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Memory, Mobility, Modernity: Archibald Motley's Portraits and the Art of 'Serious Painting'

Fionnghuala Sweeney

This article considers Archibald Motley Jr.'s academic portraiture as an address to the conjoined difficulties of the African-American as a subject of representation and the African-American body as an artefact of slavery. It argues that his work, by marshalling the conventions of this conservative, patriarchal form, stages scripted performances of critical citizenship that situate the work of art as a cosmopolitan site of diasporic memory, transforming the language of genre into an aesthetic of black identity. Cognisant of the relationship between African-American visual and literary culture, of their cooperative relationship in facilitating the telling of tales, the making of subjects and the transformation of those subjects into works of art, Motley chose a form whose precedents, the series of frontispiece portraits to literary works that emerged in the eighteenth century, were embedded in a radical history of self-making. Rather than remaining locked in nineteenth-century models of representation, unable to enter fully into an expressive understanding of the value of modernist aesthetics and their detemporalised symbolist codes, Motley stages a sophisticated challenge to new art practices, resisting the easy universalism of primitivist expression and its depoliticising relationship to constructions of modern subjectivity. His painting confirms that, for the black artist in the 1920s, the aesthetics of time, space, politics and citizenship were conjunctural, mutually complicating and interlinked.

In his 1925 essay, 'To Certain of Our Philistines', Alain Locke positioned the visual image of the African-American subject centre stage, noting the significance of portraiture in mediating political and cultural subjectivity, and emphasising the need for a radical approach to visual aesthetics. Urging artists not 'to compensate the attitudes of prejudice, [but] rather ... as is proper, to ignore them', he declared war on the Philistinism of 'lily-whitism', calling specifically for a 'new school and idiom of Negro portraiture' that circumvented, even as it disclosed, what he called 'the blindness of the Caucasian eye'.¹

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Locke's focus on the practice of portraiture provides a reminder of the aesthetic limitations of a decade marked by the emergence of new visual arts practices typically rejecting realist convention and its related models of social knowledge. His critique goes to the heart of the representative bind that confronted the African-American artist in the 1920s: the conventional and historical limitations of 'serious painting' in America. For even in an artistic climate that embraced formal and thematic novelty, these limitations continued to hold sway, inflecting modernist approaches to the black subject. Primitivism in particular, initially part of the triumphant iconoclasm that declared the liberation of the 'art of the new' from the formal constraints of its past, proved a double-edged sword, confirming the aesthetic values of non-Western art, but often casting people of African descent as 'primary primitives', who entertained with 'exotic performances, or repeated old-fashioned nineteenth-century [romantic or realist] paradigms'. Secondary primitivism, the aesthetic mastery of primitive form, including artistic control over the primitive artefact, on the other hand, became a European and Anglo-American cultural event. Mastery of the primitive (human) artefact as a political subject was starkly illustrated in racial violence across the USA, and often visually reiterated in the photographic images of that violence that characterised the period. In addition to the 'technical problems' presented by black portraiture, then, which confirmed that the possibilities of realist treatment of the human subject had not yet been fully exhausted, one of the challenges faced by contemporary black artists was the link between artistic and political mastery. Further complicating this was a history of representation encoding practices of aesthetic judgement – the 'blindness' of which Locke writes – incommensurate with the aesthetic and intellectual positions that informed the work of those artists instrumental in establishing the 1920s as an 'art era'.

Archibald Motley Jr. and Aaron Douglas in particular developed, as Celeste-Marie Bernier shows, 'new art forms . . . in their search for answers to . . . aesthetic questions' surrounding the expressive relationship between history and identity, in the context of the new dislocations of the Great Migration.² The question posed by Douglas, 'what kind of picture, what kind of world does the black artist see?', neatly captures that contemporary challenge in terms emphasising the unfolding role of the artist as beholder, mediator, creator. At the same time, it suggests the need for a critical model conscious of the simultaneous unfolding of an aesthetic vocabulary in which historicised subjectivity – encoded experience – informs formal expressions of artistic purpose. If Locke laid out a theory of aesthetics delineating the inherited shortcomings of artistic practice and art criticism, for the visual artist the task of rendering – showing and showing to – the black world coincided with an implicit recognition that, at a moment at which the newly politicised aesthetics of diaspora invoked the promise of political change, the readability of that world had been compromised by representative constraints that formed part of the history of enslavement.³

This article focuses on the work produced by Archibald Motley Jr. in the 1920s, because it exemplifies the use of academic portraiture to redress the conjoined aesthetic challenges presented by the African American as a subject of representation

and the African American body as an artefact of slavery. Following a route different from his contemporaries, Motley set about devising a visual language capable of recalibrating the patriarchal terms of American portraiture to express the complex materialities of diasporic experience. Embedding political fictions of modern black subjectivity within this most apparently conservative of painterly forms, he produced deeply historicised work that overcomes what James Porter calls the problem of ‘the Negro artist and racial subject matter’ or the ‘sparseness of ... racial idiom ... prior to the ... early 1920s’. Choosing a form whose precedents – the series of frontispiece portraits to literary works commencing with Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* – embodied a radical history of self-making, and reflexively addressing both the subject matter and formal expression that characterised academic portraiture, Motley’s painting confirms that, for the black artist, the aesthetics of time, space, politics and citizenship were conjunctural, mutually complicating and interlinked.⁴

