

31 August 2016

Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, eds. *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 468 pp. 11 plates. ISBN 978-1-107-00439-9.

Reviewed by Victoria Lessard, McGill University, Montreal, Canada  
© Victoria Lessard  
victoria.lessard@mail.mcgill.ca

*Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (2013) is a volume of essays edited by Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and the late Angela Rosenthal. Published in 2013, this book is ground-breaking within the field of the Visual Culture of Slavery Studies. The subjectivity of an enslaved person was one which is continuously subject to erasure by the slave owning classes who attempted to remove individuality, and transform the person into a commodity object. The genre of portraiture, however, is one which is predicated on the individuation of the subject. It is important to note that portraiture was a genre which was available only to those with the social and economic means to commission such a work - the disenfranchisement of enslaved peoples meant that they were unable to participate in the practice of portraiture considered to be within the realm of "high" art, and thus commission and shape their own individual image. The tension between these two seemingly at-odds categories (erasure and individuation) is what Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal propose to explore through the fourteen chapters presented in this book. The editors have compiled a work which can be utilized as a crucial text for scholars in many different fields. However, while *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* advances this field of scholarship in significant ways, there is a gap of considerable importance in the chapters presented - namely, the perpetuation of the erasure of the historical legacy of

slavery within Canada through the exclusion of a chapter examining Francois Malépart de Beaucort's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786).<sup>1</sup>

In "Introduction: Envisioning Slave Portraiture," Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal address the crux of the issue which their edited volume proposes to explore: "the paradoxical presence and erasure of the enslaved subject in portraiture, a genre founded in Western modernity on the power to evoke and revoke subjectivity by producing the visual fiction of an individualized and autonomous self." (4) Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal embrace this tension as the central question which this book proposes to examine. The editors cite this paradox between categories as a tension within the slave body itself, as both a body which has been subject to "erasure," as well as being made "hypervisible." (4, 6) The slave was constantly subject to the removal of their individuality in order to be viewed as a commodity rather than human subject. However, enslaved people were also under a constant state of surveillance. Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal propose to examine how these two states play out within the genre of the portrait.

The editors establish the parameters of their project in the introduction - the chapters within the volume focus on the period from 1599 to 1888 within the world of trans-Atlantic slavery (including the British, Spanish, French, Dutch colonial empires), within three specific mediums of portraiture: painting, print, and sculpture. (7) In an accompanying footnote, the editors note that photographic portraits of enslaved persons will not be examined within the scope of their work. This decision is academically sound within the proposed scale of the book as only a select few regions produced photographs of enslaved people (the United States, Cuba and Brazil, due to their

respective late dates of abolition). They have divided the essays within four thematic groups: "Visibility and Invisibility," "Slave Portraiture, Colonialism, and Modern Imperial Culture," "Subjects to Scientific and Ethnographic Knowledge," and "Facing Abolition." Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal argue that the intentions of the book are to function partly as an "archival endeavor" as well as to "explor[e] portraiture and enslavement in order to throw both into question." (11, 23) However, the editors note that it is not their intention for the text to function as a "survey [of] a 'genre'." (23)

The focus of the tension between individuality and erasure within the depiction of an enslaved person is one which has not been subject to a large scale investigation within the field of the Visual Culture of Slavery Studies until now. This original work lives up to its intended purpose of partially functioning as an archive - the scholars who have contributed to the volume have worked to recuperate the individual lives of the people who are depicted in (or in certain chapters, created) the artworks they are writing about. This recuperation pushes back against the erasure of the individuals lives, particularly within essays in which the individuals represented have been subject to misperception or misinformation.

*Slave Portraiture* will prove interesting for readers within a wide variety of fields (apart from its obvious and much-needed relevance in art historical scholarship) for its focused research within an area which has received little to no scholarly attention or publication. It has relevance to Post-Colonial theory, Black Diaspora Studies, Trans Atlantic Slavery scholarship, Race and Representation Studies, and Feminist scholarship, among others. The literature on which this book draws is key texts in the Visual Culture of Slavery Studies, such as Beth Fowkes Tobin's *Picturing Imperial*

*Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (1999), Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (2000), Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz's edited volume, *An Economy of Color: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830* (2003), and Kay Dian Kriz's *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840* (2008).

