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Blood at the Root

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Cover Page Footnote

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BLOOD AT THE ROOT

In a sense, the conference “Bound by History: Universities and Slavery” was a sight to behold. Hosted by Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute on March 3, 2017, the conference featured author Ta-Nehisi Coates in conversation with university president Drew Gilpin Faust, who less than a year prior had penned an op-ed in the student newspaper calling on the Cambridge campus to confront its connections with chattel slavery.¹ But before Coates and Faust began their dialogue, Radcliffe Institute dean Lizabeth Cohen took to the stage to add context for the audience about the image affixed to the conference program and enlarged on the screen behind the stage. Pictured there was an enslaved man, Renty, whose daguerreotype, along with his daughter Delia’s, had been commissioned for a study by a leading Harvard scientist of the mid-nineteenth century, Louis Agassiz. Cohen cautioned, however, that the conference would not center on Agassiz but rather on the man whose eyes penetrated the pages of the program and glared back at a crowded conference auditorium. Cohen then emphasized,

Today, it is Renty’s personal story that interests us. So, what do we know about that story? The historical record tells us that Renty was a member of the Congo tribe. The historical record tells us that he spent his days laboring. The historical record tells us that he was a father. His daughter Delia also worked on the Edgehill plantation. Renty was surely much more than either Agassiz’s list of characteristics or the bare facts revealed in the conventional, written historical record. Much of his personal story remains unknown or pieced together by conjecture because so much has been erased from that written record.²

Cohen did more than just establish the boundary of what conference participants discussed that day. She also established the boundary of what *would not* be discussed, namely, that which could not be sourced through the archive, as doing so might elide the concrete for “conjecture.” The epistemological evasion—the refrain “the historical record” is repeated three times—of any truths disconnected from documents further served to silence any legacy, lineage, or lives lived for Renty and Delia after that fateful 1850 day when the daguerreotypes were snapped. Although Cohen proclaimed the conference an occasion to remember Renty’s personal story, her comments precluded the sorts of inquiries that would have yielded information on that very topic. By characterizing these remnants of Renty’s life as “pieced together by conjecture,” Cohen consequently rendered Renty as an object of mystique sequestered to a moment in time and suspended from his humanity because of alleged archival absences, an impact that oddly resembles the one wrought by the images’ initial capture at the behest of Louis Agassiz.

Perhaps unbeknownst to Cohen, in attendance at the conference was Tamara Lanier, a descendant of Delia and Renty who was well acquainted with the personal story said to be central to the event. Lanier had spent much of the half-decade before the 2017 conference engaged in conversation with Harvard in hopes that they would, at the very least, recognize her lineage to the man whose image the university plasters onto websites, book covers, and conference programs. At the conference—to which Lanier was not invited, despite the university leadership’s promise to do

¹ Faust, “Recognizing Slavery at Harvard.”

² Cohen, “Universities and Slavery.”

so—those hopes soon turned to doubt. Cohen’s comments all but cemented the university’s position.³ Two years after the conference, Lanier turned to the one venue to which even enslaved people had access in pursuit of justice: the courts. Lanier filed a lawsuit against the university and demanded as relief, in part, that Harvard relinquish custody of the daguerreotypes of Delia and Renty into her possession as their descendent. The action seems simple enough: if Harvard is indeed remorseful about its role in profiting from chattel slavery, it should willingly return to a living family what was stolen from their enslaved ancestors. Yet Harvard has doubled down on its right—duty, in fact—to retain, or detain, the daguerreotypes. Why, with the many millions of its objects and archival holdings, would the wealthiest university in the world want to fight a protracted custody battle over two sets of images that, until forty-five years ago, were forgotten in a file cabinet? What, after all, is at stake when the dispossessed pursue possession? How, to modify a familiar refrain, might the speech of the subaltern alter the archival terrain? And to what end?

The Lanier lawsuit highlights broader dynamics of power. Power occupies prime real estate in the anxieties of archivists and those writing about their work.⁴ The tone of these tomes adheres to a similar arc: archives directly impact the production of historical knowledge and thus facilitate forgetting and remembering in service to the state. The ethical archivist, it is often argued, does not shirk this power but rather assumes it consciously and conscientiously, a wiser wielder of their force, so to say, as evidenced by the conspicuously outsized number of references to *Star Wars* in this genre of writing.⁵ It is possible to survey the “power” discourse within the archival literature and conclude that archivists are simultaneously the most empowered and disempowered professionals in history. Everything, yet nothing, arises from archives. Using power as a point of departure, I author this article with an aim to arrive at a set of conclusions that speak to a more essential truth about the nature of archives writ large. To do so, I situate the significance of process and place in the greater matrix of archival power. By wrestling with the histories of the daguerreotypes’ creation (process) and the institution where they are kept (place) as methodological frameworks, the work of this essay is to explore how the administration of the past points to aspirations for an administration of the future and how, as the anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas reveals, the past, present, and future are far from rigid epochs but indeed are “co-related.”⁶

Ultimately this essay attempts to bring archivists, archival studies scholars, and other social scientists closer to a social theory of archives that comes into view through a careful examination of the claims to archival power lodged by Lanier. The goal here is not to define what constitutes a “legitimate” or “organic” archive but rather to propose that a true social theory of archives requires not just analyses of papers or people but also interrogations of process, place, and power. I conclude with a concept that I call “archival dynamics,” a set of processes that I outline with blood at their root. To illustrate these archival dynamics, the interrogations of process and place will center around seven enslaved people—not only Delia and Renty, named earlier, but also Drana, Jack, Fassena, Alfred, and Jem—who in 1850 stood in a South Carolina studio with stark stares into the emergent visual technology of the day, the daguerreotype, in a manner that sees its

³ Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign, *Harvard and Slavery*.

⁴ Bearman and Lytle, “The Power of the Principle of Provenance”; Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives”; Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits”; Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power”; Williams and Drake, “Power to the People.”

⁵ See especially Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons.”

⁶ Thomas, “Time and the Otherwise.”

audience more than its audience has seen them. Although their mouths remain muted, their eyes elicit speech. What would it mean to listen to them?⁷ If the ultimate challenge is to expose power's roots, then my challenge is to chronicle the root of power not as an immutable object to be wielded and shielded but as a set of processes that take *place* not in some distant or disconnected past but literally right before our very own eyes.

