

Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders

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“Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb,” states black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers. The editor of this much-needed collection of scholarly essays tackles Spiller’s problem by analyzing the often-inaccurate representations of black women’s bodies in American culture and examining the deleterious effects of such representations on the formation of black women’s own identities. In the midst of these skin-deep racist and sexist representations resides a strong spirit yearning to connect with both selves and others on a deeper and more accurate plane of humanity.

Wallace-Sanders, an assistant professor of liberal arts and women’s studies at Emory University, has collected thirteen provocative essays that span the academic disciplines of women’s studies, African-American studies, cultural studies, public health, anthropology, art criticism, literary criticism, history of science, and queer studies. Arranged in three distinct sections and accompanied by black-and-white illustrations, the essays fill the silent spaces accorded to black women and their bodies in academia’s current theorizing of race and gender as separate phenomena. Wallace-Sanders’s collection calls for a new theorizing of black women’s identity as the result of a “mutually cooperative” understanding of the interdependencies of both categories. She notes that the “most pervasive stereotypes about Black women reveal some fundamental conflict of gender and race.” These essays productively examine the “doubleness” of this black female identity from an interdisciplinary approach.

The range of topics is impressive: Part One places images of black women’s bodies in the context of European history. Historian Jennifer Morgan examines sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travel narrative accounts of initial encounters between European explorers and African women. Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling focuses on the famous case of a South African woman, Saartjie Baartman—the so-called “Venus Hottentot”—and her relationship with French anatomist George Curvier, who described and dissected her “unusual” body after her death for “medical science.” Over and over again in this section one comes face to face with the ways in which the dictates of imperial expansion and colonialism has rendered such racist and sexist images of black women “necessary.”

The collection shifts in Part Two to the arts, using photography, painting, and literature to continue mapping the black female body. Photographer and writer Carla Williams gives an impressive overview of the images of black women’s bodies—as either naked cultural “others” or domestic laborers—in photography from the 1850s through the present. Art historian Lisa Collins gives a similar historical overview in painting and sculpture. Feminist media studies scholar Rachel Adams examines the carnival scene from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to illustrate how racism’s “spectacularization” of black bodies complicates the line between “normal” and “freak.” Poet and literary scholar Elizabeth Alexander traces the fragmentation and integration of black, female, and lesbian identities in Audre Lorde’s poetry and prose.

Part Three presents an eclectic mix of essays exploring black women’s relationships to food and sex, and their divested ownership of fetal and reproductive rights. Literary scholar Doris Witt, a specialist in African-American cuisine, uses the cultural icon of Aunt Jemima to take up the issues of eating disorders, contraception, and the stereotyped Black female “appetite.” A little-known and disturbing chapter of women’s medical science is brought to light in health educator and performance studies scholar Terri Kapsalis’s examination of the use of black female slave bodies as unwitting “subjects” for the experiments of J. Marion Sims, slave master and “father of modern gynecology.”

While several of the essays repeatedly refer to the same ground of historical information—the case of Saartjie

Baartman figures prominently in many of the essays on history and medical science-Wallace-Sanders' collection is certainly significant to scholars of both race and gender in its ambitious attempt to map new theoretical space to articulate black female subjectivity.

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