

Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 248 pp., 20 b/w illus. ISBN: 9781138864610.

Reviewed by: Raven Spiratos, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Raven Spiratos ©

Raven.spiratos@mail.mcgill.ca

Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art travels across time and lands to cull the various visual productions that feature black women within western art conscious of Canada's consistent exclusion from such discussions. To prove it a necessary exertion of effort, Nelson firmly situates "Canada as a location of Black Diaspora," (9) amending Canadian art history by bringing to light the social, political and racial contexts woefully untapped in analyzing works of art that undeniably require such considerations such as Edouard Manet's heralded *Olympia* (1863) among others. Nelson employs a *longue durée* framework that brings the case studies into their historical origins allowing a particular focus on what would have been imperceptible without enlarging the scope of relevant historical processes. The black subject is so inextricably linked to the history of slavery that this becomes the grounding backdrop for this book. To speak of the black female subject in Western art without referencing slavery would not only be an unforgivable omission, it would also perpetuate and participate in the continual erasure of this history of slavery within the discipline of Art History.

Nelson carefully and critically groups many artworks across genres to expose their unique implications that lie dormant under the surface of "various types of art, like sculpture, painting, prints and photography" (179). The book organizes the analysis of artworks under themes, branching off into chapters that correlate to the subjects (both implicit and explicit within) that hone the discussion around four prevalent iterations of black women in art: (1) From Girls to Women: Locating Black Female Subjects in Western

Art, (2) Slavery and Portraiture: Agency, Resistance and Art as Colonial Discourse, (3) The Nude and the Naked: Black Women, White Ideals and the Racialization of Sexuality and (4) From White Marble to Coloured Stone: Aesthetics, Materiality and Degrees of Blackness.

In the introduction, Nelson describes her unique position as a Black woman in Art History by noting “the absence of myself within the discipline” (1) a fact that has followed her throughout her formative student years well into her professional career and that still holds true today as she remains the first and only black professor of Art History (and female) to hold tenure at a Canadian university since 2001. By asking “[h]ow could one rigorously and critically analyze a work like Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* [...] without discussing his choice of a demurely clothed black female servant juxtaposed with the naked body of the white female prostitute?” (1) Nelson prefaces the need for a New Art History methodology that stresses the importance of the social, political and economic contexts in readings of artworks, demonstrating such emphasis to be just as relevant as the aesthetic, material and artistic components of a given artwork.

This feminist revisionist perspective is equally invested in bell hooks’ concept of margin centering as Nelson “attempt[s] to listen to the black female subjects themselves, women and girls whose bodies and labour were actually not marginal at all, but rather absolutely central to European programs of imperialism and colonization” (15). Nelson anchors her intersectional analysis throughout the book in postcolonial, black feminist and psychoanalytic methodologies as well as inserting extensive historical context at every turn. Part history book, part art historical survey manual, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* truly is an educational resource that is accessible to a diverse

readership regardless of their previous knowledge level and/or familiarity with the theories and methodologies used. Nelson spares no energy even down to the footnotes which are a gold mine of additional information in and of themselves.

The Nude and the Naked unveils the art historical differences between the two through Kenneth Clark. Nelson reveals the racial implications that lie under the surface of such devices by delving into the ways in which the nude (white) female is elevated to the status of allegory whereas the naked is relegated to the realm of pornography (a category that the racialized body was almost exclusively admitted into). To make this argument clear, Nelson presents the reader with many visual examples; notably Canadian painter Dorothy Steven's *Coloured Nude* (1933), Max Weber's *Retirement* (1921) and Manet's *Olympia*. Although Steven's *Coloured Nude* occupies the unsavory realm of naked more so than nude, it still achieves institutional acclaim as if it were not offensively overt in its hypersexualization. Nelson suggests that had the subject been a white woman, this carnality would have provoked immediate censorship. Instead, the subject's racial identity is deployed to normalize such fetishization as "within colonial discourse, blackness has afforded artists the license to invest an overdetermined sexuality in the represented body; what is offensive or pornographic for the white body being deemed natural and essential to the black" (110). Nelson further solidifies her argument by examining the pose of the subject, here standing with "closed eyes, cast in shadow" (116) which break with the conventions of sexual innocence that were employed to justify the white women's nudity. *Coloured Nude* through her activated, standing pose fails to communicate sleep/death or environmental interference therefore ascribing to the

woman a sexual deviancy that here is supposedly pathologically embedded due to her race (119).

