

The Fruits of Resistance:

Reading *Portrait of a Negro Slave* on the Sly

CHARMAINE NELSON

Introduction: Contesting a Colonial Art Historiography

François Malépart de Beaucourt's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* (1786) provides a rare visual document of a slave living in early New France. As such, it has a special place in the Canadian art canon and has become the artist's most cited and reproduced work. The subject of much of this scholarship, however, has been the artist—and not the sitter. As a result, *Portrait of a Negro Slave* has been situated in relation to de Beaucourt's professionalization, his travels to “exotic” locations and his potential sexual relationship with the anonymous sitter. There has been little discussion of the black female sitter's identity and subjectivity. Even when scholars have recognized the racial and sexual difference of the sitter, they have done so, incomprehensibly, without a sustained political and social analysis of the historical context constructing her identity. The critical displacement of the sitter's identity and subjectivity is ironic given that traditional art historical treatments of the portrait genre take the sitter as an important, if not *the* central subject of the work (Pointon 1993). This displacement results in a limited analysis of not only the black female sitter but also the white male artist, who is ultimately situated outside his immediate historical relation to the sitter and constructed instead primarily in relation to the transcendental category of *the* (white, male) *artist*.

I have argued elsewhere that the inability of art history to include and legitimize issues of race and colonialism has hampered the possibility of alternative, historically informed readings of this portrait (Nelson 2004). The sitter's blackness and femaleness, along with her obvious slave status, have become a mere background unworthy of serious contemplation, even within the heightened colonial context of the artwork's production: the slave-holding settler colony of eighteenth-century New France. My reading of de Beaucourt's *Portrait of a Negro Slave* seeks to bring the polarized identities and social positions of the sitter and artist to the foreground. By doing so, I

François Malépart de Beaucourt, *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, 1786.
Oil on canvas, 72.7 x 58.5 cm. Image courtesy of McCord Museum.

hope to correct the perpetuation of racism and sexism within a Canadian art history that would displace colonialism and slavery from its representational and cultural investments. What is at stake in this project is the refutation of both the dominant myth of Canadian racial tolerance and the singularity of a white Canadian past.

My previous writings about *Portrait of a Negro Slave* focused upon the portrait's construction of identity within the context of slavery in New France. I would here like to discuss a more easily overlooked aspect of the portrait: the tray of fruit held by the sitter. A postcolonial analysis demands that the fruit be situated in relation to their colonial origins and arrival in New France. Historically situating the fruit in this way opens up fundamental questions concerning the genre of still life and its indebted relation to the extraction of food products from Western colonies. *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, however, also demands a black feminist analysis because the fruit arranged on the tray is designed to convey something about the woman who holds it. I contend that on one level, the fruit employed by Malépart de Beaucourt signals the racialized sexualization of the bare-breasted sitter. On another level, however, the history of the fruit, and in particular the history of the sugar apple situated off the tray, suggests a sly expression of agency on the part of the slightly smiling slave. I speculate that this expression of agency may well have taken place in defiance of the artist's/Master's will, and may have been put into play without his knowledge because this gesture of resistance draws from epistemologies of which de Beaucourt was most likely unaware. In fact, a radically different reading of this canonical portrait begins to emerge when the meaning of the fruit is recuperated from a broader history of eating things that recounts the movement of foods and pharmaceuticals throughout European colonies. This reading both challenges the limitations of traditional Canadian art history and seeks to both humanize and activate the portrait's subject of representation—a *black woman*.

The Western Still Life Genre and Colonialism

Pierre-Marie Deparis has argued that it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe that a distinctive genre of still life began to be codified:

Ce n'est que vers 1650, dans les ateliers des Pays-Bas, qu'on se met à parler de "Still-Leven," c'est-à-dire "modèle inanimé." Au XVIIIe siècle, en France, on emploie le terme de "nature reposée," c'est-à-dire: immobile. Diderot utilise l'expression: nature inanimée.

