

# The State of the World: Abolitionist Reading Practices

## *O Estado do Mundo: Práticas Abolicionistas de Leitura*

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### Abstract

Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's daguerreotype *Boulevard du rue Temple huit heures du matin* (1838) marks a monumental moment in the history of (what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay calls) the "imperial technology" of photography (2019). This image has been historically celebrated in the Western canon as documenting "the first human being to be photographed" (Brand 2018, 202): a "man having his boots polished" who stood still long enough for the (approximately) seven-minute exposure to impress his statue-like image on the plate (anon. "Die Lichtbilder" 1839, 91). Dionne Brand sees the photograph otherwise, however, writing in her poetry/essay *The Blue Clerk* that, in this image, she sees "the state of the world" (2018, 202). Brand's vision of the image — of lived relations and intimacies that escape capture by the shutter's blades — is the counter-reading the poet challenges us to bring to the colonial archive. Dylan Rodriguez describes an "abolitionist reading practice" as reading beyond what is immediately perceived to include the conditions under which the information emerges. If the conditions for the emergence of the daguerreotype of the boulevard, and its inscription into the archive as a monumental event, are rooted in imperial powers that seek to know, possess, make and destroy worlds, then acknowledging and

reckoning with these conditions is, according to Azoulay, a method of attending to “the recurrent moment of original violence,” and beginning to “unlearn imperialism” (2019, 29). Brand’s reading of the *boulevard* daguerreotype demonstrates a process of unlearning imperialism and an abolitionist reading practice. By following the traces of Brand’s reading practice (given as poetry) while examining the conditions of the daguerreotype’s history as a monumental artefact of imperial technology — via: journalistic descriptions (1839); the speculative experiences of subjects of Joseph T. Zealy’s daguerreotype portraits (1850); Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic experiments in documenting gesture (1884); and the extended exposures of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Theatres* (1976-ongoing) — this paper rehearses methods of reading that release the grip of colonial aesthetics and transform the world into what is, therefore, possible.

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## Keywords

photography | poetry | colonialism | abolition | aesthetics

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## Resumo

O daguerreótipo de Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *Boulevard du rue Temple huit heures du matin* (1838), marca um momento monumental na história de (o que Ariella Aïsha Azoulay denomina) “tecnologia imperial” da fotografia (2019). Essa imagem tem sido historicamente celebrada no cânone ocidental como documentando “o primeiro ser humano a ser fotografado” (Brand 2018, 202): um “homem a fazer engraxar as suas botas” que ficou parado tempo suficiente para que a exposição de dez minutos impressionasse a sua imagem-estátua sobre a placa (anon. “Die Lichtbilder” 1839, 91). No entanto, Dionne Brand vê a fotografia de outra forma, escrevendo na sua poesia/ensaio *The Blue Clerk* que, nessa imagem, ela vê “o estado do mundo” (2018, 40). A visão de Brand a respeito da imagem — de relações vividas e intimidades que escapam à captura pelas lâminas do obturador — é a contra-leitura que a poeta nos desafia a trazer ao arquivo colonial. Dylan Rodriguez define uma “prática abolicionista de leitura” como uma leitura para além do que é imediatamente percebido e que passa a incluir as condições sob as quais a informação emerge. Se as condições para o surgimento do daguerreótipo do “boulevard”, e a sua

inscrição no arquivo como um evento monumental, estão enraizadas em poderes imperiais que procuram conhecer, possuir, fazer e destruir mundos, então reconhecer e levar em conta essas condições é, segundo Azoulay, um método para tratar do “momento recorrente da violência original”, e começar a “desaprender o imperialismo”. A leitura feita por Brand do daguerreótipo do “boulevard” demonstra um processo de desaprendizagem do imperialismo e uma prática de leitura abolicionista. Ao examinar as condições da história do daguerreótipo como um artefato monumental de tecnologia imperial e seguindo os traços da prática de leitura de Brand (enquanto poesia), este trabalho — através: de descrições jornalísticas (1839); de experiências especulativas dos fotografados por Joseph T. Zealey nos retratos em daguerreótipo (1850); das experiências de Edweard Muybridge na documentação do gesto (1884); e dos longos tempos de exposição fotográfica de Hiroshi Sugimoto na série *Theatres* (1976 até ao presente) — ensaia métodos de leitura que libertem do domínio da estética colonial e transformem o mundo no que é, assim, possível.

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**Palavras-chave**

fotografia | poesia | colonialismo | abolição | estética

Neither imagination nor image are primarily visual. Their medium is relation.

— Lisa Robertson, *A Rubric* (50)

The gesture ... has precisely nothing to say because what it *shows* is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.

— Giorgio Agamben, *Notes on Gesture* (59)

In October 1839 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre presented a triptych of daguerreotypes to King Ludwig I of Bavaria, mounted in a wooden frame and a passe partout with a personal dedication. In the centre a still life, and to the right and left two views of the boulevard du Temple in Paris that he had taken from the window of his home at noon and at 8am. One of these views of the boulevard immediately received the most attention because “visible in the lower left hand corner is the silhouette of *one of the first figures* to be immortalized by photography” (Ballhause 2012, 1) (image 1). Having remained still

for the entire exposure time of approximately 7 minutes, this one “man having his boots polished” (as he was described in the *Leipzig Pfennig-Magazin* in 1839) was brought to international fame via textual descriptions in gazettes around the world. The *Pfennig-Magazin* noted with some admiration, for example, that “he must have held himself extremely still, for he can be very clearly seen, unlike the shoeshine man, whose ceaseless movement causes him to appear completely blurred and indistinct” (anon. “*Die Lichtbilder*” 1839, 91). The infamy of the anonymous first human to be photographed was disseminated across the Western world by printed word.



Image 1  
Boulevard du rue Temple huit heures du  
matin, Daguerreotype, Louis Jacques Mandé  
Daguerre, 1838 | © public domain.