*Slave Portraiture* pushes the scholarship in the above foundational books further, in subject matter as well as length. *Slave Portraiture* is the first volume to specifically examine portraits of slaves. However, it is evident that there is a gap missing within the texts used to inform the scholarly inquiry that shaped this book - Charmaine Nelson's *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (2010). Part II of Nelson's work, titled "Slavery and Portraiture: Agency, Resistance and Art as Colonial Discourse," is dedicated to the examination which *Slave Portraiture* proposes to conduct. The absence of a reprinting of one of Nelson's three chapters in the aforementioned part of her book and the erasure of Nelson as a source which could have informed the volume led to a gap of knowledge within the book, which is discussed in further detail below.

*Slave Portraiture* is a leading work of scholarship in the field of the Visual Culture of Slavery. However, there are two areas in which the work could be subject to improvement. The first is the placement of the eleven colour plates in the text. All of them have been placed together at the end of Part I, "Visibility and Invisibility." While the text does an excellent job of including multiple images within each essay, the placement of the colour plates is awkward. Ideally, a colour plate would have been included at the beginning of each chapter, so the reader could easily refer to the specific work while reading the text. This would also mean a colour plate for each chapter, rather than a

select number. If this was not possible, the colour plates should have been grouped together after the introduction, or at the end of the text in order to facilitate finding the images for reference.

Second, there is a gap within an otherwise incisive work of scholarship - slave portraiture within the Canadian historical legacy of slavery. The introduction largely discusses portraiture within plantation slavery - however, Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal do not explicitly specify plantation slavery as the sole facet of slavery to be examined in the volume, and indeed, the various authors whose work is published in the volume step outside of this parameter. Therefore, the introduction stages an unstated bias towards tropical and semi-tropical plantation slavery which is not continued throughout the book. Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal name the trans-Atlantic system of slavery as their purview, but nowhere in the volume is Canada subject to discussion. As a country which frequently denies its historical legacy of slavery while celebrating its short history of participation in the Underground Railroad, it is troubling to see this erasure of slavery in Canada perpetuated within this volume. While it is understood that this volume is not meant to be an extensive survey, the rare example of a portrait of an enslaved person within Canadian art history, Francois Malépart de Beaucort's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786), makes the failure to include this portrait a serious misstep on the behalf of an otherwise nuanced and critical volume. Nelson's *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* extensively discusses Beaucort's *Portrait of a Negro Slave*. The scholar discusses the question of subjectivity in relation to the sitter of the portrait, and recuperates the identity of the sitter, Marie-Thérèse Zémire. Nelson then outlines the potential for modes of resistance within the portrait, a discussion which would have

complemented the examination of the tension between the representation and subjectivity of enslaved people within the genre of the portrait. A discussion of *Portrait of a Negro Slave* would fit well within the parameters of Part II, "Slave Portraiture, Colonialism, and Modern Imperial Culture." The inclusion of this discussion in any updated editions of this book, or any future work of scholarship regarding this subject would give Canadian slavery further visibility within Visual Culture of Slavery scholarship and work to dismantle the systemic modes of erasure of this history within Canadian scholarship and Canadian society at large.

The first of the four thematic sections of *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* is "Visibility and Invisibility." This section consists of three chapters: Marcia Pointon's "Slavery and the Possibilities of Portraiture," David Bindman's "Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture: From Courtly to Commercial Societies," and Eric Slauter's "Looking for Scipio Moorhead: An 'African Painter' in Revolutionary North America." Pointon's chapter is an excellent jumping-off point for the reader of this volume, since it works to further outline the tension between erasure and individuation that Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal discuss in the introduction. Pointon achieves this through two sets of analysis: the first, a comparison between the oil painting *Elihu Yale, the 2nd Duke of Devonshire, Lord James Cavendish, Mr. Tunstal, and a Page* (ca. 1708) (artist unknown) and William Hoare's *Portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, called Job ben Solomon (1701-73)* (1733); the second, an analysis of *Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston* (1773), the frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773).<sup>2</sup> Pointon begins by addressing her own

definition of a portrait: "strictly speaking to mean an individual known to have lived depicted for his or her own sake." (42)