Operating within conventional models of representation, Motley’s work avoids the dehistoricising tendencies of new art practices, refusing to collapse the specificity of the experience of enslavement into the easy universalism of primitivist expression and its depoliticising relationship to subjective construction. His portraits, I would like to argue, instigate a series of public encounters with embodied knowledge and temporal visibility, presenting scripted performances of critical citizenship that situate the work of art as a cosmopolitan site of diasporic memory. His early self-portrait, the paintings of his family and his series of ‘scientific’ portraits of women of mixed ancestry, named for the Creole ‘type’ of the individual represented, illustrate his transformation of the conventional language of genre into an aesthetic of black identity, reconfiguring the eye and the hand of the African-American artist in the networked but unevenly experienced contexts of modern diaspora, whose common root was the still recent history of enslavement.

In an era of mass migration, calling on aesthetic models established over the preceding century, Motley set about delineating a visual idiom in which black citizenship could find expression. Part of the wave of migration that saw the emergence of new communities of African Americans in Northern cities – leaving New Orleans in the mid-1890s, eventually settling in Chicago when Archibald Motley was still an infant – the Motley family history mirrored that of many other migrants who turned their backs on the racial conflicts and limited economic opportunity that persisted in the South. In the 1920s, Motley, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, set about establishing diasporic citizenship as an aesthetic event in the canvases that emerged in the early period of his artistic development, identifying mobility as part of the underlying character of black experience. Dedicating himself, as David Driskell notes, ‘to painting what he had seen as an inside observer’, Motley’s early work on first glance often shows little sign of the complex political and aesthetic histories that inform it. His specialism in portraiture positions him as amongst the most academic of African-American painters of the decade, serving as ‘a measure of [his] deep identification with the academic mainstream’. Certainly the visual language of

his art remained distinct from much of the contemporary work emerging from Harlem, which formed part of an interlocking series of expressive innovations across the genres of poetry, philosophy, drama and visual art, closely linked to African-American print culture and the establishment of an academic and artistic community. Locke's special edition of *Survey Graphic* published in March 1925, 'Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro', for example, illustrated articles and literary works using a range of photographic images and the occasional sketch, but granted pride of place to the German-born Winold Reiss, extensively reproducing his Harlem portraits as examples for emulation. Motley's work does not feature, doubtless because he was not resident in Harlem at the time. Nevertheless, his omission from 'Mecca', a systematic project delimiting the expressive field of black artistry while placing New York at the centre of the black art world, suggests his work falls outside the set of artistic expectations the special edition was instrumental in confirming.⁵

Set apart from Harlem's celebratory interdisciplinarity, Motley's work retains a stand-alone quality that can appear depoliticised because it operates outside and apparently out of kilter with the futurist thrust and innovative formalism of New Negro aesthetics. Neither does it lean towards the formal radicalism so much a feature of avant-gardist expression in the European metropolises. Nevertheless, his work responds to representative dilemmas central to the processes of recording and remembering a past now distanced by geography rather than time. Engaging directly with questions of artistic practice, it configures the relationship between the artist and the 'racial subject' in terms that acknowledge the histories of power mediating the complex emergence of African-American subjectivity into the public sphere across the domains of the visual, literary and performative arts. Specifically, through defamiliarising manipulations of the conventions of portraiture, Motley reanimates the modern black image using the model of self-authorising subjectivity established in nineteenth-century black autobiography. Recalling African-American conventions of literary and photographic portraiture, his paintings respond to the overlapping visual and literary dynamics that characterised responses to enslavement, drawing on the tradition of frontispiece portraiture, and translating aesthetic strategies from literature and performance into a vocabulary of the visual. Motley's idiom emphasises the artist's role in penetrating the mask of culture, in reflexive refutations of the history of artistic practice that simultaneously refuse contemporary European trends either to depreciate the inner subject through distortions emphasising colour and form, or to produce radical emotional statements in primitivist expositions drawing on insights gleaned from non-European art.

If his work in this period remains distinct from that emerging from Harlem, it retains an equal distance from European avant-gardist practice, in particular from cubist-inspired retreats from volumetric representation, figurative illusion and planar depth towards an emphasis on surface, fragmentation and expressionistic rather than figurative portrayal. Motley's modernity, as Mary Ann Calo notes of other African-American figurative artists, 'often presented itself in socio-political rather than formal terms'. Yet his treatment of the visual form is not without its subversive qualities, with

the restrained emotional content of individual works speaking to the difficulties presented by the universalising claims of primitivist expression due to its dangerous proximity to racial caricature, and relationship to the apologia of slavery and the associated logic of racial oppression. Abstraction presented related challenges by limiting the opportunity to represent historical specificity. But by retaining the illusionistic treatment of planar depth, Motley captured the complexity of the African–American relationship with a history of black aesthetics that emphasised a resilient, temporally defined subject as the repository of memory; through complex plays on the furnishings of the bourgeois interior and of the self, he insisted on the need for coherent visual narratives, true to the past, and on the significance of the recurrent drama of mobility as a metaphor and a reality of modern existence.⁶

