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"Tactile Gestures and Embodied Objects: Newport Portraiture and Landscapes of Slavery"

Abstract:

Portraits within the British North American Colonies capture sensorial moments between sitters and decorative materials tied to West Indian mahogany and sugar. Overall, this paper explores the relationship between tactile gestures in portraiture and objects connected to the slave trade. Though portraits display poses from etiquette books, ‘haptic’ expressions with decorative materials, whether mahogany or sugar bowls, also suggest bodily connections toward landscapes of slavery. Specifically, this paper revolves around the unattributed portrait of John Potter and his family (ca. 1740), which includes a young enslaved boy in the foreground. Originally installed as an overmantel in a Kingston, Rhode Island residence, the portrait depicts figures picking up a porcelain tea set and resting hands upon a mahogany table. Touching materials related to the slave trade could define the family’s own physical presence, even erase the enslaved figure’s tactile agency. Through the Potter example, the paper explores portraiture specific to Newport and a landscape embedded in slavery, specifically a city known for mahogany craftsmanship and trade in West Indian rum. In the eighteenth century, touch was admired as a cognitive sense, a means to understand bodily boundaries and recognize oneself with skin touching a surface. Similar to the idea of an embedded terrain within domestic spaces, landscapes could collapse in this interaction with materiality attached to the slave trade. Above all, the paper examines intimate experiences in portraits and the type of comportment with an “embodied” material linked to enslaved people. Portraits suggest a bodily complicity on behalf of the sitter.