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Introduction

A revolution happened in feminist discourse when race was included as a category of analysis informing gender identity. As a consequent, feminist visions of the body politic were expanded. . . . As the feminist movement progressed, discussions of the body were highlighted, and the focus on the "politics of the body were centralized." . . . The black body has always received attention within the framework of white supremacy, as racist/sexist iconography has been deployed to perpetrate notions of innate biological inferiority.

—bell hooks, "Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politics"

Mass culture, as [bell] hooks argues, produces, promotes and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness, through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community.

—Ann duCille, "The (O)cult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies"

More than fifteen years have passed since the Feminist Press first published the seminal work on Black Women's studies, an edited volume brilliantly entitled All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave.¹ The title was suggested by Barbara Smith, who sought to critique the limitations of both Women's studies and Black studies. Smith says, "At that time, Women's studies was about white
women, Black studies was about Black men." Groundbreaking ideology in both fields often resulted in Black women being pushed into the cracks of obscurity. Much has changed in fifteen years; issues of racism and sexism are now much more central to both Women's studies and African American studies. The work of Black feminists like Ann duCille, Barbara Smith, Elsa Barkley Brown, Darlene Clark Hine, Deborah McDowell, bell hooks, Mae Henderson, Cheryl Wall, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Valerie Smith, and others has been critical in this regard, as they make valiant efforts to outline a common destiny for these areas.² What persists is a tendency for Black studies and Women's studies to emphasize categories of identity as competitive rather than mutually cooperative or integral.³

In 1993 I designed undergraduate- and graduate-level courses on the Black female body and discovered that it was impossible to teach these courses using theoretical texts that ignored the intersections of both race and gender. In discourse that linked the body to larger systems of knowledge it seemed that all of the female bodies were white, all of the Black bodies male. Once again, the bodies of women of color in general, and of Black women in particular, were either excluded as a point of scholarly interest or included as a cursory afterthought.⁴ There are far too many cases of this binary exclusion to name them all here, but two examples effectively demonstrate the reductive ideologies to which the essays in this volume respond.

For example, in his introduction to The Female Body, editor Laurence Goldstein writes: "The female body has for so long been identified as an erotic object, canonized in the nude art high culture and the sex symbols of popular culture . . . Most women would not protest John Updike's remark that 'a naked woman is, for most men, one of the most beautiful things they will ever see.'"⁵

As for Updike's remark about the naked female being one of the more beautiful sights most men will ever see, I refer him to the sad, short history of Saartjie Baartman, the South African woman considered so hideous that she was displayed by an animal trainer throughout early nineteenth-century Europe. Her story is chronicled here in detail in "Gender, Race, and Nation," by Anne Fausto-Sterling. The female body that Goldstein describes is undoubtedly that of a healthy, able-bodied, white woman, her body rendered free of any identifiable markers of class or ethnicity. Subtle and profound shifts occur in the discourse about the female body when any of those factors are altered. When the female body is also Black, for example, the descriptive runs to extremes. The bodies of Black women have not only been identified as erotic ob-
Introduction

jects but have symbolized the most extreme sexuality imaginable: wild, insatiable, and deviant. One example of the erasure of race is that while the white female body has been extensively canonized in art, the Black female nude is conspicuously absent in fine art, as Lisa Collins tells us in her contribution to this book. Her work demonstrates that while the white female nude has been the subject of great artistic concern both aesthetically and academically—as Goldstein notes—there is a noticeable absence of depictions of the Black female nude.

Another example of the erasure of gender appears in the 1993 postscript to author Charles Johnson's essay "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," written eighteen years earlier. Johnson comments astutely on the need to investigate many of the questions that this volume engages. Johnson writes, "I realize that my hope was to examine the black male body as a cultural object and to inquire into how it has been interpreted, manipulated, and given to us, particularly in popular culture." Johnson goes on to delineate recent representations of Black men as a cultural metaphor for the worst of human behavior. He points out that there is a repetitious characterization of Black men as the "Negro beast"—violent, sex-obsessed, irresponsible, and stupid—in literature and in media images from the news to music. Johnson then expands on his observation with nothing less than shocking inaccuracy, by stating quite unequivocally that "none of these cultural meanings cluster around the black female body." Johnson ignores the fact that Black women have historically been represented as hypersexual, ignorant, and violent female "Negro beasts," in addition to many other denigrating types including the long-suffering desexualized Mammy, the primitive Topsy, the exotic Jezebel, and the evil,emasculating Sapphire. These well-known stereotypes are of pathologized bodies that are specifically Black and female, and they are also found in literature and in media images from the news to contemporary music. When Charles Johnson writes of the "black as body," he affirms a common sexist mistake by writing about a monolithic Black body that is male, or at best, gender neutral.