Process

Louis Agassiz was born in Switzerland and later moved to Paris for training in zoology under the tutelage of Georges Cuvier, a looming figure in the early nineteenth-century scientific scene of Europe. Cuvier established his reputation as a foremost leader in the emergent fields of natural history and comparative anatomy before bringing Agassiz under his wing in 1829.⁸ These fields owe their genesis in part to the nineteenth-century European obsession with analyzing the plants, animals, and native populations of the supposed wild, untamed lands of sub-Saharan Africa and other objects of colonial ambition. The goal, spearheaded by men such as Cuvier, was to find missing biological links between humans and other animals, with indigenous peoples of the African, American, Asian, and Australian continents occupying some space in the middle. Cuvier thus identified his prime research subject in Saartije Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from southwestern Africa brought to England in 1810 and displayed as part of the entertainment scenes of Liverpool and London under the epithet “Hottentot Venus” before being brought to the French natural history museum for Cuvier who, like other European men, was captivated by Baartman's buttocks and genitalia.⁹ Soon after her death in 1815, Cuvier created a plastic cast of Baartman's corpse before cutting out her brains and genitalia, which along with her skeleton were publicly displayed in the museum until 1937 when Baartman's remains were transferred to France's newly opened Museum of Man for public consumption until 1974. But Cuvier did not stop with his sexualized and sadistic display. In 1817, he published a widely read report about Baartman's body in which he wrote that “all these characters, in an almost unnoticeable fashion, resemble one another in Negro women, and female Bushwomen and monkeys,” and that he “had never seen a human head more similar to those of monkeys.”¹⁰

The context of Cuvier's research and prominence in the scientific community constitutes a critical context for comprehending Agassiz's training in Europe and his research interests after his arrival to the United States in 1846. Agassiz would soon build a reputation as one of the most promising scientific minds in the Americas, known for his argument that species should be classified by region as well as by physical traits. Two encounters during his December 1846 visit to Philadelphia deepened these views. The first was his observation of Black workers at the hotel where he resided for the visit. Agassiz not only found the mere sight of these laborers repulsive but he also took pains to note their “thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their curled nails, and especially the livid color of the palm of their hands.”¹¹ This observation suggested to Agassiz that perhaps, as his mentor Cuvier had attempted to prove with the body of Baartman, Black peoples were the missing links between humans and other animals.

⁷ Campt, *Listening to Images*.

⁸ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 56–57.

⁹ Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus.’”

¹⁰ Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race, and Nation,” 38.

¹¹ Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 77.

The second encounter, a meeting with the physician and collector Samuel George Morton, left no doubt in Agassiz's mind. Morton was already an avowed adherent to polygenesis, a theory that the different races of the world had entirely separate creations. To Morton and other subscribers of polygenesis, white and nonwhite peoples had never descended from a common pair. Morton's collection of hundreds of skulls from Africa, Asia, and the Americas served as his proof. The skull collection also immensely impressed Agassiz and stood as stark evidence to the Swiss scientist of the power of collecting, cataloging, and displaying a set of human and nonhuman subjects to substantiate white supremacist pseudoscience.¹² Following his meeting with Morton and other leading scientists, Agassiz accrued an audience in the social scene of Boston's scientific, political, and financial elite and left an indelible mark on those he encountered. Agassiz was subsequently handpicked in 1847 by Abbott Lawrence himself to lead the Lawrence Scientific School, a new venture Lawrence financed and designed to distinguish itself from the arts and letters emphasis of Harvard College.¹³ Agassiz's appointment, literally and figuratively, placed science at Harvard on the map.

With a Harvard professorship, Agassiz instantly became the most famous and revered champion of polygenesis. Yet he lacked an evidence base to support his claims. He would need to find an archive of his own—something comparable to Cuvier's or equivalent to Morton's—for his science to be taken seriously. This search met with a challenge: the 1807 federal prohibition on the importation of enslaved Africans into the United States meant that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, relatively few enslaved people in the country were born on the African continent, a fact that frustrated Agassiz's attempt to find so-called pure Africans who would not yet have mixed with European ancestry. A theory of separate origins required that Agassiz find the few living enslaved people in the United States born in Africa. The March 1850 meeting of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science held in Charleston, South Carolina, offered an overture to do just that.

At the conclusion of the conference, Agassiz traveled 130 miles northwest to the state capital of Columbia at the invitation of the physician Robert W. Gibbes, whose close connections with prominent families of enslavers meant that Gibbes had ample experience examining them as well as those they enslaved. Gibbes was thus positive that at least some of the people enslaved in or around Columbia were born in Africa, and he brought Agassiz to several plantations where he could inspect and "verify" their authenticity. In total, Agassiz identified seven enslaved people for inclusion in his observation. The two girls, Delia and Drana, were presumably born in the United States. One man, Jem, was Gullah. Four other men were all said to be born in different parts of the African continent: Renty (Delia's father) from the Congo, Jack (Drana's father) from Guinea, Fassena of Mandingo descent, and Alfred of Fulani background.¹⁴ Agassiz wasted little time sharing his results with readers. This encounter with enslaved people in Columbia bolstered Agassiz's assertion that humans, though of the same species, did not descend from one common pair of ancestors. He extrapolated this point in a treatise published by the *Christian Examiner* in July 1850, claiming that different races of humankind emerged in particular locations of the world just as plants and animals did. As such, the human races developed immutable physical, social,

¹² Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science," 44–45.

¹³ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 137–40.

¹⁴ Rogers, *Delia's Tears*, 218–27.

and moral characteristics that, despite years of contact between them, could not be abandoned any more successfully than a leopard can change its spots. Agassiz concluded with a rumination that in all of sub-Saharan Africa, despite years of “constant intercourse” with the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Phoenicia, “There has never been a regulated society of Black men developed on that continent.”¹⁵ Black people existed beyond the bounds of a humanity that Agassiz or Cuvier could recognize. His trip to Columbia showed as much. Now all he needed to do was amass an archive to prove it.