His portraiture fuses the role of art with the role of the artist as public intellectual, occupying the public space of culture in ways that force questions of citizenship to the political foreground. *Portrait of My Mother* (1919) became the first portrait of a black subject by a black artist to be exhibited by the Art Institute, breaking ‘new ground in [its] assertion of the individual African-American as worthy of formal portrayal’. In some ways it confirmed the obvious: that Chicago, like many other cities, had become visually black. It also demonstrates how, by appropriating conservative codes that signalled a secure embodied subjectivity, the defamiliarising perspectives of diasporic identity could be used to destabilise economic and artistic conformity to what Langston Hughes, writing in 1926, described as ‘American standardizations’: white cultural practice and Anglo-American aesthetic values. ‘[N]o great poet’, Hughes wrote, ‘has ever been afraid to be himself’, confirming that ‘[w]ithin the next decade I expect to see the work of a ... school of colored artists who paint ... the beauty of dark faces and create ... expressions of their own soul-world’. By the time of Hughes’ writing, Motley had already produced significant work capturing the character of this ‘soul-world’, radicalising realist convention by opening the doors of AfricanAmerican domestic space and providing intimate glimpses of a hitherto obscured quotidian world. Simultaneously, he gestured towards the performative self-fashioning and conscious self-recognition at the heart of the tradition of frontispiece portraiture.⁷

Far from fearing ‘the strange unwhiteness of his own features’, as Hughes put it, Motley’s earliest self-portrait presents a clear statement of his identity as an artist and an early configuration of the role of the painterly gaze in evidencing the artistic significance of that self-recognition. ‘I believe, deep in my heart, that the dark tinge of my skin is the thing that has been my making,’ he claimed, indicating the degree to which he imagined his role as one of self-creation as well as of creative mastery. *Self Portrait* (c. 1920) is a carefully constructed marker of the moment of that making as he steps forward into his public role, disclosing his visionary capacity and artistic intent to reconfirm the African-American subject as a work of art. The calculated conventionalism with which character is rendered here neatly countermands the pseudo-scientific rationalisations of racial hierarchies that had emerged from phrenology and physiognomy, and taken hold in the art world over the preceding

decades. The artist confronts a tradition of representation in the visual arts resistant, with few exceptions, any attempt at humanist depiction of African-Americans.⁸

The painting also marks Motley's strategic remaking of the theory and tradition of visual artistry which had tied those exceptional images to the creative domain of literature. The significance of visual art and its relationship to the literary form was underscored in 1773 by Phillis Wheatley in her homage to Boston artist, Scipio Moorhead, who produced her frontispiece portrait. 'To S.M., a young African painter, on seeing his works', explicitly links 'the painter's and the poet's fire', fusing the poetic and the visual into an interrelational aesthetic that was to hold sway and be repeatedly regenerated throughout the nineteenth century. In 1861, Frederick Douglass outlined a theory of visual aesthetics that found practical expression in a series of frontispiece images and daguerrotyped self-portraits, re(con)textualising the artefactual individual as a work of art. By mobilising photographic technology, he created a visual record confirming the sitter as both artist and art object. This same drive to creative mastery through aesthetic self-realisation is present in Motley's self-portrait, as, moving beyond the technological mediation of the camera, he inscribes himself into a visual tradition whose founding moment involves the conceptualisation of the formerly enslaved person as a human original.⁹

Motley's subsequent work incorporates this duality, emphasising the historical consequence of the subject as a repository of lived experience. His *Portrait of My Mother* is the first in a series of portraits of his French Creole family executed in the early 1920s that, in Mooney's terms, 'defin[ed] the self through patrimony' by establishing the artist's middle-class values and mixed ancestry. Pictured seated and unsmiling, hands held loosely in her empty lap, looking straight into the eyes of the viewer in a gesture of performative kinship, his mother's gaze reflects the comfortable intimacy of mother and child. The formalised stillness of her pose, her orientation within the picture frame and distance from the artist compositionally recall the image of Harriet Jacobs that preceded the narrative of her life and escape from slavery.¹¹

In *Portrait of My Grandmother* (1922) (Figure 1), the softened lines of the earlier painting give way to sharp definition and detailed hypernaturalistic rendition of facial features and hands. The portrait of Motley's mother is not without its sentimental inflections; this later piece, however, holds emotion in check, privileging the determined older woman as an authorising presence – the mistress of her own selfmaking. In her 80s when the portrait was done, Motley's paternal grandmother, Emily Motley, had been enslaved in Louisiana but was unusual in having received some schooling and could, according to the artist, 'write very well'. Although Motley's oral account is troubled by confused details, an indication perhaps that the occluded histories the portrait references are open to being misremembered, the painting fixes the image of Emily Motley in particular ways. A witness to the temporal proximity of slavery, she presents as a living memory, a refutation of the argument that for African Americans, as one contemporary white reviewer declared, 'slavery is as remote as the European experiences of the grandparents of most of us'. Additionally, the striking

face of the portrait presents a reformulation of the strategically sentimentalising aesthetic and other interpretative distractions that clutter the few visual and

