

Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America

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Review

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Fox-Amato, Matthew. *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America.* Oxford University Press, 2019. \$39.95
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The invention of the camera transformed the visual culture of the world; in essence it opened up a brand-new window onto the soul. Contemporary scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have explored this new visual rhetoric, suggesting that the positionality of subject and object, and the impact of the gaze, have created a startling new social environment where all of the traditional ideas associated with visual judgement are now in flux or in question. In *Exposing Slavery*, Matthew Fox-Amato confirms this from a historical perspective, showing readers with actual photographs and through a narration on visual politics the surprising power of that new rhetoric in shaping American race-based slavery.

The common usage of the camera came about in the 1840s in the form of daguerreotypes, an era when Southern intellectuals and other apologists for slavery were struggling to justify a system that had been outlawed in much of the rest of the world, and was under increasing public scrutiny from other parts of the country where it was often seen as a blight on American democracy. The camera captured in remarkable detail, “the body, head and face—features central to defining racial identity and difference in the antebellum era” (p. 7). For physiognomists who had created a careful taxonomy of what race was, the camera represented both a threat to the status quo (if slaves in photos became objects of shared humanity) and an opportunity to strengthen the institution of slavery itself (if photos reinforced racial and class differences and normalized inequality).

Fox-Amato guides his readers through this revolutionary change, which happened quickly as the popularity of the camera accelerated, and in one particularly fascinating section, demonstrates how “chattel Madonnas” (images of enslaved African-American nannies holding young white children) became iconic photographic subjects in the South, and also a new medium

for controlling the racialized cultural narrative. They did sometimes show slaves as human, but only in the more important context of their racially subjugated identity.

The author also makes a historiographic point of marking photography as a unique source on par with diaries, letters, newspapers, and orations, but also being by itself an important “narrative” historical record. “Photographs are textual constructions” (p. 13), the author states, and the antebellum public’s widespread belief that the camera captured reality with a stunning exactitude was actually beholden to equally “new visual practices” (p. 28) which were quite subjective, contested, and socially constructed. In fact, Fox-Amato goes so far as to say that some types and forms of photography were likely intentionally created as a response to anti-slavery criticism in the North, or even books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a text that was shaping the American slavery narrative in a way threatening to the South. In essence, photographs quickly became a form of propaganda.

The book is well sourced and documented, and in fact the fifty-nine pages of end notes are so extensive that one might argue the text should have been longer, and the notes shorter. None-the-less, they are rich with additional context and information, and are a significant work in and of themselves.

The book also examines the impact of slave photography beyond the Civil War, suggesting that many visual practices of racism continued well beyond the formal abolition of race-based slavery. “It was undoubtedly the grotesque emergence of lynching photography in the late nineteenth century that marked the most significant extension of slaveholders’ image-making habits” (p. 231).

Fox-Amato’s book is a unique contribution to the historical record, and will also be of great use to scholars and students in disciplines outside of history, such as critical race theorists, or feminist scholars studying bodily image-making, and others. The text makes clear something already well-known: that race permeates almost everything in the American experience, including visual practices and photography.

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