

Article

Re-Framing Hottentot: Liberating Black Female Sexuality from the Mammy/Hottentot Bind

Shaweta Nanda ^{1,2}

¹ Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India; shawetananda@gmail.com

² Department of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh 176215, India

Received: 25 July 2019; Accepted: 4 October 2019; Published: 14 October 2019



Abstract: Taking up Michele Wallace’s call to interrogate popular cultural forms and unravel their relationship with the political discourse of the time, this paper begins by examining the popular discourse about Black female sexuality in the USA. White, cis-hetero-patriarchal cultural and visual imagination still represents Black women either as asexual and maternal mummies or as the deviant ‘Other’ that is as Venus Hottentots or ‘hypersexual’ Jezebels. Maternal and sexual scripts were first naturalized by popular and scientific discourse(s), and then covertly deployed by the dominant white hetero-patriarchal set up to mask the exploitation of Black women, and constrict the opportunities of growth that were available to them even after the emancipation. This paper analyzes how Black women writers like Elizabeth Alexander and Alice Walker, and visual artists such as Renee Cox develop an oppositional gaze, to use hooks’s phrase, and ‘re-frame’ the Venus Hottentot from their radical and subversive points of view. Building on theoretical insights of Gina Dent, Cornel West, and Audre Lorde, this paper engages with the oft-neglected relationship between pleasure, desire, identity, and Black female sexuality. Thus, Black female sexuality that has been expunged and/or termed ‘deviant’ actually becomes a source of empowerment for Black women.

Keywords: Venus Hottentot; Jezebel; Mammy; Alice Walker; Elizabeth Alexander; Thylia Moss; Renee Cox; Black female sexuality; female circumcision; black photography; Saartjie Baartman

1. Introduction

“There were so many jokes about the Black body; so many stereotypes that were whispered, passed around and perpetuated The Black body had its own mythology; it had its own language” —Danquah (2009).¹

As the epigraph indicates, the dominant representations of Black² womanhood were centered on their bodies. Numerous myths were circulated about them in the form of “jokes” and “stereotypes” which then served to popularize and normalize misconceptions about Black women in American popular culture. One should be wary of the perception that these images are innocuous in nature. Canons both shape and reflect our perception of the world. Underscoring the relevance of popular culture especially that of these demeaning stereotypes, Black intellectual Michele Wallace argues that cultural criticism is as relevant as any other axis such as politics, the law, health, economics and the

¹ The given quotation has been taken from “Body Language” in *The Black Body* (14).

² Following Joel Olson’s lead I have capitalized ‘B’ while writing Black but refrained from capitalizing ‘w’ while writing white. Olson explains the choice by stressing, “. . . the two terms are not symmetrical. Black is a cultural identity as well as a political category, and as such merits capitalization like American Indian, Chicana, or Irish American. White, however, . . . is strictly a political category and thus, like “proletarian,” “citizen,” or feminist, requires no capitalization” (Olson 2004, p. xix).

family to the lives and condition of Black women. Black women's empowerment, especially their ability to reclaim control over their lives, is inextricably linked with their artistic representations both by themselves and by the dominant hegemonic structure (cited in [Thompson 2012](#), p. 139).³ Wallace urges Black artists to engage with popular cultural forms and unravel their relationship with the political discourse with an aim to transform the dominant discourse. Taking up Michele Wallace's call to interrogate popular cultural forms and unravel their relationship with the political discourse of the time ([Wallace 2004](#)), this paper begins by examining the dominant discourse about Black female sexuality in the USA. My deployment of the term 'Black' female sexuality might give an impression of a uniformly structured cohesive group of diasporic population. However, this is not the case. I am sensitive to the fragile nature of the monolithic Black identity which, Moyo Okediji argues, is continually fractured by non-racial factors like class, region, sexuality and/or special needs ([Okediji 2006](#), p. x). Given this diversity, I wish to draw attention to the multiple scripts that were constructed by the dominant white hegemonic discourse about Black women, their bodies and sexualities. Theorist Zine Magubane has expressed her discomfort with upholding a particular image as the only or central icon concerning blackness and sexuality. Underscoring the ideological nature of race, Magubane stresses the need to both historicize the nature of blackness and explore how social relationships determined who would be categorized as Black and in which context. She challenges the manner in which Sander Gilman's work, which she writes is considered seminal by most scholars who are working on race, sexuality, gender, science, colonialism and/or their intersections, established Sara Baartman as a "single ideology, central icon" about "blackness and sexuality the nineteenth century" ([Magubane 2001](#), p. 825). However, Magubane does not talk about what might be the other icons and ideologies concerning Black female sexuality apart from the Venus Hottentot. White, cis-hetero-patriarchal cultural and visual imagination represents Black women either as asexual and maternal Mammies and Aunt Jemimas or as the deviant 'Other' that is as Venus Hottentots or 'hypersexual' Jezebels, primarily. Maternal and sexual scripts were first naturalized by popular and scientific discourse(s), and then covertly deployed by the dominant white hetero-patriarchal set up to mask the exploitation of Black women, and constrict the opportunities of growth that were available to them even after the emancipation.

To examine the manner in which the discourse around Black female sexuality and the body evolved in the Euro-centric discourse, the first segment of this paper traces the iconic image of the Black woman's protruding posterior to the figure of the Khosian woman, Sara Baartman who was exhibited for her elongated genitals and steatopygia.⁴ I analyze the complex way in which multiple ideological forces, including racism, sexism, white imperialism, and scientific racism that coalesced to create this dominant image of the deviant Black female sexuality. I explore how the demeaning stereotype of the Venus Hottentot morphs into other contemporary stereotypes about Black women such as jezebel, hoochie, and the welfare queen. This section ends by taking into account Thylias Moss's *A Tale of a Sky Blue Dress* ([Moss 1998](#)). It maps how Baartman's legacy continues to impact (read scar and damage) the way in which Black women's bodies and sexualities are (mis)represented in contemporary times. The next section of this paper unearths ways in which Black women artists and intellectuals sought to counter their continued objectification and dehumanization. Black women, initially, responded by generating alternate sexual script that was based on the "politics of respectability" (Evelyn Higginbotham's term cited in [Thompson 2012](#), p. 3). It espoused the model of Black lady, based on the Victorian ideals of chastity and sexual purity of women, especially for African-American middleclass women. This model that was created to counter the history of enslavement and subsequent sexual stereotyping and hypervisibility of Black female bodies, eventually espoused sexual repression, silence, and/or self-imposed sexual invisibility on the part of Black women (including artists).

³ Lisa B. Thompson cites Michele Wallace in the epilogue of her book, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* ([Thompson 2012](#), p. 139) while discussing the relevance of unearthing Black women's sexual histories and desires.

⁴ Steatopygia is a medical term for protruding posterior which is termed disabling and aberrant in the white medical discourse.

The third section of this paper explores how Black women artists registered dissatisfaction with both sexualization of Black female bodies by whites and also with de-sexualization and/or erasure of their sexual desires by the models espoused by Black reformers and activists. This quest to re-envision the sexual models that were available to Black women led Black women thinkers to re-envision the location of the margins that they occupied. bell hooks visualizes margins as a site of radical openness, creativity, and resistance. Instead of simply symbolizing repression, hooks envisages margins as a primary location that enables the creation of a counter-hegemonic discourse that engenders radical alternatives and new perspectives that are empowering in nature (hooks 1990, pp. 149–53). hooks's theorization of the margins has been deployed as a lens to analyze the manner in which African-American women writers like Elizabeth Alexander ("The Venus Hottentot 1825") and Alice Walker (*The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*), and visual artists such as Renee Cox, develop Black oppositional gaze (hooks 1992) and reframe the Venus Hottentot from their radical and subversive points of view. In this paper I examine how they reclaim Black female sexuality from the shackles of stereotypes and male discourse that seek to alienate Black women from their bodies. Defining their body and sexuality from their own (often subversive) points of view, these artists create alternate positive models for Black women. They re-present the Venus Hottentot as an agent who wishes to break out of her cage and retaliate against her oppressors. In her resurrected form, she is not an aberrant subhuman freak but an intellectually sharp subject who also voices her desires. In their liberating re-presentations, Black women visual artists like Cox make a radical intervention by re-centering the Black female nude in the Euro-centric patriarchal discourse. This paper culminates by unraveling the relationship between sexuality, resistance, pleasure and the representation of the Black body. These Black women intellectuals recover the knowledge about the empowering and autonomous nature of female sexuality that has been strategically suppressed by the patriarchal discourse by engaging with female anatomy, fertility dolls, and folklores concerning Black female sexuality. This paper, thus, examines how Black female body that has often been raped, objectified, denigrated as ugly, and Black female sexuality that has been either obliterated or termed 'deviant' actually become sources of empowerment Black women.

