

Sitting Black

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A young woman sits straight, intensely looking in front of her. Nothing of her inner emotions is apparent. She embodies self-containment and discipline through the pose she adopts for viewers' enjoyment and for Curtis Williamson who painted this portrait. Everything of this small and simple composition, depicting this woman's three-quarter portrait on an emptied greenish background, is kept quiet. Nevertheless, we anticipate her desire to move. The proposed dynamism of this captured moment in time is suggested through this woman's gaze. Although calm, she is perched at the far edge of her seat, as if she is about to get up and take action.

The colours of this intimate composition are rich and of a dark brownish tone. The unnamed woman wears a pale shirt, enhanced by what we imagine being an A-line high waist skirt completing her outfit, where the whiteness of the collar shines on her dark complexion.¹ The wood panel on which the work is painted is visible through the brush strokes. This loose technique renders the texture of the woman's blouse more complex at the bottom of the composition. Yet, the dark line crossing the verticality of her shirt raises questions. Is this a necktie or is this brown stroke the continuation of her skin? Is this a slightly open blouse suggesting her nakedness or does this thin cravat close her respectable exterior dress? Moreover, what about those earrings that glow on her dark skin?

The skin colour of this woman leaves no doubt considering her inferior position in relation to the intended viewers of the time and the artist of this work. Furthermore, her identity remains a mystery as her name is absent from the title.² If naked, she re-enacts the associated hyper sexualization of the black female body within Western artistic traditions regardless

of the definite strength she seems to embody. On the other hand, if dressed in a clothing style conventionally associated with the middle class, who was she to have such financial means?

Additionally, regarding the genre of this work, other questions arise. If it is a portrait proper, who commissioned it and for which purposes? Arguably, this woman from her identifiable race is from a lower class and surely does not have the financial power to commission her portrait from a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. Thus, how can we consider this work in relation to the other works made by Williamson of black subjects?³ Moreover, where is she from? And where can we situate this woman within Toronto and Canadian society at large during the 1910s, as well as this country's art canon where the dominant complexion is white?

Negro Girl is the title by which this work from 1916 by A. Curtis Williamson is known. With the name of the sitter silenced from any historical records on the work, it speaks of the tradition denounced by art historian Charmaine Nelson of naming blackness "to produce and reinforce colonial stereotypes."⁴ In other words, the portrait itself speaks of this artist's privileged position and perception of his subject. Additionally, the sitter's identity rejected the word "negro" as a testimony of black people's presence on Canada soil.⁵ Furthermore, it demonstrates how race is visually articulated and the role of artistic productions in the definition of different identities. Thus, this sitter experienced simultaneous marginalization in terms of her sex/gender and her race/colour.

Curtis Albert Williamson, born in 1867 in Brampton, Ontario, was an academically trained white painter acclaimed during

the first segment of his career before the First World War and whose work is still present in Canadian Art textbooks and exhibited in Canadian institutions. Today, however, he is barely remembered. He first studied art in Toronto with J.W.L. Foster (1850-1938) for two years. In 1889, his father, a wealthy cattle exporter,⁶ provided him with funds and he was able to go study in Paris at Académie Julian. There, he was taught by three eminent Academic painters: Fernand Cormon, Jules Lefebvre and Benjamin-Constant.⁷ Eventually in 1892, he returned to Canada after spending two years working in Barbizon, a rural town South of Paris. Nevertheless, his stay was brief, since in 1894, he returned to Europe where he lived for ten years mainly in Holland and other regions of the Low Countries. In 1904, he permanently settled in Canada, and remained in Toronto throughout the rest of his career. He died in 1944 never having married and with no immediate relatives.⁸

Curtis Williamson was renowned among Canadian artists of the time as one of Canada's greatest portrait painter, yet he did not only engage in that genre. He is considered to have brought Dutch art tradition into Canada and was given the title of "Canadian Rembrandt."⁹ Compulsively searching for the "pittoresque," his work is characterized by somber interiors of rich and glowing colours, where light and shadow compete, and by an exploration of the character of his subjects.