Whereas his mentor Georges Cuvier relied on the dead dissected body of a Black woman to advance his racist assertions, and Samuel George Morton collected skull samples, Agassiz focused his attention on living Black bodies and used the emergent visual technology of the day, the daguerreotype, to showcase his white supremacy. Just before his departure from Columbia back north to Harvard, Agassiz adhered to Gibbes’s advice and contracted with Joseph T. Zealy to have the seven enslaved people photographed in dehumanizing detail. The two father-daughter pairs of Renty and Delia and Jack and Drana were stripped of their clothing from the waist up before Zealy snapped front and side views of them. Fassena’s likeness was taken in the same fashion. Jem and Alfred, however, were forced to pose fully nude as front, side, and rear views of the men were duplicated. Although science served as the public pretext for the encounter, echoes of eroticism and suggestions of sexual violence scream from the faces of the subjects.¹⁶ That Agassiz never published the images—much less mentioned them specifically in any subsequent professional literature—casts further doubt on the idea that he intended the daguerreotypes to serve any scientific ends whatsoever. By 1850, Agassiz had spent four years in the United States, presumably in more sustained interactions with enslaved or formerly enslaved people than he experienced in Europe. The sight of Black people detested him. But could that disgust have morphed into a desire? Why would Agassiz contract with Joseph Zealy, a man known to produce portraits of Columbia’s white aristocratic women, to procure detailed daguerreotypes of persons—mostly Black men—deemed by the larger genteel southern society to be invisible?¹⁷ What, after all, was Agassiz trying to *see*?

That answer would become more apparent as Agassiz’s career progressed. With smoke still smoldering from the U.S. Civil War, he embarked on an expedition to Brazil to collect evidence he hoped would disprove the theory of evolution outlined in Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*.¹⁸ Agassiz, flanked by his wife, Elizabeth, and several volunteer assistants from Harvard, identified Brazil as the ideal site to gather data because of the country’s history of mixing along racial lines. The ongoing practice of slavery in Brazil, legal there until 1888, could only have made the mission more appealing to Agassiz. He would commission many more photographs in Brazil than in South Carolina. Yet the presence of his wife and witnesses on this trip raised red flags about the extent to which the women subjects in particular gave consent to the entire ordeal, with his chief assistant entering a private room to find Agassiz “cajoling” them and with his wife later writing of worries shared among the women that perhaps the photograph would snatch their souls from their bodies and leave them lifeless.¹⁹ Their fears were well-founded.

¹⁵ Agassiz, *The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races*, 35.

¹⁶ Schneider, “Louis Agassiz and the American School of Ethnoeroticism.”

¹⁷ Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, 47.

¹⁸ Isaac, “Louis Agassiz’s Photographs in Brazil.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Place

Less than a decade after his sojourn to South Carolina to commission the profiles of Delia, Renty, Drana, Jack, Jem, Alfred, and Fassena, Louis Agassiz founded and became the first director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, colloquially called Harvard's "university museum." However, Agassiz never added the infamous images to the museum, despite the reality that, according to his scientific worldview, they would have fit alongside the museum's growing collection of natural history specimens. Instead, the daguerreotypes, along with his remaining personal scientific library, passed into the custody of his son, Alexander, on the elder Agassiz's death in 1873.²⁰ Alexander also inherited his father's post as museum director, but for more than thirty years he too held the daguerreotypes in his personal possession until 1910, the same year he died.²¹

What accounts for the sixty-year aperture between when the images were commissioned and when they were acquired by the university? Did the elder Agassiz ever intend to add them to the museum's archives, or was it his intention all along to keep them close to his person, always available to display as an open secret for prying eyes? Or maybe he simply disregarded the daguerreotypes as Darwin's theory of evolution gained more traction? The answer is ultimately a matter of speculation. More certain is that the ultimate destination of the images—Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology—found its footing from keeping souls in its stacks. In this sense, there was not a better, or worse, place for the images to end up. The background to the museum's first acquisition explains why. This moment of institutional history demonstrates the museum's past and present legacy regarding the confinement of the bones and bodies of nonwhite peoples, an important pretext to comprehend the institution's later treatment of the unique daguerreotypes.

The Peabody Museum itself was also at the time one of a kind and owes its inception in no small part to Louis Agassiz. Whereas the famed scientist sought to create a collection to further his theory of polygenesis, so too arose the need to gather materials in support of Darwin's theory of evolution. George Peabody, who found fortune from selling slave-picked cotton across the Atlantic, rose to meet the challenge. Whether out of irony or ignorance, the wealthy financier initially approached none other than Louis Agassiz himself with the idea to inaugurate an anthropology museum—the first in the Americas—on Harvard's campus under his direction. Agassiz, likely because of the combination of his role leading the zoology museum and his fierce opposition to Darwin's hypothesis, rejected the offer.²² In his stead, Peabody found a willing suitor in Jeffries Wyman, a Harvard professor of anatomy and one of Agassiz's colleagues skeptical of the scientific basis behind polygenesis. The \$150,000 endowment to create the country's first anthropology museum became official on October 8, 1866. When the museum opened its doors later that year, it did not wait long to fill its shelves in Boylston Hall on the southern edge of Harvard Yard. The museum's

²⁰ Agassiz, Last Will and Testament. The will states that Agassiz's "scientific books," which can reasonably be read to include any presumed research materials, should pass to his son, Alexander, and once the younger Agassiz had no further use for them, be given to the zoology museum.

²¹ Machado, "Traces of Agassiz on Brazilian Races," 26. It is unclear whether Alexander actively donated the daguerreotypes while he was still alive or if they were given to the museum along with the more than \$200,000 he left for the institution. See "Reports of the President and the Treasurer of Harvard College." See also Kim, *The Politics of Collecting*.

²² Hinsley, "From Shell-Heaps to Stelae," 49.

first collection was organized on November 9 and consisted of roughly fifty items. The materials included everything from tools and artifacts to “crania and bones of North-American Indians, a few casts and crania of other races.”²³ Half of the items drew from existing holdings of Harvard College while the other half originated from scientific collections Wyman maintained as part of his research. Among the latter were death masks of a boy whose body Wyman had dissected and described just five years earlier.

