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Naked, Neutered, or Noble

The Black Female Body in America and the Problem of Photographic History

The larger society, observing the [Black] women's outrageous persistence in holding on, staying alive, thought it had no choice save to dissolve the perversity of the Black woman's life into a fabulous fiction of multiple personalities. They were seen as acquiescent, submissive Aunt Jemimas who showed grinning faces, plump laps, fat embracing arms, and brown jaws pouch in laughter. They were described as leering buxom wenches with round heels, open thighs, and insatiable sexual appetites. They were accused of being marauding matriarchs of stern demeanor, battering hands, unforgiving gazes, and castrating behavior.

—Maya Angelou, “They Came to Stay”

Images of Black women that are in fact “national, racial, and historical hallucinations” have been ingrained into the collective conscience of the United States since slavery.¹ Black women have been depicted either naked, generally in an ethnographic context, or as laborers, usually domestic, their social status playing a crucial role in the development of visual identity. With rare exceptions, representations of the Black woman in art and photography have followed these prescribed lines. Using primarily published images as a frame of reference, this discussion gives an
overview of photographic history from the 1850s to the present, a history that has attempted to define the Black female body.

Countless photographers, both famous and anonymous, have photographed Black women. Open any monograph publication of an American twentieth-century portrait photographer or any fairly broad history of photography, and you will discover that nearly everybody has such a photograph. The black skin was often a visual challenge, juxtaposed against a white background or a white body for maximum visual contrast and nothing more, or so it was often claimed. In the history of photography only a handful of books are devoted exclusively to the image of the Black female; these include: *Eve Noire*, by Hans Luenberger; *Black Woman*, by Chester Higgins; *Jungle Fever*, by Jean-Paul Goude; *Black Ladies*, by Uwe Ommer; and *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*, by Brian Lanker. These few books, marginal within the canon of photographic history, are nevertheless essential to understanding the photographic image of the black female body and how certain images are perpetuated. Although the fact of publication is an inherently problematic measure of validation given that Black photographers and subjects are so rarely, if ever, published, it is especially indicative of the kinds of images that are perpetuated to evaluate what has been sanctioned, often repeatedly, to go into print.

Early twentieth-century African American photographers—including James VanDerZee (1886–1983) in Harlem (see fig. 36); Addison Scurlock (1883–1964) in Washington, D.C.; and Prentice Hall Polk (1898–1984) in Tuskegee, Alabama—photographed Black women frequently, as commercial customers and as artistic subjects, and these images have been reproduced in several monographic publications. Roy DeCarava’s 1955 publication *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, with text by Langston Hughes, was the first best-selling book of images of Black people by Black people that gained widespread recognition. Additionally, a few other Euro-American photographers published lengthy studies that feature a considerable number of images of Black women, including Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street*, Aaron Siskind’s *Harlem Document*, and Irving Penn’s *Worlds in a Small Room*.

Early Images

The history of the photographic image of the Black female body in the United States begins in the 1850s, with a model derived from European
precedents. During this period, a number of significant developments in Western culture coincided with the invention of photography and contributed to the way in which Black females were regarded and ultimately visualized. The births of “popular culture” and modern visual pornography, the development of the natural sciences and the related disciplines of ethnology and anthropology, and the abolition of slavery both
in the colonies and at home were practically simultaneous, and each served to compartmentalize, objectify, and categorize any manifestations of difference from the European ideal.

The decades including and following the abolition of slavery in England (1807), France (1848), and the United States (1865) also saw the rapid colonial/imperial expansion of these nations into Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America. These aggressions and the drive to dominate the indigenous populations subsequently fostered the births of anthropology and ethnology and the study of the natural sciences, including physiognomy and phrenology, all of which existed only through the element of comparison to an "Other," which the colonies provided. The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in 1843; the naturalist Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, *The Origin of Species*, was published in 1859; the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris was founded that same year; and the National Geographic Society debuted in the United States in 1888. The decades at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century saw a lucrative international market for ethnographic postcards and prints as colonial expansion and exploration increased in Africa, South America, and Asia. In this climate, “scientific” evaluations based on observable distinctions in skin color, facial structure, and particularly genitalia contributed to difference inevitably being assigned a moral rank, and, consequently, to the association of Blacks with moral deficiency, sexual deviance, and overall inferiority. The stereotype of exaggerated sexuality in the female corresponded with the prevailing attitudes toward all women at that time. Thus Black women were aligned with the weaker, more negative human character traits that could be readily assessed through popular phrenological charts.