2. Denial of Black Female Sexuality

White cis-hetero-patriarchal American society, including (Second Wave) white feminists, in their portrayal of Black women, tend to either completely deny them their sexuality or represent Black female body and sexuality/ies in a rather limiting fashion. Denial of Black woman's sexuality is visible even in the works of art that ostensibly aim to celebrate women's sexual autonomy. For instance, white visual artist Judy Chicago's (1939–) *The Dinner Party* (Chicago 1974–1979) is an iconic installation artwork is composed of a massive triangular banquet table that represents thirty-nine influential women via thirty-nine porcelain plates.⁵ The dinner plates represented these women through creatively imagined female genitalia. Alice Walker appreciates the fact that Chicago, unlike other white feminists such as Patricia Meyer Spacks,⁶ included a prominent Black feminist, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), in her representation of the famous women of the Western civilization. Nevertheless, Walker is deeply critical of the fact that out of the thirty nine plates, the Sojourner Truth plate⁷ is the only one that depicts three

⁵ The work was created with the intention of retrieving, celebrating and commemorating the history and achievements of women that have been obliterated by the dominant hetero-patriarchal culture. Chicago challenged the hegemony of the patriarchal world of art by according primacy to art forms like ceramics and needlework which were not considered works of 'high art' and are usually associated with women.

⁶ Alice Walker is deeply critical of the fact that Patricia Meyer Spacks in her book, *The Female Imagination* (1975) deals only with women in "the Anglo-American tradition" that is white middle-class women and makes no reference to the literary tradition and works of Black women.

⁷ For the visual, see https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/sojourner_truth.

faces instead of a vagina⁸ (Walker 1983, p. 233). Walker concludes that white women “cannot imagine Black women have vaginas,”⁹ and that they are “capable of motherhood” or are even women like them (Walker 1983, p. 233). Vagina, in Chicago’s scheme of things, is symbolic of liberation and resurrection. Thus, a formerly enslaved Black woman is denied both a vagina and a possibility of emancipation even in antebellum America. An earlier slogan of Chicago’s work, namely “Twenty-Five Women Who Were Eaten Alive” (Chicago cited in Snyder 1980, p. 31) could be adapted to underscore the central concern of this article that is meant to explore how Black female sexuality/ies have been “eaten alive” in the white hetero-patriarchal capitalist society. This paper seeks to engage with such lacuna, stereotyping, misrepresentation, and/or distortion of Black female body and sexuality. Building on the scholarship of Black women thinkers such as Lorraine O’Grady, Evelyn Hammonds, and bell hooks, I wish to stress the need to racialize the discourse of gender in addition to sexualizing the narrative of race.¹⁰ The engagement with Black female sexuality would enable us to re-imagine the Black women in more dynamic, complex, and wholesome terms rather than viewing them in a reductive fashion as merely passive victims of marginalization and exploitation.

3. The Mammification of Black Women

I wish to begin by qualifying Walker’s observation about white women’s portrayal of Black women as being incapable of motherhood by arguing that white capitalist culture has de-sexualized Black female body and projected them as loving maternal figures but not to their own children. Moreover, this construction of the Black maternal figure is predicated on her asexuality which is again achieved by obliterating all insignia of Black female sexuality. In antebellum South, Black women have been upheld in the popular imagination as Mammies and in the post-bellum American set up as domestic servants and nannies. This maternal script is naturalized in the popular American imagination by different cultural forces, such as novels, films (*Gone with the Wind*), advertisements (Aunt Jemima pancake mixes and syrup) and quotidian household objects like salt shakers.¹¹ As I have argued in another article,¹² the Mammy/Aunt Jemima figure has been enshrined as a pitch Black, fat woman, dressed in a red kerchief and oversized, long dress in the popular white visual and literary imagination. This selfless, loyal, servile, asexual, maternal figure is never placed in a setting, such as in front of a dressing table or a bedroom that underscores her sexuality and material desires. She is rather depicted in highly domesticated sites like the kitchen or the nursery. I argued at length how these “controlling images” (Collins 2000, p. 5) such as both asexual mammies and hypersexual jezebels serve three major purposes, at least. First, they mask the truth about racial, sexual, and economic exploitation of Black women in ante and post-bellum American society. Second, they are constructed and propagated with the aim of maintaining Black women’s subjugation. Collins argues that “portraying African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mamas helps the U.S. justify Black women’s oppression” in the present society (Collins 2000, p. 69). The aim of

⁸ Alice Walker critiques Sojourner Truth’s representation by Judy Chicago. She describes the three faces in detail: “One, weeping (a truly cliché tear), which “personifies” the Black woman’s “oppression,” and another, screaming (a no less cliché scream), with little ugly pointed teeth “her heroism,” and a third, in gim-cracky “African” design, smiling; as if the African woman, pre-American slavery, or even today, had no woes” (Walker 1983, p. 233).

⁹ Walker reasons that it is the Black woman’s children that white woman “resents” for they make her feel “guilty” (Walker 1983, p. 233). Instead of addressing issues such as poverty, racism, segregation and exploitation that plagues the lives of these Black children, white women choose to “deny that the Black woman has a vagina. Is capable of motherhood. Is a woman” (Walker 1983, p. 233).

¹⁰ These concerns are reflected succinctly in the title of a book, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) that was co-edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Also, for a detailed discussion of the history of Black women’s sexualities and their representation, see Evelyn Hammonds’s “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black female sexuality” (Hammonds 1994).

¹¹ For visuals of salt shakers, notepads, advertisements and films that deploy the Mammy stereotype, see <https://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/diversity/african/1-mammy/>.

¹² For details see Shaweta Nanda’s article, Re-Claiming the Mammy: “Racial, Sexual and Class Politics Behind ‘Mammification’ of Black Women” (Nanda 2014).

these “controlling images” is to make “racism, sexism, poverty, and the other forms of social injustice appear to be natural and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Hazel Carby quoted in Collins 2000, p. 69). Racist ideology, thus, negates the reality of the Black intellectualism, aspirations for upward mobility and competence to excel in other jobs. Third, apart from controlling and objectifying Black women by creating negative stereotypes about them, patriarchal white supremacist culture seeks to further oppress them by restricting the opportunities of growth that are available to them. As a result, Black women are forced to continue with low paid domestic jobs (such as that of a cook, domestic help or a seamstress) or perish.

4. The Deviant and Hypersexual Other: The Venus Hottentot

This paper, written for *Unsilencing Black Sexualities*, focuses on the other end of the spectrum. In addition to erasure of their sexuality, Black women have also been subjected to the “cultural terrorism” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, p. 38) by whites wherein they have been denounced as deviant, bestial, hypersexual creatures in the form of Venus Hottentots and later as “Jezebels” and “Hot Mamas.” The trope of the Venus Hottentot emerges from the story of Saartjee Baartman (1789–1815), a Khosian woman who was enslaved¹³ and brought to England from South Africa on the pretext of becoming a dancer/entertainer by Hendrick Cezar in 1810. She was promised half the profits that she could take back home once her contract is over. However, she was caged¹⁴ and exhibited (nearly naked) with other “freaks” at sideshows, circuses, private balls, and parties in Europe (London¹⁵ and Paris in particular). White spectators came to see her protruding buttocks and elongated genitalia, which were seen as insignia of the hypersexuality, deviancy, and inferiority of the Black women. This iconography gained further currency in the popular culture as “almost overnight, London was taken with Saartjee—mania [. . .] There was an outpouring of “Saartjee”-themed popular poesy, ballads, broadsheet caricatures, printed satires” (Rachel Holmes quoted in Willis 2010, p. 4). This narrative in the popular culture was bolstered by the white racialized scientific discourse. Baartman was studied (naked and later dissected) to establish her status as a “highly developed animal” and the “lowest exemplum of the human species” who was the “missing link” in the Great Chain of Being.¹⁶ Her closeness to animals was established first in the world of entertainment when she was displayed next to a baby rhinoceros by an animal trainer, S. Réaux, in France in 1814. This irrationality was continued later in the scientific of reason and objectivity when Baartman was painted nude and she was described no different from other “animals” that were included in the *Discours sur les revoluyions du globe* (1864): “Our drawings present each *animal* in a simple state [. . .] in order to better see and judge the animals” (cited in Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 23). Scientists such as J. J. Virlely and George Cuvier further enshrined the Hottentot Venus as a hypersexual deviant subhuman freak. They reasoned that, unlike white women, the sexual organs of African women are (over) developed and this is the cause of their sexual lasciviousness (Virley cited

¹³ I am following Natasha Gordon-Chipembere who in turn follows Pumla Dineo Gqola’s arguments about positioning Sara Baartman as a slave instead of an indentured worker despite the fact that legally or technically she is often considered to be free (Gordon-Chipembere 2011, p. 3). Rachel Holmes in *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* also stresses that Sara Baartman was unfree in sexual, racial and economic terms.