In the first analysis, Pointon compares the two images to examine the definition of a "portrait" in relation to an enslaved person, and the enslaved person's subjectivity in relation to the creation of their own image. Pointon draws in two methodological terms to discuss this tension - "oblivion": "a failure of some kind, a psychic incapacity to see what is there to be seen," and "*ritratti rubati*": "stolen portraits", or "images of individuals taken without their consent, without their knowledge, and even in opposition to their wishes." (48) Pointon's second analysis, the frontispiece to Wheatley's poetry book, examines the dynamic between the "[mythicism of] place" versus "physiognomic scrutiny as a mechanism for identification [...] as a substitute for habitus in the case of slave portrait subjects." (56, 61) Pointon points out how the apparatus surrounding people in portraits is often what is used to identify them, and argues that in the case of slave portraiture, the slave is problematically unable to be connected with a "habitus" - any environment which the enslaved person inhabits is not through their own creation, but rather has been acted upon them. Pointon argues it is this which works to create a "doubling" - a representation of the individual, and conversely, the owner, turning the individual into object through a depiction of them as subject. (62)

The second of the four thematic sections is "Slave Portraiture, Colonialism, and Modern Imperial Culture." This section includes four chapters: Tom Cummins' "Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas: A Portrait Fit for a King," Carmen Fracchia's "Metamorphoses of the Self in Early-Modern Spain: Slave Portraiture and the Case of Juan de Pareja," Geoff Quilley's "Of Sailors and Slaves: Portraiture, Property, and the

Trials of Circum-Atlantic Subjectivities, ca. 1750-1830," and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz's "Between Violence and Redemption: Slave Portraiture in Early Plantation Cuba." In his chapter, Quilley proposes to examine slave portraiture through the comparison of the genre to depictions of sailors within the same period. Quilley states: "subjectivity and its indeterminability are crucial to the representation of both blacks and sailors in this period [the eighteenth century], and [...], consequently, the consideration of sailors might illuminate aspects of the portrayal of black slaves." (174)

Significantly, Quilley's definition of slave portraiture differs from Pointon's essay. Pointon and Quilley's different definitions of slave portraiture contribute to the scholarship within the book by contesting and continuously redefining the two fundamental concepts underlying slave portraiture - "erasure" and "hypervisibility." (4, 6) Lugo-Ortiz and Rosenthal outline this as an intended facet of their book in the introduction, stating: "[W]e accept the instability, along with the voids, absences, and erasures; we look for those 'oppositional gazes' and 'oppositional attitudes' around which one might construct an account of presence, while acknowledging the fiction of pictorial and sculptural representations." (23) Indeed, each chapter in the book builds upon, contests, or presents a different definition of "slave portraiture."

Pointon argues that a portrait is one in which the person depicted is represented as an individual, which would include depictions of enslaved peoples as servants in portraits. For Quilley, the lack of subjectivity on the part of the black servant in their own representation, much like depictions of sailors of the same time period, means that the person is "subjected to the genre" rather than a "subject of the genre." (177) Quilley identifies the achievement of subjectivity, for both enslaved persons and sailors, through

owning "possessions (one's property)" and "what was intrinsic to the individual person or object (one's properties)." (182) Quilley reads the frontispiece, *Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789), to Olaudah Equiano's (a black sailor who was enslaved and eventually freed) narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), as a true portrait in which this display of subjectivity is presented through both property, his possession of a bible, and properties, the display of his education and knowledge.

The third thematic section of this volume is "Subjects to Scientific and Ethnographic Knowledge," and contains three chapters: Rebecca P. Brienen's "Albert Eckhout's *African Woman and Child* (1641): Ethnographic Portraiture, Slavery, and the New World Subject," Susan Scott Parrish's "Embodying African Knowledge in Colonial Surinam: Two William Blake Engravings in Stedman's 1796 *Narrative*," and James Smalls' "Exquisite Empty Shells: Sculpted Slave Portraits and the French Ethnographic Turn." In "Embodying African Knowledge in Colonial Surinam," Parrish builds up the idea of "habitus," which Pointon earlier introduced in her chapter, to argue that while portraits of enslaved people could not create or own their own "habitus," as Pointon argues, if the concept of "habitus" is expanded to include "the control over one's physical environment through nature knowledge," there is room for the creation and reading of subjectivity within some depictions of enslaved people. (258) In this instance, Parrish examines two engravings by William Blake for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). The first, *March thro' a swamp or Marsh in Terra-firma* (1796), and the second is *The celebrated Graman Quacy* (1796). Parrish differentiates her own work from

Marcus Wood's reading of Blake and Francesco Bartolozzi's images in his excellent chapter in *An Economy of Colour*<sup>3</sup> by outlining that she will be examining "representations of Africans in the *Narrative* that are not meant to elicit an eroticized pity." (259) Rather, Parrish is examining the potential for subjectivity of the Africans portrayed in the images, as opposed to the other images in the series, which as Wood demonstrates, portray pornographic elements designed to engage the assumed white viewer's emotional subjectivity rather than the person depicted. Parrish offers another alternative way to redefine and question the meaning of portraiture in relation to the depiction of enslaved persons. By examining the alternative modes of subjectivity which can be read within depictions over which the enslaved had little to no control, Parrish argues convincingly that their subjectivity became manifest in the environment, and their inhabitation within it.