(Deparis 1991, 101)

As Sam Segal has noted in the case of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, the use of fruits and flowers often evoked themes of Creation, cycles of Nature and the idea of the transience of life (Segal 1989). The artist's facility in capturing the shifting stages of material growth and ripening within a still life demonstrated their aesthetic mastery.

The mastery implied by the invisible artist's ability to render the forces of nature and time was extended to the absent, yet implied, commissioners of the paintings. The bountiful spreads captured by the emerging genre conveyed the social position and rising class status of those whose walls they hung upon. For who possessed the vases of rare and expensive flowers, or the platters spilling over with exotic fruit? In whose homes were such tables adorned? Furthermore, many of the items depicted in still lifes, the so-called exotic fruits, flowers, meat, nuts, breads, seafood, beverages, insects, musical instruments and seashells were derived from colonial trade, adventure and outright theft. Still life paintings therefore indicated not only the wealth and privilege of their owners, but also their ability to actively participate in the growing mastery of Europe's colonial reach. Vand der Ast, for example, included Ming vases and a parrot in his works to signal both exotic luxury and a tangible access to far-flung colonial territories (Segal 1989). The violent material history of the 'exotic' contents of still lifes, however, was deflected through the aesthetic concept of *Vanitas* and its concern with what Segal describes as, "the transiency of earthly possessions and of man's life on earth (Segal 1989, 16)." The concept of vain transiency naturalized the movement of goods throughout the colonies while legitimating capitalist exploitation and the ideology of the bourgeoisie.

The use of 'exotic' fruit in still lifes suggested a particular mode of participation in the development of colonialism. These paintings engaged other senses beyond vision, such as taste, smell and touch, in the anticipation of oral consumption. In this regard they offered an imaginary pleasure that was linked to the more visceral activation of multiple bodily sensations associated with ingestion and digestion. Fruit still lifes thus implicated the workings and mechanics of the body with colonialism in general through the mode of eating. The transiency of food follows not only a colonial geography, but also a visceral biology. This suggests that the sense of mastery connoted by a fruit still life's capture of transiency be derived not only from the artist's technical skill. Still lifes of exotic fruits also evoke a bio-political mastery based on the control of food stuffs under colonial rule and their relation to the still-emergent discipline of biology—and to the control of living bodies in general.

Still Life in *Portrait of a Negro Slave*

How then, do we situate *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, and in particular the tray of fruits held by the sitter, within this biological rubric of food and bodies moving within the *Vanitas* of late eighteenth-century colonialism?

To begin, the anonymity of the sitter is paradoxical to the genre itself. Traditionally, a portrait represents an individual in a historically specific manner. The title of a portrait is, in fact, often the name of the sitter. Intriguingly, Malépart de Beaucourt's portrait has only recently become known as *Portrait of a Negro Slave*, and its original title, if it had one, remains unknown. The sitter's slave status and the high probability that she did not commission the painting, however, suggest her objectification. That said, detailed records compiled by Marcel Trudel propose that the sitter was likely Marie-Thérèse Zémire, one of two slaves documented as the property of the artist's wife, Benoite Gaétant (Trudel 1990). According to this scenario, Gaétant either already owned Marie, or the couple purchased her in either Guadeloupe or another Caribbean colony between their time in Europe (from at least 1773 to 1784) and their sojourn to Philadelphia in 1792 (Reid 1988). An archival document from 1832, however, is attributed to Benoite Camagne and contradicts Trudel's research, stating that the name of the "negresse" represented in the portrait is Catherine Cora (cited in Major-Frégeau 1979, 60). In any event, it is likely that de Beaucourt's access to his model was through his wife. It is also likely that the portrait was painted outside of New France, since it dates from 1786 and an announcement in the *Montreal Gazette* advertising de Beaucourt's artistic services did not appear until June 1792 (Reid 1988, 40). The point here is that the production of the portrait objectifying the black, female sitter is interwoven with the historic movement of Europeans and the traffic of slaves between Europe and its colonies.

