Truth in this monument acquires an even deeper meaning, a significance that goes beyond her body. In *Women's Rights Pioneers Monument*, she becomes the symbol of all women, no matter the race nor the background. The woman obtains the central position that it deserved a century before, not only in Central Park, but in the whole United States as a foundational leader in American history.

The decision to position the memorial in the most crowded place of the Park asserts the value of the three women and their contribution to the development of the Nation. Sojourner Truth's presence in Central Park helps everyone who passes there to reflect on various facts: the role of Sojourner Truth as a black woman, a woman, and an activist equal to any other activist of American history. Her monument in that specific location makes people think of the value that she has in an environment populated only by white

[165] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/opinion/central-park-suffrage-monument-racism.html accessed on September 17, 2022.

male statues that surround her. Sojourner Truth becomes a tool useful to raise awareness towards the lack of recognition of African Americans in society.

Women's Rights Pioneers Monument is a further step towards the creation of a more aware and conscious society.

In this last section dedicated to the *Women's Rights Pioneers Monument*, two out of three figures are of activist women who fought for the rights of all those women who fit in the social canon of the white Anglo Saxon Americans. Their vision of equality did not admit any black American, man or woman. However, nobody really questioned the decision to include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in a representation of the women's suffragist movement positioned in the heart of one of the most important cities of the United States. The problem has been raised by some critics, but what has been argued was only the necessity to add someone who could work as representative of other categories, other than white.

3.6. GRACE LYNNE HAYNES: SOJOURNER TRUTH IN MURALS

This final section of this thesis will deal with the representation of Sojourner Truth by visual artist Grace Lynne Haynes in 2020, first for the cover of The New Yorker, and then as a mural for "Project for Empty Space" in Newark, New Jersey.

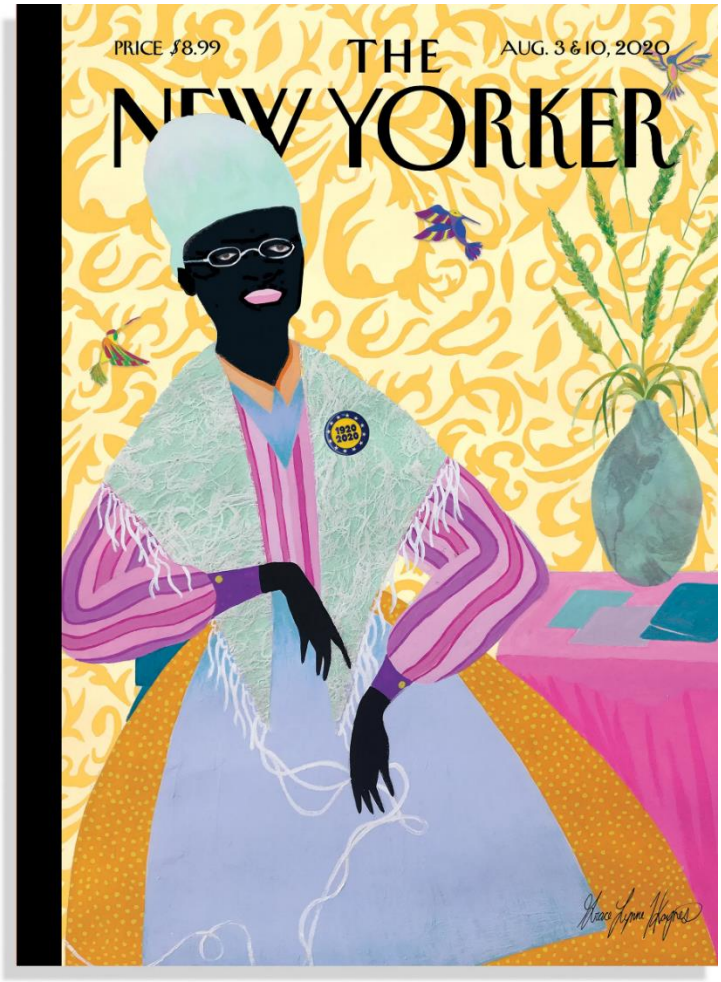

Figure 8 - Sojourner Truth, Founding Mother, 2020.