¹⁴ Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais recount that Baartman was made to sing, walk and turn around on stage (freak show) in London where the spectators were free to poke her with their walking sticks (Scully and Crais 2008). As per the account of South African History Online’s article on Sara Baartman, she was displayed in a cage in London. For details see <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-Saartjee-baartman>. Later in 1814, when she was transported to France and sold to an animal trainer named S. Réaux, Baartman was again caged and displayed next to a baby rhinoceros. Thus, one could safely conclude that there were times when Baartman was made to perform on stage while at other times she was simply caged and put up on spectacle. Zine Magubane observes the difference between the manner in which Baartman was racialized in Britain and France. Regarding the display of Baartman’s almost naked body, Sadiyah Qureshi contends that later in 1815 Baartman was made to pose nude for the first volume of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s and Frédéric’s *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* wherein she was the only human who featured next to the animals such as apes and monkeys (Qureshi 2004, p. 241).

¹⁵ Sara Baartman was exhibited for the first time at a show in Piccadilly in London in 1810.

¹⁶ I am indebted to T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s article, “Writing Sex, Writing Difference: Creating a Master Text on the Hottentot Venus” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, pp. 17, 23) for this information.

in Gilman 2003, p. 169). This ‘Othering’ of Black female sexuality that is attained by a complex mix of exploitative colonial gaze, coupled with racialized scientific and patriarchal gaze is depicted in a nineteenth century French cartoon, (1814) (Figure 1).¹⁷ It shows Venus Hottentot, standing on a podium, being examined by three men and a woman. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting argues that this satirical cartoon was intended to poke fun at the British obsession with Baartman and she identifies two of the soldiers in the print as being British. She also underscores that the presence of a dog in the cartoon refers to the baser animalistic instincts and nature of the spectators who have come to watch the Hottentot. Baartman draws diverse reactions from the spectators.¹⁸ While one admires her “strange beauty,” the other thinks her to be a unique specimen of nature. Another man sees Baartman not as a human but as a piece of animal flesh, “roast beef.” The woman, too, perceives Baartman’s “misfortune” as being “good.” Sharpley-Whiting makes another interesting observation. She writes that Baartman is invisible to the white female spectator as while bending down to tie her shoelace, she is “looking not at the “Hottentot,” but through the opening between her legs and up the kilt of the soldier behind Baartman. Thus, from an angle she sees through Baartman’s “misfortune,” her openness, or rather, the opening between her legs something more pleasing” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 21). While the reactions of all the spectators might appear diverse at the first glance, Sharpley-Whiting observes sameness in the way in which all of them view the ‘Other’ either as “exotic, amusing, invisible, and something to be eaten or consumed” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 21). Building on Sharpley-Whiting’s translations of the French dialogues and analysis of the cartoon, I contend that one can unveil different kinds of gaze on this Black female body that has been ‘Othered’, exoticized, sexualized, objectified, and dehumanized by whites. First, is the white male gaze that reduces the African female as an object of his lustful glances exemplified by two men who are gazing at her vagina and protruding posterior. Second, is the white female gaze, represented by the woman who is bending down on her knees in order to observe Hottentot’s elongated genitals closely.¹⁹ This is significant as the ideal White femininity and sexuality has been constructed by the white patriarchy as beautiful, chaste and submissive in opposition to the dark deviant ‘Other.’ Third, is the scientific gaze, represented by the man in the black coat examining the Venus Hottentot with a magnifying glass. Sharpley-Whiting borrows from the feminist film discourse the concept of the (white) male gaze as desire “to dissect,” “to lay bare” the unknown, in this case the Black female. She stresses that the gaze ““fixes” the black female in her place, steadies her, in order to decode and comfortably recode her into its own system of representation” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 6). As discussed earlier the white scientific male gaze did all of these things that is dissected, fixed, and recoded Black female Body and sexuality as pathological and overtly sexual. Baartman’s story, thus, becomes an important site to uncover the manner in which the visual imagery coupled with popular culture and scientific discourse has been deployed strategically by the white patriarchal world in order to give credence to the myths about the deviancy of Black female sexuality and validate white (sexual) purity, superiority, and normalcy.

¹⁷ I have gathered all the information concerning the title and the translations of French words written in the cartoon from Sharpley-Whiting’s article, “Writing Sex, Writing Difference: Creating a Master Text on the Hottentot Venus.” She writes that the French title could be translated as “The curious in ecstasy or shoelaces.”

¹⁸ Sharpley-Whiting writes that one soldier who is standing behind Baartman and extends her hand to touch her buttocks exclaims, “Oh, goddamn, what a roast beaf!” Another soldier who is gazing at Baartman’s genitals directly observes, “Ah, how amusing nature is!” A third man, who appears to be a civilian, is looking at Baartman through lorgnettes from a distance. He admires Baartman’s beauty by stating, “What a strange beauty!” Sharpley-Whiting further observes that the cartoon derives its subtitle from the pose of the female spectator who is bending down, ostensibly to tie her shoelace. She looks through Baartman’s legs and says: “From some point of view misfortune can be good” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 21).

¹⁹ Though Sharpley-Whiting argues that the white woman is not looking at Baartman but at the soldier behind her, close analysis of the print also enables this alternate reading of white woman’s gaze.

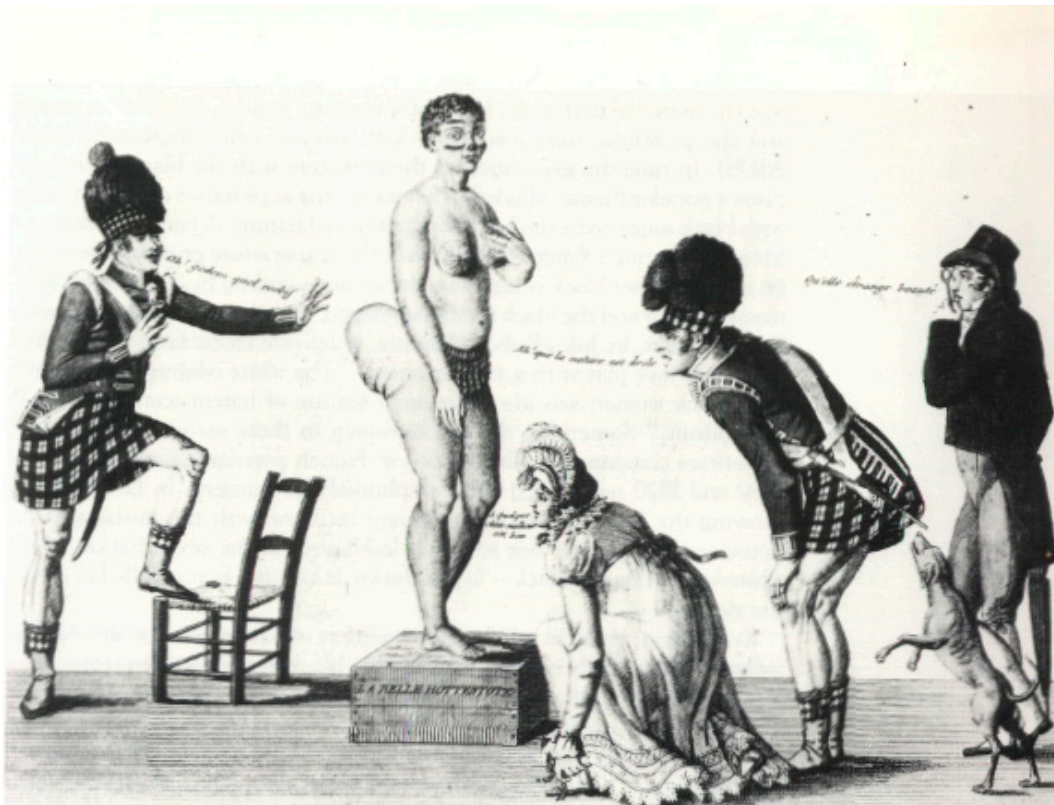


Figure 1. French Cartoon, *Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*, 1814 (available in public domain).