The final thematic section of this volume, "Facing Abolition," consists of four chapters: Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff's "Who is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négrresse*," Helen Weston's "The Many Faces of Toussaint Louverture," Toby Maria Chieffo-Reidway's "*Cinqué*: A Heroic Portrait for the Abolitionist Cause," and Daryle Williams' "The Intrepid Mariner Simao: Visual Histories of Blackness in the Luso-Atlantic at the End of the Slave Trade." Schmidt-Linsenhoff, in "Who is the Subject?", presents a reading of Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négrresse* (1800). Schmidt-Linsenhoff begins by discussing scholarly interpretations of the work, which largely share recognition of the inequity of the power dynamic between the artist and the sitter, and conclude that the image reflects the artist's subjectivity more than the woman being painted. (324) However, she refutes this interpretation, arguing that "the

strong expression of individuality is not meant to express the individuality of the woman depicted, but the capacity of black French women to develop a type of individuality that is similar to, but not identical with, the type of individuality the republican culture invented for white French women." (325) Schmidt-Linsenhoff adopts a methodology of iconography (she specifies this to mean that her goal is to "investigate the complex network of references, allusions and quotations linking the *Portrait d'une Négrresse*") (327) to read the image, looking at images of the "Black Venus," portraits of white women in the French Republic, and images of female artists' hands.<sup>4</sup> While Schmidt-Linsenhoff does state that "the artistic language in which this vision was articulated is nevertheless highly problematic," (339) the author's refutation of the earlier readings of the work, which utilize post-colonial and feminist methodology, leave her interpretation open to critique. Schmidt-Linsenhoff's analysis of the artist's use of iconography would be strengthened with an examination of the subjectivity of the portrait subject woven throughout the chapter, rather than relegated to a short section at the end. Her footnote regarding the potential for self-representation through the subject's "head-tie" is an area which could have benefited from in-depth exploration within the chapter itself, and added further to a volume in which the recuperation of identity is already a prominent theme. (343)

Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and the late Angela Rosenthal's *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (2013) edited volume is a significant contribution to scholarship within the field of the Visual Culture of Slavery Studies. The nuanced discussion of subjectivity within representations of enslaved peoples in portraiture will act as a resource for scholars within a variety of fields of study. The inclusion of an essay examining Francois

Malépart de Beaucort's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786) in any future editions of this work will work to correct the pervasive erasure of Canada's historical participation in the Atlantic slave trade within scholarship, as well as society at large.

---

<sup>1</sup> This portrait is in the permanent collection of the McCord Museum (located in Montreal, Quebec, Canada) but is currently on loan to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it is being displayed in the "Founding Identities (1700s-1870s)" section within the Quebec and Canadian Art galleries. In 2011, the title of the portrait was changed to *Portrait of a Haitian Woman*, and it is currently being displayed under this title. The explanatory text that accompanies the painting does not acknowledge the title *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, rather citing its original title as *The Negress*. The explanatory text acknowledges the possibility that this portrait is of one of de Beaucort's slaves, Marie-Thérèse Zémire, but then refutes this claim citing that the "possibility seems unlikely" due to "the model's maturity" (Zémire was 15 years old at the time which this portrait was painted). (Wall text, *Portrait of a Haitian Woman*, Founding Identities, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) This rather scant explanation refuting the identity of the sitter and the renaming of the portrait seems an exercise in obscuring the historical legacy of slavery in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> This frontispiece is thought to have been created after a painting done by Scipio Moorhead - this debate and the recuperation of Moorhead as a painter is the subject of Eric Slauter's "Looking for Scipio Moorhead" in "Visibility and Invisibility" in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Wood, "John Gabriel Stedman, William Blake, Francesco Bartolozzi and Empathetic Pornography in the *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*," eds. Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 129-149.

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt-Lisenhoff examines the relation of imaging within the painting to imaging of the "Black Venus" within high art in the 18th and earlier 19th century - in which the black female body was depicted as hyper-sexual and "primitive" (racist imagings which were used to perpetuate colonialism and slavery).