Black Female Hair and the Body as Site of Colonial Horror

by: Charmaine Nelson, Asst. Professor of Art History, McGill University, Montreal

I have been thinking about hair a lot, my hair, black female hair. On a recent trip to Cuba I became aware of a particular kind of bodily scrutiny. As a Canadian of Jamaican ancestry, I was told repeatedly by Cubans that my body looked Cuban enough, that is except for my hair. The cause? My dreadlocks were read not as a neutral black hair aesthetic as in many North American and European contexts, but as decidedly Rastafarian, Jamaican or both.

Joscelyn Gardner's lithography probes, among other things, precisely this type of difference - that of cross-racial, cross-cultural hair politics. As Kobena Mercer and other black scholars have duly noted, black hair is a fraught site weighted by the historical burden of colonial categorizations of race.[1] Second only to skin colour or complexion, hair texture evolved into a dominant signifier of corporeality - providing a supposedly objective visual text from which to assess, measure and locate bodies as raced in accordance with an implied social and political status. However, the problem of black hair is not only that is has historically signified racial otherness, but that, for centuries that otherness was potentially conflated with a slave status.

Joscelyn Gardner's eerily delicate lithographic portraits, invert the dominant western genre, problematizing its investment in the intersections between race and class in the traditional representations of so-called esteemed sitters. Put bluntly, the genre of portraiture was not only for white people, but rich whites, those with the economic position and social status to commission images of themselves and their families and those with the civic, social and political reputations to command respect within historically patriarchal and colonial societies. Slaves did not fit into this category. As such, individual portraits of black slaves are extraordinarily rare. Rather, the normative appearance of a black subject in western portraiture, has been in the subordinate position of servant to the white master or mistress who was accordingly the focus of

[1] Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha and Cornel West Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 249.

the portrait. Thus there is no shortage of anonymized black slaves, kneeling, bowing, genuflecting, offering any manner of delicacies, caring for children, fetching this or that, within western portraiture. What has historically been missing (and still is to a degree absent), are images which offered these subjects as human - as individuals, with names and identities and lives rendered distinct from their owners.

Joscelyn's lithographic images of the backs of black women's heads, although inverted and without faces, rather ironically offer this individuation and humanity, although importantly they do not glamourize the potential for freedom or agency, nor do they pose an uncomplicated representation of complex racial and social histories. Rather, they provoke us through a beauty and masterful intricacy - the crisply differentiated parts and braids - that is often difficult to look at - the assorted embedded implements of slave torture. I would like to offer a visual art context for these lithographs in terms of their debt to and sophisticated departure from the western traditions of representing the black female subject in portraiture and figure painting. It is this difference which make this work so knowledgeably compelling and provocative.

While many postcolonial scholars have written about black hair in the context of the lived experience in the colonial west, fewer have contemplated the issue in terms of its representation within visual culture. But two significant genres of western visual art - figure painting and portraiture - are central to an understanding of the conceptualization of hair as a racialized corporeal site and also of its place within the representations of human subjects in visual culture. It is almost unnecessary for me to point out, that professional artists in western colonial societies have been dominantly white. The intellectual, economic and social demands of art-making have been historically deemed to be utterly unsuited to the so-called inferior minds of the black race. Thus, for centuries, western artistic representations of black bodies were almost exclusively in the hands of white artists. The social, political, economic and cultural gaps between white artists and their black subjects has meant that the circumstances in which these artists conceptualized their works, found, chose and secured their models and produced their art were open to wide cross-racial and cross-class abuses and exploitation.

One quick example is the Canadian artist Prudence Heward, an early 20thc. figure and portrait painter whose oeuvre contains some five black female nudes of a disturbing psychological disposition. Research to date indicates that Heward, a rich white female artist from Westmount, arguably the richest district of Montreal, which itself spatially resembles (at least to me) a plantation, used her black female domestic servants as models for these nude studies. We must consider the nature of the cross-racial interaction between these women and the possibilities for equitable interaction or agency on the part of the black subjects.

But we must also consider the actual visual representation of black hair within these genres. Whereas Joscelyn's lithographs celebrate black female hair through an intricacy and precision which captures both texture and what can be described as Afro-centric styles, this has not historically been the case. Rather, there have been two dominant tendencies within the representation of black female hair which run counter to Gardner's tactic. Both tendencies are linked to the colonial ideal of black corporeality as inferior to white. The first has taken the forms of both localizing and exoticizing gestures. The Mammy or the harem girl are both black female subjects that have been juxtaposed with the white bodies of women or children in order to point up the racial superiority and supposed beauty of the latter. Within such images, the black female subject's head is often bound with head tie or orientalizing fabric in order to contain and eliminate the hair of the head as a potentially transgressive site of racial difference.[2] The works of French artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix all exhibit the orientalizing motif while countless American artists, many who worked in the southern United States, have problematically used the former strategy.