Europe's obsession with Hottentot's Black female body did not end with her premature death at the age of twenty-five. The attention was shifted from her protruding posterior to her elongated genitals. French Scientist Cuvier dissected her body in order to study the source of the deviant sexuality and lasciviousness of African women as a whole. Her subhuman and bestial nature was confirmed in the report (published in 1817) that established her likeness to apes. She was seen not only possessing "primitive" sexual appetite but also "primitive" genitalia (Gilman 2003, p. 170). Thus, this continued charade in which Baartman's naked body was first displayed as a spectacle, then dissected, analyzed, and preserved in a museum in the name of documenting the source of Black female difference, rather deviance, served to deny Baartman her humanity.²⁰ Such treatment of Baartman's sexual parts initiated a "pseudo race science which attempts to locate racial characteristics within the biological body" (Hobson 2005, p. 46)²¹. Race is now understood as an ideological and a sociological construct instead of something which is reducible to one's biological and physical differences.²² However, racialized and gendered White scientific discourse located Baartman's so called deviant sexuality and racial inferiority in her biological differences from the white race. This also determined the way in which Black female bodies were visualized, rather stereotyped, in the popular culture subsequently. Black women are most often pictured with naked breasts and enhanced posteriors. David Pilgrim's article, "Jezebel Stereotype," available on the *Museum of Racist Memorabilia's* website contains reproductions of various

²⁰ After Baartman's death, her brain, hips and other organs were preserved in formaldehyde. Baartman's body continued to be displayed for the next hundred years in Paris's Musee de l'Homme. In 1994 Nelson Mandela requested France to return her remains to her native country, South Africa.

²¹ Sharpley-Whiting views the moment when naturalist Cuvier dissected the body of Baartman as the seminal moment in the history of "sexual science as it intersects with race." She contends that this was a moment when "science and ideology merged and a black woman's body mediated the tenuous relationship between the two" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 17).

²² For a detailed discussion of the various conceptions of race, see Zine Magubane's *Which Bodies Matter?: Feminism, Post Structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the "Hottentot Venus"* (Magubane 2001).

quotidian objects, such as ashtrays, nutcrackers, swizzle sticks, fishing hooks, bottle openers, souvenirs, that reproduce these racist and gendered representation of Black women as “one-dimensional sexual beings” (Pilgrim 2012).²³ This fixation with Black women’s posteriors became an insignia of their aberrant hyper-sexuality. Gilman contends that Baartman’s representation continues to cast a long shadow in the manner in which Black female sexuality is perceived and represented in the dominant hegemonic discourse: “Female sexuality is linked to the image of the buttocks, and the quintessential buttocks are those of the Hottentot” (Gilman 2003, p. 175). Thus, Baartman’s sexual parts, especially her posterior, come to represent Black female sexuality for the centuries to come.

5. Long Dark Shadow of the Venus Hottentot

The immense popularity of the deviance of Baartman continues to shape newer (closely related) stereotypes that denigrate Black women as hypersexual Jezebels, whores, hoochies, and/or welfare queens. As opposed to the asexual Mammy, Jezebel is constructed as a Black woman who is a threat to white femininity on account of her unbridled sexuality. While the Mammy’s body has been contained by the dominant discourse in her apron and scarf, Jezebel’s body is displayed for the male gaze. She is characterized as a sexually aggressive, lustful Black woman who entices white men. Jezebel’s sexual aggression is reproduced in another closely related stereotype of the hoochie. Hoochie, like the Venus Hottentot, has been denied humanity and reduced to her body. Her sole function is to provide sexual gratification to men. Hoochie is denounced as sexually deviant because she readily indulges in allegedly impermissible sexual activities like lesbian relationships and oral and anal sex (Collins 2000, pp. 83–84). Black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins criticized popular cultural forms such as rap music that denigrated Black women. Specifically, Collins censures hip hop group, *2 Live Crew* that propagated the idea that they require hoochies only for sexual enjoyment.²⁴ This hip hop group, interestingly, was composed of African American men primarily. This shows how Blacks (especially men) had also internalized such a demeaning view of Black women. Patricia Hill Collins identifies three categories of the hoochie stereotype. Sexually aggressive Black women are plain hoochies. Scantly dressed Black women who socialize at clubs and dance in a lewd fashion constitute club hoochies. Lastly, poor Black prostitutes who are usually located in ghettos are the ghetto hoochies. Close analysis of Collins’s categorization of hoochies, sensitizes one as to how hoochie stereotype is deployed to control Black women hailing from diverse class, regional (both urban and rural) and professional backgrounds. Thus, it becomes pertinent to examine the motives behind propagation of such a negative portrayal of Black women. These controlling images²⁵ of jezebel and hoochie have been deployed since slavery to justify the sexual and economic exploitation of Black women. Representations of enslaved Black women as creatures with voracious sexual appetites enabled white slave owners to freely rape them in order to run ‘sex farms’ and produce more slaves. These stereotypes still serve as means to control Black female sexuality (hooks 1981, p. 65). Black women are presented creatures that are always eager for sex or even willing to engage in an abusive relationship with any man (Black or white). Their hyper sexuality is cited as a reason as to why Black women “cannot be raped” (hooks 1981, p. 52 my emphasis). Therefore, their sexual assault is misrepresented as consensual sex and not rape even in contemporary times.

Shayne Lee charts how discourse around sex, sexuality and the erotic has shifted from being simply biological to being a sociological phenomenon (Lee 2010, p. 1). Following John Gagnon and William Simon, Lee argues that the sociological processes in different aspects of our lives shape the

²³ For images and examples, see <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm>.

²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins denounces a hip-hop group called *The 2 Live Crew* for negatively portraying Black women as sexually deviant, hoochie mamas. Their lyrics are vulgar and insulting towards Black women as they sing that they require Black women only for sex: “Sex is what I need you for” (Collins 2000, p. 82).

²⁵ Patricia Hill Collins deployed the term “controlling images” to speak of the demeaning stereotypes about black women (Collins 2000, p. 5).

manner in which we think about sex. Social processes also determine how we experience and interpret sex; embody the erotic and the way in which we construct our sexual identities in addition to that of those around us. In the light of above theoretical insights, it can be argued that sexual scripts are fluid and differ for different people depending on intersectionality of diverse vectors of difference such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and/or region. This becomes more relevant in the case of Black girls as they grow up in a culture where a sexual script denouncing them as deviant, licentious whores has already been written and normalized. Black poet and writer Thylias Moss (1954–) in her memoir, *Tale of a Sky Blue Dress* (Moss 1998), explores the manner in which Black girls internalize degrading stereotypes about themselves which affects their conceptions about their own sexuality and pleasure. For instance, when Thylias's body starts developing, she becomes an object of the leering gaze and vulgar comments of men and boys on the streets. She feels traumatized. Gradually, her love for her body is transformed into a fear of the same. She begins to internalize the demeaning views that others harbor about her. Confidence and appreciation of her body is replaced by self-doubt and diffidence. Thylias too starts viewing her bosom not as something natural and beautiful but an "exaggerated" and "a grotesque element" (Moss 1998, p. 188). These adjectives are not innocuous when deployed for the body of a Black girl who hails from the working classes. They are reminiscent of the aberrant body of the Venus Hottentot.