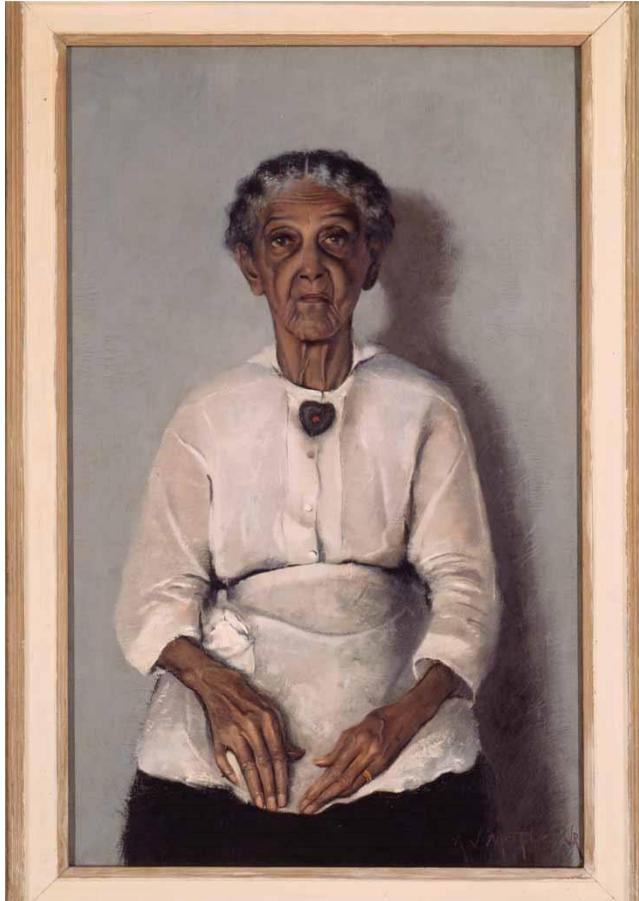


Figure 1. Archibald Motley Jr, Portrait of a Granmother, 1922, Oil on canvas 38.25 × 23.87 in. Collection of Mara Motley and Valerie Gerrard Browne.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum.

extensive literary depictions of women of mixed ancestry. Rather than identity cast as a problem of paternity, there is matriarchal lineage; rather than the threat of sexual victimisation, there is the triumph over time and achievement against adversity. The painting captures not just the momentary present of the sitter's pose, but casts Emily Motley as the sum of her past lives, lived moments and historical junctures. More than a portrait, it is an (auto)biography: a contemporary telescoping of her life and times, signifying on those comparable images preceding the narratives that conferred the memory of slavery as a lived experience onto the Afro-modern context of the 1920s.¹²

Portrait of My Grandmother positions itself in conjunctural relation to AfricanAmerican literary and visual history, showing the two to be inseparable. It provides a frontispiece image to a collective narrative stretching back into the nineteenth century and incorporating the experience of enslavement, emancipation, reconstruction and the migration north. Emily Motley provides visual confirmation of Booker T. Washington's claim that in order to understand the African-American experience, it was necessary to understand the South. Following from this is the implication that in order to understand the American national narrative, as well as the AfricanAmerican artist's response to that narrative, it is necessary to understand enslavement. For this reason perhaps, this portrait of age, and of an age, is profoundly anti-nostalgic. There is no trace of any longing for the past, no glimmer of sentiment in a work untainted by any sense of loss or tragedy. To the contrary, it refuses tragedy and its attendant historical implications, an aesthetic stance that suggests the portrait may be placed in historiographical relationship to contemporary international fictions of black identity, whose need for vindicatory narratives of slave heroism, made romantic rather than tragic forms of emplotment the enabling model of the interwar historical moment. Much the same argument, as Portrait of My Grandmother shows, can be made of Motley's historiographical self-positioning as a diasporan artist in the USA, as he harnesses his artistic vision to models of heroism whose romantic impact is undiminished by their familiar proximity.

The symbiotic relationship between artist and sitter in this portrait helps blur the distinctions between biography, autobiography and historiography, reworking the nineteenth-century idiom in ways that establish not just Motley's ancestry in the slave South, but an artistic lineage rooted in a black aesthetic linking self-making to self-mastery. The significance of this categoric slippage in elaborating the role of the African-American portraitist is visible in different ways in the slightly earlier Portrait of the Artist's Father (1921). Although depicting a kinship relation as intimate as with Motley's mother and grandmother, the title of this portrait displaces some of the implied familiarity by suggesting its subject, Samuel Motley, is to be understood in terms of his relationship to Archibald Motley, the professional painter. It substantiates the claim of technical mastery implied by his self-identification as an artist by confirming paternal kinship as something that can be seen as well as described. By framing any subsequent reading in terms that draw attention to the artist himself, the title sets up a different set of identifications: those occurring within the frame of masculinity, specifically the fraught question of paternity as it relates to the politics of slavery, its attendant paternalist myths and patriarchal structures.