Born in 1992, Grace Lynne Haynes is the youngest artist presented in this work who through her art tried to bring the image of Sojourner to our times in a way which could best convey her message, and which could be easily appreciated and understood by modern viewers. Once completed her bachelor's degree of Fine Arts in Illustration and Minor in Social Innovation, at the Art Center College of Design in California, the student

Grace Lynne Haynes proceeded her formal education at Rutgers University, New Jersey, with a master's degree in Visual Arts, in 2022. Even before the start of this course of studies, the artist participated in group exhibitions mainly in California and New Jersey, from 2016 to 2019, until 2020 when her art crossed the ocean and reached the Luce Gallery in Turin, Italy, and the Biennale De Dakar in Senegal.[166]

The visual artist focuses exclusively on the black body and to do so, she exercises a specific style of art, one which is able to create her image of what being an African American woman means, trying to go beyond and at the same time, playing with stereotypes surrounding black femininity. When looking at her works of art, the first element which strikes the viewer's attention is the use of bright colors combined together with very light ones and the almost unrealistic darkness of the subjects' skin. Her sitters are all women who hold the stage in comfortable position, laying on a bed, sitting on the couch or simply enjoying the space that surrounds them. This liberty in their movements and carefreeness that these images evoke is strengthened by the texture of the garments that these women wear. Sweaters, skirts, scarfs and even carpets, blankets and cushions contrast the flatness and simplicity of the rest of the scene with the puffy looking material which characterized those items. [167]

Grace Lynne Haynes' s art finds an explanation in her effort of creating a space in which the nature of color and their historical meanings are questioned by the modern viewer. In her pieces of art, black is dignified, and it becomes sublime in its almost standing outside the image. When referring to the use of the black color, she recalls her years as a university student when she was asked to learn how to draw and paint from live models who were always white women. As a consequence, when she decided to work on black womanhood in her thesis, she did not have the knowledge nor skill to deal with it graphically. In her paintings, the artist tries to create her own way of seeing dark skinned women, also playing on the relationship between dark and light which have become synonym for evil and good in Western's society.[168] Haynes's ambition in her paintings is to create a network of symbols, colors and meanings which refer to the complex stereotypes surrounding the black female body.

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[166] https://www.lucegallery.com/biography/grace_lynne-haynes.html accessed on September 20, 2022.
[167] https://www.bygracelynne.com/about accessed on September 20, 2022.
[168] https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/grace-lynne-haynes-new-yorker-cover-sojourner-truth/index.html accessed on September 20, 2022.

Her art quickly reached national interest and during the 100th commemoration of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in the United States, Haynes was asked by The New Yorker to illustrate the new cover of their August issue. As a black artist primarily interested in black womanhood, what Grace Lynne Haynes wanted to highlight in the cover of the 100th anniversary of the women's suffrage, was the distance between white women who were celebrating that memorial, and black women who had to wait more than 60 years to be able to do the same, given that women of color gained the right to vote only in 1965, with the Voting Rights Act.

To create an illustration that could make the viewer reflect and at the same time, celebrate the strength and courage that brought women to demand the right to cast their ballots, the artist opted for the depiction of a woman whose life was marked by courage and self-consciousness. In an age that appears to have rowed against everything she was strong for, Sojourner Truth never stopped being influential in the evolution of her times and in advocating women equality and rights to be active part of the society. The New Yorker's cover by Haynes aimed at intensifying Sojourner's message of equality but it also draws attention to the different path that white and black women had to take to arrive at the same destination.

Haynes first encountered Sojourner Truth in grade school, and her personality and history remained in her as a child until she had the possibility to employ her figure. For The New Yorker's cover, the artist desired to create an image of the woman which could speak of her in her social and historical circumstances, but in a way that was able to portrait modern society. Haynes's major concern was that of creating an image that could stand out and be remembered in a world overpopulated by images and news, and that could reveal something about her time. In her artwork, Grace Lynne Haynes examines what it means to be an African American woman in the twenty-first century, with an eye looking both at the stereotypes of blackness and at the great black figures who contributed to the development of the United States as a diversified nation.

Sojourner Truth was chosen by the visual artist because of her progressive attitude not only towards social issues such as racism and gender equality, but also towards her image and the use she made of her *cartes de visite* as a means to promote her travels and speeches. As Haynes said in her interview for the CNN Style, published on August 5th,

2020: “She was a great businesswoman and knew how to combine activism with advertising.”[169]

The New Yorker’s August issue cover presents an image of Sojourner Truth that is easily recognizable, with the woman wearing the clothes and the glasses that the viewer is used to see in her original version of the *cartes de visite*. The typical representation of the woman is, however, modified and rendered more contemporary. The artist added colors to the woman, bright colors of her dress that stand out, giving to the black and white photos that the audience is acquainted with, a more playful and modern look. Even the textures of the various garments she wears, remind of the artist’s typical style that creates a three dimensional illusion.

