Charmaine Nelson, PhD
McGILL UNIVERSITY, DEPT. OF ART HISTORY
AND COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

BLACK HAIR / HER-STORIES: JOSCELYN GARDNER'S INVERTED PORTRAITS

Joscelyn Gardner's lithographs deal with hair, not just any hair, but black female hair. I fancy myself a bit of a black hair expert - a status achieved through experience more than practice.[i] Since the age of twelve, I have experienced natural platted styles, perms, (jerry) curls, braided extensions, weaves, a shaved head and most recently dreads. That said, my memories and often the seminal moments in my life can be related to hairstyles I had at specific times. Hair can be a complicated thing for women and for black women it is even more so.[ii] Beyond an undifferentiated black hair, black *female* hair - bound up historically as it is with issues of gender, and sexuality which have burdened it as a specifically fraught site of the performance of "femaleness" - operates as an over-determined sign which binds us to our race and culture through its visibility and corporeality. As Kobena Mercer has argued, "within racism's bipolar codification of human value, black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin."[iii] As such, the stereotype of "good" and "bad" hair, code for straighter-equals-whiter-equals-more beautiful, went and still goes, hand in hand with the similar hierarchical obsession of degrees of blackness, code for lighter complexions-equals-whiter-equals- more beautiful.

Although many black women will openly lament the often painful and long processes of "dealing with" our hair (almost every contemporary black women in the west - and many outside of it - can tell stories of being at the salon "all day"), the context of the black hairdresser is an important site of cultural and social exchange within often dispersed or fragmented black communities. The black hairdresser is even more important within the black diasporic experience in the west, where black people are often scattered within dominantly white suburban or rural settings. In such cases, going to the hairdresser takes on ritual significance, not only due to the actual travel times / plans, but to the experience of being "in" the community that it provides. These sites are also places of black hair milestones, where "experiments" are undertaken and female passage to maturity and womanhood is marked. Sadly, until most recently, in a colonial west, these "passages" implied the "relaxing" or "perming" of our natural hair textures, an historically enforced, assimilatory move which traditionally marked the rejection of the black corporeal sign of hair through the transformation of its original "kinky" texture. This shift in texture also became a hoped for shift in weight and movement - evidenced by the continuing symbolic significance of the white female model / actress in contemporary shampoo commercials (Pantene and others) who flips her hair excitedly demonstrating its movement and thus health and vitality.[iv]

Gardner's lithographs recall the "simple time" of pre-processed / pre-chemicalized black female hair. But the word recall is deceptive since it infers a past which is not necessarily what Gardner's works represent in any complete or easy way. Oddly, these prints also represent a possible present or contemporary recuperation of past styles. As such they stand as both colonial and postcolonial (temporally and symbolically). What is immediately striking is the intricacy and delicacy of the complex styles which Gardner evokes in masterful detail capturing both the quality of a black aesthetic and the property of hair texture which can be read as "natural". What is most intriguing, perhaps, is how these women come to be individuated by the intricacy of their distinct hairstyles which serve to differentiate them, but also how the sign of hair becomes the dominant mark of race in "portraits" which have no faces. Although it is not explicitly coded, there is the

sense that these hairstyles are recuperable to specific African or black diasporic cultures and representative of a heterogenous experience. In this deliberate shift, Gardner refuses the primacy of the west's colonial dependence upon skin colour / complexion as the dominant means of "knowing" a body as raced. Interestingly, the specificity of an identifiable black hair aesthetic allows us to read race on to the unseen faces without the help of skin. Yet they raise questions for the viewer too: what type of face do you envision, how are our own racial identifications complicit in this visual imagining and how are race and slavery a part of the complex colonial matrix through which we come to "see" faces for these women?

It is through the absence of faces - the most crucial seat of identity in the tradition of western portraiture, that Gardner turns the portrait on its head as a reliable and complete archive for the knowing and recuperation of an historical individual. What is also at stake is how this flip forces a consideration of the colonial debt of portraits and their stake in cultural capital as an élite visual art practice invested in the class differentiation of "worthy sitters" which depended upon the othered bodies of the absent or appendaged white servant or black slave body. Historical portraits of black sitters are extremely rare in the west. Individuated portraits are even more so.[v] Since the black female body often functioned in portraiture (much as figure painting) as the foil against which white female beauty was consolidated and celebrated, such black subjects were often literally and symbolically tangential within the image, present to serve, to be the "exotic" or "primitive", to point up the colonial power and imperial reach of the white sitter they helped to elevate.[vi] Within this historical context, to devote portraits solely to black female subjects, to deliberately reference slavery, to name them and to individuate them is a knowledgeable postcolonial turn indeed.