If the painting's denotative intent allows it to feature the artist as well as his father, then the act of naming the father, or establishing likeness and paternity, speaks to a history in which such disclosures were often difficult or impossible. 'The opinion was ... whispered that my master was my father'; wrote Douglass in the opening section of his Narrative, 'but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing [for] the means of knowing was withheld from me'. For Motley, the public visualisation of his father provides a point of historical orientation as well as of individual identification. Painted

seated and at leisure, wearing spectacles, book in hand, Samuel Motley is the epitome of taste and leisured refinement, the behavioural standards and educational level depicted becoming, in the absence of accumulated wealth and the limitations on professional opportunities for African Americans, the marker of the Motley's class status. As in much of Motley's other painting, there is a dramatic quality to this work that exceeds any derivative relationship to genre painting, suggesting that the denotative realism and connotative intertextual play of the performance is as much metaphoric as illustrative. The objects that lend compositional clarity to the central figure, therefore – the books, cigar, statuette and painting – become, in the context of post-slavery and migration, part of the newly reconstituted, 'furniture of the self'. As readable signals of identity, markers of class status in a society where race functions to stratify the social system, they help situate the painting as an historical allegory, linked to contemporary debates around the ways in which a viable future might be imagined, or achieved. And if, as Judith Wilson argues, '[f]or ... Motley ... ethnography replaced ... pursuits of racial themes that were ... polemical in purpose', then this portrait has collective significance because it represents its immediate subject in relation to others.¹³

The painting on the wall behind Motley Sr. provides a window out of the modern cityscape which logically must lie beyond the depicted interior. It depicts, however, an agrarian landscape whose focal point (and the vanishing point of the surrounding painting), is the cabin half hidden behind the low wall that cuts halfway across the width of the picture, beyond the horses in the foreground. Just what the relationship is between the livestock and the dwelling must, in this unpeopled landscape, remain a matter of speculation, but might include a larger plantation house, a nearby cavalry regiment or concealed occupants. The positioning of the cabin as the most spatially distant point on the overall canvas in which genre is embedded within genre suggests an intention that is temporal as well as symbolic. Samuel Motley is portrayed as he is now, in the interior he inhabits, with the possessions he has accumulated and in relation to one of his most important familial relationships. The painting in the background suggests the existence of a different place, and, correspondingly, a journey from that place, across time to the moment of engagement between artist and subject, artist and art history. What the artist sees and shows is his paternal lineage. What he depicts is an allegory of progress, an ethnography of post-slavery, with the still discernible image of the agrarian South providing a point of cultural reference as it does a point of origin in this visual narrative of aesthetic mastery.

Motley Sr.'s performance of literacy, patriarchy, the economic success that is clear from his comfortable surroundings, lays down an historical marker. If *Portrait of My Grandmother* situates itself in relation to the ante-bellum slave narrative and the constant remaking and retelling of the self in relation to the challenges of the moment, then *Portrait of the Artist's Father* is an allegory of Booker T. Washington's post-bellum response. Samuel Motley's history is a vindication of the African-American struggle for economic and cultural as well as political citizenship, one encapsulated in the ambivalent symbolism of the cigar: a reminder that 'the weed' was one of the major

crops of the ante-bellum South, requiring large amounts of slave labour in its cultivation, as recalled in the narratives of Booker T. Washington and Henry Box Brown. Like Motley's other work from the period then, the painting suggests that in the new urban territories of the North, the relationship with the South and the past of enslavement must be kept firmly in mind. As an act of memory executed in the context of ongoing migration, the work illustrates the nuanced capacity of diasporic practitioners to respond to the complexities of internal as well as transnational displacement.

These family portraits establish a multi-generational record that configures twentieth-century portraiture in the context of a tradition of imagery linked to self-mastery and self-making. Although gesturing towards the implied realism of photography, however, Motley also manipulates illusionistic convention to reconstitute the body as a complex site of Afro-modern knowledge, memory, history; most notably in *Portrait of My Grandmother*, which lacks the readable furnishings of other family paintings, and is distinguished by the pared down, essentialised white space in which Emily Motley is depicted. The painting is staged in such a way as to make any act of looking a moment of encounter with the two signifying spaces of the picture plane: initially with the focused presence of Emily herself, and subsequently with the darkness cast on the distempered surface behind, a shadow form which establishes itself in complex relation to both the viewer and the subject of the painting. At first glance appearing merely as technical convention intended to create the illusion of depth, on closer inspection Emily's shadow emerges as a supplementary presence. Thrown to her left, its contrapposto turn into the viewing frame provides a dynamic counterpoint to the stillness of the central figure. Recalling Henry Ossawa Tanner's earlier twentieth-century work, *Salome* (1900), one of the 'diasporic veiled ladies' of the period, who 'entic[es] audiences to see, [and] question ... the ... fascination with women's bodies as conduits of black liberation politics and desire', the shadow dramatised the spectacular identity of the female subject, the performative indeterminacy of racial identity, and the related uncertainty of the historical record. Here Emily Motley sits in full view: complete, historicised, silent, still. The shadow with which she is paired is obscure, dynamic, fleeting, indeterminately rendered, apparently seeking escape from the domain of naturalist representation, perhaps even from the philosophical problematic of corporeality itself.¹⁴

