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Morales, Mariah, "The Acts of Subjugation and Repatriation of Africa and its People through the Viewfinder" (2017). *Africana Studies Student Research Conference*. 2.

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The Acts of Subjugation and Repatriation of Africa and its People through the Viewfinder

Mariah Morales

5650: Critical Issues in Art & Technologies Photographic Theory

February 13, 2017

The continent of Africa and its inhabitants have faced a dark and violent past, including the “documenting” photography showing the people of Africa as scientific subjects rather than as people. Even now Africa deals with a sense of Western idealism and its clash with African culture due to bucolic aerial photographs that perpetuate a propagandist motive rather than showing the ever changing and convoluted reality. Tourism in Africa has brought in Western views and money, yes. However, there was a change of target audience in the post civil-rights era as African Americans felt the need to search for their origins. People are now challenging the act of documentation and the touristic view that is often portrayed of Africa. Photography can have many diverse effects, and most tend to be beneficial; however, the agent(s) behind the viewfinder can dictate limited views of a continent to show only an illusionistic gaze and subjugate a culture and its people.

During the nineteenth century, the daguerreotype was put to use in a very grim and compelling way. When photography arrived in Africa, not many people had access to the daguerreotype. The first one who probed the African continent was Jules Léger, a French daguerreotypist who arrived at Algoa Bay.¹ When Léger exhibited some of his work most of the photographs tended to show settler images and the colonizing of tribes. All the images were described in *Grahamstown Journal* as, “ beautiful, wonderful, and interesting.”²

¹ Patricia Hayes, “ Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography,” *University of Western Cape, Kronos*, no. 33 (2007): 139-162

²Patricia Hayes, 139.

In 1851 three daguerreotypists, Carel Sparmann, William Waller, and John Paul were all doing excellent business and they included the wet plate process in their photography business.³ The studios of S.B. Barnard and F. A. Y. York became most renowned in South Africa during the nineteenth century.⁴ One person who commissioned the studios was Sir George Grey; Sir Grey wanted pictures taken of the Breakwater Prison in Cape Town. When thinking of prisons and Sir Grey, one should take note of the establishment of Western government, along with the domination and subjugation of the indigenous people of South Africa. Figure 1 is a famous image taken after the cattle-killing (1856-1857); the woman is the prophetess, Nongqawuse, and the other young woman is Nonkosi. The image was taken in 1858.⁵ Patricia Hayes article states: “With the emergence of colonial photographic rituals one can see the marking of subjugation and power.”⁶ John Tagg also argued that photography “has no unity,’ it flickers across different spaces of institutions”.⁷

With that being stated, looking at Southern Africa in the nineteenth century, Hayes claims “Photography is related to the history of exploration, colonization, knowledge production and captivity.”⁸ To continue along this thread, another form of subjugation is called prison photography; it developed in South Africa in 1871. Many men were taken out of Breakwater Prison to be linguistically studied; two people who documented the men in a scientific setting were Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd.⁹ In the early twentieth century. One can see that

³ IBID

⁴ IBID

⁵ Patricia Hayes, 140.

⁶ IBID

⁷ Patricia Hayes, 142.

⁸ Patricia Hayes, 141.

⁹ Patricia Hayes, 141.

photography has been deeply rooted in Africa; people can see different avenues that agents had taken when photography was involved.

When gazing at aerial photographs of a beautiful country one cannot help but wish to go there and take in those exceptional views for oneself. However, could there be the complicated issue behind aerial photographs? Aerial photographs have become progressively beneficial for many different professional fields. Benjamin Fraser's article deals with the relative difficulty of finding a perspective of aerial photography correlated with an artistic or cultural perspective.¹⁰ Fraser states, after looking at an author on aerial photography, "It favors a cold treatment of images as self-sufficient documents instead of highlighting the conditions of their perception or elaborating on their aesthetic or cultural perspective."¹¹ While looking at figure 2, which shows the trails that could have been left by elephants making their way through the grasslands, one cannot help but get a sense of wonder, vexation, and joy.¹² Fraser argues, "It is precisely because of their beauty that these snapshots directly relate to the larger topic at hand a critique of the image-from-above and concomitantly an over-arching critique of the image itself as a static abstraction of a complex and contradictory reality."¹³ People behind aerial photography will not provide a chaotic and ever-changing view of life. For documentation purposes, they wish to show a limited vision of a place or culture.