This internalization of a demeaning sexual script acts as a deterrent to her growth. Despite being intelligent and charming, Thylias is unable to break through the overarching perception about the deviance associated with Black female sexuality. She notices that white girls, unlike her, are not catcalled for casual sex in the school alleys and hallways. She realizes that nice boys do not talk to her or ask her out for a dance or a date. Nasty boys, on the contrary, think that she is a hoochie who could easily fulfill their filthy fantasies.²⁶ She is perceived by others as being a cheap and easy girl. Boys approach her only to have casual sex and not to forge a meaningful emotional relationship. Consequently, Thylias feels alienated and cloistered on account of her race, gender and class. Sharpley-Whiting's theorization of the "Black Venus narrative" could be deployed as a lens to understand as to why Thylias is treated in this manner. Sharpley-Whiting points out that the French literary and historical discourse has always been littered with a "surplus of lubricious, venal black female muses" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 2). Thus, Sharpley-Whiting traces the beginnings of the sexualized narratives about Black female bodies not to the Venus Hottentot but back to the Middle Ages (between 1119 and 1142) wherein a curious confluence of theology and sensuality could be seen in the work of a religious scholar, Peter Abelard, who wrote *Song of Songs* addressing his beloved Heloise. Contemplating about Black female body and sexuality, Abelard asserts that the "pleasures one derives from their (Black women's) love are more delightful" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 1).²⁷ The discourse grew complex and most developed in the nineteenth century owing to the French contact with Blacks due to colonization and slave trade. This was bolstered by the presence of Sara Baartman, whose influence, stresses Sharpley-Whiting, was palpable in both the high and low culture.²⁸ Such a scenario gave rise to "the Black Venus narrative" which is a "part of the larger discourse of Africanism in general, and French Africanism in particular" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 7). Sharpley-Whiting explicates

²⁶ Moss observes, "my gifted male peers don't ask me out because I look cheap and easy [...] I am the only girl among them who is the gifted with this look: Lytta's mark, ladybug marks, and bargain basement price tags. I am cloistered in these marks" (Moss 1998, p. 191).

²⁷ Peter Abelard explains: "... the skin of black women, less agreeable to the gaze, is softer to touch and the pleasures one derives from their love are more delightful" (cited in Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 1). Sharpley-Whiting further mentions how the discourse continued from Peter Abelard's *Letters* into the Classical period with Paul Scarron's *Epistre chagrin* and La Fontaine's black-white woman *Psiche* and developed later in the Age of Enlightenment via "scores of asides, footnotes references, and quasi-scientific studies on black women ... by the likes of Denis Diderot, Buffon and others" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 11).

²⁸ Underscoring the popularity of the figure of the sexualized Black woman, Sharpley-Whiting notes that "the nineteenth century is the only century in which at least six writers- Balzac, de Pons, Baudelaire, Zola, Maupassant, and Loti- rhapsodized and obsessed over racialized heroines" (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 12).

the Black Venus narrative as the one that conflates “black female body with the sexualized savage that have racialized female protagonists as objects of desire and abjection” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 12).²⁹ Constructed through a discourse of domination and submission, Black female in the Black Venus narrative is generally constructed as “available, deviant, and degraded” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 9). Thus, Sharpley-Whiting’s theorization of the Black Venus narrative can be deployed as a lens to study Moss’s experiences of being perceived as an overtly and primarily sexualized Black body that is meant to give pleasure (to whites).

Thylas Moss’s narrative underscores how stereotypes continue to mar the lives of Black women. Instead of developing self-worth and dignity, young Black girls may completely internalize the white and Black patriarchal perception of them being loose and licentious women who do not deserve to be treated with respect. Gilman theorized that in the nineteenth century the deviant Black sexuality came to be associated with the figure of the White prostitute³⁰ who, like the Black woman, was pictured as possessing unbridled sexual energy and was, thus, relegated to the margins of the society.³¹ Gilman’s study of the proximity between Black women and prostitutes reverberates in Thylas Moss’s narrative that is set in contemporary times. Thylas relates that, on account of her Blackness, she was invariably expected to excel in the role of a prostitute in a college drama. On reflection she realizes that she was cast not due to her abilities as an actress but owing to the popular notion that Black women are harlots: “We were cast according to the perception of our appearances, and the reputations necessarily attached to those appearances” (Moss 1998, p. 234). Moss raises the vexed question of agency in playing those parts. On the surface it seems that Thylas must have garnered self-confidence and a voice along with accolades while playing the lead role. However, Thylas realizes that despite being the protagonist of the play, she has been rendered mute. Rather than developing self-worth and a sense of dignity, she has become extremely submissive. She confesses that now she only “aspires to become what these men want” her to be (Moss 1998, p. 188). At first, Thylas allows herself to be sexually abused by her boyfriend’s older brother, Hector, who is a philanderer. Subsequently, she loses her will to resist and degenerates into a passive voiceless victim who is raped and impregnated by Hector at a tender age of sixteen. Moss’s memoir, thus, depicts the damaging impact of the stereotypical sexual scripts that have been written for Black women. They are propositioned, mentally and sexually abused, and vilified in popular cultural discourse. As a result, they fall into the bottomless pit of self-loathing and develop inferiority complex. They are unable to cultivate an affirmative relationship with their body and sexuality which adds to their disempowerment.

6. Re-Viewing Venus Hottentot

The first segment of this paper discussed at length the history of the stereotype of the Venus Hottentot and underscored the continued relevance of the image of Saartjee Baartman and her posterior, thereby, undermining the claim that these images are things of the past.³² Moss’s memoir also made one sensitive towards the need to create novel, revolutionary and/or subversive models and images that would re-shape the perceptions about Black women. Black women writers and artists such as

²⁹ Sharpley-Whiting theorizes the “Black Venus narrative” as one where “black women, embodying the dynamics of racial/sexual alterity, historically invoking *primal fears* and desire in European (French) men, represent ultimate difference (the *sexualized savage*) and inspire repulsion, attraction, and anxiety, which gave rise to the nineteenth-century collective French male imaginations of Black Venus (*primitive narratives*)” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 6).

³⁰ Gilman argues that the “perception of the prostitute in the late nineteenth century merged with the perceptions of the Black.” For instance, the presence of Black servants in William Hogarth’s *A Rake’s Progress* (1733–1734) and *A Harlot’s Progress* (1731) marks the presence of “illicit sexual activity” (Gilman 2003, p. 175).

³¹ Like Sander Gilman, Sharpley-Whiting also traces the coupling of the images of prostitution with Black female sexuality in the nineteenth century. Projection of the notion of “prostitute proclivities, on to the black female bodies,” Sharpley-Whiting argues, enabled the French writers to project a position of “moral, sexual, and racial superiority” (Gilman 2003, p. 7).

³² Playwright Susan Lori Parks makes the link between Baartman’s posterior and America’s present explicit: “America is past free [. . .] And a protruding posterior is a backward glance, a look which, in this country, draws no eyes. Has [. . .] no rest [. . .] What do we make with the belief that the rear end exists?” (Parks 1996, p. 12)

Elizabeth Alexander, Renee Cox, and Alice Walker re-engaged with and re-viewed the protruding past significantly in the 1990s and 2000s. Interestingly, around this time in 1994, after the end of apartheid, South African President Nelson Mandela petitioned the French government to return Baartman's remains to South Africa. The West, however, continued to obsess over Baartman. Her remains were repatriated to South Africa in 2002 after a lot of furor, debate, and legal action.

Even before Mandela's petition, poet, essayist, and playwright Elizabeth Alexander (1962–),³³ wrote her first collection of poems named *The Venus Hottentot Poems* (Alexander 1990). Daughter of a historian, Alexander engages extensively with Black history and culture in her works. Her work has often been situated in the critical framework of post-soul aesthetics. Malin Pereira argues that Alexander's work illustrates one of the significant dimensions of post-soul aesthetics that is cosmopolitanism. Post-soul poets, explains Pereira, "enact their cosmopolitan migrations in two ways: as poets moving out into the world; and as poets exploring the interior of Black subjectivity. The two movements are not mutually exclusive; rather, the poet moves back and forth between them, with perhaps one dominating the other but each direction mutually informing" (Pereira 2007, p. 712). The first poem of the collection, "The Venus Hottentot (1825)," reveals both sets of movements mentioned above. The work showcases Alexander's quest to engage with other Black cultures coupled with her desire to engage with Black interiority.³⁴ Sara Baartman's story offered Alexander an opportunity to engage with many of her intellectual concerns. For instance, in an interview with Christine Phillip, Alexander admitted that since childhood she wanted to explore what it meant to be a Black person outside America (Phillip and Alexander 1996). Moreover, she was conscious of the fact that women and people of color have not been treated in a just fashion in popular culture and also in the world of literature. She also discovered that one of her great-great-grandfather was a formerly enslaved Black domestic in Jamaica.³⁵ Thus, Alexander weaves in her concern with other cultures of Black people, Black women's voices that have been strategically expunged, and the issue of enslavement in her poem, "The Venus Hottentot (1825)".