The painting draws on earlier artistry, and uses the painterly medium to address still entrenched problems of representation. Motley's portrait of Emily and her shadow dramatises the Cartesian dilemma not as a philosophical abstract but in its full and recurrent significance for the formerly enslaved woman. Using patterns of what Romare Bearden terms 'call and recall', or, as Robert O'Meally creatively reimagines it, '[i]nspiration and memory', the portrait duplicates itself, facing two ways at once: towards the viewer to whom it presents a window onto the lived realities of historical experience; away from the denuding gaze of wider culture and the risks of mastery inherent in any engagement with aesthetic systems seeking to re-position the black subject within essentialist categories masquerading as aesthetic innovation. Conscious

of the opposing dualities with which his grandmother's figure may be invested, Motley simultaneously captures her image while allowing that figure to stage its own escape. Perhaps it is Salome' who peeps out from behind Emily's shoulder, perhaps not. But the fleetingly caught disturbance of her shadow self – of 'motion seen rather than "thing" observed' – provides confirmation of the performative presence of the mask, the mastery of which, as Houston Baker has it, 'constitutes a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism', in this most apparently academic of works. Far from failing to appreciate the formal opportunities of metropolitan modernism whose discovery of African art and appropriation of sculptural forms, including the mask, became one of the formal markers of avant-garde practice then, Motley shows himself to be in full command of his role in translating the performative power of masking into a visual aesthetic that complicates the very idea of portraiture for black subjects. Portrait of my Grandmother is not only resistant to anti-figurative strains in avant-gardist formalism; more provocatively, by using conventional technique to render the 'soul-world' beneath the surface, it stages a formal attack on its primitivist premises.¹⁵

Such is the complexity of the subject of the painting that, to do her justice, the work must find ways of articulating her underlying narrative and its shifting relationship to US political, aesthetic and philosophical systems from within an aesthetic tradition capable of retaining the link early established between the human subject of the work of art and the image of the artefactual individual this produced. In these family portraits, as in the later *Mending Socks*, Motley imagines then brings to fruition a related relationship between artist and subject. His paintings confirm an aesthetic complicity between the viewer and the viewed: an implied co-authorship in the subsequent emergence of the work of art. His work, we might conclude, is a formal enactment of artistry confronting the wider social as well as aesthetic ideas constraining contemporary address to this hitherto 'untouched ... field of portraiture'. Further, most visibly in *Portrait of My Grandmother*, artist and sitter occupy the same historical, visionary and experiential juncture, the 'space of habitation', that brings the image into being. To draw an analogy with an important though not uncontroversial aspect of literary culture, Motley's early stagings of performative kinship as the engine of the aesthetic act enable a reading of the artist as amanuensis, able to intervene creatively in the collaborative production of the subject as, of and in the work of art from the position of the ideal spectator to the act/art of historical self-making.¹⁶

This sequence of kinship paintings privileges a narrative of the subject set in relation to a set of historical and social relationships that defines rather than diminishes the paintings' aesthetic significance. Motley's emphasis on elaborating character using the classical language of portraiture helps dramatise a politicised narrative clarifying the need, especially in the aftermath of displacement, to make Southern history visible. The recurrent use of domestic interiors becomes another means of exploring the complexities of diasporic identity, particularly in a period during which key geographical relationships were being renegotiated. It is difficult to read Motley's set of 'scientific' portraits without inferring that they may be as easily set in New Orleans

as in Chicago. The Creole resonance of their nomenclature – *The Octaroon* (1922), *Octaroon Girl* (1925), *Mulatress* (1928) – inflects the space of representation, superseding any knowledge of the location of the interiors themselves. Viewers infer from the charged titles of these works that, like Motley's family, the women painted are members of the Southern diaspora, though there are no fixed indicators of this. Paradoxically, what lies beyond the interior, beyond the picture frame itself, is indeterminate but filled with geographical possibility.

The absence of any recognisable landscape or streetscape reinforces the artist's cosmopolitan self-positioning, illustrating, through omission, the networked contexts of diasporic identity made all the more intricate in the aftermath of the Great War. No glimpse of the outside world is available because there are no windows in these paintings. Conceivably the setting is Chicago or New York, or Paris, Rio, Mexico City, New Orleans, Berlin; for the performative subject and the act of artistry are simultaneously possible in all of these places. This de-privileging of location in the interests of establishing a documentary anchor in lived experience realigns the work around questions pertaining to the social geographies of diaspora. Oddly, withdrawing from public space not only lends greater focus to the aesthetics of representation, it makes the question of geographical location more pressing. Significantly, this series engages not only, as the family portraits had done, with literary history, but with contemporary visualisations of African Americans and Southern space. Specifically, it positions the painterly arts in antithetical relation to the photographic images of the lynchings that had become commonplace throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, in a reversal of a tendency that had previously sought to erase the black body from public view. Such images had widespread presence as iconographic reinforcements of the normative violence to which African Americans were subject: published in newspapers or circulating through the federal mail system as postcards, they linked viewing and reading in ways reminiscent of the fugitive slave notices of the previous century. As public rituals with socially regulatory intent, part of the 'subculture of violence', lynchings frequently had recourse to pretexts involving interracial relationships or sexual violence. Killings were held out of doors, usually in rural, sometimes wooded settings, confirming the inherent dangers of the Southern landscape for black people, for whom the natural world and public space retained many of the threats and terrors that had been part of the experience of enslavement.¹⁷

