INTRODUCTION

ENVISIONING SLAVE PORTRAITURE

Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz

A Tale of Erasure

In 1987 the African British artist Maud Sulter encountered in the Touchstones Rochdale Art Gallery a painting by John Michael Wright (ca. 1617–94) that, were it not for the astonishing history that underwrites it, she might have overlooked as a mere curiosity. The portrait in question, probably dating to the 1660s, represents a woman of the wealthy Butterworth family of nearby Belfield Hall (Fig. I.1). Before the painting had been cleaned in the 1960s, the figure had oddly gestured toward a column at her side, as if pointing out its presence to the viewer. Technical analysis had revealed the reason for this rather bizarre gesture, for beneath the column x-ray imaging exposed ghostly traces of a figure, a black male slave, who appears in a servile position pouring water onto his mistress's hand, and whose presence overpainting had eliminated. Maud Sulter concluded "and then, obviously, when slavery had been abolished and was no longer quite as fashionable, the portrait had been doctored, so as to paint out that history, that black presence in Britain."[1]

The inclusion of servants and pages of African descent in portraits of white European sitters had indeed, as Sulter remarked, become "fashionable" throughout Europe in the age of slavery and colonial expansion.[2] The word "slave" evolved from the Latin word for Slavs – *sclavus* – pointing to the great numbers of Slavic slaves in Western Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. From the beginning of the fifteenth century and increasingly through the sixteenth and later, it was mostly people from the west coast of Africa who were captured and shipped to the Americas and Europe to be enslaved. Sold to European courts as luxury items, enslaved Africans (adults and children, female but especially male) entered portraiture as a stereotypical motif in European painting, most

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I.1. John Michael Wright, *Portrait of Miss Butterworth of Belfield Hall*, Rochdale, 1660s. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Touchstones Rochdale, The Esplanade, Rochdale, U.K.

obviously, but not only, as signs of status.[3] It was, however, with the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade and of the colonial plantation system that the demand for and availability of black slaves across Europe and the Americas exploded. Between the mid-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries an estimated twenty-one million people were taken from their local villages in Africa with the intention of transforming them first into captives, then into commodities, and finally into slaves, to labor in the sugar, cotton, coffee, and tobacco fields of Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America – sites far from what are traditionally thought to be art centers.[4] Nevertheless, in Europe a black page remained for the longest time a desired asset and expensive rarity, and the inclusion of such servile figures in portraiture often became conventionalized into a type, as the Butterworth portrait itself testifies. This practice also imprinted the visual cultures of both the colonial and early republican Americas, where regional elites