Around 1850, Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, a nationally recognized paleontologist, hired local daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy (1812–93) to make photographic records of first- and second-generation slaves on plantations near Columbia, South Carolina, for Swiss-born Louis Agassiz (1807–73), the natural scientist and zoologist from Harvard University. Agassiz had observed slaves on the Gibbes plantation for a month before he asked Gibbes to arrange for the photographs; he believed that photographic evidence could validate his theories on the racial inferiority of Blacks.⁶

Fifteen Zealy daguerreotypes survive of five men—Alfred, Fassena, Renty, Jem and Jack—and two women—Delia and Drana (see figs. 37 and 38). Utilizing the frontal/profile, “mug-shot” aesthetic that was favored in ethnography photography, the photographer documented
Gibbes’s human property in half- and full-length views, stripped to the waist or, for some of the men, totally naked. The men were all African born; Delia and Drana, the daughters of Renty and Jack, respectively, were “country-born” in the United States.7

Both Delia and Drana are shown from the waist up in frontal and profile views, showing their right sides. Their printed dresses are not entirely removed for the “scientific” documentation but are pulled down around their waists to expose their breasts, which at most reveal them to be of different ages. The sight of their clothing unceremoniously pulled down to reveal these secondary sexual characteristics is more revealing and ultimately more exploitative of their bodies than their nudity would be. It is an unnatural, forced state emphasized by the lack of clothing rather than nudity. Unlike African tribal women photographed as ethnographic nudes, whose daily wardrobes might consist of little clothing, these American slaves clearly had their clothing removed expressly for the photograph. Consequently the display of flesh is neither sexual nor sensual, yet there is a pornographic element to their inability to determine the display of their bodies. The disavowal of the
women's humanity and the refusal to allow them to control the representation of their bodies neutralized their sexuality and sensuality through the photographic act and represented them as naked specimens lacking either identity or power.  

The National Geographic Society was founded in Washington, D.C., in 1888, "for the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge." The first issue of the society's magazine was published in October 1888; however, it was not until the November 1896 issue that the first photograph of a bare-breasted native woman appeared, in an image titled *Zulu Bride and Bridegroom* (fig. 39). Made in the South African Republic, or Transvaal, it showed an African man and woman standing side by side, facing the camera, his right hand crossed in front of him, holding her left hand. They both look directly at the camera, without expression. In the accompanying article, the American author describes all the tribes of the Bantu or Kaffir race, alluding eventually to sexual practice: "These people are of a dark bronze hue, and have good athletic figures. They possess some excellent traits, but are horribly cruel when once they have smelled blood. . . . Nothing but the phenomenal fecundity of the race has kept up its numbers." The language reinforces the assumption that they are no more than the sum of their physical attributes and sexual proclivities. Standards of decency do not apply, especially to the body of the woman, whose partial nudity was potentially more shocking. The couple has been reduced in the text to feral, fecund creatures, no different from wild animals, and the photograph reinforces this characterization.

This photograph established the "National Geographic" aesthetic, which would introduce generations of American males and females to "primitive-style" nudity. Countless examples of bare-breasted or totally nude women of color have appeared in *National Geographic*. Thus, presenting unclothed African bodies to a Victorian audience in the United States could be condoned. As Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins's research indicates:

The "nude" woman sits, stands, or lounges at the salient center of *National Geographic* photography of the non-Western world. Until the phenomenal growth of mass circulation pornography in the 1960s, the magazine was known as the only mass culture venue where Americans could see women's breasts. Part of the folklore of Euramerican men, stories about secret perusals of the magazine emerged time after time in our conversations with male *National Geographic* readers. . . . When white men tell these stories about covertly viewing
Fig. 39. Anonymous, *Zulu Bride and Bridegroom*, ca. 1896. (Courtesy of National Geographic Society.)
black women’s bodies, they are clearly not recounting a story about a simple encounter with the facts of human anatomy or customs; they are (perhaps unsuspectingly) confessing a highly charged—but socially approved—experience in this dangerous territory of projected, forbidden desire and guilt.12

The practice of printing photographs of unclothed native women in National Geographic did not occur with any regularity until 1903, when a photograph of two bare-breasted Filipino women was published. Only then, seven years after a Black woman had been depicted, did these images generate a moral debate among the editors.13