Williamson played an active role in the promotion and valorization of Canadian art's definite aesthetic status as deriving from the European tradition. To counter the old-fashioned ways of his country's arts, he formed the Toronto-based *Canadian Art Club* in 1907 with several other artists. The *Canadian Art Club* aimed to show the finest quality of modern "subjective" Canadi-

an works.¹⁰ Hence, in his own practice Williamson consciously participated in creating the Canadian art canon as based on the Western tradition where whiteness triumphs.¹¹

With the artist's background established, it can be argued that understanding Williamson's work is essential as *Negro Girl* reveals to us more about him than about the sitter itself.¹² Accordingly, I will attempt to follow Nelson's lead, as well as that of scholars Richard Dyer and Eva Mackey, to problematize the representation of the black female subject as to understand how it was invented and reproduce through three potential readings of this woman's identity. This small oil painting on wood entered the National Gallery of Canada's collections in 1944 as part of a bequest by Dr. James MacCallum.¹³ This renowned art collector of Tom Thomson's works had in his possession two works by Williamson, whose subjects were persons of colour: *Coloured Girl* and *Coloured Woman*.¹⁴ Of these two works, only one entered the National Gallery of Canada's collection: *Coloured Girl*, which is the previous title of the work explored here.¹⁵ MacCallum lent it in 1926 to the Art Gallery of Toronto (as the Art Gallery of Ontario was then known) for its summer show along with his other work by Williamson presenting a black woman. Their presence seems to have been noticed since they are mentioned in Hector Charlesworth's review.¹⁶ The work described above surely would have stood out in the early twentieth century as it represents a black woman in Canada, a predominantly white country.¹⁷ From this artist's body of work, we can locate only a few works that represent black subjects, which recurrence questions his relationality to this racial minority.¹⁸

Working in Toronto, Williamson had a studio at the Yonge Street Arcade situated near "the Ward," the city's neighbourhood dense with ethnic minorities.¹⁹ Considering how these different ethnicities were pictured within popular press, Sarah Bassnett suggests that they "were positioned as a source of public anxiety about poverty, moral and biological degeneracy, [...] while [...] (they) provoked curiosity and became a source of entertainment."²⁰ Accordingly, Williamson's studio at the southeast border of this neighbourhood, his day-to-day reality was no doubt punctuated by people of diverse

ethnicity and colour, and he was probably inspired by similar motives of popular contemporary press.

The fact that Williamson painted various people of colour belonging to different age groups potentially suggests that he knew a particular family of African descent of which he painted the portrait of its members.²¹ Moreover, compared with the rest of his production, the unfinished quality, especially towards the bottom of the composition, alludes to its study-like quality. And yet, the identity of the sitter is the most intriguing aspect of this work, and is the core of my present investigation: who is this woman? How did Williamson come about to paint her portrait?

If dressed in a proper exterior clothing style, who was she to have such financial means? One can believe she freely posed for this artist, as demonstrated above, but she could also hold the position of a servant labouring in a white household, which was a common occupation held by women of colour, since offered little work opportunities. As Dionne Brand rephrased James St. G. Walker's history of Black Canadians, "up to the Second World War at least 80 percent of Black women in Canadian cities worked in domestic services."²² Thus, this "*Negro Girl*" by Williamson can be argued as falling into the tradition of black maids' representation portrayed as someone belonging to a white household. Not having the means to commission an image of themselves or their relatives, the opportunity to sit for a portrait was probably initiated by their white employer. Arguably, it is these last ones whose identity is being showcased through their ability to hire such exotic and daily workers to attempt to their everyday lives.

Photographs from the famous William Notman's Montreal studio exemplify such imagery of black maids, where the name of their employer serves as their own identifier. Moreover, the relation black female wage earners maintained towards their own bodies is problematic, since they could hardly care for themselves since they were always attending to their employer's first. The fact that this woman wears such proper clothing could either be a uniform im-

posed by the household she works for or it could also be Williamson's polishing of her image.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Canada's dominant identity defined in terms of race and gender, was white and masculine.²³ Inevitably, the relationship between Williamson and this "girl" was one of power relation. She sat before him, and the portrait that was produced out of this setting was not intended to please her, as she never had the right to earn it.

Additionally, we can consider her gaze of which she is denied the power over. She bears a look of introspection and melancholy, and sports a lower deferential gaze. Charlesworth noted that Williamson's two works portraying black female subjects caused him to feel sympathy and sadness towards these two characters.²⁴ This servility and uncomfortable look of surrender underlines black women's relationality to white male artists.²⁵

On the other hand, if we consider that she was naked under her blouse, she enacts the associated hyper sexualization of women of colour. Hence, the historical justification of white access to black bodies, often resulted in sexual exploitation. Such a legacy derives mainly from the objectification of the black body through slavery and more specifically black women's quality as breeders of slaves. A legacy of the slave trade and the commodification of the black body, black women were portrayed by white artists as immoral and licentious.²⁶ Their deemed pathological racial degeneracy and sexual deviance served to support through striking opposition the "cult of white womanhood," who were considered as embodiment of proper performance of gender and sexuality.²⁷ This ideal of beauty was being reinforced throughout the tradition enacted by Canadian artists representing women of colour.²⁸ Most of the works identified by Nelson show these women as naked, and not nude since in everyday life décor, which renders their bodies as real and not allegorical.