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in the process of symbolizing their local power based upon slavery adopted its hierarchical structures (see Figs. 1.1 and 7.5). Thus, for instance, even during the transitional period from the colonial to the republican order, some important portraits of the patrician framer of the new North American republic, George Washington, still included black slaves dressed in the elegant garb of pages gazing in admiration at their heroic master, as in John Trumbull's *George Washington* (Fig. I.2). In this image – which was painted in London and not commissioned by Washington himself, but still forms part of the early heroic iconography of the Republic – the American patriot/painter Trumbull also equips the slave with the orientalizing outfit that is often found in European portraiture (see Fig. 2.6). It is this sort of typing, in tandem with the broader social and visual dynamics of the Atlantic slave trade, that helped to forge the still indelible link between black existence and enslavement, the disquieting equation between dark skin and subjection that has borne upon the way in which art and cultural histories have faced up to the challenge of interpreting both enslaved subjects and black individuals in representation.[5]
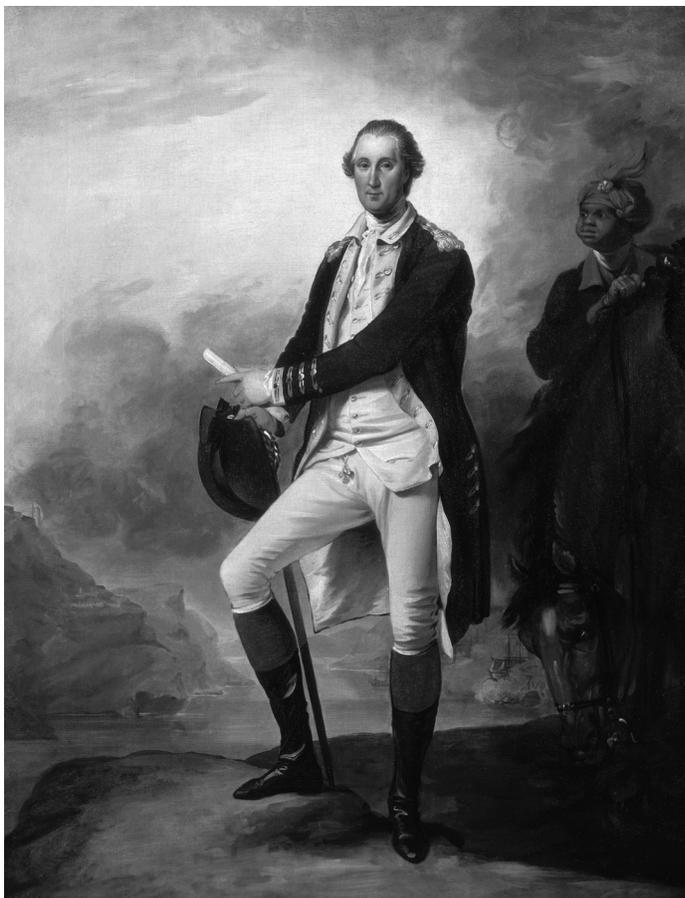
I.2. John Trumbull, *George Washington*, 1780. Oil on canvas. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

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Maud Sulter's powerful narrative of historical and visual occlusion, as well as revelatory cleaning, points to the central problem addressed by this book: 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. The cleaning of the Butterworth painting, and the reemergence of the black figure from behind the column, does not simply bring to life a lost identity. Actually, *stricto sensu*, it does not do this at all. If anything, even at the moment of its initial inscription, the subjected black figure was already, symbolically, under erasure, his presence predicated on a relation that effected his symbolic absenting in the face of the dominant and nonchalantly subjugating white presence. Central to the Butterworth painting is the way in which the enslaved presence in representation often becomes a constitutive component of white identity. Thus, in Wright's painting the uniformed slave who rushes forward to pour water over the playfully outstretched hand of his mistress appears to be, in some ways, a part of the white woman. In a Hegelian twist, however, her presence in the pre-restoration portrait makes as little sense as his presence without her. Still, as Sulter suggests, the painting-out of the enslaved figure's likeness, even if done with the best of intentions (for instance, to "liberate" the figure from his position of subordination by "excising" him from the canvas), leads to a further marginalization and blindness, one that eliminates the visual trace of subjection against which the white sitter's identity as a free subject was intended to emerge. Yet, it is through these very acts of erasure that his enslaved presence claims existence.

We begin, then, with three erasures: (1) the ideological erasure in which the subordinated presence of the enslaved figure is the condition of possibility for the visual fantasy of masterly subjectivity granted to the white sitter, (2) the historical, painterly erasure that obliterated the traces of slavery, and (3) the erasure of the role of portraiture as a technology deployed, in this case, for the illusory freezing of permanent subjection. It is almost as if the black subject in the Butterworth painting were first crossed out – set "under erasure" (*sous rature*) – and then literally erased. Building on Martin Heidegger, who in his reflections on existence had crossed out the word "Being" ("Sein") and let the word along with its erasure stand, Jacques Derrida developed his central deconstructivist concept of *sous rature*. Derrida's insistence on the necessity of retaining a term under erasure means that even though its use may be problematic we must maintain it until it can be effectively reformulated or replaced. Similarly, the figure under erasure in the Butterworth painting demands critical attention and conceptual reconfiguration.