An Artist’s Model

Not all Black women were photographed without their consent; for example, images of Maudelle Bass raise the question of the subjects’ participation in the image-making process. Maudelle Bass (later Weston, 1908–89) was a dancer from the 1930s through the 1950s, and a professional artist’s model. She was the first Black dancer to study modern dance with choreographer Lester Horton in Los Angeles and danced in 1940 in Agnes DeMille’s “Black Ritual,” choreographed for Ballet Theatre with an all-Negro cast, for which she was photographed in publicity and performance shots by Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964). She also appeared with dancer and choreographer Pearl Primus (1919–94) in the 1950s. In 1939 Bass posed for painter Diego Rivera (1886–1957) and for photographers including Johann Hagemeyer (1884–1962) and Edward Weston (1886–1958). In August 1939 Rivera began a series of nude paintings of Bass, whom he is said to have considered “the embodiment of ideal beauty and sensuality.”14 In his painting titled Dancer in Repose, Bass is depicted seated on a low stool, her broad hips anchoring the composition, with her arms upraised and tucked behind her head, in the standard pose that emphasizes the line of the breast.

In 1931, Weston had written in his journal, “If I had a nude body to work with—a Negress, a black fat Negress, then I could have worked! This desire keeps popping into my mind.”15 Eight years later he found Bass, who did not exactly adhere to his corpulent ideal; yet she was the only Black woman whom Weston would thus photograph. Bass posed for at least eighteen photographs with Weston during July and August 1939, in Carmel, California, where she had gone to perform in a series of African dances.16 The sittings, which took place at
Weston's father-in-law's home, as well as on the sand dunes at Oceano, were the first nudes that Weston made in this setting. Carmel Highlands, where he had recently settled with his new wife, Charis Wilson. Included were two conventional clothed portraits, one of which was published in *U.S. Camera* in 1941. Bass is shown wearing a polka-dotted dress, seated on the grass against a flowered bush, her legs folded to the side.

Weston used various settings for his nudes of Bass. She was photographed in the same setting described earlier against the flowers, unclothed, lying with her right arm upraised over her head. Both Bass and the setting are unidealized, her mottled and creased skin looking aged and tired against the tangle of foliage, although she was only thirty-one when the photographs were made. Her heavy breasts sag from their own weight. Bass was also photographed from numerous angles seated on the garden steps. In another view, Bass was photographed kneeling on the grass against a forest of ferns, her arms upraised as if in surrender, looking directly at the camera. Her direct engagement is disarming and does not occur with any other models in Weston's nude studies.

"The response to this photograph reveals how sensibilities and taste can change over time. Fifty years ago this image was exhibited without a murmur of protest apparently at the Museum of Modern Art and toured internationally in *World of Weston*, an exhibition sponsored by the State Department," notes Weston scholar Amy Conger. "This photograph of a black woman as if in a jungle with hands raised, surrendering, is often found offensive today by people who are sensitive to exploitation." An image of "Maudelle on Dunes" was also exhibited in *World of Weston*. Conger writes: "Weston was primarily interested in the contrast between the background and her black and shiny skin." The dunes images are the only ones that approximate such formal concerns of skin contrasted with sand or even hint at Bass's training as a dancer.

Shortly thereafter, Bass wrote to Weston from her home in San Francisco, stating that she was "wild with delight" when she saw some of the proofs, three of which she planned to use "for advertising." It is not clear which three images she selected, nor if they were ever used, but it is significant to know that she was not only pleased with the results but also planned to use them to represent herself when promoting her dance. What these images also reveal, however, is Weston's discomfort with Bass's Black body and inability to idealize and "modernize" her as he had so successfully done with Charis Wilson, Tina Modotti, and a number of other white women who had modeled nude for him. Except for the photographs made on the dunes, Bass is not posed to highlight her dancer's form; she is not formalized into angles and curves, nor is
she flattered by light and shadow. Interestingly, the nudes of Bass are among the only ones in Weston’s oeuvre in which the model’s head and face are visible and she engages the camera directly. Weston portrays her as tired and marked, unidealized, and ultimately different from the natural ideal that he promoted in his other work.

