

Cite this article: Michelle Smiley, “Daguerreotypes and Humbugs: Pwan-Ye-Koo, Racial Science, and the Circulation of Ethnographic Images around 1850,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10895>.

Daguerreotypes and Humbugs: Pwan-Ye-Koo, Racial Science, and the Circulation of Ethnographic Images around 1850

Michelle Smiley, Postdoctoral Associate, Center for Cultural Analysis, Rutgers University–New Brunswick

The Daguerreian Diptych

In a visual schema that equates Chinese identity with ornamental design and delicacy, the Boston-based daguerreotypist Lorenzo G. Chase (livedates unknown) photographed a woman identified as Miss Pwan-Ye-Koo posing in profile wearing a floral headpiece and patterned dress (fig. 1).¹ Seated in a plush, cushioned chair, the sitter, reported to be seventeen years old at the time, turns her gaze outward to the right side of the frame, while her hands rest gently in her lap, clasping a fan. Pwan-Ye-Koo proves an exceptional subject for Chase, whose clientele at his Boston establishment, which he operated at 257 Washington Street between 1846 and 1850, consisted otherwise of exclusively white sitters.² In this image, the sitter’s ornate floral headpiece, dangling earrings, and patterned robe would seem to identify her as an aristocratic Chinese lady. However, a paucity of information regarding Pwan-Ye-Koo’s background and the nature of her social position raises questions concerning the circumstances surrounding her photographic sitting.



Fig. 1. Lorenzo G. Chase, “Pwan Ye-Koo,” profile, 1850. Daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM 35-5-10/53057

An additional daguerreotype of Pwan-Ye-Koo further illuminates the nature of her photographic likeness. At the same sitting, the daguerreotypist Chase captured a second image of the sitter, this time posed square to the camera (fig. 2). In this daguerreotype, we better glimpse Pwan-Ye-Koo’s facial expression as she sits perched at an angle upon the photographer’s studio prop. Her steady yet solemn gaze presents the forlorn aspect of a young woman posed uncertainly before the photographic apparatus, as her hands remain clasped in her lap, perhaps a gesture of self-protection in the moment of her display before the lens. Individually, both the profile and the front facing views Chase employs illustrate pictorial formats commonly offered by a typical mid-nineteenth-century daguerreotype studio, where sitters commissioned likenesses as personal and familial mementoes. However, the combined use of these viewpoints, in which the doubling of the pictorial record seems to indicate a desire to exhaustively probe and record the nature of the sitter’s appearance, indicates that something else was at stake when Pwan-Ye-Koo took her seat before the lens.



Fig. 2. Lorenzo G. Chase, “Pwan Ye-Koo,” frontal, 1850. Daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM 35-5-10/53055

Alternately turned away from and toward the camera, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s Daguerreian diptych gestures outward from the confined context of the nineteenth-century parlor and onto a diasporic experience seldom accounted for in the early history of American photography.³ Beginning in the spring of 1850, Pwan-Ye-Koo appeared as the star of P. T. Barnum’s (1810–1891) “Living Chinese Family,” a troupe of six performers who staged musical numbers and other demonstrations in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia before traveling to London in 1851 for the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace. A lithograph produced by the New York firm of Currier and Ives illustrates the members of Barnum’s troupe, with Pwan-Ye-Koo seated at the far left holding a Pipa, a four-stringed Chinese musical instrument, in her lap (fig. 3). Onstage, Pwan-Ye-Koo performed musical numbers for paying audiences alongside other spectacular technological and natural curiosities of Barnum’s. Pwan-Ye-Koo’s whole known life remains accessible only through scant records of these performances, displays that were refracted through the prisms of nineteenth-century Orientalism, Barnum’s sensational marketing of racial difference, and her own embodied presence. At the same time, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s daguerreotype likenesses went on to circulate within an alternate, and, at times oppositional, context.



Fig. 3. Nathaniel Currier, *The Living Chinese Family*, 1850. Hand-colored lithograph on paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/2 in. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

These daguerreotypes are housed among the photography collection of the Swiss anatomist and naturalist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), now held at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Agassiz, who had immigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1846, is now best known as one of the most prominent members of the so-called “American School” of ethnology.⁴ Where the individuals now identified as belonging to this cadre in fact never formed a centralized or formal school, the naturalists, anatomists, and ethnographers included in the group were united by the shared belief in the doctrine of polygenesis: the theory of human creation in which the five identified races of humankind—Ethiopian (i.e., African), [Native] American, Caucasian, Malay, and Mongolian—constituted altogether separate species.⁵ Where Agassiz denied any political motive behind his work, polygenists including Josiah Nott and George Gliddon explicitly promoted the plural theory of creation as a scientific justification for the institution of slavery, laying bare the group’s ideological project of racial ordering effected through the denigration of nonwhite and non-European peoples.⁶ While the theory of plural origins has long since been debunked, and indeed faced formidable opposition in its own time, Agassiz’s daguerreotype archive forms part of a pictorial project put forth by the American School, one that inaugurated a mode of racial and photographic imaging that reverberates still today.

In one of the earliest conscriptions of the new medium of photography in this project of reifying racial difference, Agassiz commissioned in 1850 a series of daguerreotypes of racial “types,” where subjects were posed in frontal and profile view before the camera. This visual format would become widespread in the 1860s and 1870s for the purposes of comparative anatomy, in which the replication of a standardized set of viewpoints allowed for comparison of morphological features among sitters.⁷ By the 1880s, this means of picturing was adopted into the practices of criminology, eventually forming a feature of police surveillance—the mug shot—illustrating the shared history between the desire to render photographically both the racial and criminal subject.⁸ The production of visual evidence was a key strategy of Agassiz and others in their campaign to determine once and for all that

the European and African were altogether separate species, or, as Frederick Douglass described it in his 1854 lecture, “The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered,” “to forbid the magnificent reunion of mankind in one brotherhood.”⁹ However, the use of pictures as proof proved an unstable strategy for Agassiz. None of the daguerreotypes in Agassiz’s collection were ever publicly published or widely circulated as evidentiary illustrations for his theories of polygenesis, and the images of Barnum’s Chinese performers in particular came laden with visual and rhetorical associations of commercial spectacle and hoax that undermined the anatomist’s claims to impartial and objective observation. Ultimately, images such as Pwan-Ye-Koo’s exposed the fragile foundation of the American School of scientific racism and failed to emerge as authoritative evidence in the service of the project of polygenesis.

Whereas many scholars, including Brian Wallis and Molly Rogers, have discussed Agassiz’s series of fifteen daguerreotypes of enslaved subjects commissioned around the same time (1850; Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology), the images of Pwan-Ye-Koo remain an understudied aspect of the polygenist’s archive, a doubling of daguerreotypes that illuminate the ways in which the circulation of people, ideas, and objects could simultaneously strengthen and undermine the authority of racial scientists.¹⁰ As a performer, Pwan-Ye-Koo often traveled under harsh living conditions along with the rest of the “Living Chinese Family,” tucked into inhumanely cramped quarters and displayed onstage as a physical and cultural oddity, all while Barnum peppered the press with news of the arrival of the “true Chinese lady,” drumming up public interest at each new venue with sensational stories of her origins and identity. By contrast, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s photographic surrogates circulated among a much more limited group of investigators who exchanged pictures via the U.S. mail as proof of the theory of plural creation. Unlike a coin, which carries with ease its two faces, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s daguerreotypes foreground how the racialized, photographic subject vacillated uncertainly between the competing stories and values assigned to her image.

The history of Pwan-Ye-Koo’s involvement in Barnum’s traveling spectacles highlights how both the diasporic subject and the daguerreotype circulated among the seemingly opposed discourse and communities of professional science and popular spectacle, rather than serving as transparent or objective records of morphological evidence. By the mid-nineteenth century, Barnum had carefully cultivated a culture of learned skepticism in advance of each new attraction, encouraging public audiences to decide for themselves the veracity of a wide variety of questionable specimens and objects. At the same time, a group of scientists calling themselves the Lazzaroni—spearheaded by the great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Dallas Bache (1806–1867)—were working to cultivate a new image of American science, one that was elite, professional, and devoid of the base commercial interests that drove enterprises like Barnum’s. In a tongue-in-cheek gesture, the Lazzaroni took their name after a revolutionary group of Neapolitan beggars, referencing the group’s desire to attract funding from the federal government.¹¹ In this way, Bache’s cohort styled themselves as wholly above the fickle machinations of the commercial marketplace, lending a disinterested credibility to their work, as if such funding would supposedly remain untethered to the whims of public taste and opinion.