The trade of black female slaves as "breeders" of new property made them particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual exploitation at the hands of their white owners (Nelson 2004). Deborah Gray White has argued that "once slaveholders realized that the reproductive function of the female slave could yield a profit, the manipulation of procreative sexual relations became an integral part of the sexual exploitation of female slaves" (White 1999, 68). Thus as Linda Schiebinger contends, female slaves previously regarded as "work units" or potential prostitutes came instead to be prized as potential "breeders" (Schiebinger 1993). Young female slaves were particularly valuable, in some cases doubly valuable than men, since their progeny, which became the property of the slave owners, made them heirlooms (White 1999). Jennifer L. Morgan's summary drives to the heart of the matter:

When planters looked to ‘increase,’ they crafted real and imagined legacies. In the absence of living slave children, their own children still inherited the promise of future wealth. Slaveowners whose prospects might have seemed somewhat bleak looked to black women’s bodies in search of a promising future for their own progeny. With such demographic expectations also came an articulation of the longevity of the slaveowners’ enterprises and a great certainty of a future in and for the colony. Though there was certainly no guarantee, a planter could imagine that a handful of fertile African women might turn his modest holdings into a substantial legacy. (Morgan 2004, 83)

The legal and economic exploitation of black women’s bodies for profit was justified through colonial stereotypes that compulsively represented black females as sexually licentious predators of white men. This sexual excess was thought to carry over into childbirth where black women were assumed to “breed at an astonishing rate and with remarkable ease” (Schiebinger 1993, 183). The sexual utility of the black female sitter, as both sexual object and biological “breeder” of new slaves, is concretized in *Portrait* by the sitter’s exposed breast juxtaposed with the plate of fruit. The bio-economic matrix of the slave’s body and the exotic fruit is presented as a symbolic offering for the masterful gaze of the implied male, heterosexual artist and audience.

The Meanings of Fruit

If we consider that it was a white French Canadian man who depicted the offerings of foreign, decidedly tropical fruits held by a bare-breasted black female slave, the urgency of a postcolonial feminist reading of this painting’s intricate biopolitics becomes apparent. By identifying these fruits, their origins and uses, we can attempt to retrieve their contemporaneous significance and explore potential meanings for their presence within the portrait, and their relevance for the subtly smiling black female slave who carried them.

In the context of New France, the fruits, like the sitter, carried a certain amount of anonymity. All of the fruits—the pineapple, oranges, sugar apple, as well as the cashew nut—were foreign to the territory and impossible to cultivate in the region, outside of a greenhouse. Nonetheless, the white mercantile and bourgeois classes that would have made up the art viewing and collecting public for such a portrait may have recognized the fruit due to their contact with candied or preserved versions of the foreign delicacies. A. G. Reid has argued that such preserved delicacies were almost commonplace given the established colonial trade:

In return for these Canadian products, there was sent back to New France a variety of semi-luxuries which made life distinctly more pleasant, for Martinique and Guadeloupe were among the great sugar-producing areas of the world and were able to export to Quebec large quantities of sugar, molasses, syrup and rum as well as various delicacies to titillate the French palates of Quebec gourmands. Tiny lemons preserved in spirits, sugared almonds, candied fruits and all the innumerable types of preserves which were so popular at Quebec feasts must have owed their existence to trade with the West Indies. (Reid 1951, 245-246)

As this list implies, however, the accessibility of 'exotic' fruits required that many be in a stable, preserved form in order to remain consumable after the long journey from the Caribbean to New France. Eating bits of sugared pineapple from a jar is a much different experience than holding, slicing, smelling and eating the fresh, juicy fruit. Thus while a potentially significant number of the population may have been familiar with preserved tropical fruit, many would never have consumed fresh examples and few could have been well-apprised of their nutritional or medicinal properties.

