



THURSDAY, APRIL 11, AT 4 PM
THE COMMON ROOM IN WILLIAMS

“A Mighty Power”: Nineteenth Century Photography and the Visual Rhetoric of Racial Identity



For African Americans, language and literacy, especially through oral and written rhetoric, constituted a key tactic in the battle over racial identity, pointing to the importance of "fighting words" in debates over emancipation and racial equality. However, the existence of "fighting images" suggests as well the strategic importance of the visual in these battles and debates. The "picture making faculty," Frederick Douglass acknowledges in 1861, is a "mighty power," and the ones who wield it possess significant political capital. Focusing on the invention and popularity of photography, Dr. Fleckenstein examines the nature of that mighty power, arguing that photography presented a potent means to represent and culturally

position African American identity. More particularly, she addresses two key questions. First, how did photography emerge in the nineteenth century as an instrument of visual rhetoric? Second, how did photography's mighty power inflect nineteenth-century debates about racial identity? She begins with the impact of photography on nineteenth-century American culture where it initiated seismic changes, and then highlights the contribution of photography in defining what W. E. B. Du Bois in 1900 calls "the problem of the color line." Finally, bringing photography and race together, Dr. Fleckenstein concludes by analyzing a set of 1850 daguerreotypes, the earliest example of anthropological photography in America. Commissioned by Louis Agassiz, a white Harvard naturalist, and executed by J. T. Zealy, a white Southern photographer, these daguerreotypes display a double rhetorical invention: the development of a new visual technique called the "styleless style" and the use of that technique to depict black subjectivity as incapable of self-government or cultural advancement. Such a double rhetorical invention offers insights into the operation of early photography as a mighty power, one exercised in support of white supremacist ideology.

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