Crucially, in 1850 such bureaucratic reforms of scientific practice came to center on the question of racial origins, with Bache going so far as to steer Agassiz away from race and polygenesis in order to avoid public controversy and scandal.¹² As Barnum’s own activities make clear, the question of polygenesis and the visual ordering of racial identity played a

lucrative part in the commercial ventures of antebellum spectacle, popular in no small part because such questions touched on some of the most divisive political issues of the moment—including, most importantly, the expansion of the institution of slavery. Yet despite Bache's misgivings, the case of Pwan-Ye-Koo illustrates how the racialized subject crossed these domains, which respectively cultivated impressions of evidentiary objectivity on the one hand and entertainment, skepticism, and deception on the other. Ultimately, Pwan-Ye-Koo's presence in Agassiz's archive underscores how, in the antebellum United States, science and spectacle were less oppositional binaries than interdependent activities.

The entangled histories of circulation, trade, and spectacle embedded in Pwan-Ye-Koo's daguerreotypes begin to unroot early histories of American photography from the moribund narratives of technological progress carried out in the service of the development of the nation-state, instead opening onto patterns of travel, exchange, and diaspora. In what follows, I will draw into conversation two separate but related aspects of the circulation of photographs and racialized subjects around 1850, each of which converges in the daguerreotype images of Pwan-Ye-Koo. Around 1850, a group of Euro-American scientists including Agassiz, Robert W. Gibbes, and Samuel George Morton participated in the exchange of ethnological daguerreotypes sent through the US mail as a means of sharing visual evidence in support of their mutual belief in the doctrine of plural creation. Following instructions from Agassiz, these daguerreotypes were composed in a tradition of what I call "mobile" images: visual forms designed to secure the reliable transmission of data between investigators. At the same time, Barnum toured with and promoted performers, including Pwan-Ye-Koo, in ways that capitalized on diasporic chains of immigration and trade to undermine any surety regarding their origins, identity, and, ultimately, citizenship. At a moment when the United States emerged as a site of ever-increasing multicultural exchange and global immigration, the question of the relationship between racial and national identity became the explicit and tacit subject for both scientists and showmen alike. As a diasporic subject doubly imbricated within an increasingly urgent discourse of origins, identity, and national belonging, Pwan-Ye-Koo's image highlights how the daguerreotype could serve less to fix identity than to unroot the sitter from any such identifiable place of origin.

Commercial Orientalism

As the two daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo and her performances onstage in major metropolitan cities along the East Coast suggest, entertainers like Barnum sought to capitalize on the rarity of seeing Asians and Asian Americans in the United States around 1850. Relatively few daguerreotypes of Chinese and Chinese-American sitters from this period have become the focus of sustained scholarly attention. When examined, such images are typically placed in the context of the influx of workers to the Pacific Coast after news of the California Gold Rush reached the city of Canton in the Guangdong Province (now Guangzhou) in October 1848.¹³ Yet, as the historian John Kuo Wei Tchen has observed, the seafaring traditions of diasporic adventurers and traders meant that many Chinese individuals were present in ports across the Atlantic World.¹⁴ Beginning in the late eighteenth century, ships from Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Salem traveled to the ports of Guangdong and Canton, while mercantile sailors also began arriving in these same ports from China. Such routes took on renewed energy after the 1844 signing of the Treaty of Wangshia, which fixed tariffs on trade, gave American traders the right to buy land and erect churches and hospitals in Chinese treaty ports, and granted Americans the right to

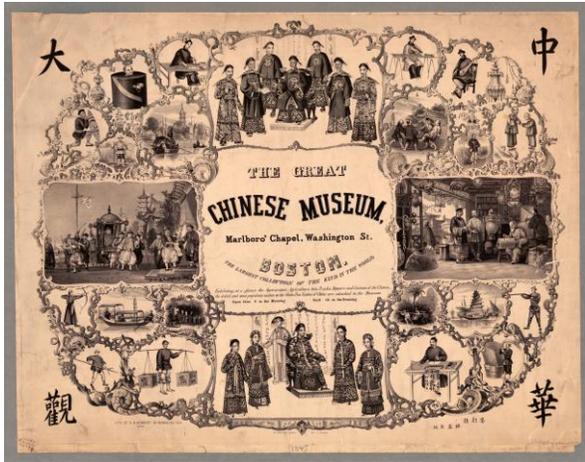


Fig. 4. G. W. Endicott, *The Great Chinese Museum, Marlboro' Chapel, Washington St. Boston*, between 1844 and 1847. Lithograph and chine collé on paper, 20 x 21 1/2 in. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

learn “any of the languages of the empire,” among other provisions.¹⁵ The result was a renewed market for Chinese goods tailored toward American middle-class consumers alongside a proliferation of displays and exhibitions on the subject, both of which provided access to products and images of what American merchants promoted as the “Celestial Empire” to a much wider and heterogeneous population than before possible.

For example, the Great Boston Chinese Museum, the contents of which Barnum would purchase in 1850, emerged as a direct result of the 1844 treaty (fig. 4). Between September 1845 and February 1847, visitors could enter a vast collection housed at Boston’s Marlboro’ Chapel, a famed abolitionist meetinghouse and

public lecture hall located on Washington Street.¹⁶ The museum contained cases of porcelain, musical instruments, everyday material goods, oil paintings, and life-size wax sculptures of posed Chinese figures, in addition to two Cantonese tradesmen hired to interpret the collection for the public. Although the means by which these two men came to reside in Boston remain unclear, it is possible they were commissioned as unofficial ambassadors and cultural interpreters by the hong merchants—Chinese intermediaries responsible for all foreign trade in Canton—who donated many of the goods for the exhibition.¹⁷

An 1847 daguerreotype shows a three-quarter-length portrait of one of these individuals, the Chinese writing master T’sow Chaoong (fig. 5). Holding a daguerreotype in one hand and a folding fan in the other, T’sow Chaoong presents himself in a self-possessed manner typical of the mid-nineteenth-century daguerreotype studio. The daguerreotype held close to the sitter’s chest, which contains a portrait of another sitter, represents a common motif of the daguerreian studio, functioning as a visualization of the kinds of familial ties that daguerreotypes both represented and sustained over the distances of time and space. The decorative vase, flowers, and wooden chair all similarly call up the domestic atmosphere of the bourgeois home that daguerreotypists cultivated in the studio through the use of soft fabrics and props.¹⁸ The delicate hand-tinting of T’sow Chaoong’s cheeks, hat, and the accompanying floral arrangement—typically painted by women colorists employed within the studio—provides a patina of lively presence to the image. The



Fig. 5. Unknown, Portrait of “T’sow Chaoong,” 1847. Sixth-plate daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Gift of The Howard Gilman Foundation, 2005

sitter’s long fingernails further mark him as an erudite scholar, whose hands were freed from manual labor to be employed in the practiced pursuits of calligraphy. Previously, written descriptions and the enigmatic images of China available on export porcelain had made it difficult to form an accurate image of the Celestial Empire, but at the Boston museum T’sow Chaoong provided direct interpretation of the collection, engaging the public by performing writing demonstrations and providing translations of the texts and objects on display for such notable visitors as Emily Dickinson and Daniel Child.¹⁹

In addition to the Great Chinese Museum, in July of 1847 the Chinese junk *Keying*, a coastal trader from Hong Kong carrying a crew of twenty Europeans and somewhere between thirty and forty Chinese crewmembers, arrived in the port of New York. Its journey to the United States, and later London, was part of a commercial money-making enterprise, as visitors were welcomed to tour the junk for the price of twenty-five cents. Onboard, they could view Chinese objects in glass cases filled with specimens of “almost everything produced or used in the Chinese empire,” in addition to paintings, lanterns, and the crewmembers themselves.²⁰ Tchen observes that, prior to this moment, Chinese luxury goods were consumed largely by the patrician class as signs of wealth and elite status; however, with the arrival of more affordable, mass-produced goods, a new stage of “commercial orientalism” took hold, one made possible by developing urbanization and the market revolution of the 1830s.²¹ Through such exhibitions, both the race and culture of China was figured through a constellation of objects and living persons, a strategy that Barnum would later deploy in his own staging of the Living Chinese Family.