When first introduced to Europe, most 'exotic' fruits were invested with social status, as opposed to being valued for their biopharmaceutical utility. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, fresh pineapple was perhaps the most coveted of tropical fruits by the European aristocracy. According to Hoag Levins, it was expensive, prestigious and difficult to acquire (Levins 1995). Indigenous to Brazil and Paraguay, the pineapple became a favourite of the Native Caribs through trade. Disembarking at Guadeloupe in 1493, Christopher Columbus detailed his delight in a delicious fruit which he called *nana* (Deparis 1991). During the sixteenth century it was imported to Europe and became a coveted extravagance of the aristocracy. Rare, expensive and visually striking, the pineapple became the ultimate symbol of exoticism. Due to spoilage common in early ship travel, it was often imported to North America chunked and glazed, candied or packed in sugar. Since it was both costly and difficult to acquire a whole fruit, they became centerpieces and status symbols at dinner parties and feasts, and were even rented out solely for visual effect. Levins adds that they became synonymous with hospitality, and were integrated by architects and craftspeople into exterior and interior home décor (Levins 1995). It was not until the eighteenth century, however, that the European fascination with pineapples resulted in greenhouse cultivation and the importation of more diverse varieties,

indicating both the increased availability of fresh pineapple and more knowledge of the fruit (Rohrbach et al. 2003).

In contrast to the celebrity status acquired by the pineapple amongst Europeans, both the cashew nut and sugar apple had medicinal uses for indigenous populations. The cashew, made of a pseudo-fruit and a nut that grow in a kidney-shaped shell, is indigenous to the Amazon. Traditionally, indigenous peoples have used the juice and fruit to treat fever, sweeten breath and “conserve the stomach.” Europeans may have been aware of its ability to aid in the prevention of scurvy due to its high vitamin C content (See www.rain-tree.com). The sugar apple grows in tropical or semi-tropical weather, and was originally known to South America, Central America, Southern Mexico, the West Indies and dry regions of North Queensland, Australia. Its exclusion from the platter held by the slave may be instructive. Although the sweet flesh of the small, pale, yellowish pods inside of the green skin are sucked clean of their seeds during eating, the seeds themselves are acrid and poisonous. The poisonous aspect of the sugar apple may point to an act of resistance couched in the otherwise masterly *Portrait of a Negro Slave*.

Abortion, “Breeding” and Female Reproductive Resistance in Slavery

Since Marie was likely from a region to which the fruit was indigenous, it is not a stretch to speculate that she was far more familiar with their nutritional and medicinal uses than the artist. As John M. Riddle has argued, “The evidence for the concept and existence of contraceptives and abortifacients that were deliberately used is clearly and abundantly in the records. Moreover, classical and medieval peoples believed that they worked” (Riddle 1992, 17–18). Centuries later, in the American South, slave owners, overseers and doctors all recognized the female slave practice of abortion. In particular, Dr. John H. Morgan listed various herbs, fruits and seeds as abortifacients (Morgan 1860; White 1999). These practices of reproductive resistance were widespread throughout the European colonies amongst women of African descent during the eighteenth century (Schiebinger 1993). The practice of what was commonly called “folk medicine” by white colonizers and slaveholders was in practical terms the knowledgeable use of local vegetation, herbs and fruit in quantities significant enough to prohibit impregnation or induce an abortion thereafter. As Jennifer L. Morgan has written,

Among the African plants transported to the Caribbean were okra and aloe, both of which were used as abortifacients. Knowledge about using snakeroot and cotton roots as emmenagogues survived the Middle Passage;

plants from European and Native American pharmacopoeias joined these West African plants in the New World to help women control reproduction. (Morgan 2004, 114)

It is important to note that the reproductive control achieved by this bio-pharmacopoeia was not only mobilized as a form of resistance to subvert the birth of mixed-raced children of rape, but also with the knowledge of the inhumanity of slave labour conditions which were largely undifferentiated by sex/gender. Morgan thus urges that disease and overwork, as well as the psychological toll of having children over whom you would have no social control, were equally urgent factors in the fertility rates of black female slaves (Morgan 2004).