The boy, whose name is rendered most consistently in archival records as Steaurma Jantjes, was taken in 1860 from the southwestern cape of Africa to the United States along with four others to form the core of a living ethnological display at the Boston Aquarial and Zoological Gardens. To celebrate the occasion of the exhibit’s public launch, organizers arranged for Agassiz to deliver a keynote address to the audience.²⁴ Following a few months of display in Boston, the five were taken for exhibition at P. T. Barnum’s American Museum in lower Manhattan. The exhibition of live persons aroused concern from onlookers, questioning whether the five Africans had actually given consent to the arrangement. To assuage these doubts, none other than Louis Agassiz himself emerged to defend the display’s integrity, writing a statement in early 1861 that multiple New York newspapers reprinted verbatim: “I am further informed these natives were shipped with the knowledge and consent of the local authorities, and that nothing was done in securing them that would be objectionable either in a moral point of view or with reference to the laws of nations.”²⁵

However, events soon followed that cast doubt on the degree to which these boys and young men agreed to the affair. Steaurma and the remaining four “displays” finished their term in New York but were brought back to Boston in February 1861 for additional exhibition at the Gardens, presumably to be held there indefinitely. But indefinitely ended early. Just two weeks after the first canons were fired at Fort Sumter, Steaurma was found hanging in the basement of the Gardens, a victim of what contemporary news accounts deemed a suicide.²⁶ The stories of his death repeat a similar refrain: his personal belongings had been removed to a separate room, as is the custom in his culture when one takes their own life. But a few critical details about this classification offer more than enough room for pause. First, the remaining four Africans harbored no fear or concern for Steaurma’s state of mind. His alleged suicide shocked and shook them. Second, he was “under engagement” to return back home to the southwestern cape of Africa later that year. If true, this suggests a faint hopefulness for an imminent end to the exhibition. Third, an inquest into the boy’s death was commissioned but evidence for its completion is wanting, which may have yielded an alternative explanation of his passing.²⁷ These peculiarities do not preclude a suicide, of course, but they raise sufficient skepticism about the precise details of Steaurma’s death.

Those circumstances notwithstanding, Steaurma’s loss brought the exhibit to an abrupt end, and the four remaining captive Africans were shipped back across the Atlantic to the cape of

²³ “First Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum,” 5.

²⁴ “An Extraordinary Importation from South Africa”; “Opening of the New Aquarial Gardens.” For a larger context on the history of living ethnological exhibits across Africa, Australia, and Europe, see Poignant, *Professional Savages*, and Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade*.

²⁵ Miller, “Surely His Mother Mourns for Him,” 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86–87.

²⁷ “Suicide of a Hottentot at the Aquarial Gardens,” *Daily Evening Traveller*, April 29, 1861; “Suicide of a Hottentot at the Boston Aquarial Gardens,” *Evening Post*, May 1, 1861; “Suicide of the Hottentot at the Aquarial Gardens,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 2, 1861.

southwestern Africa. But Steaurma's body did not accompany them. Rather, the person who "curated" the exhibition "bequeathed the young man's body to Jeffries Wyman."²⁸ Steaurma experienced postmortem a similar fate that befell Saartje Baartman. He, like Baartman, was of Khoikhoi ancestry yet also endured the epithet "Hottentot" from the scientific community and in newspaper accounts. With his young body still warm, Wyman created a plastic cast of Steaurma's deceased face, dissected his body, and removed his brain. Wyman performed several measurements on his skeleton before it began to be displayed in the scientific scene of Boston.²⁹ As was the case during his life, Steaurma in his death was part specimen, part spectacle. He was seen everywhere and yet somehow not seen anywhere.

Four years passed between Steaurma's death and the publication of Wyman's analysis of his body. In the interstice, a bloody civil war was waged that left more than half a million people dead. But the battle for dignity of African-descended people had barely begun. Formerly enslaved people would face unprecedented levels of racial terrorism, the emergence of the criminal punishment system, and the institution of Jim Crow. All of these phenomena centered on the premise that Black people were either nonhuman or a subclass of humans.³⁰ Wyman stood opposite Agassiz on this point: he found Darwin's thesis persuasive and hoped his dissection of Steaurma would prove it. Yet Wyman's analysis deployed many of the same tropes found in the writings of Agassiz as well as the man who trained him, Georges Cuvier. Wyman wrote, "The nasals are completely co-ossified with each other, no trace of a suture remaining. This was the more noticeable, as the individual was young, and the bones of the skeleton generally are immature; and has an interest in connection with the fact that the nasal bones are co-ossified at an early period in the monkeys, and before the completion of the first dentition in the gorillas and chimpanzees."³¹

Wyman would continue on in the article to detail even more of Steaurma's skeletal features. His goal was to demonstrate that the seventeen-year-old Steaurma actually more closely resembled a person from Europe than an ape. But the mere proposition of the argument undermined his intent. For instance, when presenting measurements of the pelvis and limbs, Wyman arranged the data table from left to right as follows: European, Hottentot, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. Wyman hoped that the numbers and prose surrounding the data tables would suggest the unity of humankind. But by placing the measurements of Steaurma in between Europeans and apes, the visual narrative is one of degeneration, suggesting perhaps that Africans are at a different point on the evolutionary timeline. While his intent may have differed, Wyman's analysis registered the same impact as Agassiz's in 1850 and Cuvier's—whom Wyman references in the study—decades earlier after his dissection of Baartman. In all three, African and African-descended people were put before a microscope, a camera, or a scalpel in order to make a case for (or against) racial difference.

A little more than a year after his article appeared in a leading British anthropology journal, Wyman added the death masks of Steaurma Jantjes into the first collection of the Peabody Museum.³² Another four decades passed until the faces of Delia, Renty, Drana, Jack, Jem, Alfred,

²⁸ Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, 192.

²⁹ "The Natural History Society."

³⁰ Wynter, "No Humans Involved."

³¹ Wyman, "Observations on the Skeleton of a Hottentot," 331.

³² Digital renderings of the death masks are available through the Peabody's website, <https://www.peabody.harvard.edu/>, with a keyword search for "Sturman."

and Fassena accompanied him. By the time the museum moved out of the cramped corners of Boylston Hall in 1876, it had a new curator, Frederic Ward Putnam; a new address; and a new neighbor, the Museum of Comparative Zoology, which Agassiz had founded some twenty years prior. Although Agassiz snubbed the offer to lead the Peabody, he long envisioned a science museum complex centered around the aptly named Divinity Avenue.³³ For Putnam it was a reunion of sorts. He had attended Harvard as an undergraduate and been a student of Agassiz and Wyman in the Lawrence Scientific School. Moreover, Putnam served as Agassiz's chief assistant at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and so had familiarity with the responsibilities of running a research operation, later writing glowingly of his time learning under Agassiz.³⁴