Alexander's work shows her commitment to bringing out the voices that have not been heard. Alexander underscores how the approach and task of the creative artist is different from that of a historian especially when it comes to unearthing the voices that have been ignored and/or erased from records: "The historian laments caesuras in the historical record; the artist can offer deeply informed imagining that, while not empirically verifiable, offers one of the only routes we may have to imagine a past whose records have not been kept precious" (cited in Walters 2010, p. 1041). Alexander contends that poetry offers an opportunity to the poet to look inward in a way that could give an alternate perspective that challenges stereotypes and hackneyed doctrines about a subject. She explains that she writes with an "assumption that people are equally complex or equal in their complexity" (Phillip and Alexander 1996, p. 505). Consequently, Alexander re-writes Venus Hottentot's narrative from Baartman's perspective and demolishes the white verdict that Baartman was a sub-human creature. She places Baartman's narrative after that of the French scientist, George Cuvier, who had dissected Baartman's body after her death and museumized it so that a dead Black woman's body (especially genitalia) was displayed on a shelf in a French museum.

³³ Elizabeth Alexander is lauded for having recited an original poem, "Praise Song for the Day" at Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration in January 2009.

³⁴ I have drawn the phrase, "Black interiority" from Alexander's book of essays named *The Black Interior*.

³⁵ Alexander discovered facts about her family's history while working on her family tree with Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Gates 2010).

I contend that the poem, “The Venus Hottentot (1825),” is structured around a series of contrasts. Immediately, in the beginning, contrast is set up between white male scientist Cuvier’s voice which is then undercut and countered by Black enslaved Hottentot’s narrative later. Moreover, Bronca’s brain is juxtaposed with Hottentot’s genitalia in the Museum: Baartman’s genitalia “float[s] inside a labeled pickling jar in the Musee de l’Homme on a shelf above Bronca’s brain” (Alexander 1990, lines 19–25). Alexander is critical of the tendency of the patriarchal society to value men’s intellect and women’s bodies. She argues that the “19th century, wanted us (to) think that what you needed to know about European men could be found by studying their brains, what you needed to know about African women and [. . .] the essence of those women could be found in their genital region. We need to be mindful of her story because [. . .] There are all kinds of ways every day that that story still manifests itself” (Phillip and Alexander 1996, p. 503). As opposed to the norm, Alexander ventures to engage with Black interiority and describes her task as understanding Baartman as a woman with a rich and complex inner life (p. 503).³⁶ Alexander’s deeply contemplative Baartman opens her narrative by underscoring how she has been reduced to “a Black cutout” who has been “working” in a “cage” wherein she is made to pivot nude so that the “paying audience can view” her “naked buttocks” (Alexander 1990, lines 29–31 and 34 respectively). Again, a contrast is drawn between the spectator and the one who has been put up on display. Also the two diverse narratives concerning representations of Baartman are presented by Alexander. The white account of Baartman’s bestiality is ruptured when Baartman envisions herself as being a “family entrepreneur” (Alexander 1990, line 94), who is working in Europe. This naming is relevant as Deborah King argues that “Black feminism asserts self-determination as essential” (King 1988, p. 7). However, the epithet, family entrepreneur, appears to be laced with irony as Baartman voices her thwarted dreams and aspirations. She reveals that she was promised “half the revenue” and “passage home” by the master’s brother when she left Cape Town. She dreamed of returning to her family “a duchess, with watered-silk dresses and money to grow food, rouge and powders in glass pots” (Alexander 1990, lines 41–44). Instead of providing “non-pareils, taffy [. . .] plums” (Alexander 1990, line 50) for her brother, she is earning money for the white master at the cost of displaying her body and bruising her soul. Alexander, thus, undermines the colonial view that Baartman was a free agent by uncovering that Baartman was a victim of white patriarchal colonialism and racism.

Baartman also demolishes the authority of the renowned white scientist, Cuvier, who investigates between her legs to prove his hypothesis about the racial inferiority of African people. He intends to cite Hottentot’s ‘aberrant’ body as a proof of African inferiority because Baartman was considered to be the “most correct and perfect specimen of her race”³⁷ (Lindfors quoted in Hobson 2005, p. 36). Baartman, nevertheless, undermines his authority by observing that she expects him to “pull silk scarves [. . .] rabbits” from inside her (Alexander 1990, lines 74–76). She views him as a trickster or magician and not a rational scientist. This reconfiguration is indicative of Baartman’s “oppositional political struggle” (hooks 1990, p. 145). bell hooks identifies language as a site of struggle against domination: “Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited [. . .] a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is the act of speech, of ‘talking back’ [. . .] that is the expression of our movement from object to subject” (hooks 1989, p. 9). Baartman talks back to assert the voice and identity that has been denied to her. There is again a contrast between Cuvier and Baartman’s perspective about her intelligence. Cuvier thinks she is dumb, slow-witted, and uncomprehending. Baartman observes that Cuvier complains about her stench thinking she does not comprehend. Sharpley-Whiting also cites Georges Cuvier’s

³⁶ Maureen McLane argues that “Alexander writes poetry that posits race and racial identity as lived—although not static or reductive—realities . . . ” (cited in Pereira 2010, p. 217).

³⁷ This view about Sara Baartman being representative of the people of the entire African continent is challenged by scholars such as Zine Magubane. Magubane also raises concerns about Baartman’s identity as ‘Black.’ Magubane argues that Baartman belonged to a tribe that were technically not Black but had yellow skin tone.

actual notes wherein he writes that Baartman had a happy disposition, a good memory and could speak different languages.³⁸ Sharpley-Whiting contends that despite these qualities, Cuvier views Baartman as a “learned, domesticated beast” who was indulging in the “simian like mimicry of the European race” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 24). As opposed to this, Alexander’s Baartman presents herself to be a complex subject who is not bestial and subhuman. She draws attention to her intellect by revealing that she speaks multiple languages: “I speak English. I speak Dutch. I speak a little French as well” (Alexander 1990, lines 81–84). Baartman asserts her superiority over scientist Cuvier by saying that she speaks “languages Monsieur Cuvier will never know have names” (Alexander 1990, line 85). Interestingly, Hottentot in Dutch means to stammer or stutter. This signifies the failure of the white man to understand Baartman’s complicated “Khosian’s clicks” which she had not forgotten (Alexander 1990, line 109).

Baartman’s counter-narrative is augmented by her “oppositional gaze” (hooks 1992, p. 116). While theorizing about the Black female spectator and deployment of gaze as a site of resistance, bell hooks builds on Michael Foucault’s argument that there is always a possibility of resistance in all the relationships of power. hooks stresses that a dominated subject can exercise agency even in the most incapacitating circumstances by developing an ability to manipulate her gaze and politicize the visual relations between the dominated and the dominator (hooks 1992, p. 116). hooks urges Blacks to develop a critical gaze that is oppositional and is meant to resist and challenge the authorities. Such an oppositional gaze, hooks argues, would enable Black people to both interrogate the gaze of the ‘Other’ and also look back at the ‘Other’ (hooks 1992, p. 116). hooks’s theorization about Black female spectatorship becomes useful to analyze the relationship between Alexander’s Baartman and her spectators. Baartman is characterized by the white spectators as filthy, abnormal, and malodorous. Despite being caged as an object in the circus, Baartman appropriates the position of the spectator. Baartman looks back at the circus and the visitors with a critical eye. She condemns the circus as being “florid and filthy” (Alexander 1990, line 52). She also denounces the citizens who stare and poke at her naked buttocks by describing them as “cabbage-smelling citizens” (Alexander 1990, line 53). Furthermore, Manthai Diawara underscores how a spectator accords meaning to a spectacle: “Every narration places the spectator in the position of agency; and race, class, and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator” (Diawara 1990, p. 33). Thus, meanings given to a particular visual entity are subject to change depending on the ideology and positionality of the spectator. Diawara also theorizes about the manner in which a Black spectator can transform into a resisting spectator (Diawara 1988, p. 66). The power of the spectator lies in moments of rupture when the spectator resists complete identification with the discourse presented by the images in question (Diawara 1990, p. 33). Considering these theoretical discussions, I contend that Alexander’s Baartman develops a Black and becomes a resisting spectator from being a passive spectate or spectacle. She views the “newspaper lithograph” (Alexander 1990, line 71) with a counter-hegemonic look. Baartman ruptures the identification with the dominant narrative. She astutely observes that in the cartoon her “buttocks are shown *swollen* and *luminous* as a planet” (Alexander 1990, lines 72–73 emphasis added). She understands and documents that the white gaze has produced a distorted representation of her body. Thus, instead of uncritically accepting the dominant perception of her, she counters it.