A paste made from the seeds of the sugar apple was one such known poison and abortifacient. The potent paste was used as insecticide and to kill head lice, but if it came in contact with the eyes, it caused blindness. If applied to the uterus, it induced abortion. I would speculate that the seed's poisonous elements would be a natural option of slave resistance to abort children of rape. With respect to the *Portrait* then, the position of the sugar apple off the platter may be indicative of more than random arrangement. The female sitter was likely born and raised in the French Antilles, and thus had indigenous knowledge of the fruits, plants and vegetation of her native land. Is it not fair to speculate that a part of her knowledge might entail the medicinal, or so-called folk knowledge, of the sugar apple as an abortifacient? If so, the platter of fruit and bare breast offered to the master's gaze would contain a poisonous act of resistance that would thwart the illusion of bio-political control.

I want to push this speculation further. The fruit carried by the black female slave has not been prepared for consumption: the pineapple is not carved, the oranges are not peeled and the cashew nut lays whole on its side. Furthermore, the sugar apple is fully removed from the tray. While traditional fruit still lifes commonly implied that the servant or slave had already laid the table for the indulgence of the masters, this black woman appears to be pausing prior to that moment of preparation. Her hands and left forearm seem to be braced against the marble surface for support. We might speculate that she is on her way to prepare the table of "exotic" delicacies for her master and mistress. But for some reason, her momentary pause on the way to the kitchen—perhaps the weight of the tray caused her to stop—has resulted in the dislodgement of the sugar apple.

The traditional context of portraiture, when the sitter commissioned his

or her own portrait, afforded agency to the sitter and encouraged cooperation from the artist. The context of production for this portrait would have afforded no such customary agency to the black female sitter. We have an instance of a portrait commissioned by, and for, someone other than the sitter, her family or relations. The time involved in the completion of a portrait of this nature ensured that the countenance, pose and expression of the sitter had less to do with what she actually looked like or wanted to look like at any given moment, than the way the artist posed, interpreted and *saw* them. Seeing is subjective, always bound to the identity and location of the seer. Thus, portraiture was a financial engagement, wherein both sitter and artist generally wielded power, yet the artist ultimately controlled representation and likeness. Critically then, the slight smile or willingness in the slave's face would seem to have less to do with her emotion or feeling at the time of the portrait. Instead, it reflects the white male artist's perception and his desire to represent the slave in a racially and sexually stereotypical fashion: gladly offering her body.

While not wishing to glamorize the potential for this woman's resistance in the face of the entrenched and interlocking regimes of race and sex, I feel that it is important to examine such a work for signs of her agency. I suggest that during the production of a portrait in which there is an extraordinary degree of power imbalance, if not the use of outright coercion, the sitter may have exerted a degree of undetected control through the selection and placement of the fruit. Used primarily as domestics in New France, in part because of their high value and social prestige, most black female slaves would likely have been made to go to the market for the white households they served (Winks 1997). More than their mistresses, they would have been familiar with the various vendors, prices, locations and uses of the food they were made to purchase and prepare. In the case of this sitter, likely from the French Antilles, the sight of various tropical fruit native to her home may have reminded her of their digestive and medicinal uses.

Without archival sources we can never know for certain if it was François Malépart de Beaucourt, the sitter or some third party who determined the specific selection of fruits. It is not unreasonable to assume however, that it was the slave who did the purchasing and very likely would have had opportunity during the creation of the portrait to affect the end result of its presentation. I would argue therefore, that the location of the sugar apple on the marble slab, as opposed to on the platter, can be read as a deliberate, defiant attempt to register her unwillingness to be represented in a portrait by her master, and within his bio-political fantasies. If this were the case, then

the slyly smiling black slave would have anticipated another audience for the portrait, one constituted beyond the masterful gaze of the ascendant bourgeoisie. This audience would be constituted by those dusting the *Portrait's* frame with knowledge of the sugar apple's medicinal uses, and by the gaze of other women, and other black women, then and now.

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