In the initial descriptions printed in journals across Europe and in America, a “*décrotteur*,” “shoeblack,” or “shoe-shine” figures prominently albeit “blurred and indistinct” (anon. “*Our Weekly*” 1839, 435) due to the movement of their arms “which were never still,” (anon. “*Self-operating*” 1839, 115) moving “to and fro” (Schorn and Kollof 1839, 306). The German public received the photo with great excitement when it was displayed at the Munich Arts Association, but the technology was quickly surpassed by other forms of photography that, with quicker shutter speeds, were able to capture the likeness of “moving objects,” (anon. “*Our Weekly*” 1839, 435) and daguerreotypes

lost their novelty and public appeal, leaving the triptych languishing in the back of the royal drawers for a hundred years. In 1839 the “curious specimen” (ibid.) of an image of a human is widely described as a “shoeblack at work on a gentleman’s boot” (ibid.) — yet, a century later, when the image enters the newly documented photographic canon, the first human to be photographed would become the “man... stopped to have his shoes shined” (Newhall 1949, 19). In 1936/37 an American photo historian named Beaumont Newhall bought reproductions of the boulevard du Temple for an exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art titled *Photography 1839-1937*, and then published them in his 1949 book (based on the exhibition catalogue) titled *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*. In the book, he writes “In only one of Daguerre’s pictures does a man appear: by chance a pedestrian on the boulevard had stopped to have his shoes shined, and had held still during most of the exposure” (ibid.). Since then, the photo has been mentioned if not also reproduced in every archived history of photography and is commonly known as the first photograph of a human being.<sup>1</sup>

When the poet Dionne Brand receives a copy of this photograph from a friend, she is aware of the canonized descriptions of the image that “claim that the first human being to be photographed is the figure having his shoes cleaned,” yet she *sees* the image otherwise: “I see first the figure cleaning the shoes as the photograph’s subject. Secondly, the event of the shoe-cleaning,” she writes (2018, 202). The “instituting imaginary” of the archive, as Achille Mbembe describes the archive’s power (2002, 19), categorizes this photograph according to a logic whereby the first human in the photographic archive is a man who stands still long enough to be attended to — both by the bootblack and the camera — the rest of the animated world disappears from the archive as it revolves around him. Yet, counter to this definition of humanity as it is expressed by “all descriptions of the photograph” as what holds still and is captured by the shutter, Brand sees in this photograph the moving, breathing world that escapes both capture and definition. Brand sees first the figure who is in movement, then the event of this act of service or care in relation to another figure; “from this,” she immediately sees “the state of the world” (2018, 202).<sup>2</sup> For Brand, seeing is an aesthetic practice that, like Gayatri Gopinath’s aesthetic practices of queer diaspora, “open[s] the way to a different apprehension of time and space, history and memory, that counters those instantiated by colonial modernity and its legacies” (2018, 12).

<sup>1</sup> Notably, on the 150th anniversary of the “birth of photography” in 1988, a special issue of *Life* magazine reproduced the *boulevard* as a two-page spread, celebrating it as the “first photograph of a person” (7) (qtd. in Sekula 24). Allan Sekula points to the discourse around this daguerreotype in 1989, “at the end of a decade of unbridled upper-class consumerism in the United States,” in his essay from 1996, considering the conditions for interpretation of the archive as they are produced by subjectivities, labour, class, and capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> Brand is not the only scholar to identify the figure in movement as central to *boulevard*, but she is among the minority. In his 1996 text, Allan Sekula mentions that there is “Only one description of this photograph [that] has acknowledged the agent, rather than the recipient, of this brushing and polishing” (25). His editor offers that since the original publication of Sekula’s text there are others, including (for example) Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 136.



## Reading the Routes

Documented texts published in 1839 — in German, French, British, and North American journals and papers — about the daguerreotype<sup>3</sup> return again and again to the failure of the image to faithfully capture anything that moves, rendering these subjects “confused” in comparison to the “perfect ...depiction of inanimate objects, of buildings, monuments, statues, and so on...” (Schorn and Kollof 1839, 306). Critics accuse the technology of having the ability to command “space but not time” (ibid.), a disappointment set up by the expectations of Daguerre’s previous work with painted dioramas, “where he created so many masterpieces; by commanding the sun, his obedient and willing slave, ... leading it hither and thither, to all points where its bright or pale rays were needed” (Janin qtd. in Siegel 2017, 59). Unlike the dioramas, daguerreotypes “lack radiance,” “as if their high creator had wished to conceal his name from us”: “the power that created these drawings seems to have withdrawn from them” leaving these views “too strongly in the pale, leaden tints of our sad northern skies” (Schorn and Kollof 1839, 306). Again and again in the descriptions of *boulevard du Temple*, writers note their disappointment that, with this new technology, Daguerre fails to exert perfect control over the sun, the light, the image, or the (living) subjects depicted, with the same fidelity he manages to copy the inanimate world. Control is associated with the fidelity and detail of the copy, contingent in part on the ‘enslavement’ of the sun. The (gentlemen)<sup>4</sup> authors are disappointed by the imperfect capacity of the technology to carry out their (naturalized) imperial privileges — the daguerreotype is unable to enslave the elements and still the ever-moving world.

The assumption, that people, places and things are all “waiting to be reproduced” and “simply given to the gaze” is established and naturalized through the practices of imperialism (Azoulay 2019, 26). “Photography,” writes Azoulay, “was rooted in imperial formations of power: first and foremost the use of violence, the exercise of imperial rights, and the creation and destruction of shared worlds” (ibid. 25). Photography is an imperial technology because it accelerated the “process of plunder that made others and others’ worlds available to some” and provided, alongside its development, further methods and means of pursuing the process of imperialism (ibid. 27).

<sup>3</sup> For these texts I am indebted to the collection by Steffen Siegel, *First Exposures: Writings from the Beginning of Photography*, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Something we know about the routes of the conditions of these texts from 1839: the authors publishing in journals and newspapers in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe were predominantly (if not ubiquitously) male and white. Certainly, the subject matter of technological innovation would have been reserved for “civilized” white men. I am locating all the authors from 1839 in this paper, including the anonymous ones, socially as “gentlemen,” to indicate the gender, race, and class social location in proximity to hegemonic power that conditions their instructions of how to see the daguerreotype of the *boulevard*. These “gentlemen” are different from, albeit related to, Allan Sekula’s interpretation of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of the figure in *boulevard*: “The gentleman, ... is really a historicist prefiguration of a specifically postmodern urban-bourgeois subjectivity, an enlightened shopper” (26). Both figurations of gentlemen (critically) identify the majority of the daguerreotype’s self-authorized interpreters with the figure “having his boots polished” (Anonymous, “Die Lichtbilder” (1839, 91).