Alexander in “The Venus Hottentot (1825)” dexterously weaves in two of the primary ways in which Black women intellectuals have historically engaged with the issue of Black female sexuality. (This issue will be discussed in detail in the last segment of this paper). Black women have a history of being raped and displayed naked in auction blocks in America. As a way of countering this, many Black women writers chose to deflect attention away from their bodies (Davidson 2017, p. 8). Later (in the 1980s) many writers (such as Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins and Toni Morrison) engaged

³⁸ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting cites Georges Cuvier’s *Discours sur les revolutions du globe* where he observes that Baartman’s “personality was happy, her memory good [...] she spoke tolerably good Dutch, which she learned at the Cape [...] also knew a little English [...] was beginning to say a few words in English [...]” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 24).

with Black female sexuality especially by discussing the issue of Black women's rape and sexual abuse. Alexander does both these things simultaneously in the poem. First, Baartman views herself as an agent and draws attention away from her posterior and sexuality towards her intellect. Secondly, she also projects herself as a sexually desirable subject.

In addition to looking and talking back, Baartman envisions herself not as a passive object but an active subject. She wishes to retaliate with violence and often fantasizes about it.³⁹ She imagines that if she could rise from Cuvier's table, she would seize the knives that he used to dissect her body. She would then cut out his heart and accord it the same treatment that was meted out to her body. She would display it on a low shelf in a white man's museum. The poem culminates with another set of contrasts. Baartman's Black body which is deemed to be unnatural by whites is contrasted with white Cuvier's "black heart" which she stresses is "shriveled and hard, geometric, deformed, unnatural" (Alexander 1990, lines 121–122). Baartman showcases her agency by re-deploying the same (pejorative) adjectives, which had been used to dehumanize and objectify her, in relation to the white male scientist. Besides imagining about taking action, Alexander exercises her agency, however flawed, even in such incapacitating circumstances. Alexander in an interview explained that she was keen to explore as to the manner in which "a woman who is away from home, [. . .] naked, [. . .] made (into) a spectacle, [. . .] is daily abused and daily gazed upon and touched against her will, how does she persevere [. . .] and [. . .] maintain [. . .] dignity and a sense of self?" (Phillip and Alexander 1996, p. 502). The poem unravels how Baartman creates a new center for herself despite lacking control over her life and circumstances. Baartman overturns the conventional parameters of the public and private, sexual and asexual by exclaiming, "Since my own genitals are public/I have made other parts private" (Alexander 1990, line 100). Hortense Spillers, while discussing Ralph Ellison's work, exhorts Black writers to envision blackness not as a condition of physiognomy but a critical posture and strategy that would enable a cultural critique (Spiller 2003, p. 5). Ralph Ellison, argues Spillers, harnessed "'blackness" to a symbolic program of philosophical "disobedience" [. . .] that would make the former available to *anyone* [. . .] (who) was willing to take on the formidable task of *thinking* as a willful act of imagination and invention" (Spiller 2003, p. 5). For this, Spiller writes, Black writers must "retool the languages(s) that they inherit [. . .] The work of logological refashioning [. . .] involves the dissipation of the positions of cliché and its uncritical modalities [. . .]" (Spiller 2003, p. 4). Read in Spiller's terms, then, Alexander's Baartman showcases intellectual disobedience by imagining and appropriating her public parts as private ones in a radical fashion. She is able to revise and correct "blackness" into a critical posture as she dislodges uncritical modes of thinking, thereby, subverting the hackneyed and clichéd ways (read sexualized and racialized manner) of looking at her body and identity. Thus, she comes across not as a flat stereotypical character but as a critical thinker who possesses an intellectual range.

Furthermore, Baartman in Alexander's poem re-claims three things, namely brain, voice, and mouth, which have been denied to her by the dominant hegemonic discourse: "In my silence I possess/mouth, larynx, brain, in a single gesture" (Alexander 1990, lines 102–103). Besides revealing her inventiveness in re- envisaging the public as the private domain, Baartman discloses that she spends hours every day in conjuring up her "imaginary daughters" (Alexander 1990, line 99). She expresses

³⁹ Alexander finishes the poem with the following lines:

if he were to let me rise up
from this table, I'd spirit
his knives and cut out his black heart,
seal it with science fluid inside
a bell jar, place it on a low
shelf in a white man's museum
so the whole world could see it was shriveled and hard,
geometric, deformed, unnatural. (Alexander 1990, lines 114–22 emphasis added).

her desire for a progeny. In doing so, she posits herself as a sexually desiring subject. She showcases a complexity of thought and character as she uses the words larynx and mouth together. While the larynx signifies the development of Baartman's voice, oppositional discourse and perspective, mouth connotes multiple things such as appetite, romance, sexual and erotic pleasure. By hinting at non-penetrative, non-phallic forms of sexuality (or sexual pleasure including oral sex and/or kissing), Baartman poses a challenge to (white) hetero-patriarchal penetrative sexuality and suggests the complexity of Black female sexuality that is re-envisioned as empowering instead of being stripped down as deviant and passive. Rather than engaging with her posterior, Baartman underscores the relevance of the other parts of her body and identity. Alexander's Baartman, thus, has the moorings of being a sexually autonomous and actively desiring subject.

7. Re-Envisioning Hottentot in Black Photography

Many visual artists such as Lorna Simpson, Deborah Willis, Renee Green, and Carrie Mae Weems have deployed varied mediums such as photography, quilting, installation and performance art to engage with Baartman's legacy and have sought to re-view her from Black women's oppositional perspective. Debra Singer reasons that most women artists engage with Baartman because her original circumstances continue to have a strong resonance for them (Singer 2010, p. 87). Conventional representations of Baartman function as a fertile site for women artists to examine how the (white) Western male artistic canon viewed and presented Black women's bodies and sexualities. These representations were not unbiased but were informed by the intersecting ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality. There are two ways in which Black women artists engage with Baartman primarily. Artists such as Deborah Willis, Renee Green and Lorna Simpson (to an extent) engage with Baartman conceptually. They do not present Baartman's backside and genitals but choose to either draw attention to the other parts of her body (that are considered to be non-sexual) or foreground other aspects of her personality and identity (Singer 2010, p. 91).⁴⁰ Contrastingly, other artists such as Renee Cox and Carla Williams do not shy away from representing Baartman's body and also her posterior. In this section, I engage with Jamaican-American photographer Renee Cox's (1958–) re-envisioning of the Venus Hottentot. Cox's choice of the subject coupled with that of her model is analyzed in detail in order to appreciate how Cox undertakes the 'recuperative project'⁴¹ of centering and reinventing the Black female nude that has often been marginalized in American art history.