Painting may require a different vocabulary than the textualist crossings-out of both Heidegger and Derrida, and, perhaps, openness to different accounts of what presence might mean in the *visual* realm. Neither Heidegger's existential reflections on Being and Not-Being "in-the-world" nor Derrida's critique

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of Western metaphysics and of its notion of presence in language captures the ontology of paint.[6] This is not to claim social or physical presence as origin in the figures represented but rather to acknowledge the recalcitrant physicality of paintings, where the presence of Beings cannot be crossed out or erased in textual fashion. Within a figurative aesthetic, the enslaved figure, although not there, is there. The materiality of his image, despite occlusion through paint, insists and produces its own reality. One might consider his presence a haunting, a translucent invisible visibility.

Not only does the ghostly enslaved subject exist within and without portraiture, but the very focus of this collection on slave portraiture must exist as well in a liminal space of undecidability and paradox. If portraiture as a genre, in its most conventional pre–avant-garde fashion, has been understood as demanding that the viewer grant a subject-reality to the image made visible on the canvas, what then are the particularities of the dynamics of visualization and subjectification that underwrite the portrayal of enslaved beings whose conditions of existence and visibility have been historically under erasure? The essays in this collection place the terms "slave" and "portraiture" into useful friction and bring to the fore the specific historical and discursive circumstances that made such a conceptual and material encounter possible at key moments during the long history of transatlantic slavery.

PORTRAITURE AND THE SCOPIC DYNAMICS OF PLANTATION SLAVERY

The period running from the sixteenth to late nineteenth century marks a significant shift in the history of slavery – a history understood here not linearly, but as a series of variations and dissonances around the theme of "the human as property" and of its many ideological justifications. This period saw a progressively exponential expansion of the trade in human flesh to satisfy the demands of the colonial plantation economy, which became, in contrast to early Spanish colonial settlements, the dominant feature of the pan-European colonial venture in major areas of the Americas. The geographical displacements spawned by the intersection of the slave trade, the plantation system, and the modern colonial enterprise produced a new territoriality that Joseph Roach, in dialogue with Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic," has called the "circum-Atlantic world." This concept of "the circum-Atlantic," whose theoretical underpinnings inform our understanding of "the Atlantic world" in the title of this book, "insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity."[7] Or, as Stephen Shapiro has put it, it entails a recognition of a matrix formed by Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the broader indigenous Americas in its constitution.[8] This is not to suggest that such a matrix yielded homogeneous

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patterns of plantation enslavement, which, of course, it did not, but to acknowl-
edge the kernel of shared violence that constitutes modern territorialities and
their histories. This violence also entailed, as we will see, a visual dimension.

Scholars have paid attention to the specifics and permutations in the struc-
tures of colonial and republican slavery in the Americas from a range of perspec-
tives. These include the analysis of divergent patterns of plantation ownership
(e.g., predominantly absentee/corporatist in the British Caribbean versus own-
ership by local white elites in the Spanish, Portuguese, and North American col-
onies); the definition and position of the slave within different legal traditions
(the provisions, for example, within Spanish legislation that allowed for slaves to
acquire their freedom through mutually agreed contracts with their masters – a
right known as *derecho de coartación*, and which was totally absent from English
slave law); the structures of sociability within various plantation regimes and
the forms of slave familial organization these enabled (the Portuguese patriar-
chal *casa-grande* versus the conjunctural emergence of the Cuban jail-like *bar-
racón,* for instance); to the various degrees of regulation and/or suppression of
African religious practices that took place within different colonial contexts
and that yielded heterogeneous forms of cultural syncretism (the development
of *candomblé* in Brazil or *santería* in Cuba by contrast to the emergence of black
Christian churches in the U.S. South).[9] Yet, despite this diversity of topics and
approaches, we wish to focus on a concern common to them all: the production
of the slave as a "hypervisible" entity – to borrow Saidiya Hartman's fruitful
term – as a being whose existence had to be permanently subject (at least theo-
retically within the logic of chattel slavery) to the surveilling gaze of the master
and/or its surrogate figure, the overseer.[10]