The brightness of the cover, however, seems to be staged to contrast the sense of tiredness given by the eyes and the body position of the woman sitting in a chair. The way in which her arms and hands rest on her lap, and the “heaviness” in her expression suggest a feeling of being on the edge of losing hope. Together these two elements function for the creation of the meaning the artist wants to convey. Sojourner Truth’s life is characterized by a series of events that inevitably traumatized her: beginning from her years as a slave during which she was forced to undergo mental and sexual abuses; the fight in front of a court of law for the sake of her own son; to the almost constant derisions she had to face during her speeches, and the risk of being imprisoned every time she moved from a city to another in her tours. All because of her being an African American woman. This racial and social burden that Truth had to carry her whole life has only recently begun to be lifted. Sojourner’s figure in The New Yorker’s cover is physically weary, but the colors, shapes, and texture of the circumstances she is now living in, meet her halfway and try to give her back the hope for a new society where her presence as a black woman is no longer seen as a threat.

Talking about the way in which she wanted to represent Truth, Haynes declared that because of the lack of time she had to complete the work, she could not pay much attention to the way in which the audience would have perceived it. Because of it she simply did what she thought was the proper way of honoring both Sojourner and the 100th celebration of the women’s suffrage. Once the paint was over and published, the artist

[169] Ibid., accessed on September 20, 2022.

remained positively touched by the response she had from the public. Some of the readers appreciated her effort in bringing to life such a central, but often marginalized figure for the advancement of women. Others admitted their complete ignorance about who the subject of the paper was and thank her for making them aware of her existence and precious contribution.

The feedback she received highlighted how the decision of focusing the cover on the life and deeds of this abolitionist who was not deeply known by modern society, reveals itself to be appropriate. Grace Lynne Haynes's work contributed to a further dissemination of the hidden part of the history of the United States and to raise awareness of the relationship between past and present, and black and white women.

On September 28th, 2020, this remake of Sojourner Truth's *carte de visite* made his debut as thirty-foot-tall murals on the wall of the Prudential Building, in Newark, New Jersey. With the title "Sojourner Truth, Founding Mother", the figure of the woman who looks from above the people passing over, acts as a significant token of Truth's life more than ever. At the inauguration of the mural, Newark Mayor Ras j. Baraka stressed the essential role that the woman played in her times and still does in our modern society:

> "While she may have spoken and fought for women's rights and against racism more than 150 years ago, her message remains as current and important now as it did then. It is truly appropriate for us to honor her work now and carry her message into the future, both through activism and art."[170]

Sojourner's effort in raising awareness for the creation of a more inclusive society still resonates today. Furthermore, it was not a coincidence that it was decided to position her enlargement in that specific wall. As a matter of fact, the Prudential Building served as a "super" polling site for the 2020 presidential election that took place only a few months later. 2020 presidential election[171] came after a critical moment in history not only for the United States, but for the entire world. Therefore, the government felt that in order to allow and encourage every American citizen to fulfill their duties and cast their vote, they had to create a space able to do that. The image of the activist Sojourner Truth was

[170] https://www.allarts.org/2020/09/grace-lynne-haynes-sojourner-truth-newark/ accessed on September 20, 2022.
[171] https://www.newarknj.gov/news/mayor-baraka-essex-county-new-jersey-devils-prudential-center-and-national-basketball-players-association-nbpa-host-press-conference-about-voting-process-and-polling-site-for-2020-presidential-election accessed on September 20, 2022.

thought of as the best way to raise awareness on the importance to vote, a real issue among Americans in today's society.

In addition to this, Grace Lynne Haynes's work of art gives the people that see it the opportunity to reflect on the woman and her contribution in advancing equality. More importantly, this image is a reminder of the history that allowed them to live their lives, a moment in which they can meditate on the importance of being active members of the society. Once again, Sojourner Truth's representation plays a central role in the process of raising awareness on the position and role that the viewers can take as modern citizens.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this work has been that of getting to know more about Delia and Sojourner Truth, deepening the relations that these two black women had with photography and nudity. I started from a more general introduction of photographs as a tool perceived as able to capture the essence of the world, as the nature's handwriting of reality, thanks to its apparent objective nature. From here I tried to outline the use that scientist Louis Agassiz made of daguerreotypes, photography's first effective form, in his racial studies. The work has stressed Agassiz's methodology in his analysis and the importance he gave to the act of seeing as the most reliable form of truth. Precisely for this, he turned to photography as the tool that at the time was able to give him the most objective way to see and study reality. Since the first chapter, the biased nature of photography has been revealed to be inevitably spoiled by the subject's eyes and so unsuitable as fully effective scientific evidence. This, however, did not stop Agassiz from developing his research on human races as based on photography, and he reached the point of demanding daguerreotypes of naked African Americans as items to be studied for the sake of science.