By the middle of the century, Barnum, a master marketer and manipulator of difference, profited from the emerging commercial market for Orientalist spectacles. But the showman’s trafficking in racialized marvels and grand hoaxes, in which he relied on the public desire to gape at other humans, was nothing new. Indeed, Barnum’s earliest exhibition in 1835 showcased the display of an elderly Black woman named Joice Heth, who he claimed was the 161-year-old enslaved former nurse of George Washington, and whom he humbly marketed as “The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World.”²² Typical of Barnum’s displays, the showman provided documentation of Heth’s origins, presenting a bill of her purchase and a legal affidavit signed by “eminent physicians and intelligent men,” who “examined this *Living skeleton* and the documents accompanying her, and all *invariably* pronounce her to be as represented 161 *years of age!*”²³ Such questionable documents and press puff were deployed by Barnum not simply to assure the public of his subject’s authenticity but rather to entice audiences—after paying the price of admission—to use their senses to judge the veracity of the spectacle for themselves. With his purchase of the Great Chinese Museum in 1850 and his subsequent staging of the Living Chinese Family at a moment when public interest and government relations with the nation were renewed, thanks to the 1844 treaty, Barnum would once again entice the public with a curiosity both natural and national in nature.

Mobile Images

Agassiz’s daguerreotype archive makes clear that, as was the case for the general public, his most direct access to Chinese subjects was made possible through these circuits of commercial Orientalism. In fact, Agassiz had two additional members of Barnum’s Living Chinese Family photographed for his archive, including a woman identified as Pwan-Ye-

Koo’s “maidservant,” Lum-Akum (fig. 6) and the “professor of music” Soo-Chune (figs. 7, 8). Where only a profile daguerreotype of Lum-Akum survives, Soo-Chune’s daguerreotypes illustrate the now-familiar format of the sitter posed frontally and in profile before the camera lens, identical to the images of Pwan-Ye-Koo. No correspondence exists to attest to Agassiz’s explicit instruction to Chase to photograph these subjects from profile and frontal viewpoints. However, the consistency of this visual framing throughout the anatomist’s daguerreotype collection, in addition to his later deployment of this pictorial strategy in his 1860s studies in Brazil, suggest Agassiz had some role in their composition.²⁴ Unlike T’sow Chaoong’s portrait, in which the sitter poses with the trappings of bourgeois individuality and familialism, the express goal of Agassiz’s choice of photographic pose aimed to decontextualize his subjects, unrooting each sitter from his or her role as a performer and instead framing each image as a disinterested view onto each sitter’s morphological characteristics, including head shape and the angle of profile. This visual strategy transforms its subject into comparable, quantitative measurements—in other words, into types. Crucially, such images also had the distinct advantage of ease of circulation, where the standardization of viewpoints allowed for quantitative comparison across any number of specimens. But do these daguerreotypes accomplish such an aim?



Fig. 6. Lorenzo G. Chase, “Lum-Akum,” profile, 1850. Daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM 35-5-10/53056

In the images of Soo-Chune, the sitter’s lips show traces of delicate hand-tinting, providing a sheen of liveliness and presence beyond the presumed use of such images as anatomical evidence. Seen in profile, traces of each fold of the musician’s garment, the sheen of light reflected on top of his hat, and even the delicate veins visible in his forehead are recorded with a striking clarity of detail that render the subject with a profound bodily presence. Further, in a sartorial refusal of the anatomist’s desire to document and scrutinize the sitter’s phenotype, Soo-Chune wears a simple hat similar to the one sported by the writing master T’sow Chaoong in his 1847 daguerreotype (see fig. 5), effectively obscuring an accurate reading of his cranial anatomy. Similarly, Lum-Akum’s hairstyle—a gravity-defying design of lacquered waves that swoop up and out from the nape of her neck—fully obscures the shape and form of her skull. Held up through a series of supports and pins, Lum-Akum’s hair creates an ornamental extension backward in space, forming the center of visual interest in her daguerreotype, as if the purpose of the image was not to capture her profile but to fully display the craftsmanship of her coiffure. In both Soo-Chune and Lum-Akum’s

daguerreotypes, the cultural signs of hair, dress, and ornamentation threaten to undermine the use of these images as records of anatomical evidence. Yet the consistency of viewpoints and compositional framing across subjects nevertheless underscores—if, perhaps, futilely—the life of these objects as mobile specimens of racialized evidence, providing both with an enclosing frame for those extra-bodily details of dress and presentation.



Figs. 7, 8. Lorenzo G. Chase, “Soo-Chune,” aka “Le-Kaw-Hing,” profile (top), and frontal (below), 1850. Daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM 35-5-10/53062 and PM 35-5-10/53053

The circulation of both physical specimens and their pictorial representations in the first half of the nineteenth century was one means for naturalists, ethnographers, and anatomists to share and publicize their work and to ultimately garner professional authority. This was particularly true of those working in the antebellum United States, where many practitioners sought recognition abroad from the more centralized, better-funded, and longer-established European institutions such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Royal Societies of London and Edinburgh. For those working in the burgeoning field of “racial science”—less a coherent field of study than an amalgam of heterogeneous practices, including ethnography, comparative anatomy, natural history, phrenology, and physiognomy, among others—recognition from such institutions was a crucial means of legitimating the very methods and goals of these practices. Institutional recognition supposedly protected such activities against association with

spectacles like Barnum’s, which, as figures like Bache claimed, painted the field of racial study and of scientific practice more generally with a brush dripping with quackery and sensationalism.

Further, the circulation and exchange of pictorial surrogates allowed scientists to control the context and presentation of “evidence” while also providing an experience of “virtual witnessing,” as interested parties in Europe could vicariously view and confirm evidentiary confirmation of theories with their own eyes.²⁵ When it came to the study of human races, daguerreotypes, like printed illustrations, served as convenient surrogates for fragile specimens—including skulls, mummified remains, and living subjects—that could not otherwise travel swiftly and safely.²⁶ In this way, the transatlantic circulation of images through the mail became a primary driver of the spread of theories of race in the mid-nineteenth century.

As previously noted, by 1850 Agassiz came to mobilize daguerreotypy for the purposes of collecting and circulating evidence. Most notorious among Agassiz’s collection is a series of fifteen daguerreotypes of seven enslaved Africans—including Delia and her father Renty, Alfred, Fassena, and Jem, as well as Dana and her father Jack—stripped naked and posed bust- and full-length before the camera. In a manner similar to the images of Pwan-Ye-Koo and Soo-Chune, Zealy photographed the subjects head-on and in profile. The anatomist commissioned this disturbing and haunting series from the South Carolina photographer Joseph T. Zealy in June 1850, after Agassiz had observed the enslaved workers on a local plantation at the invitation of the South Carolina naturalist Robert W. Gibbes, where he “found enough to satisfy him that they have differences from other races.”²⁷ Notably, the images of Barnum’s Chinese performance troupe were probably taken in July 1850, when the Living Chinese Family made an appearance at Boston’s Armory Hall, one month after Zealy completed his commission. Whether or not Zealy’s daguerreotypes made their way, via the mail, to Boston before the Chase commission, where Chase may have viewed the images as models for his series of Pwan-Ye-Koo and her fellow performers, remains unclear. While many scholars have identified the Zealy images as illustrative of the peculiarly American School of racial science, equally important to the political, social, and scientific urgency of this heterogeneous field of research was the global circulation of people through developing capitalist infrastructures, as multiple diasporas converged on both coasts of the United States.²⁸