Tourism can be seen as a double-edged concept; a country can always benefit from the money that will come from this venture. Unfortunately, with tourism visitors want to take in some of the "exotic" atmospheres, but not necessarily the whole culture. However, during the

¹⁰Benjamin Fraser, "The Ills of Aerial Photography: Latin America from Above," *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana*, *Chasqui*, no.2 (2010): 70-84.

¹¹ Benjamin Fraser, 72.

¹² Benjamin Fraser, 77.

¹³ Benjamin Fraser, 77.

Civil- Rights era expatriates were framing their ‘return’ tours as ‘Back to Africa.’¹⁴ The first big wave of African American tourism to Africa began in the late 1970s, and the number by the mid-1990s soared to tens of thousands per year.¹⁵ Salamishah Tillet brings in anthropologist Edward Brunner to explain this phenomenon. Brunner states: “ Many African American heritage tourists who travel to the slave forts are already motivated by the larger “quest for their roots, to experience the very sites from which their ancestors journeyed to the New world.”¹⁶ One place that was and still is frequently visited is The House of Slaves, which is located on Gorée Island. It could be seen during these visits that African Americans wanted to reclaim these slave forts in a desperate act to rediscover a point of cultural origin.

These Back to Africa tours brought together many different types of people, some of which were African American photographers. Two such photographers were Chester Higgins and Carrie Mae Weems. They traveled to Gorée Island, Senegal. For Higgins and Weems it was their goal to unearth concrete monuments of the slave trade, and engage in a touchstone of the lives and experience of their ancestors.¹⁷ Tillet argues that “ By privileging and reconstructing the House of Slaves at Gorée Island as the visual symbol of the entire slave trade, Higgins and Weems can remember slavery and reclaim Africa as an original site of African American identity.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Salamishah Tillet, “ In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans) Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Gorée Island”, *Indiana University Press, Research in African Literatures, Writing slavery in(to) the African Diaspora*, no. 4 (2009) : 122-141

¹⁵ Salamishah Tillet, 124.

¹⁶ IBID

¹⁷ Salamishah Tillet, 126.

¹⁸IBID.

One of Higgins work called “ The Door of No Return in The House of Slaves.” The image frames Higgins broader perspective of the African Diaspora.¹⁹ The fort then becomes the symbol of forced separation and loss of identity. Tillet describes how Higgins reinforces this bleak feeling through the “ Separation by foregrounding the silhouette of the young, black woman against a mysterious, ceaseless Atlantic Ocean.”²⁰ The saying “The Door of No Return,” was supposedly the last view of Africa before Africans were placed on a ship for the Western powers.²¹ Tillet profoundly describes the door and shillouet in Higgins photo in this quote:

The door in Higgins' photograph is even more pronounced, in the midst of the darkness that envelops the room, leading out past the female's body, into the Atlantic ocean, the only source of light comes from beyond the door, consists of sunlight bounced against and reflected from the Atlantic, is the suns reflection. As the sun hovers over the Atlantic Ocean, it simultaneously illuminates the haunting darkness of the House of Slaves. As a result, the doorway becomes the most significant object for the viewer. Even as our gaze is drawn to the camera's point of focus upon the Atlantic horizon (a perspective that in fact simulates the last memory before dispersal) the darkness of the silhouette and the doorway pulls us closer towards the Door of No Return. Since the doorway is occupied by the young woman who stands the intersection of darkness and blinding light- or between Africa and the New World. (130)

The description given from Tillet brings out the subjected feeling that no doubt the people who were enslaved felt during this brutal time. Higgins photograph is challenging the documentation of African slavery.

Weems challenges documentation photography by acknowledging the meaning behind documentary photographs. Brian Wallis who states, “Rethinking documentary photography as a constructed language rather than as an indisputable fact means recognizing photography as an agreed-upon fiction combining the aesthetic, ethical, political, and the social. She attempts to

¹⁹ IBID

²⁰ IBID

²¹ IBID

open up this discourse through the use of fictional or subjective forms, one such being storytelling.²² storytelling, photography is , “ The meaning resides not simply in the text itself or in the subject matter, but in the human transmission of experiences, the form itself foregrounds the act of exchange.”²³ weems wants to show an organic way of weaving a person's life, but not with empirical facts; truth is relative in storytelling photography.