In Max Weber's *Retirement*, Nelson demonstrates what happens when the white woman is described through corporeal vocabulary understood to communicate blackness. Weber's fleshy bodies illustrate the women as being ample bosomed and bottomed. Nelson relates the censorship of this work in Canada to its resemblance to Hottentot bodies, which here denote that "anatomical and physiognomical signs of the body were as important as colour in the identification of race" (135). The outcry around this work and others by Weber is understood by Nelson to be a result of Weber's disregard for signaling the white women's body as Black therefore disrupting the sexual purity of white women very much like Manet's *Olympia*. By redressing the traditional yet problematic reading of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) that often disregards the black maid's presence—despite the fact that she is contingent to the viewer's understanding of this very painting—Nelson reveals the power in addressing the obvious race relations in this artwork to come to a truer reading of the painting. Nelson argues that *Olympia* was so controversial because of Manet's reversal of an undesirable type of sexuality onto the white woman at the center, "investing her with a carnality usually reserved for racial 'others'" thereby "shatter[ing] the elaborately constructed artifice of the courtesan as Desire" (112).

This dichotomy of naked/nude is continued in the final part of the book where Nelson focuses on the neoclassical sculptures of white marble and their inherent racial implications. Nelson argues that such artistic concern with the material's aesthetic was in fact coded suppression of race, in particular, blackness (14). In chapter 6 titled *White*

Marble, John Gibson's *Tinted Venus* (c. 1851-56) is at the center of this analysis as the marble sculpture's colored surface illuminates the contemporary push-back against the classical tradition of polychromy because it rendered the nude subject all too real; shifting the allegory from nude to naked (relegating it to the pornographic as summarized above). What is particularly singular in this chapter, as opposed to the previously mentioned one, is that this *Tinted Venus* takes on characteristics of the interracial octoroon when described as having a "ruddy" complexion (145). The initial allegory as expressed by the classical elements of the posing of the female body is perverted, Nelson suggests, because of its affinity to blackness –here offering a way into consuming this image for sexual pleasure (as always for the white heterosexual male gaze). I was very intrigued at the staging of this plate image within the book, as it –like all the other images –is black and white which is simply unfortunate when considering that Nelson's main points center around the artwork's color elements. That being said, it offers a very interesting visual conundrum as without its controversial coloring, the *Tinted Venus* appears so benign as to not incite a second glance, thereby demonstrating just how divisive such a matter of race as defined by color would have been in 1851-1856.

In *Racing Childhood*, Nelson centers her analysis around the questions 'what is childhood?' and 'what does childhood look like?' She complicates this by interjecting post-colonial analysis in this portion by acknowledging that childhood is a privilege deeply tied to class and race:

To examine race and childhood is to call for a postcolonial reading capable of scrutinizing the ways in which the western scholarship of Childhood Studies has neglected the bodies and subjectivities of Native children and children of colour and centralized the white child as the universal paradigm upon which explorations should be based (38).

What this does for the rest of the chapter is that it justifies the slotting of black childhood into its particular historical context that indelibly lies in the history of slavery.

Not only limiting herself to what is visually represented, Nelson begins with a series of reality checks that originate in the treatment of enslaved women and how their child would suffer from malnutrition that “start[ed] in the womb” (41), resulting in underweight babies that would continue to have “nutritional deficiencies [...] that slave children inherited from their mothers at birth would continue through nursing because the quality of the breast milk was affected by a slave mother’s health” (41). Nelson continues to draw out the implications of the institution of slavery on developing children by taking the time to humanize their traumatic experiences without losing her focus: “[it] is hard to fathom the psychic and emotional burden that black slave children would have felt when they reached an age at which they connected their mother’s loving attention to her violent abuse at the hands of white enslavers” (43). These particular insights that Nelson gleans from archival research create a composite portrait of enslaved children and their plight. This is essential to Nelson’s particular approach, not only in *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*, but is present as a distinctive style in her scholarship, as she addresses the gaps in visual representations of black subjects (particularly during the period of Transatlantic slavery) by allowing herself to responsibly hypothesize around the unique experience that would otherwise be left unstated, further othering the enslaved despite the best of intentions. Here, the contemplation of possible truths garnered by extensive archival dedication repositions the previously marginalized to the center continuously throughout the book.

Nelson's black feminist revisionist perspective is supremely perceptible in Part II; *Slavery and Portraiture: Agency, Resistance and Art as Colonial Discourse* within her analysis of *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786) by Francois Malépart de Beaucourt. This very important exploration puts into practice Nelson's mandate of rectifying the erasure of slavery from Canadian history by demonstrating how obvious it is within Malépart de Beaucourt's work. The urgency to revisit this portrait through the intersectional lens Nelson has undertaken cannot be overstated as this painting "has traditionally been discussed almost entirely in terms of its stylistic and tonal properties" (65), completely disregarding its primary subtext entrenched in visualizing the black body as commodity:

The prolific disavowal of the racial implications of this unique portrait has occurred despite the artist's obvious desire to foreground the slave's sexual and reproductive utility through the exposed breast over the plate of tropical fruit, despite the known historical documents that record the slave as the legal property of the artist and despite the circulating title of the work that indexes both the significance of the race (*Negro*) and the subordinate legal status of the sitter (*slave*) and even despite the obvious opportunities to address the circumstances of production, the function and circulation of a unique portrait whose commission was likely (and unusually) not instigated by its sitter herself (for how many slaves had the agency or the wealth to commission portraits?) (66).