Like his former mentor, Putnam also plied his trade in procuring human flesh. A core difference between Putnam and Agassiz was that the former relied on his status as a Harvard curator to chart the course of museum praxis across the country.³⁵ Putnam fired an assistant at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition's Anthropology Building, which he oversaw, due to her objection to Putnam's living ethnological exhibits of indigenous peoples.³⁶ Following the conclusion of the world's fair, Putnam, still head of the Peabody, assumed the directorship of the anthropology department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. He lobbied the head of the museum to employ his protégé the German physicist-turned-ethnologist Franz Boas. Under the leadership of Putnam and Boas, the American Museum in 1897 brought six living Inuit people to their building for exhibition and study, yet all but one—a boy named Minik—died in captivity at the museum.³⁷ Minik's father was among those who died, but rather than return the remains to the Pacific Coast community from which he came, Boas (under the advisement of Putnam, no doubt) orchestrated a traditional Inuit burial ceremony in New York and substituted tree trunks shrouded in fur to deceive Minik that it was his father's body.³⁸ But Putnam was not finished. He also founded the anthropology department and museum at the University of California, becoming the first director of both entities while still retaining his responsibilities as the Peabody curator. As at the 1893 World's Fair and the American Museum of Natural History, the University of California Museum of Anthropology soon took captive a Yahi man for display and observation. He, like others before him, died in the custody of the museum, only to have his brain removed and displaced from his community for close to a century.³⁹ While Putnam was no longer employed at the California museum by the time of the captivity, he certainly trained his successor, Alfred L. Kroeber, who also happened to be the first doctoral student of Franz Boas at Columbia University.

It remains an open question whether Putnam, who helmed the Peabody post longer than anyone else before or since, curated living ethnological exhibits on the Cambridge campus. Reports of collection activity from his tenure show a sizeable number of "ethnological specimens" acquired from Africa, Asia, Australia, and of course other parts of the Americas, but missing is any

³³ Brew, "Introduction," 22.

³⁴ Hinsley, "Anthropology as Education and Entertainment," 2.

³⁵ Browman, "The Peabody Museum, Frederic W. Putnam, and the Rise of U.S. Anthropology."

³⁶ Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 63.

³⁷ Harper, *Give Me My Father's Body*.

³⁸ Dinitia Smith, "An Eskimo Boy and Injustice in Old New York." For more background on Boas's dealings with the Inuit prior to this episode, see Pohl, "Assessing Franz Boas' Ethics in His Arctic and Later Anthropological Fieldwork."

³⁹ Jiménez, "UC Berkeley Looks Back on Dark History." See Starn, *Ishi's Brain*, for a more detailed account of the fight for Ishi's remains.

indication about whether any were taken alive.⁴⁰ At least one of those acquisitions aroused suspicion among Bundjalung descendants of a man, Neddy Larkin, whose conspicuous death in 1888 afforded Putnam and the Peabody the chance to capture yet another prized possession.⁴¹ The determination of these descendants to question the authority of Putnam, the Peabody, and Neddy's body-snatchers brings under a microscope the cross-cutting issues that may, after all, allow for a more reflective rendering of Fassena, Alfred, Jem, Drana, Jack, Delia, and Renty.

Power

Tamara Lanier pursued a similar path in search of her ancestor and likewise landed at the Peabody Museum. She grew up roughly one hundred miles southwest of the Cambridge campus, in the textile mill town of Norwich, Connecticut. Her mother, Mattye Pearl Thompson Lanier, was born in Montgomery, Alabama, into a family of sharecroppers, but like many other Black people in the U.S. South, sought refuge from the racial terrorism and economic exploitation of Jim Crow by moving to the western, midwestern, and northeastern regions of the country.⁴² The displacement did not, however, dispossess the Laniers of their lineage. The elder Lanier often relayed stories about the family's long legacy, and nearing her death in 2010, urged her daughter Tamara to compile a written family history to complement the rich oral tradition transmitted through the generations. In particular, Mattye Lanier wanted the world to know about an ancestor who, as recounted in the family narrative, overcame the steepest of odds during enslavement. Among other accomplishments, he managed to get hold of Noah Webster's blue-backed speller, clandestinely teaching himself and other enslaved people to read. Those whom he inspired referred to him as "The Black African" because of his birth in the Congo region of central Africa. But the Lanier family knew him as Papa Renty.⁴³

Tamara Lanier's quest for archival records about her great-great-grandfather Papa Renty led her to discover that the Peabody Museum possessed daguerreotypes of a man named Renty who had been enslaved in South Carolina. Careful not to assume a connection, Lanier combed records from the census and probate courts before consulting with noted genealogist of U.S. presidents Christopher Child, who learned through an inventory of Benjamin Franklin Taylor's estate that Delia and *two* men by the name of Renty Taylor were enslaved on Taylor's Edgehill plantation.⁴⁴ The revelation accorded with Lanier's oral tradition that Papa Renty fathered a son, also named Renty Taylor, who was sold west to an Alabama plantation where his last name was changed to Thompson to reflect the surname of the new man who then enslaved him. Lanier shared her research with the Peabody curators, who repeatedly rebuffed her rendering of her genealogy, with one curator even stating in 2014, "She's given us nothing that directly connects her ancestor to the person in our photograph."⁴⁵ In addition to reinforcing the racist intention of the institution of chattel slavery to sever family ties of Black people, the curator's comments came at a curious time for the university. A Harvard history professor, Sven Beckert, and graduate student, Katherine Stevens, had recently released a detailed report about the university's ties with slavery, including

⁴⁰ Brew, *People and Projects of the Peabody Museum*, 36–47.

⁴¹ Garbutt et al., "Why Did They Take Him Away?"

⁴² Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

⁴³ McLoughlin, "FAMILY TREE."

⁴⁴ Hartford and Schoeffler, "In Search of a Truer Picture of Papa Renty."