Photographs of these scenes stand in complex relationship to their immediate subject, providing a visual record that contributes to, because it is implicated in, the violence involved. They testify to the impunity of the perpetrators, providing evidence of mastery that normalises both the spectacle and sociality of racial violence. They implicate makers, viewers and recipients of the images in reconfirmations of post-slavery hierarchies in speculative acts that repeatedly strip the victim of subjectivity and citizenship. In the ubiquitous context of these images, Motley's 'scientific' portraiture acquires a more evidently radical cast. The young women in the paintings are positioned indoors, in the relative safety of the architectural interior. Framed as a series of apparently bourgeois aesthetic events, the portraits are dramas of intimacy,

part of a private process of artistic making that detaches the subject from even the suggestion of public space. *The Octaroon* (1922) begins a complex negotiation of the overdeterminations inevitably attending any address to the identity of the person embodying the 'scientific' category, who, for Motley, Mooney argues, 'represented the ideal of femininity and the most beautiful type of blackness'. She is pictured seated, without any surrounding objects to mediate the scene apart from the vertically shadowed, redbrown drapery that forms the backdrop. Calling into question the evidentiary value of looking in contexts already determined by classificatory systems of race, the title is at once theatrical, regional, racially inflected and indicative of the multiple possible routes of ancestral mixing that may have produced the person whose frank gaze emerges from this painting. Despite his choice not to stage a radical spectacle of racial passing in the selection of a model 'with ... blond straight hair [and] blue eyes' this visual drama is nevertheless spectacularly subversive, flagging, on the one hand, the realities of sexual violence, but also, in ways further rebutting the gender politics of contemporary lynchings, the 'indelicate familiarities' that formed part of a history of consensual inter-racial relations.¹⁸

Hints of the theatrical are contained in the use of draperies at the subject's back, as she leans slightly forward into the viewing frame, engaging not just the viewer, but the symbolic cargo of the category that inflects the moment of viewing. Embedded in this instrumentalisation of the ethnographic category then lies a deeper rejection of its social and aesthetic institutionalisation. Like the moodier *Mulatress* (1928) whose sideways gaze and distant expression recall Thomas Eakins' *The Red Shawl* (1890), the painting foregrounds the transformative vision of the artist, able, to see with the inner as well as the outer eye.

These two paintings from the series invoke the significance of ancestry in terms that require address to the collective history of race – its gendered complexities, its social meaning, its aesthetic implications. Significantly perhaps, in Motley's *Creole* series, it is the subject with most African ancestry whose interiorised gaze signals her disengagement from the authority of inherited visual orders with their associated aesthetic baggage. *Octaroon Girl* (1925) shifts this ground, by repositioning the 'scientific' category in the context of Afro-modern political opportunity. Readied for departure, calmly returning the spectatorial gaze, the subject sits to the left of a painting of a ship passing close to the wharves on shore, with barely discernible figures on deck. On a side table to her left stands an ornamental Toby jug, reversing the usual model of racial caricature and sexual power, in a compositional destabilisation of the interrelationship between commodity, mastery and representation. This positioning of the subject plays on metaphors of mobility, including the possibility, given the young woman's potential to pass, of her incorporation into the white racial body. As in *Portrait of the Artist's Father*, the bourgeois interior of the painting provides a readable landscape in which a visual narrative of contemporary identity may be staged. Here, mobility itself comes to occupy a central thematic place. In the modern context of freedom and diaspora, the ship, as well as a symbolic reminder of historical passages,

also presents the possibility of new journeys, untrodden paths and undiscovered landscapes.

It might be possible to dismiss any one of these paintings as limited by the degree to which it appears to concede aesthetic or political authority to inherited hierarchies of race. Taken together, however, the Creole paintings disclose the complexity of their positioning in relation to historical categories of domination. Rather than conceding the authority of the scientific nomenclature, and therefore the representative subservience of aesthetic to scientific practice, or, as Porter puts it, 'the prostitution of science to motives of race subjugation', they present an allegory of art overcoming scientific anachronism. The defeat of that anachronism is simultaneously a statement of the modernity of Motley's vision and a declaration of an aesthetic politics aimed at countermanding visual acts of contemporary oppression. This allegorical function suggests the significance of painterly portraiture as the key to understanding troubled and troubling memory in the 1920s, precisely because of its power to invoke history, tradition, descent.

The paintings' emphasis on interior space turns the viewing gaze inwards and away from the violent depictions of racial violence to which they stand in antithetical relation.¹⁹ That Motley chose to paint women of obviously mixed ancestry is, of course, not without its difficulties. Nor can their depiction ever quite escape questions of commodification inevitably attending the constitution of female subjects in bourgeois space, despite any enabling use of a vocabulary of the domestic. Motley's work is also a long way from contemporary literary confrontations with racial violence practised by Langston Hughes in, for example, 'Song for a Dark Girl' and 'Christ in Alabama'. So too is his rejection of the aesthetics of tragedy that literary colleagues found so enabling in adaptations of the blues form and related emphasis on the culture of the 'low down folks'. But, although his work draws on the tradition of frontispiece portraiture and, therefore, the narratives they authenticated, Motley was confronting the current state of the visual not the literary arts. With the exception of a very few genre paintings, and the iconic *Salome*, that legacy had emphasised the ways in which autobiography could be translated into visual culture in artistic acts of selfauthorship that transformed the subject of portraiture into a work of art. In the past, that tradition had confronted the perennial problem of the replication of mastery that had resulted either in the pictorial absence of the African-American body from the landscape of American art, or in the pernicious influence of caricature, pseudo-scientific discourse or politically motivated sentiment in those representations that received cultural sanction in the white world. Motley's interventions into this tradition stipulate the equally significant role of the artist as a master craftsman in the creation of representations that begin the institutionalisation of the AfricanAmerican portrait as an act of memory framed by but resistant to the selective memory of the bourgeois convention it initially invokes. His paintings also mark the moment at which African-American portraiture re-emerges from the pages of nineteenth-century literary texts and from the photographic standard as 'serious painting', in original works whose singular executions reflect the artistry of the artist as well as the self-mastery of the sitter.

