

The Unseen Truth: When Race Changed Sight in America

Sarah Lewis

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The fictions that underlie racism and how they affect the way Americans perceive reality are dissected in Sarah Lewis's eye-opening history text, *The Unseen Truth*.

In his 1861 speech "Pictures and Progress," Frederick Douglass presented the new technology of photography as a means to promote racial equality in the US. Photography depicted reality, Douglass said, and could be used as a tool to distinguish between fact and fiction in the visual representation of Black Americans in politics and popular culture. But photography could also be a tool for the opposite, as demonstrated by the so-called Circassian beauties, women of ambiguous ethnicity who were displayed in circus sideshows to underscore the fiction of the Caucasus mountains as the homeland of the white race and whose images were sold as calling cards.

Douglass's speech and the Circassian beauties begin the book's thorough examination of the construction of a number of fictions used to uphold racial discrimination in the Civil War and Jim Crow eras. These fictions included Caucasians being white and the similarities between the Confederate States being "under attack" from the North and the Circassian people being eliminated by Russian imperialism. In the end, many refused to accept those realities that contradicted their specific worldviews.

Lewis analyzes positive and negative representation throughout to demonstrate that visuals are as much about absence as they are about presence. Though it sprawls and sometimes meanders, hers is a work of searing perspective, adjudicating race issues from the Reconstruction-era Supreme Court's argument in determining who is a white person to the recent replacement of stained-glass windows depicting Confederate generals in the Washington National Cathedral.

A multilayered and complicated history text, *The Unseen Truth* exposes ongoing historical narratives about who belongs in American society, revealing the skewed perceptions behind fiction-based racial systems.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (September / October 2024)

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