To conclude, this woman's exact identity can hardly be retrieved. Nevertheless, having followed Nelson's proposition of examining the "historically, socially and nationally specific pro-

cesses as they have informed artistic practice and helped to produce specific representational forms which circulated as *natural* within a dominantly colonial space,” three potential readings can be made of this work by Curtis A. Williamson that also reveal the reality of black Canadian women at the beginning of the twentieth century and the visual tradition they fall into, as much as white male artist’s dominant position.

Notes

1. This type of practical outfit was common through middle and lower class as an exterior outfit, yet the class distinction could have been made through the fabric that composed her garments. Williamson’s sketchy finish especially with regards this girl’s torso does not provide any clues regarding the materiality of its fabric. “History of Fashion 1900 – 1970,” *The Victoria & Albert Museum*, accessed November 7th, 2016. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/h/history-of-fashion-1900-1970/>
2. Most artists omit the name of their sitter when depicting a black subject, which results in their appropriation of their subject and depriving these last ones of their individuality. Thus, it leaves them with a total absence of agency over their portrait. Note here that Louis Muhlstock (1904-2001), a Jewish Montreal based artist did record the name of his black model name Eva. Charmaine Nelson. *Through an-Other’s Eyes: White Canadian Artists – Black Female Subjects = Le Regard de l’Autre: Artistes Canadiens Blancs – Sujets Féminins Noirs* (Oshawa, Ont.: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1998), 21
3. Hector Charlesworth. “Summer Shows at Toronto Art Gallery; Superb Collection of the Works of A. Curtis Williamson, R.C.A., and Interesting Pictures by Other Canadian Painters.” *Toronto Saturday Night*, August 21st, 1926.
4. Charmaine Nelson. *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 19.
5. Since the beginning of transatlantic settlement, black people lived in Canada. Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experience, Social Conditions* (Halifax, N.S. : Fernwood Pub. Co., c2010), 46.
6. Hector Charlesworth. “Late Curtis Williamson; A painter’s Painter,” *Toronto Saturday Night*, June 3rd, 1944.
7. Fernand Cormon is a renowned portraitist, while Jules Lefebvre is remembered for his nudes and Benjamin Constant is an acclaimed history painter and orientalist. Charlesworth. “Late Curtis Williamson”
8. “Noted Painter of Portraits,” *Toronto Globe & Mail*, April 20th, 1944, 169.
9. Arthur Lismer. “A portrait by A. Curtis Williamson,” *Canadian picture study*. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Toronto, 1940), 15-16.
10. This private exhibiting society of Canadian artists active in Toronto until 1915 aimed to show the finest quality of modern “subjective” Canadian works as to attempt to establish higher standards through small, carefully hung shows. Membership of the Club was strictly through invitation. The work of its artists varied in style and subject, but generally showed influence from Impressionism and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. This group of well-known artists, some of them members of the RCA, presented eight well received exhibitions which helped them to lobby collectors more effectively. However, “the Club disbanded in 1915, having lost some of its momentum because of the death” of one of its founding member in 1913 “and because of the distractions of the First World War.” In its way, it can be argued, that the Club helped to prepare the way for the Group of Seven and art that was solely “Canadian.” Charles C. Hill. “Canadian Art Club.” *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* [online], edited by Gerald Hallowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) Accessed November 1, 2016. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093ac/ref/9780195415599.001.0001/acref9780195415599-e-252>.
11. Curtis Williamson was included in Arthur Lismer’s book *Canadian picture study* from 1940. Lismer. “A Portrait by A. Curtis Williamson,” 15-16
12. Nelson. *Representing the Black Female Subject*, 22.
13. Born in 1860 in Richmond Hill, Ontario, James MacCallum was an eminent Ophthalmologist and art patron, who died on December 2nd, 1943. Following his death, his collection was donated to the National Gallery of Canada. Through his prized collection, the museum was able to acquire major Canadian works of art. Thus, they hold the record of this precious transaction as well as MacCallum papers.
14. The post-mortem inventory made of Dr. MacCallum’s possessions teaches us that he owned few works by Williamson. Why and how did he had in his possession two of his works representing black women? These questions remain not answered, yet he clearly appreciated such subject. National Gallery of Canada fonds, Gifts: Bequests/Oils – MacCallum, James, presented by, 1.71, Box 54, File 12.