Figure 4 is from Carrie Mae Weems series ‘From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried.’ Carrie Mae Weems uses a series of slave daguerreotypes, produced over one hundred and fifty years ago.²⁴ Figure 4, which is Delia, inscribes a white slogan across her chest, which is, You Became a Scientific Profile.²⁵ As stated in Smith’s article, *Fragmented Documents*, she describes how Weems, “ symbolic use of color in red filter, white inscriptions, and a black telescopic frame appropriates racist imagery and problematizes their objectivity and contrasts their accuracy.”²⁶ Carrie Mae Weems shows with text and image how an African American twentieth-century artist can sabotage and negate nineteenth-century male racist iconography.²⁷ With Delia’s photograph and text Celeste-Marie Bernier argues that; “Delia gains a highlighted dignity in Weems hands, while her newly inserted text partially obscures Delia’s breast, she crops this image to conceal her half-removed dress and thwarts audiences towards a voyeuristic

²² Brian Wallis, 60.

²³ IBID

²⁴Celeste-MarieBernier, 2008. African american visual arts: From slavery to the present. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 14.

²⁵IBID

²⁶ Cherise Smith, “ Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Willie Robert Middlebrook at The Art Institute of Chicago,” *Art Institute of Chicago*, no.2 (1999): 244-272

²⁷Celeste-MarieBernier,. 2008. African American visual arts: From slavery to the present. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 15.

viewing of a half naked slave woman's body."²⁸ Carrie Mae Weems these people are her ancestors, her people who have gone through an act of physical and emotional rape to their persons and culture.

Photography has many different profound effects; it can send ripples out into the world that turn into a tidal wave of movements and emotions. Whatever the individual or agent wishes to convey or allude to the spectator can weave an entirely different story of a continent. Views from above bring about a sense of a static image of a beautiful place. However the folly of these photos is that one is not getting a sense of the world below; an illusion is being created to perpetuate a touristic view. Many African American people purchased these African tours in a desperate and all too often-fruitless attempt to find their place of origin and sense of belonging that had been ripped away from them. Higgins and Weems, wanted and needed to reclaim slave forts and the people who passed through them as their ancestors and touchstones to a very real event that forcibly ripped them away from their home. Africa has been and still is too often a place of violence and confusion; going back to the nineteenth century photographs were taken with the act of documenting specimens rather than people. However, through the course of time people, such as Higgins and Weems, are standing against these photographs and telling a different story, one that sheds light on the abused and gives them back their dignity and humanity. We can see that even though photography can capture acts of subjugation, and domination, it can also show acts of reclaiming.

²⁸Celeste-MarieBernier, 2008. African American visual arts: From slavery to the present. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 16.

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Photo Reference



Figure 1 : Nongqawuse
usercontent2hubimgcom53
72937f248jpg



Figure 2: Elephant Trails, Zakouma National Park
Photographer: Kate Brooks



Figure 3: *The Door of No Return in the House of Slaves*
Photographer: Chester Higgins
<http://www.chesterhiggins.com>

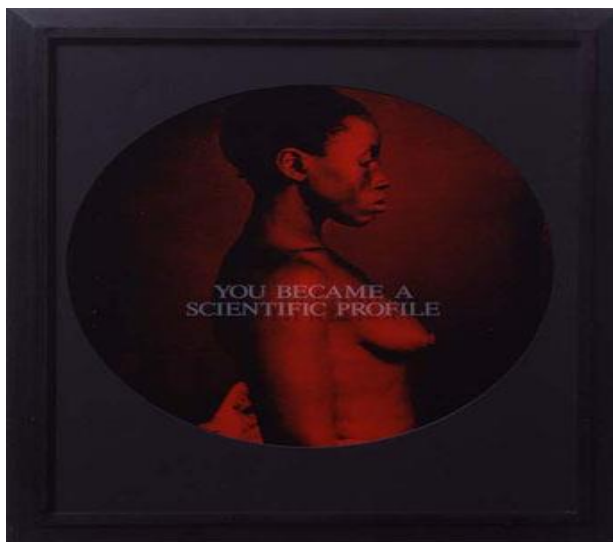


Figure 4: Delia,
Series: *From Here I Saw What Happened And I Cried*
<http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>