

# Louis Agassiz and his colonial legacy

Sina Jenny, Decolonize Zurich

Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) grew up as the son of a Protestant pastor in Môtier, Fribourg, Switzerland. He studied medicine and natural sciences in Biel, Lausanne and at the University of Zurich. During a study visit to Paris he met Alexander von Humboldt, a recognized German explorer and scientist, and Georges Cuvier, a French zoologist, who became two of his mentors. With the support of Cuvier, he published his widely recognized study on Brazilian fish in the Amazon region in 1829. His work on Central European freshwater fishes and new types of fossil fishes also received great recognition. By the time of his death in 1873, Agassiz had become one of the most important collectors and archivists of natural history, founding various natural history museums in Cambridge (Massachusetts), Charleston, and South Carolina.

Lesser known is his involvement in race theory as an advocate of polygenesis. He believed in the plural origin of mankind and saw the different ethnic groups as separate species with different origins. The theory was popularized by Samuel Morton (1799-1851) who is known for comparing the skulls of white, indigenous, and African Americans over several generations in his publication *Crania Americana* (1839). Morton theorized that different sizes and shapes of skulls proved the existence of different species and pointed to different origins of humans. The thesis opposed the theological worldview of a common origin of the world and contradicts Darwin's theory of evolution.

A clear example of Louis Agassiz racist intentions and colonial entanglements are a collection of fifteen photographs of enslaved people from South Carolina (USA) from 1850. He commissioned the daguerreotypes from the photographer Joseph T. Zealy. The images were intended to document racial characteristics, as was customary in eugenics at the time where photography was used to legitimize race theories. In one of the photographs, Delia, a black, enslaved woman, sits in front of a dark background, she is photographed from the head to her hip, with her face turned frontally to the camera. She is stripped bare, her dress pushed up to her hips. Seemingly emotionless, she looks into the camera. All of the fifteen photographs show the subjects half-naked and exposed to the gazer's eye.



The Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber has been dealing with the intertwining of Louis Agassiz and Switzerland for years in her art project "Demounting Agassiz". She uses her art to heal colonial trauma and draw attention to the racist and colonial past of Agassiz. She also offers a decolonial intervention of the so called "Slave Daguerrotypes". In her art piece "Tailoring Freedom" (2021), she retroactively clothes the nude, photographed subjects, Delia and her father Renty, with an embroidery technique of silver thread. With that she gives them back their dignity and identity.

Maria Machado for all the places named after Louis Agassiz in the world). While in the USA critical discussions around Agassiz work and legacy first began during the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the first discussions in Switzerland started only in the 2000s. Switzerland has still not fully reckoned with either Agassiz legacy nor its involvement in colonial race science. Since 2007, the campaign "Démonter Louis Agassiz" by the Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber has demanded the renaming of the Agassiz Horn. Although the Federal Council officially condemns Agassiz's racism, it does not advocate renaming the horn and thus, does not support a complete reappraisal of Agassiz's racist legacy. The ETH Zurich, which exhibits objects gathered by Agassiz in the Geological-Paleontological Collection mentions his involvement in the race-theoretical discourse in the collection description only in a subordinate sentence.

## Sources

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