Significantly, as Pwan-Ye-Koo’s daguerreotypes illustrate, Agassiz’s collection contains what have remained a series of largely overlooked images of individuals posed in identical frontal and profile views depicting Chinese and “Hindu” sitters, the latter also taken by Chase. Where much attention has rightly been placed upon Zealy’s series of fifteen daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans, the neglect of the wider scope of Agassiz’s daguerreotype activities at this moment has occluded certain aspects not only of the antebellum science of race, but also of how we understand the history of the visualization of race around 1850. First, Agassiz’s series of daguerreotypes of African, Chinese, and “Hindu” sitters demonstrates the aspired global reach and comparative scope of the polygenist’s photographic archive of racial difference. For Agassiz, these provided an illusion of his study’s comprehensiveness. The global scope of Agassiz’s research was one means by which he claimed political impartiality on the issue of the expansion and continuation of slavery. As Agassiz stated in an editorial printed in the *Christian Daily Examiner* in July 1850, “let the politicians, let those who feel themselves called upon to regulate human society, see what they can do with the results. It is for us to examine into the characters of different races, to ascertain their

physical peculiarities, their natural developments.”²⁹ In other words, Agassiz claims he is only interested in dispassionate description and not in prescribing the ordering and regulation of society.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the exclusion of the daguerreotype studies of Chinese and “Hindu” subjects in discussions of Agassiz’s collection puts forth the tacit equation of the history of race and scientific racism in the antebellum United States with exclusively antiblack and proslavery attitudes.³⁰ As such, the concurrent histories of Asian immigration, commercial Orientalism, and the African slave trade have yet to be fully integrated when it comes to writing the history of racialized photography in the years leading up to the Civil War. The daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo and others prompt us to consider: What is lost when the history of race and racialized visualization takes into account the history of African Diaspora subjects to the exclusion of others? How did economic circuits outside the institution of slavery, including the China Trade, operate to sustain, undercut, and otherwise complicate ideas of racial identity around 1850? In what ways was the rise of Sinophobia in the United States shaped by antiblack stereotypes and sentiment? And how might an attention to the geographic mobility of both people and images broaden the ways in which we discuss the functioning of scientific racism and its modes of representation both historically and today?

While many scholars have discussed the infamous series of Zealy daguerreotypes as one of the earliest uses of the medium as an anthropometric instrument, few have noted the physical circulation of these images, which made their way from Columbia, South Carolina, into Agassiz’s collection through the postal service. As the historian David Henkin has noted, money and photographs were the two types of items that most frequently circulated in the American post throughout the nineteenth century, as is evident from the “dead letter” inventories.³¹ With the Gold Rush, further territorial expansion westward, and the onset of the Civil War, the circulation of photographic portraits in the mail served as one way to maintain familial bonds in a period of intense mobility and national expansion. Where the immobile, materially fragile, and unreproducible qualities of the Daguerreian art are typically contrasted with the greater mobility and reproducibility of later paper processes like the albumen print, the transmission of daguerreotypes through the postal service demonstrates how cased objects enjoyed a comparable amount of circulation.

As exhibition objects, Agassiz’s daguerreotypes circulated in the public sphere in a more limited way. As Molly Rogers has uncovered, Agassiz displayed the Zealy daguerreotypes at a special meeting of the Cambridge Scientific Club on September 27, 1850, where, as one reporter recounted, the anatomist “pointed out many differences between the forms of the negro and the white race . . . and in proof of his statements he exhibited a large number of daguerreotypes of individuals of various races of negroes.”³² By contrast, no such accounts of any public display of the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo and the other members of Barnum’s troupe have come to light. Yet, before the September meeting of the Cambridge Scientific Club, the Zealy images did circulate via the mail among an exclusive group of correspondents, including Agassiz, Morton, and Gibbes. Further, the Zealy daguerreotypes were not the only photographs exchanged among Agassiz and his collaborators.

In an April 10, 1850, letter to Morton—the Philadelphia craniologist, friend of Agassiz, and polygenist—Gibbes expressed his desire to hold the likenesses of his fellow scientists, lamenting, “I am living so much out of the way of communion with naturalists, that I would like to have them about me, if only in their portraits. Has Cannon ever finished the bust of

yourself which he surmised to do for me?”³³ Gibbes’s reference to a bust of Morton made by “Cannon” probably refers to Marsena Cannon, a daguerreotypist active in Boston between 1841 and 1850.³⁴ An object fitting this description now resides in the Agassiz collection at Harvard alongside the Zealy daguerreotypes and the Chase daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo (fig. 9). The portrait illustrates not the man but what appears to be a sculptural bust or perhaps a cameo (the current location and maker of which remain unknown) of Morton seen in profile, an image twice removed from its subject: first, as a sculptural copy of the living man; and second, as a photographic copy of that sculptural copy. One could imagine Gibbes sitting in his study, surrounded by similar daguerreotypes of distant friends and colleagues while simultaneously wrapping up the commissioned Zealy daguerreotypes, a commission Gibbes probably oversaw, to be sent to Agassiz in Boston.

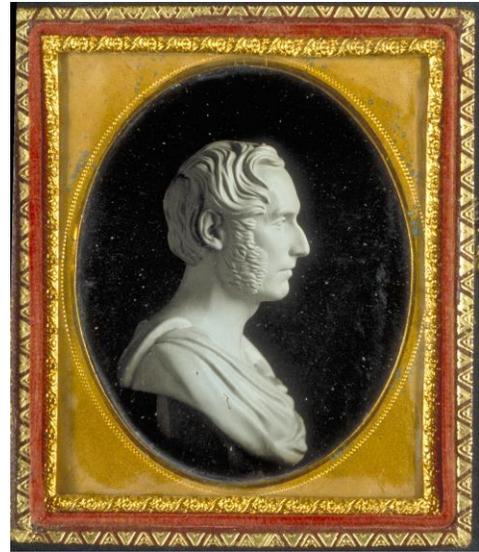


Fig. 9. Attributed to Marsena Cannon, *Samuel George Morton*, daguerreotype of marble bust, profile, c. 1840–60. Sixth-plate daguerreotype, 2 3/4 x 3 1/4 in. Harvard University Archives. HUP Morton, Samuel G.(VT), olvwork96210

Whereas the profile views typical of Agassiz’s photographic archive reference the scientific instrumentalization of the image, the form also points to a longer pictorial tradition of mobile images. As Marcia Pointon has demonstrated, in the mid-eighteenth century, the profile portrait was associated with the honorific tradition of the *imago clipeata*, in which soldiers bore an emperor’s visage on a circular shield that they would carry into battle.³⁵ As a visual surrogate, the profiled shield carried the likeness of an emperor far beyond the ruler’s physical body, serving as a pictorial extension of power on the battlefield. Importantly, the profile view also had the added advantage of generalizing and simplifying a person’s facial appearance, making it an ideal form for coins and medals produced on a large scale. In Jennifer Roberts’s words, this made the profile a form of “excised portraiture,” a type of image “cut off from the local and specific contexts that defined their original meaning.”³⁶ In this way, in addition to the literal circulation of such objects, the profile view structures mobility and ease of transport into its very composition.

The Swiss pastor Johann Caspar Lavater similarly argued for the desirable generalizing function of the profile portrait in his ten-volume treatise on physiognomy published between 1775 and 1778. A touchstone for the work of later racial scientists, Lavater provided the following reasoning for his preference for the profile as a means of recording and ascertaining a sitter’s true character:

The silhouette of a person, or of a human face, is the weakest, the emptiest, but simultaneously, if the light stands at a proper distance, if the face falls on a clean surface—is parallel enough with this surface—the truest and most faithful image that one can give of a person; the weakest, for it is nothing positive, it is only something negative, only the outline of the half of the face—the most faithful, because it is an immediate imprint of nature, as none, even the most skilled drawer, is able to sketch freehand.³⁷

Here, Lavater refers to the use of a physiognotrace, a device by which the silhouette of a sitter’s profile was cast onto a semitransparent screen with the aid of a candle or other light source. The shadow image, then, was traced by the artist.³⁸ In this passage, Lavater’s reasoning for the use of the profile is twofold: first, as an “immediate imprint of nature,” by which he refers to the direct cast of the shadow from sitter to screen, in which a certain degree of unmediated indexicality infuses the truth quality of the representation; second, unlike a forward-facing portrait, the profile view disallows the manipulation of a sitter’s appearance through the contortions of facial expression, instead recording only those immovable and non-malleable features of the skull, which Lavater determines to be the source and visual manifestation of a person’s true character.³⁹ In this way, Lavater ties the profile to mobility once again, as he promotes its reliable movement from sitter, to tracing, to its reproduction as engraved illustration in his text.