Around the same time Johann Hagemeyer, a Carmel-based portrait photographer originally from Amsterdam and a friend of Weston’s, also photographed Bass. Hagemeyer, who made his living photographing celebrities and artists who passed through Carmel, produced a sensitive head-and-shoulders portrait study of the dancer. Bass is photographed in close-up, her hand gently touching her cheek while her glassy eyes are fixed with a faraway gaze. Her lined face, furrowed brow, and hands cause her to look older than her years. Photographed from below with strong directional lighting, she is monumentalized, the gravity of her expression matching the serious consideration paid to her as a subject. As an expressive artist in another medium, she is treated as a portrait study; in short, Hagemeyer renders her as a peer.

In 1940 Cedric Gibbons, the Academy Award–winning head of art direction for the Metro-Goldwyn Mayer studio, asked Weston about obtaining prints of the Bass nudes, “having heard that he had photographed ‘that black dancer friend of [Miguel] Covarrubias.’”22 This suggests that the images of Bass were known and collected in artistic circles. Seven years later photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo (1902–) photographed Bass in Mexico, titling the image he made and published of her Espejo Negro, or “Black Mirror.”23 In the photograph, Bass sits on a crumpled cloth against a wall in bright sunlight. “Inspired by the myth of Tezcatlipoca, Lord of the Smoking Mirror,” this image of Bass’s glistening, almost polished black skin is meant to reflect the world—“the symbol of the Espejo huéscante (Smoking mirror)—just as her Black body, like that of the Sable Venus, is meant to symbolize “a Black Eve, mother of humanity.”24

Bass is exceptional in that she is the only Black female model that appears with some frequency in the work of so many Euro-American artists from this period. Not merely a model, she had a successful artistic career in her own right and so would have surely been sympathetic to—and cognizant of—a fellow artist in another medium. Given her status as an artist and her response to the Weston images it is fair to say that Bass was at least an active contributor to those images that survive of her. Her legacy in photographs provides a glimpse into a period of the twentieth century in which one Black female body came to represent an ideal, a fantasy, a stereotype, and ultimately herself.
Skin Deep, Spirit Strong

Black Is Beautiful

The Kamoinge Workshop, an association of Black photographers, was founded in 1963. Roy DeCarava was the group’s mentor and first president. The often-echoed statement “I had never seen any positive images of black people” was the impetus behind their organization—they wanted to picture Black people more fully and positively than they previously had been. In 1965–66, Kamoinge even mounted an exhibition at the Market Place Gallery in Harlem titled “The Negro Woman.” During a crucial moment within the Black Art Movement, almost ten years later, Joe Crawford, Beuford Smith, and Joe Walker founded The Black Photographer’s Annual, which offered African American photographers an opportunity to combat media stereotypes in print. Many of the published works focused on the Black female body, particularly with regard to hairstyle and dress, which during the 1960s had become signifiers of pride and identity. The Annual’s legacy was its ability to make visible the multiple experiences of Black peoples in the African Diaspora. It also encouraged Black photographers to locate the Black body in an art context.

Published in 1970, Chester Higgins’s (1946–) publication Black Woman, with text by Harold McDougall, was the first book devoted exclusively to celebrating the Black woman in all of her aspects. Taken as a whole, the book encompasses a range of representations, with an emphasis, but not an exclusive focus, on women wearing Afro hairstyles. Higgins’s images range from candid street photography to a more contemplative nude study. “As Chester puts it, these women are of a new breed—a Black Breed,” writes McDougall in his introduction. “A breed that has racial pride in being black, and human pride in being a woman. At the same time.” McDougall based his text, which accompanies each image as a first-person quotation, on conversations with women in Harlem. In the first section, “Black Sisters into the Black Thing,” a portrait of a young Black woman sitting on the beach in a two-piece swimsuit is accompanied by the text: “Black women have to start doing things that are more daring as far as their bodies are concerned. Because we just happen to have much more beautiful bodies.” Sporting a short Afro, the woman appears at ease in her mostly exposed, slender body, soaking up the sun. The image and text are empowering, validating not only the Black woman’s beauty but, more importantly, her awareness of it.

In the section titled “Old Souls,” Higgins presents an older, heavier Black woman as a smiling, warm presence, hand on hip. In the context of the other women in the book, her strength and bearing are at once
formidable yet open, the image embracing her corporeality while subverting stereotypes associated with it. While this “paean of praise to the Black Woman,” as McDougall describes it, is a triumphant affirmation of Black women as complex human beings, engaged in a myriad of activities and represented in every shape, size, age, and skin tone, it also presents McDougall’s and Higgins’s “positions as black men” vis-à-vis Black women.31 Nevertheless, the voice that McDougall attaches to Higgins’s subjects has an authenticity that rings true, demanding a reassessment of the Black woman’s image in photographs.