After the initial chapter, I analyzed how Delia had to undergo this process of racial subjugation through the "camera/gun"[172] becoming an instrument in the hands of white society useful to "read the Negro out of the human family".[173] Delia's disrobing and her forced positioning in front of the camera are the outcome of a white dominated society. For Delia, photography was a cage.

Later, I presented the use that Sojourner Truth made of *cartes de visite*, as an instrument that could represent herself free from external labels and depending only on her own will about herself. Once again, photography is viewed as a tool to show reality and an instrument to make herself known by Americans. Sojourner was able to create her own environment and to personally choose her clothes in her pictures, according to the idea that the woman wanted to give of herself. This is a further element which highlighted the controversial nature of photography, as a space in which the sitter or the photographer could create the situation desired, showing how the neutral dimension of the image can be a staged authenticity.

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[172] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 19.
[173] Barbash, *To Make Their Own Way in the World: the Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, p.302.

From Delia to Truth, photography changed its use: it passed from being a scientific device for scientists, to a means of propaganda, able to reach all Americans, independently from their race, gender, or social status.

Photography and nudity related to the black body are at the heart of my work. I wanted to study the differences between Delia's daguerreotype as a product of the white man in his effort to categorize and so subjugate the black body, and Sojourner's *cartes de visite* as an active positioning of her subjectiveness among Americans. Together with this, I put at the center of my discussion the process of being forcibly undressed in front of the camera, and Truth's self-representation and her conscious disrobing guided by her ideal of equality.

Throughout the first two chapters, the space between the two African American women seemed to widen: Delia confirmed the idea advanced initially, of her as the black enslaved controlled by the white master; her body, displayed and studied, turned her into a specimen apparently unable to speak and act. Delia's body became a form of corporeal reveal in which the physical appearance was necessary to read external traits and her inner characteristics. She became an object. I show how this phenomenon of objectification which Delia was forced to undergo, was caused not only by Agassiz and Zealy, but also by whomever looked at her as a specimen and not as a woman. With the analysis of her image in the daguerreotypes, however, I pointed out how the tears in her eyes reveal a state of consciousness. Delia was aware in front of the camera, and this changed her from object to active subject. Furthermore, as I argued in the third chapter, her body and her daguerreotype turned out to be helpful for our society for delivering a message of equality. The presentation of Sojourner Truth supported the initial ideas concerning the woman: an African American abolitionist, activist, and preacher who used her body and its representation to convey her message and be heard by people. The two women became equal in their role of communicating a specific meaning through the use of their bodies and images.

In the final chapter, I presented some examples of contemporary revisitations of Delia's and Sojourner's images which gave the possibility to the two women to establish themselves as active figures, functional for raising awareness among Americans. If, initially, Delia and Truth were introduced as two epilogues of the same history, the third chapter about contemporary society, shows how history has narrowed the apparent divide

between the two. Especially in the case of Delia, her modern revisitations offer a solid ground in which her life and her body can be read and looked at.

My point in this work has not been that of providing a complete analysis with every possible interpretation and school of thought related to Delia, Truth, and their relationship to photography and nudity. As it is with the nature of photography which despite its visual proximity with reality, is never fully objective, so it is with this work: even if I tried to create a thesis as neutral possible, my personal thought and interpretation may be inevitably found among the lines and the very structure of the work.

Many questions have been raised and many did not find a proper answer. In the final chapter, I stressed the fact that dealing with representations of Delia continues to be a problem: her image and the one of her peers have not found a peaceful and proper place to rest yet, for example. Many tried to give her a new meaning and voice, but the wound appears to be still open and the necessity to find a suitable place and interpretation does not cease to exist. Even when talking about Truth's presence in today's society, it is not immediate and widely shared the essential role that the woman played not only for the society in the past, but also and most importantly for our generation. The discussion on the two women is therefore open.

If I had the possibility to keep working on this thesis and widen the discussion on Delia and Truth, I would try to find an answer to some of the questions remained open, such as the one concerning the legitimacy of handling Delia's daguerreotype. In addition, I would keep working on the way in which modern society sees these two women and their representations, not only as symbols of past oppressions, but primarily as tools essential for the development of a more conscious and responsible society.

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