In the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo and Morton, the profile view establishes a photographic scene of comparison between the subjects, allowing the racial scientist to highlight supposed differences of character between what were then described as Mongolian and Caucasian subjects. In the profile image of Pwan-Ye-Koo, the subtle lines of her forehead, nose, and jaw stand in naked contrast to the elaborate nature of her dress and vertical and horizontal forms of her hairpiece, much as in the daguerreotype of Lum-Akum. By contrast, Morton’s sculptural cast, draped in a mock classical robe, abstracts his image from his flesh and body, a copy of a copy in which the nature of racial classification is laid bare as a project of pictorial representation and replication. Significantly, Morton’s own craniological investigations frequently drew upon ancient sculptures as evidence for the unchanging differences between racial types, exposing the instability of the discourses of racial science as such practices blurred the boundaries between fine art production and scientific observation. The daguerreotype of Morton echoes powerfully pervasive attitudes toward whiteness as a disembodied, abstract, and universal category, in stark contrast both to Pwan-Ye-Koo’s images and the fifteen daguerreotypes of enslaved African subjects, which respectively burdened their sitters with the particularized trappings of Orientalist fantasy of the Chinese subject and strip their bodies to expose ideas of the African subject as bare, physical flesh.⁴⁰ In both his use of the profile and of a sculptural stand-in, Morton placed his own likeness within the tradition of racial science he practiced, while also belying the shifting grounds of pictorial evidence mobilized for his efforts.⁴¹



Fig. 10. John Adams Whipple, *Self-Portrait with Artist’s Brother*, 1840s. Daguerreotype, 1 7/8 x 1 7/16 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005

In this way, the profile views of Pwan-Ye-Koo, Lum-Akum, and Soo-Chune represent an overlooked convergence of the histories of physiognomic representation and of a genealogy of mobile images. Although many daguerreotypists favored the three-quarter view of a sitter for its ability to mask any unusual facial defects, such as facial blemishes or asymmetries, which could be obscured by turning the sitter’s better side toward the camera, the profile view also frequently appears among the repertoires of more mundane studio daguerreotype commissions. John Adams Whipple’s self-portrait with his brother provides one early example (fig. 10). Picturing the two siblings

side by side, the image demonstrates their morphological similarities while also providing a kind of visual echo not unlike a double exposure, tying the representation of kinship to the techniques of photographic reproduction. Although it seems likely that the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo, Lum-Akum, and Soo-Chune circulated in the mail, the use of the profile and frontal views nevertheless anticipates their circulation, embedding both the ethnographic applications and mobility of these objects in the visual forms of their staging. All these examples illustrate how the profiled photographic sitter could carry a polysemous register of pre-photographic image techniques (the physiognotrace), mobile imagery (such as the *imago clipeata*), and the visual typology of physiognomic investigation.

Finally, Agassiz’s commissioned works were not the only instance of the combined profile and front-facing portrait views being sent through the mail. In 1856, for the price of four dollars, the Fowler brothers, Orson and Lorenzo, whose phrenology firm was housed within the Fowler & Wells Company, advertised a new service in which the duo would conduct readings based off of a sitter’s photographs sent to their offices in New York from anywhere in the world.⁴² As the firm advised, two photographs, one of the front of the head and one of the side, were required in order to conduct an accurate phrenological analysis. Ladies were warned “no puffs, braids, or other arrangements of hair or combs,” for “beauty, however desirable, is not the desideratum in a portrait when it does not exist in the type.”⁴³ The materiality of the daguerreotype as an unreproducible image on glass, however, proved fickle in the extension of the Fowler’s phrenological services via the auspices of the postal service. In a later advertisement, the firm requested the use of albumen and salted paper prints in place of either the daguerreotype or ambrotype, as the latter were “frequently broken by the postmaster stamping the name of his post-office on the package.”⁴⁴ The Fowlers’ advertisements illustrate how the materiality of the daguerreotype—its status as a unique, unreproducible photograph, small size, fragility, and variability of expressive features and poses of the sitter—severely limited the medium as a tool of scientific illustration. Agassiz was no doubt aware of these limitations when he commissioned his daguerreotypes of ethnological specimens. Yet the fragility and irreproducibility of the daguerreotype alone, aspects that could be overcome through engraved reproductions, cannot account for the limited circulation and the near total secrecy of these objects as part of Agassiz’s anatomical investigations.

The Scientist and the Showman

For Bache, the head of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the question of racial origins investigated by Agassiz touched too closely on the politics and controversies surrounding the expansion of slavery, making the topic unsuitable for professional, objective, scientific debate. These debates came to a head at the March 1850 meeting of the newly formed AAAS in Charleston, South Carolina, where Agassiz publicly presented his findings on the question of the origin and diversity of the human species. Gibbes recorded in his diary that the meeting was “very pleasant” and “passed off very well,” but others were not so pleased. Agassiz was attacked for his views on diversity by various theologians who argued his doctrine was incompatible with the unity of human origins described in Genesis, leaving Agassiz grumbling that there was “no freedom for a scientific man in America!”⁴⁵ For Bache, the intimate link between the doctrine of polygenesis and the increasingly dire political debates over the expansion of slavery—particularly in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—made the issue best left to figures like Barnum. As Bache

complained: "The remarks at the close of the meeting were altogether of too popular a cast to require their printing."⁴⁶

Crucially, the desire to draw a line between the popular and the professional constituted an uphill battle for Bache and the rest of the Lazzaroni, as the polygenesis school continued to mobilize popular and fine art imagery as scientific "evidence" in publications such as Nott and Gliddon's 1854 *Types of Mankind*. Agassiz, who succeeded Bache as president of the AAAS in 1851, in a professionally and financially savvy move, aligned himself with the professionalizing efforts of the Lazzaroni and, following the controversy of the Charleston meeting, downplayed his support of the doctrine of polygenesis beginning with an editorial in the *Christian Examiner* in July 1850, in which he denied any proslavery sentiment or refutation of Christian doctrine underlying his theories.⁴⁷ Yet, the anatomist's daguerreotype archive testifies to the enduring sympathy between the realms of scientist and showman, underscoring the futility in drawing a clear line between these domains, united as they were by a desire to visualize and scrutinize the physical features of race.

In Agassiz's daguerreotype archive and in Barnum's spectacles, it is as if Chinese identity had to be theatricalized—through elements including costume, hairstyle, ornament, and musical performance—to become visible to a Euro-American audience of spectators and scientists. A comparison of the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo, Soo-Chune, and Lum-Akum with Currier and Ives's lithographic illustration of Barnum's Living Chinese Family points to the strong possibility that Lum-Akum, Soo-Chune, and Pwan-Ye-Koo were photographed wearing their theatrical costumes. More than mere coincidence, this importation of the theatrical into the image points to an enduring affinity between some of the earliest, experimental deployments of the lensed arts and the performances of Asiatic and otherwise orientalized subjects. This lineage spans from Agassiz's daguerreotypes to some of the earliest experimental films produced by Thomas Edison, William K. Dickson, and William Heise, including an 1895 film of the Sarashe Sisters performing the Imperial Japanese dance, and a filmed performance of an Egyptian dance by one "Princess Ali," the latter a traveling performer with Barnum and Bailey's circus. In Pwan-Ye-Koo's daguerreotypes, even the standard trappings of the photography studio are caught up in an ornamental and Orientalist fantasy; the flowers of her headdress echo the floral pattern of her silk garment, which in turn repeats the motif embossed on the inside of the object's velvet-lined case, drawing a material and ornamental equivalency between the daguerreotype sitter and its enclosing frame. In these daguerreotypes, clothed in the costume drama of Orientalist opulence, Pwan-Ye-Koo embodies the contradictory demands placed on her as she vacillated between the categories of stage celebrity and scientific specimen.

In April 1850, Barnum availed himself of his tried-and-true method of planting sensational puff pieces in the press to advertise the arrival of a young woman at the port of New York on the ship *Ianthe*, straight from the shores of Canton. Newspaper articles fabricated by Barnum reported that the young lady, Pwan-Ye-Koo, was accompanied by five other Chinese subjects, including her maidservant Lum-Akum and a professor of music, Soo-Chune. As printed descriptions planted by Barnum testified, Pwan-Ye-Koo was "peculiarly prepossessing," "young and handsome, vivacious, artless," and "refined in her manners." It was also said that she belonged to a family of "high standing," making her "a rare curiosity in our midst" as "the first Chinese *lady* that had yet visited Christendom."⁴⁸ As future performances would demonstrate, part of Pwan-Ye-Koo's status as a Chinese *lady* was authenticated by her bound feet, which reportedly measured two and one half inches long.