15. Notably, since 1944, this work stayed in the museum galleries or vaults, where in 1992 it changes its French title from “Jeune négresse” to “Jeune Noire” as to avoid any racist connotations. Only in 1999 did it leave the museum to be lent to the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, in Oshawa, for an exhibition titled *Through Another’s Eyes: White Canadian Artists-Black Female Subject*, curated by the only black art historian in Canada Charmaine Nelson. National Gallery, Curatorial File: *Negro Girl* (1916) by Albert Curtis Williamson (no. 4735)
16. “No picture can be more effectively illustrated than Mr. Williamson’s mastery than the “Study in Black”, always the most difficult color mediums. It is not only technically skillful but the treatment of the woman’s countenance as an exquisite quality of charm. His two studies of negro women have an inimitably human touch, with an underlying note of pathos, and like all of his portrait studies reveal a fine meticulous taste.” Hector Charlesworth. “Summer Shows at Toronto Art Gallery; Superb Collection of the Works of A. Curtis Williamson, R.C.A., and Interesting Pictures by Other Canadian Painters,” *Saturday Night, Toronto, Ont.*, Saturday August 21st, 1926.
17. “No picture can be more effectively illustrated than Mr. Williamson’s mastery than the “Study in Black”, always the most difficult color mediums. It is not only technically skillful but the treatment of the woman’s countenance as an exquisite quality of charm. His two studies of negro women have an inimitably human touch, with an underlying note of pathos, and like all of his portrait studies reveal a fine meticulous taste.” Hector Charlesworth. “Summer Shows at Toronto Art Gallery; Superb Collection of the Works of A. Curtis Williamson, R.C.A., and Interesting Pictures by Other Canadian Painters,” *Saturday Night, Toronto, Ont.*, Saturday August 21st, 1926.
18. Whiteness was equated with Canadian citizenship as its homogenous identity. Thus, Toronto urban planning was tailored as to favour northern European and to ghettoised ethnic minorities. Accordingly, this situation created the framework within which black people could live in this city. “Up to the early 1960s, it was not surprising to come across notations such as ‘coloured persons not wanted’ on ‘For Rent’ notices.” Mohammad Qadeer “Urban Planning Multiculturalism in Ontario, Canada.” in *Race, Equality, and Planning: Policies and Procedures*, ed. Huw Thomas and Vijay Krishnarayan (Avebury Aldershot, Hants, England; Brookfield, Vt., USA 1994): 190-194.
19. To recuperate his work is an arduous task since he is not an artist favored today. Thus, a large part of his works are in private collections and, as no monograph has been made on his work, it remains hard to know the exact extant of his artistic production.
20. Between the turn of the century and World War 1, Toronto experienced a rapid growth in population, of which 80 per cent were new immigrants, who mostly “settled in a congested a section of the downtown core,” and which was considered a slum. Sarah Bassnett. “Shooting Immigrants: Ethnic Difference in Early Twentieth-Century Press Photography.” in *The cultural Work of Photography in Canada*, ed. by Andrea Kunard and Carol Payne (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 106.
21. Bassnett. “Shooting Immigrants,” 107.
22. From the catalogue of the Toronto Art Gallery 1926’s Summer Show and Hector Charlesworth’s review of it, we know Curtis Williamson painted two works representing black women that were perceived as studies, and of which one it the work the present entry focuses on. Additionally, from an auction list held by Sotheby’s in Toronto from May 25th to 27th, 1970, we know that Williamson also produced a water-colour with touches of gum Arabic titled: *Head of a coloured child*. Moreover, Dr. Brian Foss knows a work by this same artist from a private collection of which we only have a photograph. This work also presents a young coloured boy of young age that seems to suggests that he could hardly be a professional model, which reinforces the theory of this being a member of a family Williamson knew.
23. Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s-1950s*, (Toronto, Ont., Canada: Women’s Press, 1991), 15; and James St. G. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada : A Study Guide* (Ottawa, Ministry of State-Multiculturalism, 1981), 132.
24. Canadian colonial myth is based on a narrative “constructed as a story of two forces, French and British. The marginalization of Native and specific immigrant populations has served to equate particular forms of whiteness with Canadian citizenship.” Thus, the desired identity was white at a time when male hegemony dominated the gender hierarchy. Nelson. *Through an-Other’s Eye*, 9.
25. Charlesworth. “Summer Shows at Toronto Art Gallery.”
26. Nelson. *Through an-Other’s Eye*, 23.
27. Nelson. *Representing the Black female subject*, 23-25.
28. *Ibid.*, 22-30.

29. For an extensive overview of the representation of black Canadian women, see Nelson's catalogue made for the 1999 exhibition, in Hamilton: *Through an-Other's Eye*.
30. Ibid.

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