These exclusions are ironic when we consider the many ways in which Black women’s bodies have historically symbolized a site where the vast (and largely problematic) complexities of gender and race are represented. For example, consider the ways in which American slavery, racism, and motherhood converged upon slave women’s bodies, determining that their own children belonged to slave owners rather than to the mothers themselves. The most pervasive stereotypes about Black women reveal some fundamental conflicts of gender and race. For example, the stereotype of the "strong Black woman" occupies heroic
standing within African American culture, yet her lack of femininity obscures her gender.

Johnson suggests that Black women "have succeeded in culturally 'defining' themselves in their own terms and not those of the racial (or gendered) Other." Yet it is precisely because Black women are very often defined as the racial and gendered Other that this volume is so desperately needed. Skin Deep, Spirit Strong builds upon this theme and provides an insightful historical context for comprehending the representation of Black female embodiment.

Each chapter in this volume constitutes an eloquent and passionate response to the previous implication that all of the female bodies are white and all of the Black bodies are male. Additionally, they reveal a struggle between constructed and projected versions of Black women's bodies as devoid of beauty, innocence, or purity and more complex representations granting Black women a full measure of humanity and selfhood. This book serves as a map acknowledging those complex representations and directing us toward possible paths leading us to an increase in the quality and the quantity of these representations.

One of the most devastating results of this aggressively consistent mythology is that contemporary Black women are trapped by this externally imposed second skin of misconception and misrepresentation. This shell is both skin deep, as it emphasizes the most superficial versions of Black women, and skin tight, as it has proved to be nearly inescapable, even in Black women's self-conception and self-representation. Shedding this illusive layer is a daunting task, yet it is an imperative one if Black women are ever to be seen and to see themselves in a more humane light. Poet Nikki Giovanni writes: "We are all imprisoned in the castle of our skins... let my world be defined by my skin and the skin of my people. / for we spirit to spirit / will embrace this world." In this movement from the confines of "skin deep" or superficial misconceptions to the celebration of a "spirit to spirit" acceptance of historic limitations, transcendence becomes not only possible, but inevitable. Certainly it begins with the kind of close cultural scrutiny that these chapters undertake. Perhaps the best and most eloquent suggestion for a remedy comes from Elizabeth Alexander's reading of Audre Lorde's words.

The implications of this thinking for questions of identity are broad. For the self to remain simultaneously multiple and integrated, embracing the definitive boundaries of each category—race, gender, class, et cetera—while dissembling their
Static limitations, assumes a depth and complexity of identity
collection that refute a history of limitation. For the self to
be fundamentally collaged—overlapping and discernibly dia-
logic—is to break free from diminishing concepts of identity.9

This volume marks a significant step in creating that collage of
Black women's corporeal existence in the United States. The metaphor
of collagist of identities is especially powerful for me because my father
uses collage in his artwork. From childhood I recall he used cutouts from
_Ebony_ and _Life_ magazines, layered them on canvas, and then drizzled Elmer's glue over them in complex designs. When I asked him why
he didn't try to hide the glue neatly behind the cutouts, he pointed out
that when the glue dried, it was transparent; it did not obscure the pic-
tures themselves. "The glue is part of the whole picture," he explained.
These words came back to me as I thought about how the chapters here
are held together by a common theme as they overlap in concepts, ide-
ology, theories, and approaches.