An engraving made after a daguerreotype by James Beard in London, where Pwan-Ye-Koo sits in the front row on the far left, seems to confirm the small size of her “golden lilies” (fig. 11).⁴⁹ As recorded by one audience member, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s feet, barely visible as they peek out beneath her dress in the *London News* engraving, were not in fact nakedly exhibited as one might expect. Instead, audiences were presented with “a model of the foot, two inches and a half in length, on which is a shoe . . . [The shoe] is taken off, by the exhibitor, and put upon the real foot of Miss Yekoo [sic], over a shoe, already there. This model is affirmed to be exact.”⁵⁰ For Barnum’s purposes, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s feet authenticated her as a true Chinese aristocrat, as the practice typically signaled the wealth and status of a woman who need not perform labor for hire. Yet, the nesting doll-like performance, in which one shoe is examined only to be placed atop another, constitutes a theatrical mode less amenable to direct observation and more akin to a magician’s sleight of hand, in which even the supposed natural proof of her identity as an aristocratic lady continues to slip from view.



Fig. 11. “The Chinese Family, in the Exhibition at the Albert Gate, from a Photograph by Beard,” *Illustrated London News*, May 24, 1851, p. 450

As with the fable of Joice Heth, Barnum’s portrayal of the arrival of the Chinese family on the ship *Ianthe* similarly manipulated and sensationalized the reputed origins of his traveling curiosities.⁵¹ There was indeed a ship called the *Ianthe*, which arrived in the port of New York from Guangzhou in April of 1850. However, no passenger list exists to confirm that any Chinese were on board. Further, the “professor of music,” Mr. Soo-Chune, had in fact arrived in Boston some six years before 1850 and worked as a musical performer alongside T’sow Chaong. As recounted by historians Ronald and Mary Zboray, Le-Kaw-hing, who later worked for Barnum under the name Soo-Chune, had supposedly left China to escape his opium addiction and worked at the museum performing Chinese musical demonstrations for audiences.⁵² In Nathaniel Currier’s lithograph of Barnum’s Living

Chinese Family, the musician is depicted holding a sanxian, a three-stringed Chinese lute (see fig. 3).

As for Soo-Chune’s fellow performer, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s origins are even further shrouded in mystery. Indeed, Barnum’s Chinese Lady may have been born in New York City, possibly the child of a Chinese father and white mother. As Tchen has noted, in 1855, a census officer recorded eleven Chinese seafarers and boardinghouse operators married to Irish women, a pattern that later became a commonly caricatured stereotype of the city’s downtown port culture.⁵³ This possibility was alluded to in newspaper reports of Barnum’s show, which remarked that Barnum “is exhibiting several Chinese of the ‘upper ten,’ as he calls them, who are said to have arrived here a week or two since, but probably have been living for some time past in some obscure part of the city, and brought out for the occasion.”⁵⁴ At a later performance, one audience member attested to having overheard the Chinese lady speaking in a “low Yankee slang,” while others expressed more subtle skepticism.⁵⁵ In Boston, the author and antiquarian Lucius Sargent, who was invited near the platform at the close of an exhibition, determined that the collections of Chinese objects Barnum displayed alongside the performing troupe were by no means sufficient to prove Pwan-Ye-Koo’s “tartar origin,” while her fellow performer Lum-Akum merely “passes for her waiting woman.”⁵⁶

Reading the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo, Soo-Chune, and Lum-Akum as inscribed in Agassiz’s archive alongside performance-goers’ reactions to Barnum’s purported Chinese lady, these accounts illustrate how the daguerreotype was imbricated within what the poet and theorist Dionne Brand has called the “voluptuous intrigue” of diasporic identity.⁵⁷ In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand highlights a fundamental trope of early ethnographic science. Referring to Hiob Ludolf, the seventeenth-century German founder of Ethiopian studies, she points out how the ethnologist and naturalist never visited Abyssinia but nevertheless constructed a map of the region from the reports of Portuguese missionaries. This, Brand writes, “proves to me something of which I’ve had a nagging inkling—that places and those who inhabit them are indeed fictions” in early works of ethnography.⁵⁸ The racialized subjects and distant lands that such reports constructed were indeed dependent as much on imagination and hearsay as on observation and firsthand description, a trait that would persist well into the nineteenth century. As for Agassiz, he never visited China. His only access to living representatives of the fictionalized and racialized Celestial Empire was mediated through Barnum’s styling and presentation of the Living Chinese Family. Indeed, the only other Chinese subjects Agassiz had photographed in frontal and profile views include Pwan-Ye-Koo’s fellow performers. In this sense, Pwan-Ye-Koo is called “to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction” two times over, both on the stage and in the daguerreotype studio. In Pwan-Ye-Koo’s daguerreotype—one of the few, and arguably most revealing, records of her life—her image is forged photographically through the mutually dependent circuits of imperial conquest and commercial entertainment, a conquest that is at once material, aesthetic, and epistemological.

The Fictions of the Diaspora

When it comes to the representation of the diasporic subject in the archive, and the Asian American woman in particular, scholars have tended to emphasize either the exoticized and objectified status, what Frantz Fanon termed the “crushing objecthood” of the racialized subject, or the redemptive capacities of the photograph to capture and reflect back some

kind of agency on the part of the sitter.⁵⁹ For example, Lily Cho points out the connection between mobility and suspicion that converged in Chinese head tax photographs—portraits measuring approximately 2 1/2 by 3 inches that the Canadian government began requiring Chinese immigrants affix to their visa papers in order to enter the country, beginning around 1910. Such photographs would become the standard for identification in passport documentation for all immigrants and citizens in later decades, but the origination of the practice with Chinese immigrants points to the experience of diasporic citizenship, which, as Cho writes, is an identity made uniquely “legible but nevertheless easily misrecognized precisely because it acquires form in dialogue with the instrumental photography mandated by the state.”⁶⁰ Yet, as Cho argues, even in this state-imposed relationship to the medium, the sitters turned the experience to their own ends. Chinese immigrants repurposed identification photographs as honorific portraiture, posing in fine suits with dignified expressions and even collecting them in family albums, exposing how “racialized subjects reveal a moment prior to the polarization of affect between honorific and repressive portraits.”⁶¹ Like Cho, many scholars of racialized photography, from Chinese head tax photographs to the Zealy daguerreotypes, desire to locate resistance and contestation on the part of the subjects represented. However, I am hesitant to claim agency for Pwan-Ye-Koo.

If Pwan-Ye-Koo was indeed Chinese American, born and raised in New York, both Barnum’s spectacle and Agassiz’s daguerreotypes would have functioned as visual disavowals of her national belonging, attesting to how appearing as a diasporic subject could continually undermine her potential citizenship, since, prior to the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, subjects born within the United States were subject to the ruling of each individual state regarding their citizenship status. Her staging among Barnum’s Living Chinese Family therefore rested on an intentional misrecognition of Pwan-Ye-Koo’s potential status as an American citizen. Further, as Sargent noted on his visit backstage after one of the family’s performances, the working conditions of these individuals indicated a clear lack of agency and basic care:

Upon my first visit to Pwan Yekoo [*sic*] and her *suite*, in connection with other visitors, I was not admitted for nearly two hours, after the appointed time. Ample sleeping arrangements had not been made, for these Celestials; and, for one night, at least, they had been packed, like a crate of China ware, in a closet, or small apartment, contiguous to the hall of exhibition. Yekoo was indignant, and refused to show her “golden lilies.”⁶²

Sargent’s note that the performers were “packed, like a crate of China ware” in a closet highlights the detestable working environments of Barnum’s traveling performers, who he treated and marketed like imported and exoticized consumer goods.