In juridical terms, and regardless of their variations, slave codes across the
Americas made hypervisibility a disciplinary imperative. Enslaved persons had
to be unyieldingly available to the scopic lust of a domineering gaze. Conversely,
it was through hypervisibility that the masterly gaze constituted itself as such
and attempted to render the slave subjectless (i.e., a mere instrument for eco-
nomic production, a surface without depth). This is not to say, of course, that
in the daily practices of slave life such an imperative was not constantly under-
mined through multiple modes of resistance – the most radical of these pos-
sibly being the act of the runaway slave, who quite literally escaped, erased
him- or herself, from the masterly field of vision.[11] Nevertheless, slave codes
were unequivocal in their will for visual control. Practically without exception,
from the infamous 1661 "Barbados Act" onward, the slave was expected by law
to be permanently visible to the eye of the master. Thus, for example, the 1842
Hispano-Cuban Slave Code in no uncertain terms stated:

> Slaves of one estate shall not be able to visit those of another without the
> express consent of the masters or overseers of both. When they have to go

to another estate or leave their own, they shall take a written pass from the owner or overseer with the description of the slave, the date of the day, month, and year, the declaration of his destination, and the time he must return.[12]

Not incidentally, permission to leave the premises of the plantation involved not just a written document stating that such a license was indeed granted to a particular slave (within restricted spatial and temporal limits) but also an ekphrastic act of verbal portraiture – "the description of the slave" – by which his or her visual particularities (e.g., a scar on the shoulder, a tribal mark on the face) were to be recorded so as to make the document nontransferable, the slave visible to other overseers/masters, and the coercive will enforceable. The main concern of this volume is to underscore, through a series of case studies, the relationships between the placement of the slave's hypervisible body within the violent foundational dynamics of the trans-Atlantic, from 1599 to the date of the official abolition of the regime in its last hemispheric stronghold (Brazil, 1888), and the specifics of the representational practice of portraiture – most specifically, painted, printed, and sculpted portraits.[13]

In the context of imperial and colonial slavery, portraiture occupied an ambivalent position. The period marked by an expanding trade in human bodies coincided with the emergence of portraiture as a major field of representation in Western art. Yet, the two categories "slave" and "portraiture" appear to be mutually exclusive or, as David Bindman puts it, oxymoronic.[14] The logic of chattel slavery strived to produce the body of the slave in a very restricted manner: as a purely instrumentalized being, as a body dwelling in the eternal present of labor, reproduction, and punishment. The body of the slave appears as the site of a nonsubject, of an entity without memory or history – the slave as pure bodiliness and immanence. Portraiture, on the other hand, insists on the face as a primary site of an imagined subjectivity, often at the expense of the rest of the body. Its metaphysical aura of transcendence has been conventionally understood as a privileged tool for the visualization of "being," and for the production of the subject as visuality. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might have called it a machine for "facialization." It is their contention that in Western culture the face has acquired a privileged signifying status over the rest of the body. The face is produced, they say, when the head ceases to be coded by the body "so that the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *over-coded* by something we shall call the Face." That act of overcoding the body by the face is what they call "facialization."[15]

However, in the logic of chattel slavery, it is the face that seems to be over-coded by the subjected body, and "facelessness" the means by which the slave is theoretically rendered a nonsubject.[16] This is perhaps the most profound significance of the passages in Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography (1837), where

the Cuban slave poet insistently narrates his experiences of torture as a constant assault against his "face" ("daily receiving blows on the face, that often made the blood spout from both my nostrils"), while covering with a "veil of silence," as he puts it, the violence wielded against the rest of his body. The body, in Manzano's autobiography, is insinuated yet concealed from the voyeuristic gaze of his well-intentioned (although perversely fascinated) abolitionist reader, and the drama of his dehumanizing subjection staged as a visualization of the broken face. This dialectic of bodily occlusion and facial display is central to the figuration of personal dignity and to the undoing of the slave subject position subtly at work in the text.[17]

Thus, what is at stake in producing the *likeness* of a slave's face, however illusory this production might be? What are its challenges?