“The aesthetic can never be sutured against or cauterized from the “colonial event,”” writes Brand. “What is pleasing, what is in beautiful form, is the violence” (2020, 24) of mastery, of non-consensual givenness, the control of the artist (as proxy for the imperial body) over the image, its subjects, even the sun. “The violence of forcing everything to be shown and exhibited to the gaze” (Azoulay 2019, 27) “is a desired and valued commodity of an elevated mind, a good character,” a civilized taste (Gikandi 2011, ix). “The cultured subjects of modernity,” writes Simon Gikandi, are those “whose lives are available to us through the monuments and institutions of European civilization” or what he calls the “culture of taste” (ibid.). The (civilized) virtues of *boulevard* lie in its technology’s ability to make the world within its frame a monument, by recording (and thus possessing) what falls, or is non-consensually stilled, within the scope of its lens and shutter. As Brand notes, these virtues “cannot be separate from the moments of their production and description,” or their roots/routes: “the colonial event,” she writes, “is the aesthetic” (2020, 24).

In an interview from 2021, Dylan Rodriguez describes an “abolitionist reading practice” as reading beyond what is immediately perceived to include the conditions from which the information emerges. He asks us to not read the demands of people in prison at face value, and instead to radically recontextualize those demands within the conditions under which the demands were made. His example is the Pelican Bay Hunger Strike in 2013 when the list of demands from prisoners included the (seemingly modest) ask of being allowed a couple of personal photographs in their cell (ibid.). What this demand speaks to, says Rodriguez, “is a condition that is so isolating, so punitive, so demoralizing and soul-crushing, that it actually has to be listed by someone who is putting their body and their mind on the line in a hunger strike to be allowed a couple more photographs” (ibid.). He reads this particular demand within the context of what he calls “asymmetrical warfare,” and believes that it is incumbent upon “those of us who are not under the conditions of security housing unit incarceration” to name the condition that produces the demand:

when someone is telling you they need more photographs in their cell they are telling you they are in a condition of such sensory deprivation, of such isolation, ...fighting an apparatus which is spiritually and existentially trying to break them ...it is genocidal, and there is no other ethical alternative but to abolish it. (ibid.)

Rodriguez describes an abolitionist reading practice as getting to the roots of what is communicated, the roots of the conditions for expression, which then allows the perceiver to apply an explicit abolitionist analysis (ibid.).

When I first listened to Rodriguez speaking about abolitionist reading practice I heard him say “once you’re able to come to terms with the roots of the condition you can come to a more explicit abolitionist analysis;” today I hear him say “... the routes

of the conditions...” (2021). Roots are a way in and an origin story, they are what feed the blossoms, fruits and branches, what nourishes or starves the conditions that lead to the demand. Routes are a way to, through and beyond current conditions, they are the paved roads, well-beaten pathways, and (less apparent) desire lines that connect here to elsewhere(s), past, present and future. Paul Gilroy makes a case for the shift from roots to routes in *The Black Atlantic* when he writes, “Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (1993, 19). Where roots are causal and imply an ancestral inheritance, the underground network that feeds the organism growing toward the sun, routes are cartographic, non-linear, and traceable back and forth across time and space. Routes map the development of current conditions through grammatical conditionals of thinking time: the potential development of “what could have been” (Lowe 2015, 40),<sup>5</sup> the histories that “should have been unimaginable” (Azoulay 2019, 31),<sup>6</sup> the futures that imagine “that which will have *had to* happen” for the existence of conditions that yet could be (Campt 2017, 17)<sup>7</sup>, and the “futured history” of a prior body embodied in a present one, conditioned by shared experiences across time and space (Young 2020, 138).<sup>8</sup> Following the routes of a condition *might be* an abolitionist *practice* of reading.

5 In Lisa Lowe’s book *Intimacies of Four Continents*, she attends to the colonial archives in the grammar of a “past conditional temporality” (2015, 175). She does not attempt to represent missing narratives or rebuild history by filling in its gaps; instead Lowe insists that we attend to the absences in the archive as a cipher for connections, intimacies and possibilities that could have been. Reading for “what could have been” returns the unthought to history, imagines a more complicated trajectory of how we got to where we are now, and removes the inevitability of a future mapped by the traditions of liberal humanism (ibid. 40). Writing/reading in the past conditional temporality makes space for the possibilities of what might have been and what yet could be.

6 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s book, *Unlearning Imperialism*, “is the outcome of research conducted through a series of “rehearsals” that “do not seek to make legible again but from ever—from an indefinite past rather than toward (or in anticipation of) indefinite futures, as in for ever—not as retrieved histories but as an active mechanism that seeks to maintain the principle of reversibility of what should have not been possible... Potential history does not mend worlds after violence but rewinds to the moment before the violence occurred and sets off from there” (2019, 31).

7 In her book *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt activates a visual archive (of photographs) through her capacity for listening to “photos that ruminate loudly on practices of diasporic refusal, fugitivity, and futurity” (2017, 24). Through this method of engagement, she opens the temporal space of the archive to what she calls a “grammar of black feminist futurity” which indicates a “power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be” or “that which will have *had to* happen” (ibid., 17 emphasis original). This is a grammar of hope, possibility, and action, as “striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present” (ibid.) which defies the normalized temporal guidelines of Western archival practices that chronologically cohere “pieces of time” in an order that reasons a causal sequence of events towards an end (Mbembe 2002, 21).

8 In his book *Embodying Black Experience*, Harvey Young examines how past, shared experience overlaps with the present and future bodies of black people, and how “the body is the futured history — the future made past — of a prior body” (2020, 138). I will return to Young’s analysis of fifteen infamous daguerreotype portraits from 1850 later in this paper.