⁴⁵ Barry, "Norwich Woman Tracks Down Slave Ancestor's Inspiring Story."

an entire section on Louis Agassiz.⁴⁶ Their research prompted the university leadership in 2016 to install a plaque outside the historic home of Harvard presidents in recognition of four people—Titus, Venus, Juba, and Bilhah—enslaved there.⁴⁷ The university’s peek into its past peaked at the aforementioned “Bound by History: Universities and Slavery” conference in which Radcliffe dean Lizabeth Cohen implored the audience to disregard as illegitimate any parts of Renty’s life “pieced together by conjecture.”⁴⁸

The use of Renty’s image as the conference backdrop, coupled with Cohen’s comments, prompted Lanier to proffer pieces of the proof that the Peabody and Harvard fought adamantly to deny. Posting to social media with the conference’s hashtag, she shared photographs of her research trip to South Carolina, which included a home visit to meet the great-grandson of the man who enslaved Renty and Delia.⁴⁹ Lanier also posted photographs from her research trip to Switzerland, Agassiz’s home country, to meet with the artist Sasha Huber, who in 2008 documented her journey to rename the Swiss Alps mountain named for Agassiz, Agassizhorn, to Rentyhorn.⁵⁰ Huber partnered with an historian and activist, Hans Fässler, for the project.⁵¹ Years after Huber published the film, Fässler experienced his own battle with the Peabody. He hoped to use reproductions of the daguerreotypes for an exhibit in Switzerland centered on the legacy of slavery in the country, with Agassiz at the center. When Fässler approached the museum in 2012 for high-resolution reproductions, curators rejected his request due to its “blanket policy against the display of exploitative images of naked people.”⁵² Yet apparently the Peabody exempted itself from its own policy, given that the museum published to its website not only the images of Renty, Delia, Drana, Jack, and Fassena but also daguerreotypes of other African people stripped naked from the waist up.⁵³ A different part of the Peabody website even provides visitors the option to zoom in on the bodies of Renty and Delia as well as one of the women photographed in Brazil—potentially one Agassiz “cajoled” in private.⁵⁴ These details of Lanier’s research visits and the Peabody’s own self-contradictory policies escaped mention at the conference.

Just six months after the conference, Lanier formally asked the museum to recognize her as the direct lineal descendant of Renty and, accordingly, relinquish the images to her. After evasive and elusive responses from Peabody curators, Lanier assembled a team of attorneys, anchored by the high-profile civil rights lawyer Benjamin Crump. The inclusion of Crump is instructive. His notoriety stems largely from representing the families of Black people killed by police, most notably Alesia Thomas, Michael Brown Jr., and Tamir Rice. In the vast majority of Crump’s legal cases, he has worked to pressure district attorneys and federal prosecutors to issue indictments against law enforcement officials who, in his client’s view, unjustly took the life of a family member. But Lanier’s fight constituted a role reversal of sorts. Lanier’s contention with the museum revolved around the university’s refusal to even recognize her as a legitimate heir to Renty

⁴⁶ Beckert and Stevens, “Harvard and Slavery,” 20–22.

⁴⁷ Miller, “Harvard Leadership Acknowledge University’s Slave History.”

⁴⁸ Cohen, “Universities and Slavery.”

⁴⁹ Lanier, “Dr. & Mrs. Edmond Taylor.”

⁵⁰ Lanier, “Children of Renty at the Base of ‘Rentyhorn’ in Switzerland.”

⁵¹ Huber, “Rentyhorn, 2008.”

⁵² Carmichael, “Louis Agassiz Exhibit Divides Harvard, Swiss Group.”

⁵³ Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, “Collections Online—Daguerreotypes.”

⁵⁴ Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, “Online Exhibitions—From Site to Site.” These images are published in Banta et al., *From Site to Sight*. The book’s cover portrays the naked torso of Renty.

and Delia, which ultimately served to deprive her family of the right to manage their family members' lives even, or especially, in death.

Thus, Crump's addition to the team hinted at a potential legal strategy, and on March 20, 2019, the legal team filed a lawsuit naming Harvard University and the Peabody Museum as defendants.⁵⁵ The complaint states the stakes of the case clearly in its opening line: "The plaintiff, Tamara Lanier, brings this action against Harvard for its wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation of photographic images of the patriarch of her family—a man known as Renty—and his daughter, Delia, both of whom were enslaved in South Carolina."⁵⁶ The core of the legal argument thus proceeds from the position that, given enslaved people's legal status as property, they could neither consent nor object to participation in the creation of the daguerreotypes, a fact the complaint argues Harvard continues to exploit. The attorneys argued then that the immediate source of creation and later acquisition by the Peabody was unlawful and tantamount to an initial and continuous theft. The most searing set of charges of the complaint come with the count accusing the museum of violating the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which outlawed slavery except as punishment for a crime. The claim reads,

At the time the daguerreotypes were made, Renty and Delia could not make or enforce contracts, own property, inherit or cause their heirs to inherit, access the courts, or protect the integrity of their familial relationships. Harvard's ongoing possession of the daguerreotypes reflects and is a continuation of core components or incidents of slavery. Harvard's ongoing refusal to recognize Ms. Lanier's superior claim to the daguerreotypes as next of kin to Renty and Delia reflects and is a continuation of core components or incidents of slavery. Harvard's ongoing profiting from the daguerreotypes reflects and is a continuation of core components or incidents of slavery.⁵⁷

The Lanier lawsuit, which remains ongoing at the time of this writing, fundamentally calls into question the ultimate power of the Peabody or any cultural heritage institution: the power to possess. Unlike petitions to access materials or reproduce them in other works, a claim of ownership from outside the archival repository directly subverts the authority and ability of an archive to exert exclusive and eternal ownership of records. Unlike the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which mandates museums identify and return ancestral remains and funeral objects to indigenous peoples, no similar legislation governs the transfer of materials to descendants of enslaved Africans, meaning the Peabody can return the remains of two thousand people from the Pueblos of Pecos and Jemez while simultaneously refusing the inheritance to the Laniers.⁵⁸ The legal team of Tamara Lanier argues that Harvard and the Peabody never lawfully possessed the daguerreotypes, whereas the indifference of the institution insinuates that Renty's and Delia's descendants themselves do not have the right to possess them. They, it must be intimated from the university's refusal, exist in a space of perpetual rightlessness, both inside of history and outside of it.

⁵⁵ Hartocollis, "Who Should Own Photos of Slaves?"

⁵⁶ "Tamara Lanier v. President and Fellows of Harvard College," 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁸ Capone, "Amending Wonder," 124–25.

This conundrum explains one of the few comments given by Harvard President Lawrence S. Bacow regarding the lawsuit. When student activists questioned him about the museum's refusal to relinquish the daguerreotypes to Tamara Lanier, Bacow simply responded, "Those images belong to history."⁵⁹ His pronouncement offers an overture to conceive of archives less as material manifestations and more as processes that concentrate, control, and codify power.