PORTRAITS AND TYPES, ONCE AGAIN

Few potential constraints hover with such force over the study of slaves of African descent in portraiture as our modern history of racism, which has denied singularity and individuality *as subjects* to non-Europeans and especially to those who have been enslaved.[18] This denial has taken place, though, through a rather paradoxical logic. Construed as "others" within racialized Western/ modern notions of personhood (which, in its pre-Freudian Enlightened version, are structured by concepts of autonomy, sovereignty of rational consciousness, self-possession, and freedom), the existence of these "others" has been conceived of as a radical singularity, as a difference that subtracts them from the condition and destiny of "Man" as the universal subject of world history.

An exemplary, and rather foundational instance of this view is found in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. For Hegel, in sub-Saharan Africa: "history is in fact out of the question. Life there consists of a succession of contingent happenings and surprises. No aim or state exists whose development could be followed; and *there is no subjectivity*, but merely a series of subjects who destroy one another." In the *Lectures*, Africa is a site where the "principle of cultural backwardness" predominates, a place of historical impossibility where movement and progression is understood to be detained – in both senses of being "trapped" and "stopped."[19] Therefore, the singular and hyper-contingent difference of this "otherness" ("a succession of contingent happenings and surprises") grants Africans the status of a nonuniversal "generality" lacking in *subjectivity* (i.e., agency, *telos*). Or inversely, the African "other" is not universal because of its collective singularity vis-à-vis a no less phantasmatic "Europe." Racial types and stereotypes are a performative expression of this logic. If slave portraiture could be thought of as "oxymoronic" (to use again David Bindman's provocative term) it is also because it represents a moment of impossibility within the modern paradox set forth by Hegel. The
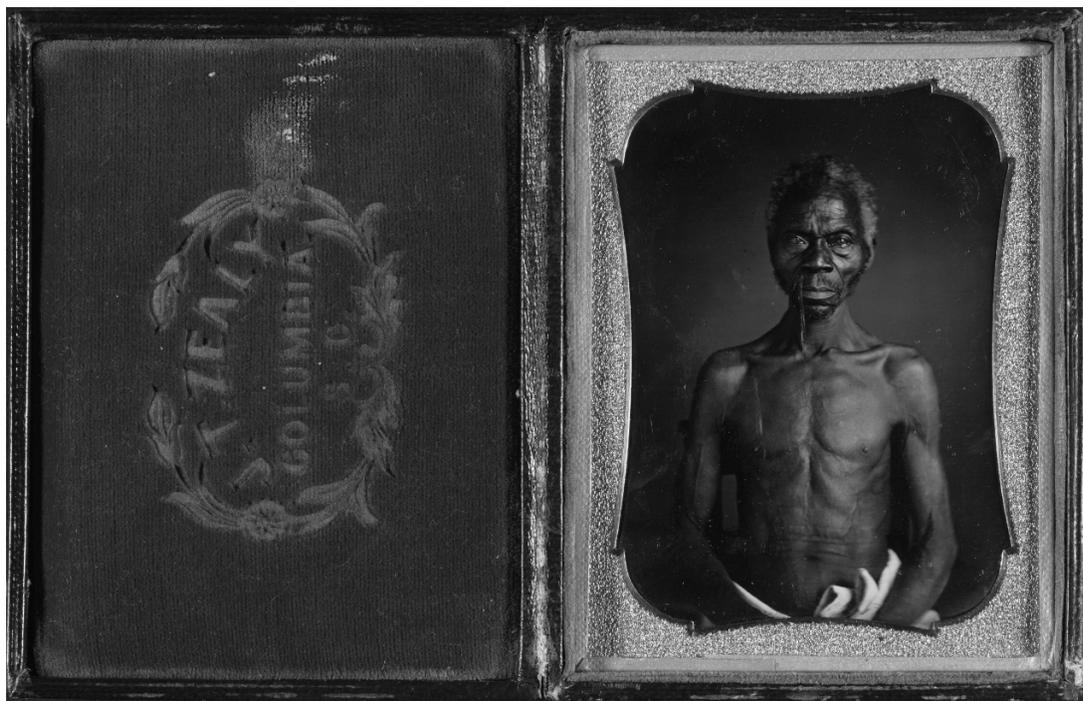
I.3. J. T. Zealy, *Renty, Congo, Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esqu*. Columbia, S.C., March 1850 (frontal). Daguerreotype. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 35–5-10/53037, Cambridge, Mass.

type casts its shadow over the singular, and the singular is forced to carry on under the shadow of the type.