## The Work of Reading

In 1839, Dominique François Arago presented a report to a group of (other) white scientists and statesmen expounding the virtues of the new daguerreotype technology for carrying out the imperial agenda of possessing the world. Referring to the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, he instructs his audience (in the conditional tense) to imagine, had “we” had the technology then, the treasure “we would possess today” in the form of “faithful pictorial records of that which the learned world is forever deprived of by the greed of the Arabs and the vandalism of certain travelers” (qtd. in Azoulay 2019, 25). The conditional is the space of imagination, in this case, the imperial imagination.

Reading through the 1839 texts about *boulevard* brings into relief the imperial conditions of capture and control, the imperative to record and copy, the entitlement to do so, the equation of documenting with knowing and understanding, the projection of greed and vandalism onto *others* (“Arabs and...certain travellers”), and the anxiety about achieving a technology that can accomplish the imperial agenda (an imaginary goal that seems to soothe the gentlemen as assurance of a kind of safety). There is a distinct anxiety in the gentlemen’s texts about what escapes capture, or what remains unseen due to the long exposure necessitated by daguerreotype technology.<sup>9</sup> 1839 is a key moment in following the routes of photography as an imperial technology because of the not-yet ‘perfect’ achievements of Daguerre as described by the agents of imperialism so eager to harness what they foresee as photography’s (imperial) power. How do the gentlemen pave the roads of colonialist expansion through the hopes, wishes and demands outlined in their texts about the *boulevard*? What is the work they are doing when they read this image?<sup>10</sup>

During a conversation about archives and archival practices, Dionne Brand asked an audience (composed primarily of archivists): “What is the world where we might live in, where we have taken into account and reckoned with what we know — what might that look like?” (2021). This (conditional) question feels like an extension from Rodriguez’s abolitionist reading practice, wherein first we must follow the “roots/routes of the conditions” for what is expressed, recorded or archived, and then we must reckon with that knowledge beyond its face value, beyond the demand for a couple photographs to the genocidal conditions that produce the demand. The conditional is a linguistic space of imagination. What might a future world look like if we reckon with what we know now? Acknowledging and reckoning with genocide, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay suggests, is a challenge to “attend to the recurrent moment of original violence,”

<sup>9</sup> The contemporary version of this anxiety might be (according to Allan Sekula) that “the vaporized shoeblack is the complementary, negative prefiguration of the contemporary transnational elite’s geo-economic restlessness in scouring the globe for newer, cheaper, post-Fordist labor markets” (1996, 26).

<sup>10</sup> I owe this question to Katherine McKittrick who, to a question posed to her at Berkley in 2017, responded with another question: “What kind of work are we doing when we’re reading, and are we doing the kind of work we want to do?”

and begin to “unlearn imperialism” (2019, 29). By following the well-trodden routes of “original violence” we can “unlearn” them. What do we know about the conditions for archival collections? About the conditions for capturing, preserving and disseminating photographic documentation? How can we apply an abolitionist reading practice not just to the demands of prisoners, but to our everyday practice of perceiving the world? Lisa Lowe writes, “only by defamiliarizing both the object of the past *and the established methods for apprehending that object* do we make possible alternative forms of knowing, thinking, and being” (2015, 137 my emphasis).

“Unlearning imperialism,” writes Azoulay, “attends to the conceptual origins of imperial violence, the violence that presumes people and worlds as raw material, as always already imperial resources” (2019, 29). Unlearning imperialism is connected to an abolitionist reading practice whereby, in Azoulay’s reading, the information offered by photographs is first and foremost understood as arising from the conditions of the imperial technology of photography. The invention of the camera shutter, according to Azoulay, accelerates the violent process of imperial plunder that makes “others and others’ worlds available to some” (ibid. 27) and not to others. Azoulay cautions (conditionally) that in order to unlearn imperialism

one should learn how to withhold alternative interpretations, narratives, or histories to imperial data, how to refrain from relating to them as given objects from the position of a knowing subject.... One should unlearn the authority of the shutter to define a chronological order... and the organization of social space.... One should engage with others, with people and objects across the shutter’s divides, as part of an encounter to be simultaneously resumed, regenerated, retrieved, and reinvented. (2019, 29)

Dionne Brand’s *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos*, demonstrates perception as a practice both of unknowing and of world-making. Verso 40.6 reads:

M sent me a photograph by Daguerre. It is of the first human being to be photographed. Someone is cleaning the shoes of someone. All descriptions of the photograph claim that the first human being to be photographed is the figure having his shoes cleaned. I see first the figure cleaning the shoes as the photograph’s subject. Secondly, the event of the shoe-cleaning. From this immediately I saw the state of the world. (2018, 202)

The subject Brand sees is beyond the “shutter’s divide,” — thus Brand retrieves an encounter with someone who was originally “excised by the shutter” (Azoulay 2019, 24). Concluding with her observation of “the state of the world,” Brand withholds further interpretation — she refrains from relating to the imperial information she reads in the photograph from the position of a knowing subject. In addition, she challenges the common reading of the photograph as a document of the “first human being to be photographed

[as] the figure having his shoes cleaned,” reading beyond the face value of the image towards the root of the conditions under which the photograph was taken and the routes of its interpretation over time (Brand 2018, 202).<sup>11</sup> With this short Verso, Brand demonstrates a process of unlearning imperialism and an abolitionist reading practice.