When the hair of the black female head has not been contained, it has often been neutralized in other ways. One such way is the stylization or idealization of black female hair

[2] This is not to negate the evidence of culturally and ethnically specific head adornment and costuming traditions amongst black women, but merely to acknowledge the ultimate power of the artists during sittings with a portrait or figure painting subject, to control and manipulate the types and amount of clothing worn. See: Helen Bradley Griebel, "The West African Origin of the African-American Headwrap," ed. Joanne B. Eicher, Jonathan Webber, Shirley Ardener, Tamara Dragadze, Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time (Oxford: Berg, 1995)

which has been tantamount to "straightening" it into a style and texture associated with a white female body. This latter gesture has often been disconnected from the actual hair texture of the black female model, but rather has been a strategy on the part of the white artist to control the sign of black corporeality and process it into something palatable to the dominant white gaze of the art audience. The "whitening" of black female hair has often been used by white artists who have represented black female subjects in ways which contests their stereotyping as ugly or masculine. However, ironically, the racial transformation of their hair into a so-called whiter form, has denied the inherent beauty of the black body and instead celebrated the black body only in its proximity to whiteness. Historical western art works which detailed the specificity of black female hair texture and style are more likely to have emerged from ethnographic contexts and thus had decidedly ulterior motivations - many explicitly colonial.

The difference of Joscelyn's representation of black female hair is not only about the head, it is also about other parts of the body and how the visual signs of the body are produced in order to racialize sexuality. I am referring to Joscelyn's pubic triangles, equally intricate lithographs which pattern the often invisible genital hair of the female body. Evoking the specificity of texture and style once again, these images in their revelation of the often hidden, compel us to consider the specificity of the black female body as sexual and sexualized object of slavery. Slavery was founded upon the sexual exploitation of black women as breeders and nurse maids who could ensure the economic profitability of entire plantations because their bodies could be harnessed to produce human commodities. The significance of Joscelyn's pubic triangles is the gender-specificity of this sexual exploitation which has been cited as the roots of sadomasochism. At the origin of the colonial dichotomy of racialized sexuality is the obscene indifference to black female bodies and sexuality that was simultaneous to the obsessive protectionism of white female bodies and sexuality. Scholars of Trans Atlantic Slavery like Deborah Gray White have detailed the nature of black female slavery and the commonality of the public display of black female bodies within systems like auction, labour and punishment.[3]

[3] Deborah Gray White Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W.W. Norton and

This visibility lead to a stereotype of hyper-sexuality which was founded upon the socially embedded construction of sexuality as a race-specific category.

Western figure painting in the form of the nude has traditionally had no use for pubic hair. Pubic hair on adult female subjects was erased and policed as transgressive and a potentially pornographic sign of sexual complicity and self-knowledge.[4] It is common to see nineteenth-century white female nudes with a plethora of phallicized head hair, and yet absolutely no body hair of any kind.[5] The later Modernist artistic representation of pubic hair was a breech with tradition which intersects with the advent of the "New Woman", the European appropriation of non-western art and its attendant negrophilia and the break with the dictates of the European Salon system. Joscelyn's rendering of pubic hair into recognizable patterns and styles individuates for public consumption a part of the body, associated with the private and the personal, which has for centuries never quite been thus for black women. They therefore question where recognizable public identity is situated on the body - and for whom.

Hair for Joscelyn is a site of pleasure, indicated in the rituals of grooming which the intricate styles imply. But it is also a site of torture, restraint and pain. The whips, chains and restraints which are bound into the hair of these faceless women are slave-specific torture technology which point up slavery not just as a "Peculiar Institution", but as a "Peculiar Industry". Nineteenth-century abolitionist art was full of representation of these horrific contraptions. Female allegories of Liberty or America were often represented trampling on whips and shackles while holding aloft wreaths, torches and flags. While many paintings and travel books like J. G. Stedman's Narratives of a Five Years' Expedition (1796) contained images detailing the torture of black male and female slaves, Joscelyn's embedding strategy demands that her viewers consider the extent to which such instruments were not only applied to the body

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Company, 1999)

[4] Charmaine Nelson, "*Coloured Nude*: Fetishization, Disguise, Dichotomy" Canadian Art Review, XXII, 1-2/1995 (Fall, 2003)

[5] Lynda Nead The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality (London: Routledge, 1992)

but used to transform and mark slave bodies in horrific and brutal ways.[6]

I have recently been researching France's colonial slave laws, Le Code Noir, and their connection to the representation of a black female slave in an eighteenth-century portrait produced in New France, now Quebec Canada.[7] What the Code has revealed is the extent to which instruments and practices of torture were deliberately contrived not only to inflict excruciating pain, but to cripple and deform black slave bodies in spectacular ways. For instance, runaway slaves could be punished with the severing of an ear, and branding and whipping were equally common. The embedding of implements of torture into the backs of the black women's heads and hair in Joscelyn's lithography asks us to consider not only the nature and scope of slave torture, but the extent to which such acts came to be a part of the conflation of the black body and the slave body.

The hair stories that Joscelyn has offered us in these lithographs have grave historical and contemporary significance. With unflinching precision, they offer us aesthetically beautiful images which nonetheless test our ability as viewers to contemplate evidence of racially-motivated horror. I am grateful to Joscelyn for her unflinching representations which call us to contemplate the shared pain and sorrow of our interconnected, inter-racial histories.

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[6] The full title of the work was: J. G. Stedman's Narratives of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the year 1772, to 1777: elucidating the History of that Country, and the Description of its production, viz. Quadrupedes, Birds, Fishes, Reptiles, Trees, Shrubs, Fruits and Roots; with an Account of the Indians of Guiana, and the Negroes of Guinea 2 vols., (London: J. Johnson, St. Pauls Church Yard and J. Edwards, Pall Mall,1796)

[7] Charmaine Nelson, "Slavery, Portraiture and the Colonial Limits of Canadian Art, "*Women and the Black Diaspora* Canadian Woman Studies/les cahier de la femme (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., forthcoming 2004)