Black as Fetish

A permutation of the celebration of Black beauty is the work of French photographer and illustrator Jean-Paul Goude (1940–).32 His 1980 book Jungle Fever is a highly personal, obsessive journal about his feverish love of nonwhite people, from Vietnamese to American Indians, but especially Black American females. However personal, “the ‘private’ vision emerges via a public preconscious that is heavily invested with the historical accretions of representations,” writes Francette Pacteau.33 Goude fully acknowledges and exploits these referents, concluding his text by stating:

As a European, let me pause here to say, I have the advantage of being able to describe my romantic conception of blackness from a white point of view. My conception is free of all social connotations because I am European. Americans cannot dissociate themselves from the social implications of their artistic evaluation of black people. . . . So, I really find myself in a strange situation, because on the one hand liberals are embarrassed by my attitude, while racists ironically misinterpret me as one of them. And the blacks? I’m not sure; I think my conception may appeal to some with a sensibility similar to mine. I’m not sure. . . . I am just letting my emotions do the work.34

Goude’s statement that he relies on emotions to guide his work subverts the standard assumption that Europeans are intellectual while non-whites are instinctual. Half of Goude’s six chapters are dedicated to individual Black women, while two of the other three contain photographs of nude Black women worth displaying yet possibly not quite chapter-worthy. The text guides the reader chronologically through Goude’s boyhood and each of his many ethno-romantic fixations.
Along the way there was Radiah, from Mobile, Alabama, whom Goude wanted to improve upon to create a "giant African beauty."35 For her, Goude invented removable African tribal-scarification marks. His photograph of Radiah in the act of either removing or applying the marks made the newspapers and appeared in the December 1970 issue of the American men's magazine *Esquire*. Goude describes the marks by stating, "They emphasize the savage aesthetics of the face," thus equating the American Radiah with at best an "uncivilized" person and at worst an animal.36 On the opposite page is a photograph of a nude Radiah lying on the floor of a studio wearing a headwrap made from a dishcloth. Goude conflates the nude, idle Black female body with a symbol, enveloping her head, of domestic labor that is usually associated with the image of the Mammy, thus conjuring up the image of the house servant, of the Black woman in the kitchen.37 Here, however, she is visualized in the same body as the sexually available Black female capitulating to a fantasy of the Jezebel.38 The beaded ornamentation added to the dishcloth and the braids of hair barely visible underneath further emphasize her otherwise airbrushed ethnicity.

Next came Toukie Smith, a model whom Goude met through Radiah. He began to photograph her and draw her nude, focusing on her hips and buttocks, cutting up the pictures and reassembling them to exaggerate her already voluptuous features.39 Literally dehumanizing her and reducing her to body parts, Goude made first a life-size and eventually a twelve-inch cast of her nude body. Of his cast model of Smith he wrote: "I had always admired black women's backsides, the ones who look like racehorses. Toukie's backside was voluptuous enough, but nowhere near a racehorse's ass, so I gave her one. There she was, my dream come true, in living color . . . I saw her as this primitive voluptuous girl-horse."40 Included are photographs of the artist and model in the studio during the casting, presumably to document the process, but also to suggest her complicity in the spectacle that would transform her, like Radiah, into an animal-like creature. Goude transformed her Black-bodied reality into his white-minded ideal; or, as Pacteau has observed: "Confronted with an excess of difference, the white male subject will excel at defensive ingenuity, making her blackness becoming to his light, brightening up his day with her night."41 A two-page photograph of a white male hand with a smudge of black literally under its thumb, holding the miniature replica of the nude Black female, who "hated what [Goude] did . . . [and] did not share [his] views," is the most explicit visual representation of Goude's intentions.42
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The Neutralized Woman

Brian Lanker (1947–) was a Pulitzer Prize–winning photojournalist and contract photographer for *Sports Illustrated* magazine when he conceived of the project of photographing Black women who had changed the course of history in the United States. *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America* became a best-selling book and calendar and a successful traveling exhibition. Its mission was to uplift, to celebrate women who had accomplished something noteworthy in their lives and to share their stories and images with the masses. The seventy-five portraits range from head shots to full standing shots, from photographs with seamless studio backdrops to those with forest perches. The portraits are of extraordinary women to be sure, each deserving of her own book, but life accomplishments are difficult, if not impossible, to convey photographically.