### Alive in the Space Between Us

The early critics of daguerreotype technology are precise about how they want to see the world. The anxieties the gentlemen authors express are directed at uncertainty, the places in the photograph where the “diverse movements of human beings” have blurred the image and made its details indiscernible, “barred to that chemical process” which cannot command time (Schorn & Kolloff 1839, 306). The “foliage of trees,” for example, “nearly always moving in the wind,” (ibid.) “is often but imperfectly represented” in daguerreotypes (anon. *The Spectator* 1839, 114-5). Onto the blurs they project fantasies of gestures: the man who has stopped to have his “boots polished” for example “can be very clearly seen, excepting his head and hat which showed that in speaking he had nodded” (anon. *Das Pfennig-Magazin* 1839, 91). Onto the blur of the man’s head, this author wills a gesture of agreement, a movement that transmits meaning to another person to whom he is “speaking.” The “ceaseless movement” of the other figure’s “right arm and brush” over the man’s boot causes him to appear “completely blurred and indistinct” (Anon. *The Athenaeum* 1839, 177). Each moment of imperfect blur in the image points to a transitive exchange: speaking to, polishing, and agitating. As the poet Lisa Robertson writes, “gesture constitutes any particular body’s expressive movement and stance in relation to a receiver or a material. In this sense the imagination is transmitted, alive in the space between us, rather than individually possessed... [it] is expressive and social, as well as deeply intimate” (2021, 49). Uncertainty, indiscernibility, what is expressive and social and intimate in the photograph, are the elements of the image that the gentlemen cannot abide.

When philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that “by the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures,” he is naming a loss (or destruction) of a sphere of relationality (2000, 49). In his essay “Notes on Gesture,” Agamben defines gesture as that which escapes a false alternative between ends and means, or poiesis (production as means towards an end) and praxis (action as end in

<sup>11</sup> Allan Sekula’s essay from 1996 titled “An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures” is an important critical text that examines the conditions for the interpretations of *boulevard*’s figures specifically in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His analysis differs from Brand’s, or my own, in that he focuses on labour and the labouring body, and the positioning of photography as a reflection of subjectivities formed by and for late-stage capitalism: “What is celebrated? The static moment of consumption, the fashionable pose. What is obscured, denied, disavowed? The productive moment, the energetic blur of that other body, unacknowledged, the working body, the invisible shoe-black. A silhouette and a blur. The former is enough to give us a fictitious identity, replete with style. The latter gives us only this: an instance of average labor, eminently replaceable, eminently forgettable, vaporizing in the flux of the moving throng” (1996, 25).

itself). Gesture escapes the binary pairs of ends and means, doing and making — “The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such” (ibid., 58). Gesture’s place is in the middle. With gesture, something is being “endured and supported” rather than “produced or acted” (ibid. 57). Agamben describes this as the ethical dimension of being human, and the “being-in-a-medium of human beings” (ibid. 58). Forty years after Daguerre introduced his invention, photographic technology had established a shutter speed that allowed photographers to capture not only the frozen image of a still subject but, as in Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs, serial images that amounted to the still documentation of moving subjects (image 2). While they succeeded in representing their subjects with the focused detail and fidelity longed for by the gentlemen-authors from 1839, “man walking at normal speed,” and “walking woman sending a kiss” fail to capture the gesturality, the relationality, the ethical dimension, of these actions. Gestures may not be captured by images, moving or still, because they are the space of transmission of imagination “alive in the space between us” (Robertson 2021, 49).



Image 2  
Woman in long dress  
curtsying, kissing hand and  
turning around, Plate 200 from  
series *Animal Locomotion*,  
Eadweard Muybridge,  
collotype, 1884-87. | © public  
domain.

Yet, Brand sees the trace of the gestural in *boulevard*. It is an image of the fugitive blur of gesturality/relationality. The figures occupy a medial space between the seen and unseen, still and in movement, marking the time it takes for all the other animated beings in the picture to move through the frame to the realm of the undocumented. Brand reads their escape — both seen and unseen by way of their being-in-a-medium, the multitudes show Brand “the state of the world” (2018, 202).

Rodriguez also sees the gestural in the demands of the Pelican Bay prisoners: “when someone is telling you they need more photographs in their cell they are telling you ... it is genocidal, and there is no other ethical alternative but to abolish it” (2021). He sees beyond the stated end-goal of the demand (a couple of photographs) to the (un)ethical

conditions of the demand that constitute, as Agamben writes, “the more proper sphere of that which is human” (2000, 57). In the gesture of “communicating a communicability,” the prisoners express both their own humanity and the inhuman system that locks them in isolation, attempting to deprive them of relationality and block their gestures. The prisoners break from the binary of seen/unseen when their demands are perceived as gestures, beyond what is said to what is *shown*, “alive in the space between us” (Robertson 2021, 49). The receiver, then, has an important role in this alchemy of relationality. Rodriguez is the abolitionist reader who perceives the prisoners’ demands as gestures, enters into the space of imagination alive between them and himself, and recognizes the ethical dimension of their communication. By perceiving beyond, or between, the binary of seen/unseen, both Rodriguez and Brand see the “state of the world.”

### Stillness as Gesture

In 1850 America, Joseph T. Zealy made daguerreotype portraits of seven Black individuals named Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty. None of these people had the freedom to consent to the capture of their images due to their condition of captivity, having been “compelled to appear before Zealy and his camera” (Young 2010, 27) by Louis Agassiz, a Swiss-born natural scientist from Harvard who planned on studying the daguerreotypes with an eye to “comparative anatomy” (ibid. 30).<sup>12</sup> In search of African born subjects of study and their descendants, Agassiz had visited at least four plantations in Columbia, South Carolina, selecting the seven individuals whose likenesses would eventually be captured on 15 daguerreotype plates. After Agassiz had concluded his study, the plates went into storage, and were only returned to scholarly consideration when Harvard archivist Elinor Reichlin found them in 1976. The 15 daguerreotypes, attributed to Zealy, have been objects of interpretation (and counter-interpretation) ever since. As one of these interpreters, Michael Kimmelman, concludes, “interpretations of the images are based more upon the viewer’s imagination than anything contained within the frame,” (ibid. 35) and “they prove only that we see in photographs what we want to see” (Kimmelman qtd. in Young 2010, 35). Taking a number of analyses into consideration, Harvey Young’s review of the multiple interpretations of the 15 daguerreotypes from 1850 reveals how “the figure of the interpreter shapes the interpretation more than the image,” and follows the routes of the conditions of interpretation (ibid. 37). Young’s strategy (in contrast) is to seek the “truth” of the images, which lies in the technology and conditions of their production: “that a black

<sup>12</sup> ...eventually supporting the white supremacist narrative that “the African body bore no relation to the European body” (Young 2010, 30).



body<sup>13</sup> sat before a camera,” for at least 60 to 180 seconds, in perfect stillness (ibid.).