The chapters in _Skin Deep, Spirit Strong_ are both discernibly inde-
pendent and in dialogue with each other as they address issues of iden-
tity and representation in visual, literary, and historical contexts. The
volume demonstrates that when Black women stand at the center of the
discussion about the female body, their bodies tell a profoundly differ-
ent story about historic and contemporary American culture. The work
of feminist scholars like Hazel Carby, Susan Bordo, Jennifer Terry, and
many others directed us toward a cultural approach to the female body.
This study builds upon that approach by concerning itself specifically
with theoretical discourses on the Black female body. The authors take
on the task of redirecting the current discourse about the female body
that ignores or sublimes race.

This project was preceded by some inspiring work on race, gender,
and corporeality.10 My editorial intention was to design and present a
conference of reflections, concepts, theories, and insights about repres-
sentations of Black women's bodies in literature, history, and visual cul-
ture. The pieces included are therefore comprehensive in scope and
provocative in eclectic methodological approaches, as they constitute a
fundamental stepping-stone to future theories of race, gender, and cor-
poreal reality. _Skin Deep, Spirit Strong_ is clearly structured to evoke dis-
cussions and responses that will lead to necessary paradigm shifts.

The collection is both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, sug-
gesting a model for scholars devoted to stimulating dialogue across
disciplines. As this volume makes clear, all of the most salient discourses
in post-structuralist and feminist theory are made richer and more complex when the Black female body is considered.

This volume represents an effort to chart how the simultaneous interrogation of gender, race, and corporeality shapes the construction of Black female representation. As the table of contents reveals, this volume enlists a wide variety of scholarly perspectives on, and critical approaches to, the place of Black women's bodies within the American cultural consciousness. Each chapter presents a persuasive argument for broadening the ongoing scholarly conversations about the body.

Part one sets up a framework of constructions of Black female subjectivity through history, travel narratives, and scientific racism. Beverly Guy-Sheftall's chapter informs us that in order to properly understand the history of American attitudes about the Black female form, we must begin with a close look at how both blackness and femaleness figured within the European imagination. In her look at how the Euro-American imagination has defined and manipulated Black women's sexuality, Guy-Sheftall combines historical and theoretical perspectives on art, history, and feminist theory to illuminate how "being Black and female is characterized by the private being made public."

Jennifer L. Morgan and Anne Fausto-Sterling illuminate the perspective of early European contact with the African female form, providing significant insight into the complexities of attraction and repulsion characterizing this interaction. Morgan points out how European discourse on the "monstrous" bodies of African and Amerindian women was used to justify the slave trade. Fausto-Sterling finds that these early depictions of African women became the working background of nineteenth-century racial studies.

Part two draws our attention to the symbolic power of the Black female body in visual culture and literary representations. The chapters here stress the profound consequences of narrow and predictable typecasting of the Black female form in visual mediums. This section begins with Lisa Collins's overview of the historic and contemporary representations of the Black female body in fine art. Collins notes that scholarly discussion on the unclothed Black body in art is missing from most formalist and feminist scholarship on the nude. Collins's argument moves deftly from this historical overview to an examination of recent representations of the Black female nude in the work of African American artists Emma Amos, Alison Saar, and Renée Stout. These artists work to expand the range of visual possibility "by taking the body elsewhere," thereby combining contradictory and opposing histories, concepts, and artistic prac-
tices. Lisa E. Farrington picks up this thread by taking a very detailed look at African American artist Faith Ringgold’s series of paintings entitled *Slave Rape Series*. Ringgold’s female figures are particularly compelling for their vulnerability, which is at first unnerving to the viewer, as it shakes the image of heroic “strong Black slave women.” Through this risky yet necessary move to highlight their humanity, slave women become “real” to us in a new way. Viewers are challenged to interact with the subject first, before attempting to fully comprehend the circumstances and experiences surrounding slavery and sexual violence. Carla Williams’s chapter on the history of photographic preoccupation with Black women’s bodies is a troubling and significant documentation of the narrow and predictable typecasting of Black women as photographic subjects. Williams concludes that it is an especially complex task for contemporary Black women to define their own images in a holistic way that necessarily both incorporates and subverts the stereotypes, myths, facts, and fantasies that precede them. Williams reminds us that, despite the inextricable linkages between blackness and sexuality, ironically, it is taboo for Black people, especially Black women, to revel in their bodies, to enjoy expressing the sexuality that has traditionally defined them.