Among the subjects there are award-winning performers and writers, a choral director, two MacArthur fellows, three Pulitzer Prize winners, an Emmy-winning journalist, politicians, grassroots civil rights activists, educators, an architect, a curator, newspaper publishers, a bishop, sports champions, a child-care provider, a neurosurgeon, heads of nonprofit organizations, a chef, a storyteller, and a visual artist. The two least educated or celebrated subjects are midwives, one of whom, depicted in an eyelet sleeping cap and a tweed coat with a fur collar, is revealed to be the childhood mammy of the photographer’s white wife, seemingly included as a personal, posthumous tribute.43

As Maya Angelou points out in her foreword, the women literally share a “sameness of gaze,” which is ultimately problematic.44 Only ten of the women even smile; the rest are so possessed with the solemnity of their blackness that it is oppressively palpable. Taken as a whole, they are noble savages gone to the extreme, none of them, in the photographic space, possessed of either complexity or corporeality that would identify her as a woman, let alone a sexual being. Indeed, their bodies cease to exist altogether: only eleven of the women either wear short sleeves or go sleeveless, the facts of their flesh carefully and decorously hidden amid the folds and shadows. They are aggressively covered up, their physicality and sexuality sublimated to and exclusive of their achievements, which are articulated in a page of text facing each image. Two fair-skinned women tentatively reveal their décolletage, yet only dancer Katherine Dunham speaks directly about her publicly sexual image, and then refutes it, stating: “I never thought of myself as sexy. I didn’t think
of what we were doing onstage as sexy, because I could always feel and know that there was something solid, that authentic feeling under it."45

The nude Black female body appears only once, as an out-of-focus sculpture in the foreground of artist Elizabeth Catlett's (1915--) portrait, with her bespectacled head emerging from behind it. She states: "I was working always with the black theme. I did a whole series on black women. Nobody was doing black women. I am a black woman. That's what I know most about."46 Catlett's own images of Black women tend toward the full-bodied and sensuous; her sculptures celebrate the body. Ultimately, her statement highlights the missing element within the images in Lanker's volume. The photographs are inextricably examples of being looked at and interpreted by an outsider, not of picturing one's self. While the women's words are provided to carry the authenticity of narrative, their visual images are still the creation of someone else, a white man determined not to repeat any stereotypes in his depictions and in the process nevertheless reinforcing one of the neutered Black female denied her sexuality. The prima-ballerina-turned-painter Janet Collins states: "When you get to be an exceptional black, you don't belong to the white and you don't belong to the black. You are too good for the black and you will always be black to the white."47 Likewise, if you are a Black woman noted for her sexuality, you are unworthy of praise.

The images discussed in this essay are among the most accessible images of Black women in photographic history, yet they are repeatedly reproduced without discussion of the subject's desire or role in the image-making process. The simple fact of the matter is that in most cases, that information is simply not known and will forever be left up to conjecture. Contemporary historians and theorists such as Deborah Willis, Coco Fusco, Kellie Jones, Judith Williamson, and Lisa Collins have begun to address the image of the Black female body in all of its complexity. Evaluating the history of the photographic image of Black women is a crucial beginning for intelligent art and analysis. The theoretical discussion that arises from issues of representation is best left to cultural theorists.

Given the legacy of images created of Black women, it is an especially complex task for contemporary Black women to define their own image, one that necessarily both incorporates and subverts the stereotypes, myths, facts, and fantasies that have preceded them. Black female photographic artists including Clarissa Sligh, Renée Cox, Roshini Kempadoo, Carrie Mae Weems, Joy Gregory, Lorna Simpson, Maxine Walker, and Cynthia Wiggins have already begun to do so with a breathtaking range of image making. Some write an autobiography of the body,
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using their own likenesses and those of other Black women to explore shared experiences and perceptions, including both universal injustices against and celebrations of the Black female body. It is to all of the aforementioned artists and writers that the task falls to incorporate visual legacies with contemporary realities in order to present images of real Black women who are no longer acted upon but who possess, in one body, both active voice and visual self-presentation.