Motley's family portraits are both narratives of progress and allegories of survival. As visual dramas of Afro-modern subjectivity, they initiate new dialogues with the past; by insisting on the continuing significance of the collective experience of enslavement in a decade alive with possibilities born of the new opportunities of diaspora, they reverse the exclusionary mechanisms of earlier American art. By mediating subjectivity in part through the domestic furniture of the self, they indicate a multiplicity of contexts, landscapes and futures for diasporic subjects – their resilience embodied in their capacity always to be at home – underlining the significance of mobility and the possibility of cosmopolitanism as metaphors of modern identity. Like other strains of visual art emerging in this decade, Motley's work is cognisant of the relationship between AfricanAmerican visual and literary culture; of their cooperative relationship in facilitating the telling of tales, the making of subjects and the transformation of those subjects into works of art. In many ways, it is haunted by the inter-relationship between nineteenth-century literary and visual artistry. This finds formal expression in the sometimes oblique manipulations of academic convention that reflect on the importance of literacy and the related recurrent significance of autobiographic form. In his self-positioning of the artist as amanuensis, however, he translates received literary practice into a quest for aesthetic as well as literal patrimony in the visual domain.

The work also incorporates a further frame of reference: the artistry of performance and the performance of artistry, the 'drama' noted by Zora Neale Hurston as one of the key 'characteristics of Negro expression' in her later anthropological study. If many of his contemporaries sought to rejuvenate their art in primitivist expression often involving the experimental re(dis)covery of Africanist art practices, Motley's work displays little interest in avant-gardist formalism, expressionism or the rejection of planar depth. Instead, it recovers a temporal aesthetic progressivist in nature and futurist in outlook. Adapting the visual vocabulary that had emerged in slavery, these portraits provide a rebuttal of contemporary political and cultural mechanisms of oppression, remediating the relationship between viewer and viewed, artist and audience. Using complex acts of recall, Motley situates his work as the culmination of a tradition of artistry that had emerged during enslavement, producing an aesthetic intrinsically related to public/private textualities and geographies of freedom. His portraits are modern histories of the African-American self-image as much as they are characterisations of contemporary subjects, positioning the 1920s as a threshold decade, one seeking out the terms of cultural as well as political citizenship.²⁰

Notes

- [1] Alain Locke, 'To Certain of Our Philistines', *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (May 1925): 115–6 (115).
- [2] Guido Podesta', 'An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance', *MLN* 106, no. 2 (1991): 395–422

- (396) and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 57, 87.
- [3] Aaron Douglas, quoted in Bernier, *African American Visual Arts*, 58.
- [4] James Porter, 'Four Problems in the History of Negro Art', *Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 1 (1942): 9–36, 15–17.
- [5] David Driskell, 'Foreword', in Amy Mooney, Archibald J Motely Jr. (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2004), i–viii (vii) and Wendy Greenhouse, 'An Early Portrait by Archibald J. Motley, Jr.', *American Art Journal* 29, nos. 1&2 (1998): 97–102 (100).
- [6] Mary Ann Calo, 'African American Art and Discourse Between the Wars', *American Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1999): 580–621 (583).
- [7] Greenhouse, 'Early Portrait', 99 and Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, n.p.
- [8] Hughes, 'Negro Artist', n.p. and Motley, quoted in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 151.
- [9] Frederick Douglass, 'Pictures and Progress', in *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, Interviews*, vol. 3, ed. John Blassingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 452–73.
- [10] Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 75–123 and Douglass, 'Pictures and Progress', 462. [11] Mooney, Archibald J Motely Jr., 13–19.
- [12] Oral history interview with Archibald Motley, January 23 1978–March 1, 1979, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Motley notes that his maternal grandmother had been enslaved and his paternal not, but goes on to suggest that his painting *Mending Socks* includes objects received from Emily Motley's former mistress) and Calo, 'African American Art', 591.
- [13] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Antislavery Office, 1845), 2; Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 174–77; and Judith Wilson, 'Optical Illusions: Images of Miscegenation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Art', *American Art* 5, no. 3 (1991): 88–107 (96).
- [14] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 329.
- [15] Robert O'Meally, 'The Black Sermon: Tradition and Art', *Callaloo* 34 (1988): 198–200 and Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 17.
- [16] Locke, 'To Certain of Our Philistines', 155 and Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 17.
- [17] James Clark, 'Without Fear or Shame: Lynching, Capital Punishment and the Subculture of Violence in the American South', *British Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 2 (1998): 269–89 (269).
- [18] Driskell, Archibald J Motely Jr., 41.
- [19] Porter, 'Four Problems', 16.
- [20] Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)', in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 355–64 (355).