The relentless symbolism of Sethe’s body in *Beloved* has held the attention of literary and historical scholars since the novel’s publication in 1987. Rachel Adams shifts the emphasis from Sethe’s body to the carnival that Sethe, Denver, and Paul D attend right before Beloved appears. Her strategy is to read the carnival’s display of “racialized” and deviant bodies against Beloved’s embodiment and eventual disembodiment within the context of corporeal extremes. Adams reads the Black body as a “spectacle,” thus linking the novel with visual aspects of the Black female bodies on display in art and photography.

Siobhan B. Somerville’s study of cross-dressing and racial disguise in nineteenth-century literature frames her thorough analysis of Pauline E. Hopkins’s novella *Winona*. Somerville suggests that the temporary passing and gender-bending in this novel reflect the contradictory status of nineteenth-century Black women writers at the turn of the twentieth century, when literary and political worlds were closed to them.

In “Coming Out Blackened and Whole,” Elizabeth Alexander pays homage to lesbian poet and activist Audre Lorde. Alexander takes on the complexity of race, gender, sexuality, class, and corporeality in her astute reading of Lorde’s work. Lorde’s body “becomes a map of lived experience and a way of printing suffering as well as joy upon the flesh... . . . In Lorde’s work, the body speaks its own history.”

Part three explores how deeply invested American culture has been
in controlling Black women’s bodies. Doris Witt and Terri Kapsalis confront how cultural systems of surveillance have manifested around issues of the Black female appetite and reproductive technologies. Witt identifies the intricate network of forces obsessed with Black women’s bodies, first by valuing them exclusively for their ability to nurture others, then by devaluing them as unsuitable to nurture their own children. Kapsalis deftly describes the work of James Marion Sims, who invented the speculum during a prolonged period of experimentation on slave women. Sims treated several slave women for a gynecological disorder, women who endured one operation after another—all without anesthesia—while Sims perfected his surgery. Kapsalis points to how Sims’s technological innovations help to reinforce institutionalized racism. Emphasizing these consequences, Evelyne Hammonds charts the evolution of contemporary feminist scholarship on sexuality through queer theory. She describes a space where Black women are both invisible and silent, finding that the “void” of Black women articulating their own sexuality is not empty at all but is, instead, full of silence. Hammonds makes the powerful suggestion that Black women “have not taken up this project in part because of their own status in the academy.” I am intrigued by this overt call for more scholarly attention to Black female sexuality; I look forward to readers responding to this invitation.

The final chapter challenges readers to imagine new possibilities for future representations of Black women. In 1992 African American filmmaker Bridgett Davis set out to confront some of the most daunting and perplexing issues surrounding Black women’s preoccupation with body image. In her independent film Naked Acts, her main character’s identity is complicated by intricate issues of Black female representation within her own family, since she is a third-generation entertainer. Both cultural and familial baggage weighs heavily on the protagonist as she attempts to construct a healthy identity for herself. Davis presents her film as one example of a Black woman defining her own image. Like Faith Ringgold, Davis finds that viewers must be challenged to interact with Black women as subjects first, rather than as victims.

These authors point to ways that art, literature, theories about sexuality, public policy, and medical history interlace and interconnect with regard to bodies that are both Black and female. Clearly one volume cannot begin to fill the gap left by the absence of more specific focuses on race and ethnicity in contemporary discourse on the female body.

This introduction serves as a kind of drum roll for the chapters that follow, which constitute an impressive gathering of writings from femi-
nist scholars and artists, teachers, poets, and visionaries. Each con-
tributing author is a drum major for justice, a righteous warrior of
words, insisting that the collage of Black womanhood be seen as a
whole, bound together by a richly complex diversity.