NOTES


3. There are numerous books on VanDerZee’s photographs. See, for example, Deborah Willis and Rodger C. Birt, VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886–1983 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993). Also see The Historic Photographs of Addison N. Scourlock (Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976); and P. H. Polk: Through These Eyes: The Photographs of P. H. Polk, exhibition catalog (Newark, Del.: University Gallery of the University of Delaware, 1998).


5. Bruce Davidson (1933–), East 10th Street (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Aaron Siskind (1903–91), Harlem Document: Photographs, 1932–1940 (Providence, R.I.: Matrix Publications, 1981); Irving Penn (b. 1917), Worlds in a Small Room (New York: The Viking Press, 1974). Davidson’s book featured 121 photographs, made over a two-year period, of Blacks and Latinos in an East Harlem neighborhood that was not his own. Thirty-four of the portraits are of Black women or girls; of those, ten are shown on or in bed, three are naked, and another three are in bed with men. Davidson’s photographic project
was undertaken more than thirty years after Aaron Siskind made the photographs included in his book, but Davidson’s images were published eleven years earlier. Siskind’s book includes accompanying text from the Federal Writers Project; oral histories gathered by Ralph Ellison, Frank Byrd, Dorothy West, and Vivian Morris; and a foreword by Black photographer Gordon Parks, who called the book “a mirror of [his] own past” (5). The American Penn’s publication included images of African women.


7. The designation is from the label attached to the daguerreotype.


11. Whites were not the only audience for the periodical. For some African Americans, the Black female bodies in National Geographic served another purpose. As comedian Richard Pryor used to joke, National Geographic was the black man’s Playboy, which makes clear that whites were not the only audience for these images. See Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, Reading National Geographic (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 172.

12. Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, 172.


17. U.S. Camera 1941, vol. 2, This Year’s Photography, ed. T. J. Maloney, pictures judged by Edward Steichen (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce 1941), 157. Bass is wrongly identified as “Mandelle.” No description of the image or comment by the photographer is given in the index.

18. The prints described here are project prints from around 1950. They were part of a mock-up for an unpublished book by Nancy Newhall of Weston’s nudes. Along with these, there were to be two other images of Bass in that collection. See Amy Conger, Edward Weston: Photographs from the Collection of the
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Center for Creative Photography (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1992), fig. 1480.
19. Conger, Edward Weston, fig. 1476.
20. Conger, Edward Weston, fig. 1481.
21. Maudelle Bass to Edward Weston, 1 Sept. 1939, Edward Weston Archives, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. My thanks to Amy Rule for bringing the letter to my attention.
23. The image was also published as La Negra (1959).
26. While there is some dispute among former members regarding this attribution, every published source on Kamoinge credits DeCarava as its director. Shawn Walker remembered how his involvement came about: “It was Lou [Draper] that suggested Roy as a mentor in helping us form the workshop. . . . The workshop adopted the name ‘Kamoinge.’ . . . Roy DeCarava was the president.” See Shawn Walker, “Preserving Our History: The Kamoinge Workshop and Beyond,” Ten.8, no. 24 (ca. 1984), 24.
28. The first edition was published in 1973; four volumes were published intermittently until 1980, when publication ceased.
32. Jean-Paul Goude declined to give permission for the use of his photographs.
36. Goude, Jungle Fever, 32.
38. Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America, 46–47.
40. Goude, Jungle Fever, 41.
41. Pacteau, Symptom of Beauty, 126.
42. Goude, Jungle Fever, 41.
43. Lanker, I Dream a World, 10. Lanker describes subject Priscilla Williams as “a remarkable human being who had helped in my wife’s upbringing,” an interesting inclusion in light of subject and novelist Toni Morrison’s text that
accompanies her photograph: “I hate ideological whiteness. I hate when people come into my presence and become white. I’d just been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a man whom I used to read in anthologies came up to me and said, ‘Hello, welcome to the Academy.’ Then his third sentence was about his splendid black housekeeper. This little code saying, ‘I like black people or I know one,’ is humiliating for me—and should have been for him” (Lanker, I Dream a World, 32).

44. Angelou, “They Came to Stay,” 9.
45. The only two women with décolletage are former model and newspaper publisher Ophelia DeVore-Mitchell and businesswoman Jewell Jackson McCabe. For the Dunham quote, see Lanker, I Dream a World, p. 28.
47. Lanker, I Dream a World, 19.