Brian Wallis has provided a useful, although debatable, differentiation between "type" and "portrait" in his study of the colonialist and, at points, overtly pornographic daguerreotypes of slaves made by J. T. Zealy for the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz in 1850.[20] By focusing on images such as that of *Renty, Congo, Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esqu*. (Fig. I.3), Wallis problematizes historian Alan Trachtenberg's iconographic linking of Zealy's slave daguerreotypes to Roman portrait busts – an affiliation that leads him to underline the complicated status of subjecthood and presence at work in Zealy's images and to claim that, against Agassiz's intentions of zoological classification, they end up visualizing the performance of a self-aware denied personhood.[21]

While building on Trachtenberg, Wallis takes distance both from his iconographic and humanistic accents, insisting that Zealy's daguerreotypes are fully invested in a project of scientific racism and have very little to do with traditions of Western portraiture, much less with that of Roman busts. Far from portraits, they are "types." The type, unlike the portrait, he argues, "discourages style and composition, seeking to present the information as plainly and straightforwardly as possible. Thus, the images are frequently organized around

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a clear central axis with a minimum of external information that could distract from the principal focus … objectivity is the goal." In the type, as he sees it, the subject is already "positioned, known, owned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as silent; in short, it is ignored.... Fundamentally nonreciprocal, [the type] masks its subjective distortions in the guise of logic and organization. Its formations are deformations."[22]

Wallis's contentions exemplify the challenges posed to our understanding of slave portraiture by the pressures that discursive regimes of racialization exercise over the rhetoric of singularity at work in the genre. However, although we agree with the sentiment of his criticism, and with his formal characterization of "the type," it seems to us that there are two issues that cannot be bypassed in examining the presuppositions at work in this analysis. The first of these concerns the sharp distinction Wallis makes between portraits and types, which tends to underestimate the extent to which "types" too, just like portraits, follow conventions and employ a style, even though this style might be one of "stylelessness." In other words, types are constituted by a rhetoric of authenticity and objectivity, just like portraits can be understood to employ, in the words of Marcia Pointon, a rhetoric of portrait-likeness. Ironically, many of the Roman "portrait busts" to which we ascribe individuality and character, are, as Sheldon Nodelman has demonstrated, not based on individuals at all, but on portrait types.[23] Thus, the distance between portrait and type may not be as unbridgeable as Wallis suggests, and questions pertaining to the rhetoric of subjectivity not as irrelevant to the typological. Likewise, the occlusion of singularity may not be so estranged a fact from acts of portraiture.

The second issue concerns, precisely, the status of discourses of "subjecthood" within the type. Depending on the circumstances, "types" can also subvert their "muted" condition if, for instance, the information contained in or excited by the image exceeds its frame of discursive intentions. This is certainly the case with Zealy's daguerreotypes. Anthropological as they no doubt are, they also allow for a different kind of gaze – one potentially moved by oppositional ethical concerns and values and, thus, able to register (in the material *thereness* of the image) the inescapable presence of subjects in pain. The perception of such a presence troubles the subjects' purported status as "specimens" and has the potential to overwhelm a viewer with the intensity of their suffering, with the agonic trace of a subjective singularity. More than inciting in the viewer the realization of "the universal humanity we share with them" (as Trachtenberg would have it),[24] that encounter does open up a fissure that upsets the viewing prescriptions of the "type." Once dislocated from their discursive framework, once they travel, as they belatedly did, "elsewhere," beyond Agassiz's meaning-making archives, the "type," despite itself, sets free (so to speak) the potentialities of "the portrait" that the images also