As this book was going to press, I received an email message from
Yvette Abrahams informing me that Sarah Bartmann’s remains would be
buried on 9 August 2002 on the banks of the river Gamtoos, where she
was born. Abrahams is the project manager for “Herstory: The Return
of Sarah Bartmann,” at the University of the Western Cape. Bartmann’s
return to South Africa is significant to this volume for many reasons.
Several contributors evoke Bartmann in their discussions about the
perceptions of and attitudes toward African American women’s bodies;
Bartmann’s experience represented the most pernicious “editing” of
Black women’s bodies and Black women’s lives. Many of us feel a kin-
ship with Bartmann and have been paying close attention to the nego-
tiations between the South African government and the Musée de
l’Homme concerning the fate of the woman known as Sarah, Sartjie,
and the “Hottentot Venus.”

The funeral was held in Hankey and (appropriately) coincided with
national Women’s Day. President Thabo Mbeki said that it was not
efficient to honor her death by burying her remains, but that the coun-
try had a responsibility to work toward racial and gender equality.
“When that is done, then it will be possible to say that Sarah Baartman
has truly come home.”11

May this book honor Bartmann’s life and celebrate her return.

NOTES

1. Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, and Pat Bell-Scott, eds., All the Women Are
White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave (New York: Feminist
Press, 1982).

2. This kind of list is always problematic, as it is impossible not to exclude
someone of importance.

3. By extension, as a feminist activist and coeditor of All the Women Are
White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave, Barbara Smith succinctly
points out, in the introduction to The Truth That Never Hurts (New York: Rout-
ledge, 1998): “Racism is what happens to black men. Sexism is what happens
to white women.”

4. I taught the undergraduate course, called “The Black Female Body in
American Culture,” at Spelman College in 1995. I taught graduate seminars by
the same name at Emory University in 1996 and 1997. A list of such exclu-
sionary works includes, but is not limited to, the following: The Female Body (a
collection of scholarly essays and creative work in which author Ruth Behar is
the single representation of women of color), edited by Laurence Goldstein; The
Female Body in Western Culture by Susan Suleiman; Gender/Body/Knowledge:
Feminist Reconstruction of Being and Knowing, edited by Alison Jagger and Susan
Bordo; Volatile Body: Towards a Corporeal Feminism by Elizabeth Grosz; Body
Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science, edited by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn
Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth; “Phenomenology of the Black Body,” by
Charles Johnson, addressed in this introduction; the exhibition “Black Male:
Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art,” and the cata-
log by the same name, edited by Thelma Golden; and “Friday on the Potomac,”
the introduction to Rac(e)ing Justice, En-gendering Power, by Toni Morrison.

5. Laurence Goldstein, introduction to The Female Body in Western Culture

6. Charles Johnson, “A Phenomenology of the Black Body,” Michigan Quar-

7. Johnson goes on to describe what he calls “an amazing and revolution-
ary feat of cultural reconstruction” that resulted in Black women taking control
of their own images and in their bodies being represented as, “first and fore-
most, spiritual. . . . The black female body is, in fact, frequently offered to us as
the original body of a humankind descended from a black Eve of Africa.” The
chapters included here show that the “cultural reconstruction” to which John-
son refers has not had any substantial impact on the larger culture, if in fact it
existed at all. From a feminist perspective, Johnson’s essay reinforces a phallo-
centric African American canon. He speaks of “black authors” yet refers only to
male authors like Eldridge Cleaver and Claude McKay.

139.


10. See: bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy,” in Black Looks and “Feminism In-
side: Toward a Black Body Politic”; Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Female
Omolade, “Hearts of Darkness”; Lisa Jones, Bullet Proof Diva; and Codes of Con-
duct by Karla Holloway. Since the conception of this project new titles in related
areas have been published including Recovering the Black Female Body: Self Rep-
resentations by African American Women, edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa
Dickerson; Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty
by Dorothy Roberts; Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Poli-
tics of Respectability by E. Frances White; The Black Female Body in Photographic
History, edited by Deborah Willis and Carla Williams; and Stolen Women: Re-
claiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives by Gail Elizabeth Wyatt. The
Hyper-In-Visible Woman: Black Female Bodies in Public Culture by Deborah
Grayson, is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

11. Associated Press, Friday, 9 August 2002. For additional information see
the excellent documentary film The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: The Hott-
tentot Venus, by Zola Masek.