Yet, as Tchen and others have illustrated, the theatrical arts were one of the few sectors of employment available to Chinese and Chinese Americans in the 1850s, driving many Chinese and American-born men and women to continue performing their racial difference onstage and under horrific living and working conditions.⁶³ Indeed, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s predecessor, Afong Moy—the first Chinese woman to arrive in the United States, in 1834—also relied on selling a spectacularized and commercialized version of her identity to make a living. As Nancy Davis has detailed, Moy was first brought to New York to work as a promoter and brand ambassador for two merchants, Frederick and Nathaniel Carne, selling middle-class wares imported from China by performing their uses and explicating the histories of the goods for sale.⁶⁴ By 1850, following eight years of obscurity living in a New

Jersey poorhouse, Moy transitioned from a promoter of goods to an entertaining spectacle on Barnum’s stage until she was supplanted by the younger Pwan-Ye-Koo. For both Moy and Pwan-Ye-Koo, their lives remain known only through performance. Spectator accounts, newspaper clippings, lithographs, and daguerreotypes—artifacts that seem to offer some account of these women’s lives—reveal only ever-shifting and ungraspable images, caught in the trappings of a labyrinthine, Orientalist fantasy.⁶⁵ On Barnum’s stage, surrounded by a simulacrum constructed of Chinese objects and ephemera—cases of porcelain, ivory, tortoise shells, hanging lanterns, model houses and bridges, and more—we come to be led through a historical archive comprised of trap doors, trick mirrors, and nesting boxes, where any supposed evidence offered by the archive crumbles under its own weight of authenticating artifacts.

In Chase’s profile daguerreotype of Pwan-Ye-Koo, the seventeen-year-old sits largely covered in waves of silk fabric, enfolding her in materials that threaten to swallow her whole, obscuring the forms of her body beneath finely embroidered floral patterns, as her headpiece extends and transforms the shape of her head into an Orientalized ornament. In 1850, Pwan-Ye-Koo stood ambiguously between the categories of ethnographic specimen and celebrity, traveling among the spheres of pseudoscience and spectacle, as Barnum staged her body as one component among the inorganic trappings of Orientalism, clothed as she was in silk and gold. Curiously, as in the images of Lum-Akum and Soo-Chune, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s ornamental coverings probably also partially defeated the purposes of Agassiz’s archive of racial difference, just as the ornamentations of commercial Orientalism physically obscure many of the morphological features of her skull and body. Where Agassiz sought to use the double daguerreotype view as a means to more exhaustively catalogue a subject’s appearance, Pwan-Ye-Koo’s doubling only adds to the hall of mirrors effects of her traveling performances. In Pwan-Ye-Koo’s case, the pictorial evidence ultimately proves as fragile as the daguerreotype, a type of object that was frequently cracked and destroyed in the mail. In her multiple Daguerreian images, this young woman is made to bridge the shores of Canton and the port of New York. As her body sits wrapped in the costume drama demanded by Barnum’s racialized spectacle, it resists Agassiz’s archival impulse via the very trappings of commercial Orientalism that led her to the studio in the first place. In her profile view, half-obscured and half-exposed, we are left with, as Lavater hypothesized, both the weakest and also perhaps the truest and most faithful representation of the unrooted fictions of the diaspora. In this way, the daguerreotypes of Pwan-Ye-Koo demonstrate how the mobile, photographic image not only failed to reliably transmit evidence of racialized difference but in fact actively fomented racialized and exoticized fictions, while remaining one of the few records of her life and legacy.

August 23, 2021: This article was updated to add Aleet-Mong’s name as a third member of Barnum’s Living Chinese Family photographed by Agassiz.

Author’s note, August 23, 2021: The author would like to thank Ilisa Barbash, Curator of Visual Anthropology at the Peabody Museum and author of the 2014 essay “Unpacking the ‘Chinese’ Daguerreotypes at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,” for graciously clarifying several aspects of the place of these objects in the collection. An earlier version of this article noted the wrong number of performers daguerreotyped by Lorenzo G. Chase. The author would also like to underscore that the daguerreotypes of Chinese performers were examined in a seminar convened by Barbash and Harvard faculty member

John Stauffer at the Peabody Museum in 2008 and that Barbash’s identification of the sitter Pwan-Ye-Koo was essential in accomplishing further analysis of these objects.

Notes

- ¹ For a recent discussion of the intersections between ornamentation, Orientalism, and East Asian femininity, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- ² Lorenzo Chase closed his Boston studio in 1850 and relocated to California some time before April 1852. See “Lorenzo G. Chase,” in *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840–1865*, ed. Thomas R. Kailbourn and Peter E. Palmquist (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 174.
- ³ Scholars including Robert Taft, Alan Trachtenberg, and Marcy J. Dinius have discussed the forms and meaning of American daguerreotype portraiture in the context of a burgeoning commercial business tailored to the values of the bourgeois private sphere, an industry built on the newfound ability of the middling classes to afford and disseminate their own self-images. See Robert Taft, “Daguerreotypes and the Public,” in *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 63–75; Alan Trachtenberg “Illustrious Americans,” in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 21–70; and Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
- ⁴ For the term American School, see William Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). I use the term ethnology to refer to the study of the outer physical features of human subjects, although this method of racial classification was only one of several competing methods practiced by the American School of Ethnology. Agassiz frequently couched his studies of the races of humankind in terms of his earlier zoological work. The discipline of anthropology, which expanded from the purview of ethnology to include the study of the nature of man, would not be formalized as a scientific discipline until the later 1860s.
- ⁵ The theory of separate creations had been a source of scientific debate long before Agassiz’s arrival in the United States, including in the writing of Samuel Stanhope Smith. For an overview of this history see Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 2–10.
- ⁶ Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1854).
- ⁷ For more on anthropometric photography of the later nineteenth century, see Gwyniera Isaac, “Louis Agassiz’s Photographs in Brazil: Separate Creations,” *History of Photography* 21, no. 1 (1997): 3–11; Amos Morris-Reich, “Anthropology, Standardization and Measurement: Rudolf Martin and Anthropometric Photography,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 46, no. 3 (September 2013): 487–516; and Efram Sera-Shriar, “Anthropometric Portraiture and Victorian Anthropology: Situating Francis Galton’s Photographic Work in the Late 1870s,” *History of Science* 53, no. 2 (2015): 155–79.
- ⁸ This technique was applied by Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton, who used superimposed profile and frontal views of criminals to produce an image of a universal criminal type. See Josh Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images: The Photography of Bertillon, Galton, Marey* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); and Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.
- ⁹ Frederick Douglass, “The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, on 12 July 1854,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John Wesley Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, vol. 2, 1847–1854 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 504.

- ¹⁰ For one exception, see Ilisa Barbash, "Unpacking the 'Chinese' Daguerreotypes at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology," *The Daguerreian Society Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (January–March 2014): 16–18, 21. In the recent edited volume, Tanya Sheehan briefly discusses Chase's portraits of Chinese types. See Sheehan, "Business as Usual? Scientific Operations in the Early Photographic Studio," in *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, ed. Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis (New York: Aperture, 2020), 194. For more on the Zealy daguerreotypes, see Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 38–61; Mandy Reid, "Selling Shadows and Substance: Photographing Race in the United States, 1850–1870s," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (2006): 285–305; Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Suzanne Schneider, "Louis Agassiz and the American School of Ethnoeroticism: Polygenesis, Pornography, and other 'Perfidious Influences,'" in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 211–43; and Barbash, Rogers, and Willis, *To Make Their Own Way in the World*.
- ¹¹ For more on this history, see Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, *The Formation of the American Scientific Community: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1848–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).
- ¹² Kohlstedt, *The Formation of the American Scientific Community*, 112–13.
- ¹³ See Jane L Aspinwall, "Diversity in the Gold Fields," in *Golden Prospects: Daguerreotypes of the California Gold Rush* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 144; and Anthony W. Lee, "The Place of Chinatown," in *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2001), 9–33.
- ¹⁴ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 79.
- ¹⁵ See Article XVIII in *Treaty of Peace, Amity, and Commerce, Between the United States of America and the Chinese Empire*. Dated at Wangshia, July 3, 1844; ratified by the president, January 17, 1845; exchanged, December 31, 1845; and proclaimed, April 18, 1846.
- ¹⁶ For more on the significance of Marlboro Chapel and the relation of the museum to the signing of the 1844 treaty, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Between 'Crockery-Dom' and Barnum: Boston's Chinese Museum, 1845–47," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004): 271–307.
- ¹⁷ Zboray and Zboray, "Between 'Crockery-Dom' and Barnum," 282.
- ¹⁸ For a discussion on the softening effects of the photography studio as a means to provoke a correct emotional expression in the sitter through the use of fabrics, carpets, and other props, see Tanya Sheehan, *A Study in Black and White: Photography, Race, Humor* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 77–97.
- ¹⁹ A daguerreotype of T'sow Chaoong, posing alongside another man who may be John Peters, is also held in the Agassiz collection of daguerreotypes at Peabody Essex Museum alongside the images of Pwan Ye-Koo, [https://pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu:8443/peabody/view/objects/asitem/search\\$0040/8/title-desc?t:state:flow=5d7c4ef8-ecf8-47ce-b53c-ff685c44ada9](https://pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu:8443/peabody/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/8/title-desc?t:state:flow=5d7c4ef8-ecf8-47ce-b53c-ff685c44ada9).
- ²⁰ "A Visit to the Chinese Junk," *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* 10 (1848): 40–41, as quoted in Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 65.
- ²¹ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, xxi.
- ²² For more on Barnum's exhibition of Joice Heth, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 20–23, 25–26; Benjamin Reiss, "P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth, and Antebellum Spectacles of Race," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 78–107; and Uri McMillan, "Mammy-Memory: Staging Joice Heth, or, The Curious Phenomenon of the 'Ancient Negress,'" *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012): 29–46.
- ²³ Undated handbill for a show in Hingham, MA, as quoted in James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 6.