The Peabody Museum manages more than a million objects, artifacts, photographs, and human remains. The daguerreotypes of Jem, Alfred, Drana, Jack, Delia, Renty, and Fassena—even if they could ever have been considered strictly scientific—certainly offer diminishing value to contemporary scientific inquiry, which has revealed Louis Agassiz's aims and approach to be misguided at best. Additionally, over one hundred years elapsed between when Agassiz commissioned the images and when in 1976 a Peabody curator found them shoved in a nondescript cabinet long overlooked in the museum's attic.⁶⁰ Lastly, the current access policy for the daguerreotypes dictates that they be exposed to just ten hours of light per year.⁶¹

To summarize, the images do not serve the scientific purposes for which they were ostensibly created, were relegated to the dustbin of history for over a century, and have extremely stringent access requirements that encumber their access to the vast majority of the public. Moreover, dozens of descendants of Louis Agassiz signed an open letter in support of the claims made by Tamara Lanier.⁶² These factors, combined with the substantial negative press from the lawsuit, might seem to suggest the decision is an obvious one: relinquish from among the million-item collections just four long-forgotten images to the descendants of the people reflected in them, commissioned by a man whose very own descendants support the move. The museum's reticence then cannot be reduced to the empirically obvious. Instead, the phenomena at play are best analyzed with theories about the nature of archives, for the claim from Lanier is at its root a critique of the foundation of archival praxis.

But the ongoing dispute for the daguerreotypes cannot be fully grasped from the current landscape of literature within archival studies and other related disciplines. These bodies of scholarship, while useful to be sure, have neglected to develop a theory of archives elastic enough to provide analytical value for the varying types of archives (e.g., community-based, human rights, state, carceral, social justice), the varying entities in which they are primarily managed (e.g., museums, libraries, universities, governments, churches, corporations), and the varying societies around the world in which they are located (e.g., the North Atlantic, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Caribbean, the Americas). Missing from the collective fields is an attempt to explain the root of it all. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, however, offers a generative framework in his conception of the state. He argues, like many others before him, that the state is not simply reducible to the four walls of government buildings, agencies, or legislation. Rather, scholars must study the state through the production of state effects: the isolation effect, the identification effect, the legibility effect, and the spatialization

⁵⁹ Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign, "Harvard President Claims without Evidence."

⁶⁰ Reichlin, "Faces of Slavery."

⁶¹ Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, "Daguerreotype FAQs."

⁶² Tepfer, "Family Demands Harvard Return Images of Former Slave."

effect.⁶³ Adapting and amending Trouillot’s framing, archival studies and other scholars might look to study archives not through their material manifestations but through the production of a set of archival dynamics, such as:

Include ←→ exclude dynamic, which entails setting the bounds of belonging

Possess ←→ dispossess dynamic, which entails establishing the parameters of property

Inherit ←→ disinherit dynamic, which entails legitimatizing descendants

Embody ←→ disembody dynamic, which entails administering death

These archival dynamics do not suggest absolutes. It is not my argument that all archives engage in these serialized actions, or that all archives vacillate from one pole to the other. Instead, these dynamics might exist along a spectrum, with the processes at times unfolding in contradiction or tension, and by agents not under the employ of an archive at all. Most importantly, should this construct of archival dynamics be useful, it should bear relevance for analyses of phenomena unbounded by space, time, and type. Looking at the case of the daguerreotypes through these archival dynamics reveals an essential truth about archives: their violence is underwritten largely by blood. Lanier’s struggle shows as much.

The initial conscription of Delia, Renty, Jem, Alfred, Fassena, Jack, and Drana into Agassiz’s “experiment” occurred only because of the perception that their blood placed them beyond the bounds of belonging to the white racial power structure of the antebellum South (include ←→ exclude). A refusal within this regime of racial terror would have exposed the enslaved to the wrath of the whip, which itself was applied until blood dripped down a beaten, Black backside. Exactly who could be mounted and tortured has always been a matter of alchemy. Rapacious enslavers who ravaged Black women’s bodies later enslaved the very children born from these vicious violations, highlighting that what could (and can) be done to a person’s body had (and has) everything to do with ideas about whose blood was (is) said to be coursing through it. The consensus on that question constituted the contours of who created the archives versus who became its object. Racial formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, therefore, cannot be seen as simply coincidental to the ascendancy of archives. Rather, racialization itself was accelerated by archives, from the West Indies to the East Indies, and many places in between.⁶⁴ Blood does not, as might seem the case, stain archives. Archives in fact stain blood. They ascribe onto bodies beliefs about belonging by seeding systems that say whose lives matter and whose do not.

It follows then that the evidence of enslaved conscription thus became the property not of themselves but of the person responsible for documenting their exclusion (possess ←→ dispossess). This property, like the enslaved people themselves, can be commodified, traded, and maximized for surplus value by the owner. Blood too propels this process, often quite literally. As an example, the Genographic Project’s collection of DNA samples and Arizona State University’s assertion to use the Havasupai people’s DNA in perpetuity for whichever “scientific” purpose it sees fit are but two cases that contextualize how whiteness works as a form of “possessive logics.”⁶⁵ Archives do not simply reflect these logics. They actively produce them. To claim lands

⁶³ Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 81.

⁶⁴ Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

⁶⁵ Reardon and TallBear, “Your DNA Is Our History”; Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xii. For more thorough treatment on whiteness in archives, see Kim, “Appraising Newness,” and Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to

is to claim bodies is to claim archives. These simultaneous phenomena pair processes of dispossession, for instance, in contemporary Palestine as well as the early twentieth-century Philippines.⁶⁶ They connect Canada to the southern seas of the Pacific.⁶⁷ Property—in the private or state realm—simply could not function as a set of societal relations without archives. W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1920 essay “The Souls of White Folk” noted that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”⁶⁸ Archives are both the invocation and the benediction to possession and dispossession. The earth, its lands, and its bodies could not be owned if they could not be inscribed. If archives provide the answer to Du Bois’s prayer, for nonwhite peoples they represent the angel of death.