Meticulously, Nelson provides extensive proof that substantiates the sitter as Marie-Thérèse-Zémire (via Trudel) (70), the enslaved woman held by the artist's wife as opposed to the "perfectly free young West Indian" as argued by Major-Frégeau (65). Nelson continues with a detailed analysis in the second chapter of the section by centering around the "still life tray of fruits" that she posits "signal the racialized sexualization of the black female sitter" (77). By calling attention to the particular produce represented, Nelson zeros in on the *pomme-cannelle*, or sugar apple, that is the sole fruit not on the tray carried by the sitter. Through this consideration, Nelson is able to bring in

the strategies of female resistance against rape and breeding coercion. Therefore, whereas white viewers would see this sugar apple as the pinnacle of exotic luxury, enslaved women were using it as an abortifacient. This gap in the sugar apple's symbolism is only accessible through the type of reading that Nelson is undertaking. Furthermore, Nelson posits the possibility that the sitter would have chosen the fruit as her domestic slave status would require of her, resulting in Marie-Thérèse-Zémire exercising some agency over the still-life which Nelson suggests "may indicate her knowledge of the foreign fruits, her specific knowledge of the sugar apple as a symbol of black female slave resistance in diaspora and her defiant attempt to register her unwillingness to be represented in a portrait by her master and represented in this way" (85). I wonder if this choice is also telling of her own sexual abuse as it could perhaps be documenting her need for such an abortive tool just as it might demonstrate Zémire taking the opportunity to reclaim control over her own body through the "practice of abortion as resistance" (82). Nelson concludes this chapter by opening up the portrait to more interpretations as her particularly focused analysis "does not exclusively hold all of the relevant information with which to analyze the meanings of this painting" (86).

Throughout the entirety of the book, Nelson does not miss an opportunity to purposefully consider the enslaved as humans, respecting their humanity all the while writing about how it was denied them. I was particularly impressed with the discreet examples of this (not to say that more overt examples of this do not exist, because they are aplenty); in Nelson's discussion of Olivier Le Jeune, the "first documented black slave in the part of New France that would come to be known as the province of Quebec," she deliberately specifies after his name "*as he was renamed* (italics mine)" which acts to

recuperate, albeit partially, his agency (67). This speaks to the tone of the book in which Nelson reinforces the individuality and humanity of the black enslaved person, demonstrating page after page the lengths taken to debase, dehumanize and deflate them down to the mundane aspects of personhood that were “oftentimes simply normal behaviours of a person with thoughts, feelings and emotions” (96). Nelson also champions the ways in which black enslaved people were constantly resisting in their everyday existence: huckstering “demonstrates a widespread and persistent entrepreneurial spirit that even the violent abuses of slavery could not destroy” (92).

In conclusion, this peppering of concise historical context is crucial to counter the erasure of racial and social context within Art History. The traditional readings of so-called classic Western art are supremely contested throughout Charmaine A. Nelson’s *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art*. The historical context that has languished in the dark is now center-stage and plays an essential role in making sense of the representations of black female subjects in Western art. In order to do this properly, a multitude of experiences and research across national boundaries is required to supplement the gaps in documentation as well as compliment the similar slave practices that occur due to the “shared similar experiences of forced acculturation, although under different European flags and with varying levels of contact with indigenous populations” (97). This book is uncontestably important to the burgeoning studies of Black Canadian Art History as it is the first book of its kind. Its interdisciplinary methodologies combine historical knowledge with critical thinking that challenge the traditional ways in which black female subjects have been understood (if at all) within canonical Art History. Intertwined with the history of Transatlantic Slave Trade, the black female subject has and continues

to be subjugated to its legacy. Nelson employs a revisionist lens (in addition to her postcolonial, black feminist and psychoanalytic methodologies) which is completely apropos and is necessary as this book dispels the myth that slavery no longer impacts race relations and makes a case for its continued consideration. Nelson is deeply invested in re-inserting this disregarded history of slavery into Art History and this is particularly present in her Canadian focused chapters. Her meticulous research and writing contribute greatly to the development of a Canadian art history that is more inclusive of race. Nelson's newest edited book, *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance* (2018) follows up on this.