-
- ²⁴ For more on Agassiz's photographic work in Brazil, see Gwyniera Isaac, "Louis Agassiz's Photographs in Brazil," *History of Photography* 21 (Spring 1997): 5–6; and Christopher Irmscher, "Mr. Agassiz's 'Photographic Saloon,'" in Barbash, Rogers, and Willis, *To Make Their Own Way in the World*, 205–231.
- ²⁵ For virtual witnessing, see Steven Shapin, "Pump and Circumstance: Robert Boyle's Literary Technology," *Social Studies of Science* 14, no. 4 (November 1984): 481–520.
- ²⁶ For a recent history of the role of circulating objects in the globalization of race science see James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
- ²⁷ Robert W. Gibbes to Samuel George Morton, Columbia, South Carolina, March 31, 1850, Box 4 Folder 4, Samuel George Morton papers, 1832–62, Library Company of Philadelphia, (henceforth known as Morton papers).
- ²⁸ A recent lawsuit brought against Harvard University by Tamara Lanier makes a similar argument. See Anemona Hartocollis, "Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says," *New York Times*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/us/slave-photographs-harvard.html>. Karl Marx observed in 1867 that "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population...the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1961), 760. As Kathryn Yusoff explains, Marx demonstrates how the slave trade "preceded and fashioned the economic conditions (and institutions, such as the insurance and finance industries) for industrialization." See Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 43.
- ²⁹ Louis Agassiz, "The Diversity of the Human Races," *Christian Examiner* 48 (July 1850): 4.
- ³⁰ For an exception, see Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848–42* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003).
- ³¹ David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 57.
- ³² "The Unity of the Human Race," *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, 2, as quoted in Molly Rogers, "This Intricate Question: The 'American School' of Ethnology and the Zealy Daguerreotypes," in Barbash, Rogers, and Willis, *To Make Their Own Way in the World*, 68.
- ³³ Gibbes to Morton, Columbia, South Carolina, April 10, 1850, Box 4 Folder 4, Morton papers, 1832–62.
- ³⁴ See "Marsena Cannon," in *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840–1865*, ed. Thomas R. Kailbourn and Peter E. Palmquist (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 148.
- ³⁵ Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 66.
- ³⁶ Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 27.
- ³⁷ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, und Heinrich Steiner und Compagnie, 1775–78), 90, as quoted in John B. Lyon, "'The Science of Sciences': Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's Physiognomics," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 262.
- ³⁸ The physiognotrace is often credited as a precursor to the photographic portrait, as a similarly affordable and light-based means of producing likenesses. See Mary Warner Marien, "Toward a New Prehistory of Photography," in *Multiple Views: Logan Grant Essays on Photography, 1983–89*, ed. Daniel P. Younger (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 17–42.
- ³⁹ As literary historian Christopher J. Lukasik has outlined, "This distinction [between the malleable and non-malleable features of the face] limited the powers of persons to manipulate the reception of their

image, in theory, since it dissociated gestural expression, and thus volition, from the legibility of moral character.” See Christopher J. Lukasik, *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 17.

- ⁴⁰ For a reading of the states of undress figured in the Zealy daguerreotypes, see Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, “The Insistent Reveal: Louis Agassiz, Joseph T. Zealy, Carrie Mae Weems, and the Politics of Undress in the Photography of Racial Science,” in Barbash, Rogers, and Willis, *To Make Their Own Way in the World*, 297–328.
- ⁴¹ In *Crania Americana*, Morton writes, “In like manner the characteristic features of the Jews may be recognized in the sculpture of the temples of Luxor and Karnak, in Egypt, where they have been depicted for nearly thirty centuries.” See Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839), 1–2. The use of sculpture as illustrative evidence in studies of racial difference had precedent with the work of Dutch anatomist Peter Camper, who used the Apollo Belvedere to illustrate the pinnacle of his sequence of facial angles in his *On the Connexion between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary & c.* 1794. The Apollo Belvedere would appear later in Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1854), where it was juxtaposed with the Negro type. For more on this topic, see Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- ⁴² “Written Descriptions, From Daguerreotypes,” *American Phrenological Journal* 24, no. 1 (July 1856): 1–2.
- ⁴³ “Written Descriptions of Character from Likenesses,” *American Phrenological Journal* 33 (1861): 101.
- ⁴⁴ “Written Descriptions of Character from Likenesses,” 102.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 154.
- ⁴⁶ Alexander Dallas Bache to Lewis R. Gibbes, May 30, 1850, Lewis Reeves Gibbes Papers, 1793–1894, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- ⁴⁷ Agassiz, “The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races.”
- ⁴⁸ P. T. Barnum, *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1860), 6. Emphasis in original.
- ⁴⁹ As Nancy Davis has observed, in the nineteenth century the bound feet of Chinese women served as both a spectacle and an object lesson for the American public, as the practice drew comparisons to the use of corsets in the United States. See Davis, *The Chinese Lady: Afong Moy in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.
- ⁵⁰ Lucius Manlius Sargent, *Dealings with the Dead*, vol. 2 (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1856), 399.
- ⁵¹ Fictional or spurious representations of China had long been a feature of early American visual culture and entertainment. In 1795, the Dutch American merchant Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, returned to Philadelphia with five male Chinese servants after a multi-year sojourn in Guangzhou. In addition to a temporary exhibition of Chinese goods that Houckgeest installed in the city, the merchant also commissioned a Chinese-style pagoda to be built on the 2400 block of Fairmount Avenue. In a peculiar decision, Houckgeest went so far as to style himself as a Chinese Mandarin living on American soil. See John Rogers Haddad, *The Romance of China: Excursions to China in U.S. Culture, 1776–1876* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 1–19.
- ⁵² Zboray and Zboray, “Between ‘Crockery-Dom’ and Barnum,” 282.
- ⁵³ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 77.
- ⁵⁴ *Daily Morning News* (Savannah, Georgia), April 29, 1850, as quoted in Davis, *The Chinese Lady*, 259.
- ⁵⁵ Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought Thee Hither?: The Chinese in New York, 1800–1950* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 4.
- ⁵⁶ Sargent, *Dealings with the Dead*, 403, 401. Emphasis my own.

-
- ⁵⁷ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2012), 18.
- ⁵⁸ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 18.
- ⁵⁹ For crushing objecthood, see Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 82.
- ⁶⁰ Lily Cho, "Anticipating Citizenship: Chinese Head Tax Photographs," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 165–66.
- ⁶¹ Cho, "Anticipating Citizenship," 171.
- ⁶² Sargent, *Dealings with the Dead*, 401.
- ⁶³ Tchen provides an account of the contemporaneous Tong Hook Tong Dramatic Company, a Cantonese opera organization that Barnum purportedly swindled when presented with a \$6,000 bill, denying any involvement with the troupe. Tchen describes how, at the end of the opera troupe's run, several members were taken to a workhouse on Blackwell's Island, while "others drifted through the streets . . . selling cigars and fabrics from their personal belongings." See Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 90.
- ⁶⁴ Davis, *The Chinese Lady*.
- ⁶⁵ For a related discussion of the persistent characterization of East Asia as an indecipherable other in American cinema, see Homay King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).