In his book *Embodying Black Experience* (2010), Young examines these images as instances of *stillness* that are actively performed by the subjects of the photos and “resonate with their daily, lived embodied experiences” (29). For Young, the prolonged stillness of Alfred, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty, necessitated by the slow technology of the daguerreotype, is an active *repeat* performance of their embodied experience of being held still: “in cells, holds, blocks, and plantations;” shackled, tied, and rendered immobile on transatlantic ships — on the photographic stage of Zealy’s studio. “Each captive,” writes Young, “...survived the Middle Passage. Their bodies are not the products of the Middle Passage. They embody the Middle Passage” (ibid. 38-39). Reading the stillness of the subjects of these portraits offers insight “into the experience of the Middle Passage” and the role of stillness in the diasporic experience (ibid. 29) by following the (embodied) routes of the conditions effecting all participants, voluntary and involuntary, in the production of the images.

Young imagines the space of Zealy’s studio and the captive subjects awaiting their turn on stage; he acknowledges that Alfred may have been observing Renty during his 1-3 minute performance, and observing Jack as he, too, awaited his turn in front of the camera. Young imagines that they “might have first recognized their own experience of stillness and, indeed, captivity through their observations of fellow captives who were confined in rest areas, holding cells, ship holds, and on auction blocks and realized that this experience, again, was repeating in the present moment” (2010, 48). Young reads stillness as gesture in the images because he sees how stillness is “endured and supported” (Agamben 2000, 57) by the subjects of the portraits, not only for three minutes, but as a repeated embodied experience. Young’s observation of these “performances” of stillness frees gestural communication from enforced stillness as a (violent) means to an end (as it was and is used to enforce white supremacy). This is an abolitionist reading practice that sheds light on previously erased, suppressed, and denied information, indeed *communication*, within the archive, including the lived experiences of “human bodies” (Young 2010, 42).

Young’s reading practice empowers the subjects of these daguerreotypes by connecting, through time and space, with their performances of their embodied experiences. Young writes, “in light of the concerted efforts throughout the era of legalized black captivity (and beyond) to prevent the recording of black history and memory, the preservation of past experiences within [Alfred, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty’s] bodies and the writing of history with(in) their performances are especially powerful acts” (2010, 29). Because they were still for the imperial technology of the daguerreotype, scholars

<sup>13</sup> Harvey Young defines “the black body” as the phenomenon of what results when “popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people... an abstracted and imagined figure” that “shadows or doubles the real one” (2010, 7). It is this black body, and not flesh-and-blood individuals or groups of people, that is “the target of a racializing projection” (ibid.).

like Young have the ability to connect the specifically Black, embodied, stillness enacted by Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty with other acts of stillness through time, including his own. Young employs what he calls “critical memory” in his engagement with these photographs, identifying “shared experiences and attributes of being and becoming” among Black people, “not by presuming that black bodies have the same memories but by acknowledging that related histories create experiential overlap” (ibid. 18). Young shows how black bodies throughout American history have both challenged and appropriated the violence of enforced stillness, transforming it into a form of agency (ibid. 47). The performance of stillness, for Young, is a method of examining how past, shared experience overlaps with the present and future bodies of Black people, how “the body is the futured history — the future made past — of a prior body” (ibid. 138). Understanding the representation of bodies in this way — as communicating in a gestural space between human beings, a space where imagination allows a shared, embodied experience — maps routes of relationality across time and space.

The gesture that Young sees in the 15 daguerreotypes from 1850 is stillness itself as motion. Unlike Muybridge’s “motion studies,” which map movement but fail to record gesture, the images of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty document the motion of stillness — performed stillness *as* gesture. “To look at Alfred is to see a person who stood still not for a brief moment but upwards of a minute,” Young writes, “it is to see a person who consciously is enacting motionlessness. His performance becomes atemporal. It collapses the past with the present with the promise of extending into the future. Alfred stands still and still stands” (2010, 44). Where Agassiz employs daguerreotypes as a technology of imperialist imagination, commissioning the photographer to frame his selected subjects according to his presumed power to objectively observe, articulate and interpret, Young works with photography with a similar sensibility to Brand: reading beyond the face value of images towards the roots of the conditions under which photographs were taken and the routes of their interpretation over time.

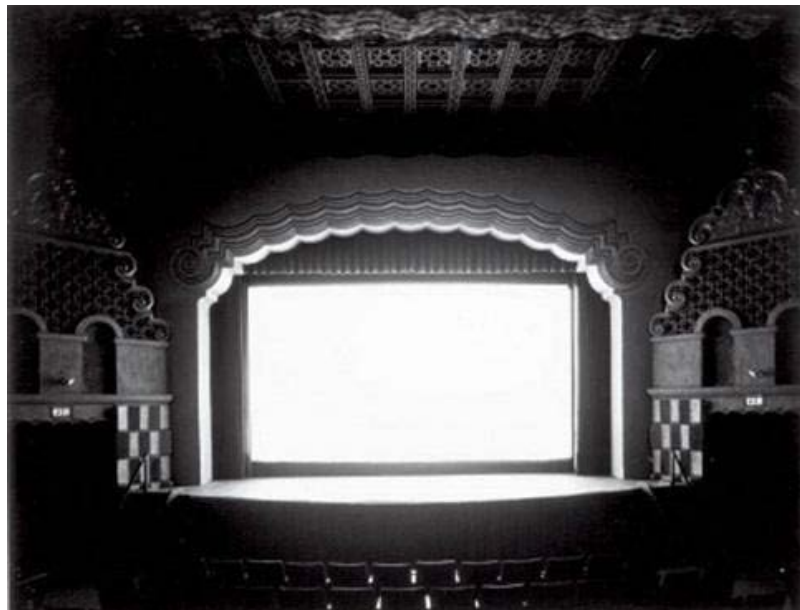
The conditions of the making of *boulevard* and its popular (published) interpretations are the same. Narration and interpretation are structures of sociality and, just like the imperial technology of photography, are conditioned by the imperial world view. The routes of how I come to reading are conditioned by the colonial present. How I read is conditioned by violent structures of seeing that are abhorrent to my way of being in the world. Brand writes, “if structures of sociality derived from the colonial moment pursue us and are anathema to our living, and if such structures include narration and narrative style, then a rethinking of these forms of address is ...as urgent as the overturning of that sociality” (2020, 45). I include ways of seeing and ways of reading in the category of “structures of sociality,” as forms that must be rethought, reworked, and overturned. This is part of an abolitionist reading practice.