The references to slavery are precise and often difficult to look at. Gardner embeds the oppressive implements and weapons of slave torture directly into the beautiful and intricate hairstyles adorning her black female slaves. In so doing the beauty of the hair is disrupted in a disturbing gesture which again points up the race of the faceless women and their oppression within a colonial institution that literally committed a physical violation which threatened the integrity and safety of body and culture. At the same time, the embedding, does not "mess up" the hair - but is seamlessly and securely a part of the whole. As such one can speculate about how the rituals and practice of black hair were in part formed and hybridized through slavery and how assimilationist strategies were often thwarted through resistance of and on the body. Slavery, amongst its other evils, attempted to break the ability of black people to care for black bodies.[vii] In the process, traditions, knowledge, rituals were lost - but new ones were formed.

For me, Gardner's lithographs remember the experience of black females doing the hair of other black females. As a young child, that experience was deeply comforting - sitting on the floor, between your mother's legs, while she combed out your (often unruly) hair and applied (at times, not too gently) healthy dobs of Dax or TCB. The smell of the products, the tug of your hair as it was formed into plats, the smell of breakfast (since this was surely a morning ritual), the pain in my neck as I squirmed to glimpse the cartoon on the television, the yank of the head and pain in my scalp as my mother compelled me back into place - all this is the joy of black female hair.[viii]

Today black hair in the west is at a full circle moment. With the advent of "natural", often chemical-free styles which embrace our original textures, there are more "natural-exclusive" hairdressers and more unisex salon experiences. Twists, short Afros, shaved heads, braids and dreads are common sights on black women, especially in urban diasporic centres in North America and Europe. Such shifts are celebrated in contemporary song by singers like Lauryn Hill and India Arie and contemporary books like the children's work *Nappy Hair* (1997).[ix] Although many of us can "do these styles" at home, the black hairdresser still retains its importance as a vibrant cultural and racial site of great community importance.[x]

Although Gardner's portraits are faceless, this move can be read as a unifying, solidarity-building gesture, rather than a homogenizing one. Here, the viewer has agency and the faces we may choose to insert say more about our own knowledge and / or ignorance of slavery and its

attendant racial baggage than about the artist's own desires and consciousness. Do we see light or dark brown skin, do we imagine African tribal markings or scars from abusive masters, are they smiling or sad?

Gardner's inverted portraits can be read as an ironic move, which through naming and the specificity and intricacy of hair, is a retroactive reclamation of individuality for those who were most disenfranchised and anonymized by slavery.

---

[i] I of course note the diversity and heterogeneity of the black hair experience throughout the world and therefore, my insights are best applied to the black diasporic experience in and of the west in countries like Canada, the USA, Britain and the Caribbean.

[ii] See: *Black, Bold and Beautiful* (1999), directed by: Nadine Valcin, National Film Board of Canada.

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

[iv] The white woman hair flipping phenomenon is an often painful bain in black female existence since its unattainability (generally without some form of chemicalization and/or hair augmentation) signals the so-called inferiority of black female standards of beauty within the colonial western context.

[v] Historical individual portraits of black or other colonized subjects as well as ones of white servants.

[vi] Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 1.

[vii] Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001).

[viii] I also vividly recall the pain of not having my Mother do my hair - as in the time she was in the hospital and my Dad, unable to do it himself, had our maternal Grandmother do it and alternatively, the Jamaican woman across the street. In both cases my sister and I thought it quite disastrous since the style (shape, positioning of plats and parts) were not our favourite or alternatively the parts were crooked. In the context of white suburban Canada, hair was for us a critical and often traumatic site of our racial difference which the prying questions from white kids ("why don't you need elastic to keep your braids in?") and actual physical assaults (braid yanking with a purpose of "feeling" our difference?) helped to memorialize.

[ix] Carolivia Herron *Nappy Hair* (Toronto: Random House, Canada, 1997).

[x] Hence, the success of films like *Barber Shop* (2002) starring Ice Cube, Eve and Cedric the Entertainer, soon to be followed by a sequel.