It is at the moment of death, when the blood no longer pumps through the body, that archives accomplish their most practical purpose in capitalist societies: to proscribe the transfer of property, as outlined above, across generations (inherit ←→ disinherit). Bloodlines and documentary proof thereof dictate the legitimacy of claims made on the materials—the land, the bodies, the archives—left in one’s wake. The will, the inventory, and other probate records survive from centuries ago not simply as a result of their historical value but due to their integral role in authenticating whiteness. Thus, when an institution such as the Peabody Museum disputes the ancestral lineage of Tamara Lanier because of want of evidence, it does so precisely in alignment with the possessive logics undergirding the archival enterprise. Lanier’s claims do not register as legible before the law or the archive because her ancestors did not register as legible before these institutions. Whereas Louis Agassiz bequeathed assets to his son, Alexander, who later gave portions of those assets to Harvard, Drana, Jack, Alfred, Jem, Fassena, Renty, and Delia occupied subject positions that expressly prohibited them owning property, much less passing it on to family, friends, or loved ones. To recognize that Harvard has inherited stolen goods would be to acknowledge that the wealth generated from chattel slavery is likewise stolen, as is the wealth amassed during Jim Crow and the wealth still being generated from the prison-industrial complex.⁶⁹

Lastly, Harvard President Lawrence Bacow sentences the seven enslaved people into a perpetual bondage postmortem; their images “belong,” present tense, “to history,” for the infinite expropriation and exploitation guised as education, refusing their bodies, even in death, a chance to rest (embody ←→ disembody). Their labor—initially on the Edgehill plantation to produce maximum surplus value and indefinitely at the Peabody Museum to accumulate historical value—knows no bounds that any white person or white institution need respect, much less compensate. If the Latin dictum of *terra nullius* (nobody’s land) enabled settler colonialism, Harvard has rendered these enslaved people *corpus nullius*, “nobody’s body.”⁷⁰ The antilynching song “Strange Fruit,” first performed by blues singer Billie Holiday, depicts the scene vividly: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.”⁷¹ A common and calculated aspect of lynching was the prohibition of family from cutting down their hanged loved one’s body and

Be.” For more on the ways that archival studies scholars and archivists are confronting whiteness in archival praxis, see Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” and Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive.”

⁶⁶ Wahbe, “The Politics of *Karamah*”; Beredo, *Import of the Archive*.

⁶⁷ Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive”; Bennett et al., *Collecting, Ordering, Governing*.

⁶⁸ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 30.

⁶⁹ Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign, “The Harvard-to-Prison Pipeline.”

⁷⁰ For an extended meditation on this point, see the concept *partus sequitur ventrem* in Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.

⁷¹ Holiday, *Strange Fruit*.

giving them a proper burial. In other words, the utility of the lynching was not fulfilled until and unless the broken Black body could be seen long after its blood had spilled. Theirs was a fate shared across different parts of the British imperial world, where in places like Barbados the colonial governor expressly forbade enslaved families from claiming the bodies of an enslaved person who was executed, requiring instead that the corpse immediately be taken to the sea and sunk to the water with weights for a “second death.”⁷² In this regard, Harvard’s archives bear a strange fruit. It prevents Tamara Lanier from claiming the bodies of Renty and Delia, giving a more literal meaning to the “afterlife of slavery.”⁷³ These seven souls stand—or swing—in the balance while a museum makes the case that the very blood that condemned them to a life of bondage serves as sufficient cause to condemn them to an eternity of bondage. Crimson is the name of the Harvard mascot. It is also the color of dried blood.

Yet the blood of the enslaved still runs bright red, as Saidiya V. Hartman argues that “the enslaved are our contemporaries,” and our debt to them is not to create a more perfect archive for redress, recognition, or relief but to imagine the impossible across time and space by “making good the promise of abolition.”⁷⁴ The incitement to insurgency might induce the idea that abolition is finite or finished, identifiable with a land, resources, an archive, or a nation-state. In actuality, abolition is more the means than the end. This is by no means to diminish the ends but to link them to the means while acknowledging that the “ends” are never actually such, simply new beginnings. For instance, across several decades, Black students and faculty at Yale University expressed contempt for the stained-glass windows that depict enslaved people on a cotton field. The windows gazed downward in the dining hall of Calhoun College, named in honor of the nineteenth-century politician who devoted his life to maintaining misery for millions of Black people through the regime of chattel slavery. But Black contempt—whether shouted through petitions, protests, and town halls, or whispered over email, text, and brunch—failed to achieve the desired end: the removal of the windows. Generations passed through Yale’s hallowed halls and left without making progress. Then, during the middle of a bloody summer at the fever pitch of the Movement for Black Lives, it came crashing down. Not from a lawsuit. Not from a letter. Not from an ordinance. Corey Menafee, a Black dishwasher at the Calhoun College dining hall, grabbed a broom. Equipped with the only weapon in reach, he tapped, and tapped, and tapped the infamous images until they shattered. For his defiance, Menafee was fired and charged with a felony. Public outpouring and support caused Yale and the police to reverse course, and Menafee was rehired on the condition that he make no further statements to the public about the case. The windows remain out of sight.⁷⁵

Menafee’s muted speech acts reveal that silence does indeed leave a sound worth listening to.⁷⁶ His efforts echo that looking to the letter, the law, the statement, or the archive for reparation can only produce disappointment, for the very terms of subjugation are set in those same arenas. Certainly, John C. Calhoun was a white supremacist and advocated for the permanent bondage of African-descended people. Yale historians and archivists, among the most revered in the world, could testify to these facts. But it was a wage worker in the kitchen whose theory and praxis of the

⁷² Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 117.

⁷³ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169–70.

⁷⁵ Brighenti and Yaffe-Bellany, “Yale Gags Rehired Cafeteria Worker.”

⁷⁶ Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid.”

past won out. Similarly, neither law nor archive could approximate the justice on display from Jacqueline Smith, the Black woman who was the last resident of the Lorraine Motel before she was evicted in 1988 in order to make way for the National Civil Rights Museum. For the last thirty years, Smith has staged a one-woman protest across the street from the museum to bring awareness to the displacement and gentrification that soon followed the museum's construction.⁷⁷ Menafee and Smith embody an alternative, more radical theory of archives, most profoundly mused by Chicago hip-hop artist Bella Bahhs:

[I] don't fuck with the pigs, I don't fuck with the bacon
 Think that I'll go then you're sadly mistaken
 This is Black history that we are making
 We are Black history, it's in the making
 Even if we don't, our stories will make it!⁷⁸

This might be the ultimate lesson from archives, that they are concurrently fundamental yet futile for liberation, that the archival imperative may not be access but action, and that this action might get bloody, yet no bloodier than it already is. The final decision on the daguerreotypes may take years to unfold, for what is at stake is not simply a battle for documents but a potential paradigm shift for what and who constitute archives. Whereas the Peabody Museum and Harvard University are collectively denying the DNA of Tamara Lanier, the pressing concern for them and other archival projects is that, if successful, her claim will alter the DNA of archives.

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⁷⁷ Armada, "Memory's Execution."

⁷⁸ Wilson and Bahhs, *Fuck Yo System*.

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