### “A Mouth Whose Light Screams Out”

Michael Nelson wrote the text titled “A Picture Stands in Solitude” while in Administrative Segregation at San Quentin State Prison in California in 2011. Ad Seg, or “the hole” as Nelson calls it, means he was “taken away from everything,” (qtd. in Poor 2021, 28) — held in a cell for twenty-four hours a day (aside from shower or yard time), away from the general population of the prison, and away from attending the photography class he was taking with Nigel Poor through the Prison University Project. Nelson wrote this text in response to Poor’s assignment to compare two photographs of (blank) cinematic screens: Richard Misrach’s *Drive-In Theatre, Las Vegas* (1987), and Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *La Paloma, Encinitas* (1993) (image 3). Nelson describes the conditions in which he wrote the text as “so loud” he “couldn’t even hear [his] own thoughts,” (ibid. 29) but the assignment gave him something to focus on: “I was able to tune out everything else,” he says in an interview with Poor, “It was like I was in those pictures. I was in the spaces that I was creating in my mind. I was creating a different reality for myself” (ibid. 31). Sugimoto’s image in particular connected Nelson to the emotional conditions of his situation. He writes that Sugimoto’s work inspires,

a space of passionate anger. The darkness of the theatre sets the mood; the illuminated screen playing the role of a mouth whose light screams out to be heard, to be seen; the EXIT signs act as annoying reminders of where all the absent characters in this photograph have gone. (Nelson 2021, 22-23)

Image 3  
Hiroshi Sugimoto, *La Paloma, Encinitas*, gelatin silver print, 1993. | © copyright Hiroshi Sugimoto.



The photographs in Sugimoto's series *Theatres* (1976-ongoing) (of which *La Paloma, Encinitas* is a part) are a response to the question "suppose you shoot a whole movie in a single frame?" (artist's website). The process of their production is described by that question: the artist brings a camera into a movie theatre and when the film begins he fixes the shutter of his large-format camera to a wide open aperture — when the film ends he closes the shutter. The result is what the artist calls "a shining screen" framed by a dark cinema, whose architectural and decorative details are illuminated by the central, white, collected light of the "whole movie" (ibid.). The extended exposure of the film, like in daguerreotypes, means that everything that moves escapes capture by the apparatus. Two hours of moving images are recorded as a singular glowing light source in the shape of the movie screen. The narrative details of the film are lost into "a mouth whose light screams out to be heard, to be seen" (Nelson 2021, 23). The details that are recorded are the context for the screening itself, and the space and structure that holds up the screen, as still as a photograph. Flanking the screen in the photograph are two EXIT signs that, as Nelson points out, "act as annoying reminders" of where all the living, breathing, moving people have exited the frame and evaded capture (ibid.).

Nelson's reading of Sugimoto's image from the conditions of forced isolation and confinement clarifies that an abolitionist reading practice doesn't only trace the routes of the conditions under which the image was created but can also follow the routes of the conditions of the image's interpretation and how it exists in the collective imagination through language. The anger of the screen "whose light screams out to be heard, to be seen" describes a "communication of a communicability" that is frustrated by the absence of audience — a blocked relationality that expresses the conditions of Nelson's segregation. The "annoying" EXIT signs, in Nelson's experience, do not lead to a way out and instead stand in for the autonomy of every moving person who might have been caught by the long exposure but were not. These signs are a site of anxiety. They mark the doors that he cannot move through, as he remains trapped by imperial technology, the prison industrial complex, along with the rest of the characters projected onto the screen whose movements in a confined space (a frame within a frame) relegate them to erasure by their collective, concentrated, light.

Reading Nelson's observation about Sugimoto's photograph through an abolitionist reading practice allows me to transpose this practice onto the gentlemen authors from 1839. Tracing the nature of the anxieties of the authors as they are expressed through their texts is a way of reading the conditions of their expression — what are their hopes, wishes, and fears as they project them onto this image? One reporter observes about *boulevard* that "nothing which moves onwards leaves a sensible trace behind, and the stones of the causeway, ... are nearly as distinct in the pictures, as if no one passed over them" (anon. "Our Weekly" 1839, 435). The daguerreotype performs a kind of ghosting. It either makes "confused images" (ibid.) or disappears anything that moves with a speed faster than the relative duration of the shutter's period of being open. I say

disappears, but what I mean is, any body who moves quickly enough to escape capture within the frame of a daguerreotype is fugitive: the technology (at least in 1839) includes the conditions for escape. The anonymous author quoted above goes on to hypothesize the beings who might have occupied the space of the picture without being captured by the picture: “if a body of military, so numerous that their passage would occupy the whole time employed to form the picture, were to be passing, a confused trace would be made in it, but still a representation of the roadway would be perceptible” (ibid.). Of all the activities that might be taking place on the boulevard du Temple at 8am on that day in 1839, this author imagines the “numerous” bodies of a military occupation. I read in

all these early texts an anxiety about what *might have been* yet remains unknown, of what “the learned world is forever deprived” (Arago qtd. in Azoulay 2019, 25).



Image 4  
Boulevard du rue Temple  
huit heures du matin (detail),  
daguerreotype, Louis Jacques  
Mandé Daguerre, 1838 |  
© public domain.

In response to this anxiety, the critics concentrate on what they think they know. Following the lead of M. Arago, they focus on what “can be very clearly seen,” (anon. *Die Lichtbilder* 1839, 91) “the gentleman” (anon. “Our Weekly” 1839, 435) “having his boots polished” (anon. *Die Lichtbilder* 1839, 91). The figure’s position, with one foot resting on the ‘décrotteur’s’ stool causing his leg to bend at a right angle to his body, is familiar in a way that might be read differently today from in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a gesture belonging to a certain race, gender, body and class, familiar to the gentlemen writers by the likely regular embodiment of exactly this position (image 4).<sup>14</sup> It is something known to them as an embodied pose. This knowing, or recognizability, in the context of the new technology, is a revelation and a delight. The work they are doing when they read is recognition — knowing something they already know as the feeling of knowing *more*. The gentlemen want to know everything. Seeing, for them, is an exercise in knowing.

<sup>14</sup> As Allan Sekula points out, Life Magazine’s 1988 description of the photograph as depicting “a Gentleman having his boots polished [who] remained still long enough to become frozen in history”(7) or “a bourgeois with the leisure to be “frozen” (Sekula 19996, 25) is “the flattering prefiguration of [the magazine’s] ideal reader.” (ibid.).



### Invisible Until Needed

Prophetic author Octavia Butler's father was "a man who shined shoes," a Black person, like Butler's mother who cleaned homes, who was "only to be seen by what their labor could produce: a sparkling bathtub," a shiny pair of boots (Abdurraqib 2021, 128-29). Hanif Abdurraqib describes this method of surviving under the conditions of white supremacy as being "invisible until [one is] needed" (ibid. 130). He describes this way of being as (another) form of "hybridity," a quality shared by a number of Butler's characters that both serves their survival and causes them to be exiled from community. Abdurraqib's description of Black "people who were invisible until they were needed" emphasizes the transitive nature of code-switching, the relationship of visibility to a relational exchange. Mapping this onto the *boulevard* I imagine that the bootblack only appears to the white gentlemen as they imagine the 'need' of the gentleman poised with one foot raised. They 'see' the bootblack *as a bootblack* in the moment of transaction. A transaction is not a gesture, it is a means to an end (shiny shoes). The gentlemen's gaze is "very precise about how it wants to see the world" (Brand 1994, 171), only admitting to the visibility of someone "cleaning the shoes of someone" (Brand 2018, 202) through the imagined needs of the "very distinct" gentleman patron (anon. "Our Weekly" 1839, 436).

In Brand's essay titled *Seeing*, she writes about the difference between how she sees and how a white cinematographer sees as they work together on a video Brand is directing. Where Brand's "frame" includes the "whole body" of Sherona, the person in front of the camera "as the sum of what she is saying," the white cinematographer zooms in to Sherona's face, "filling the screen with it until all other gestures are absent" (1994, 170). Brand sees Sherona's gestures as "describing her politics, her affirmation, her insistence and her don't-take-shit-from-nobody attitude," her consent to appear within the camera's frame alongside her agency to step out of the frame at any moment "if you don't see me right" (ibid. 169-70). Yet the white cinematographer narrows the frame to Sherona's skin, cutting out "the finger of the hand moving rapidly across the face," cutting out anything that interrupts the skin. His frame excludes Sherona's agency, consent, politics and attitude; his eye regulates, "it has fancies," "it is very precise about how it wants to see the world" (ibid. 171).

One hundred and fifty years after the gentlemen experience the discomfort of gesture as it is blurrily recorded by the seven-minute exposure of a daguerreotype, the white cinematographer zooms in to elide the gestures that (ironically) the technology of videography was developed to capture. Agamben claims that "cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, [therefore] it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply to that of aesthetics)" (2000, 56). Yet the conditions of seeing/reading are where ethics are activated — the ethical is not unconditionally denied to the still image while belonging to the (cinematic) moving image. The relationality of gesture is not inherent to a technology of showing/depiction but in the space of medi-ality, that place between seeing and being-seen, reading and being-read. The moving

image accomplishes much of what the gentlemen authors from 1839 claim they want: a level of detail and information that captures everything that moves through the frame. And yet, the white cinematographer still *does not see* gesture, the ethics and politics of what is being relayed. He is in full, individual possession of his aesthetic frame. Agamben's claim that the Western bourgeoisie has lost its gestures and attempts to retrieve this loss in cinema (while at the same time recording this loss) fails to account for the white gentleman cinematographer's aesthetic frame that continues to deny relationality. For Brand — who is, notably, *not* represented in Agamben's thought — gesture has never needed to be “retrieved,” nor can it be captured, because it is never individually possessed. Gesture is always “in relation to a receiver or a material” (Robertson 2021, 57). If Brand is present for Sherona's gestures, and “imagination is transmitted, alive in the space between” them (*ibid.*), where is the white cinematographer? He is alone in the room, and yet he frames the image that will constitute the video artwork that will go out into the world as part of a visual, cultural archive.

At the end of the essay, Brand cautions “you cannot leave this [other] eye alone for a second, at least not if it's resting on you. It will fall back on itself, on things it knows” (1994, 171). The eye that reads-to-know, or for what it already claims to know, is dangerous. In contrast, I am thinking about Brand's eye in the context of Katherine McKittrick's provocation from her essay “Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered About the Floor)”: “What if we read outside ourselves ... to actively unknow ourselves, to unhinge,”<sup>15</sup> (2021, 16) and I ask, how can we *see* outside ourselves in order to unknow ourselves? How can *seeing*, or reading, be an act of *unknowing*? Seeing gesture — reading the communication of communicability — means seeing the potential, conditional, present/past/future that arises in the spaces between us. Interpretations are no more than imagination, which belongs to both of us (like in the shared space of a pronoun “us”). Seeing gesture means reading the routes of the conditions that bring me to this place of viewing, and the daguerreotype of the *boulevard du rue Temple* to this place of being seen. This reading practice is an act of unknowing because it operates within the sphere of mediality, where I cannot not know myself in relation to another (and cannot know myself without relating to another). For the gentlemen authors and the white cinematographer, who are in individual possession of their knowing, what is known to them is necessarily untrue for the world. For those of us who engage an abolitionist reading practice, what is unknown might, certainly, be true. From this, I see “the state of the world” (Brand 2018, 202).

<sup>15</sup> “... and thus come to know each other intellectually inside and outside the academy as collaborators of collective and generous and capacious stories.” (McKittrick 2021, 16).

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