Recognition of Black creativity is marked by an implicit paradox: While Black music, dance and literature have been enjoyed and extolled with great gusto, Black visual arts have been deliberately ignored. Lisa Gail Collins defines the neglect of Black visual production in African American studies and the low priority status assigned to its analysis in art history as "visual troubles" (Collins 2002, p. 127). The situation is more challenging for Black women visual artists as they encounter "triple negation," a term used by Black artist Adrienne Piper⁴² to explain the increased difficulty faced by artists owing to their race, sex, and profession. Museums and art galleries are primarily owned and/or controlled by Whites. They often display racist attitudes and ignore the achievements of Black artists.⁴³

⁴⁰ Debra Singer argues that there are visual artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson and Renee Green "who have produced works that refuse to re-present Baartman's body visually. Rather, they invoke the body primarily through *verbal* means in order to focus on how structures of voyeurism and the spectacle affect the construction of desire and sexuality and how these relationships consequently influence formations of black female subjectivity" (Singer 2010, p. 91). For a detailed discussion of the artists and this line of argument, read Debra Singer's article, "Reclaiming Venus: The Presence of Sara Baartman in Contemporary Art" (Singer 2010).

⁴¹ Judith Wilson deployed this term in relation to the nudes of Black artist Romare Bearden: "By undoing the erasure, marginalization, and fetishistic exoticizing of the Black female nude, he participated in an important recuperative project twentieth century African American art" (Wilson 1992, p. 118).

⁴² AdriennePiper has been cited by Frieda High W. Tesfagiorgis (Tesfagiorgis 1993, p. 229).

⁴³ Black artist Howardena Pindell contends that the "mainstream art world" in America operates like a "close circuit" excluding the activities and achievements of artists' of color. She stresses that "they do not state it, they practice it. The public sector is even craftier and will state they do not discriminate and roll out the word "quality" (Pindell cited in Bernier 2008, p. 7).

Moreover, whatever little attention is accorded to Black visual arts, it is usually directed towards the works of Black male artists.⁴⁴ The problems that Black women visual artists face are amplified when they attempt to engage with the issue of Black female sexuality through the genre of the nude. Nude is considered to be an insignia of 'high art' and was traditionally off-limits for women artists.⁴⁵ Representations of Black female body are marked by an interesting paradox in the Euro-American art world. Lisa Farrington draws attention to the fact that there is sustained neglect of Black female body in the history of Western nude and subsequent literature about 'high art.' She cites a recent exhibition catalogue, *Ex-posed: The Victorian Nude*, to bolster her argument. Out of two hundred catalogue illustrations, merely two representations characterized women of color. Conversely, Black female bodies are hyper-visible in the nineteenth and twentieth century pornographic prints and photography. Not only were Black people not treated worthy or rather human enough to deserve to be subjects of the nude in white artistic production, Judith Wilson highlights a more disconcerting fact: There is an immense "paucity of Black nudes in U.S Black artistic production prior to the 1960" (Wilson 1992, p. 114) and even in the twentieth century, they are few in number. Wilson, following Dr. Boone, designates this as an "unexamined problem in the history of African American art" (Wilson 1992, p. 114). This absence of Black nudes could be traced back to the history of Black women's enslavement, and racialized and sexualized stereotypes that were circulated about them. Wallace reasons that Black artists choose not to draw Black nudes because probably they were responding to the stereotypes about bestiality and deviant hyper-sexuality of Black women (Wallace 1992, p. 342). Either they had internalized these stereotypes or deflected attention away from the sexualized Black female bodies to arrest the white dehumanizing gaze.

Judith Wilson⁴⁶ identifies the 1960s as heralding a shift in the history of Black nudes as eminent artists such as Romare Bearden made their mark then. This was also a time when the Black nudes were deployed politically to symbolize the "Black Is Beautiful" movement. Though Wilson appreciates efforts of Bearden and also that of artists Augusta Savage and Eldzier Cortor who drew Black nudes before Bearden in the 1940s, she highlights a major limitation in the artistic and political vision that is reflected in their representation of Black nudes. Wilson argues that these works primarily address the "charge of its aesthetic unworthiness" by proclaiming "the beauty of Black nude. But [. . .] none of them focus on the volatile conjunction of gender and race or the inflammatory myths of Black sexuality that the Black nude also inscribes" (Wilson 1992, p. 116). Thus, robbed of the oppositional politics, the Black nude primarily functioned to showcase the physical appeal and desirability of the Black body for the white consumption. The next segment deploys Wilson's analysis of Bearden's Black nudes as a frame to analyze contemporary photographer Cox's work. I wish to argue that Cox's work is radical not only because it engages with the iconography of the Hottentot but also because it deploys the genre of the nude to address the vexed issue of Black female sexuality, race, gender, and body in a comprehensive fashion.

As I have pointed out earlier, Renee Cox is not the only Black visual artist who engages with debilitating stereotypes about Black women. Many women artists such as Betye Saar and Kara Walker have also done so extensively. Betye Saar produced many pieces debunking the Mammy stereotype in a militant fashion during the Black Power Movement. Cox appreciated Saar's work and expressed a desire to engage with, what she calls, "historical wrongs" and refashion them into "rights" (Cox

⁴⁴ Frieda High W. Tesfagiorgis observes that "the art history and criticism of African Americans prioritize the lives and works of African American men while inscribing women as complements, those of Euro-American feminists center the work and issues of Euro-American women while marginalizing American women of color. Black women artist, in the last decade of the twentieth century, remain semi-muffled, semi-invisible and relatively obscure" (Tefagiorgis 1993, p. 228).

⁴⁵ For details read Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking article, "Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists" (Nochlin 1971). Nochlin examines how women (at least until the late nineteenth century) were debarred from studying and drawing nudes as nude models (both male and female) were made available only to male artists and students.

⁴⁶ This observation by Judith Wilson has been cited by Lorraine O'Grady in her article, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" (Wilson 1992).

cited in White 1998, p. 55). Like Saar's work that gives a clarion call for action, Cox takes the issue of Black empowerment to the next level by creating her two alter-egos, Raje and Yo Mama. Raje is the reincarnation of herself as an "African American superhero who gets back into history and changes things around . . . She takes on the issues that plague African Americans and other minorities" (Cox cited White 1998, p. 58). Younger Black artist, Kara Walker also revisits the antebellum era and underscores the theme of various kinds of violence that were meted out to Black people. She deploys the mode of exaggeration and satirizes the stereotypes about Blacks. White highlights the difference in the approaches adopted by Cox and Kara Walker when they represent Black female body. White argues that while Kara Walker's work focuses on the psychological dimensions and what was "extracted" from Blacks "psychically," Cox's image "explores what was extracted from Black physically" (White 1998, p. 49). In her works, Cox foregrounds Venus Hottentot's body and sexuality and does not deploy a satirical approach while doing so. Cox observed in her interview with Artress White that African Americans often revisit the sites of sexual trauma with the intention to heal or to gain a sense of desensitization against the pain that the stereotypes evoke. Cox's perspective towards the Venus Hottentot could be best understood in the light of Elizabeth Alexander's reflection on the Black body. Alexander wonders, "what would it mean to scrutinize the *disarticulated Black body with love*, to put it back together, in a sense, and do a new arithmetic that attempts to bring light to the study of who we are?" (Alexander 2009, 31 emphasis added).⁴⁷ Cox's engagement with Baartman's body could be seen as her visit to a site of trauma where she re-members Baartman's body that was poked at, pinched, denigrated, dissected and pickled by whites.

Cox puts Baartman's dismembered body back together in all its beauty, glory and strength deploying the metal prosthetics in two of her works. While *Hot-En-Tot* (Cox 1994, Black and White, Figure 2) was shot by Cox herself, Cox collaborated with another artist Lyle Ashton Harris who shot the photograph named *Venus Hottentot 2000*⁴⁸ (Cox and Harris 1994, colored print) which was then made part of an exhibition named *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* (Harris 1995). Both the pictures were created in 1994, the same year Mandela petitioned for repatriation of Baartman's remains to South Africa. Interestingly, Cox uses her own body in the variations on the theme of Venus Hottentot to engage in a dialogue with Baartman in order to explore the ways in which the trope of the Venus Hottentot continues to impact the lives of Black women. In her engagement with Hottentot, Cox reflects on the intersecting tangents of race, gender, Black visual culture and representations of Black female sexualities. Cultural critic Stuart Hall observes that self-images by the contemporary Black artists could be seen as a strategy that enables them in the task of "translation and re-appropriation which is literally a kind of re-writing of the self on the body" (quoted in Singer 2010, p. 89). Cox's choice of her own body as the canvas enables her to re-signify the set of meanings that are accrued around Black female body and sexuality. Cox dismantles Hottentot as being an insignia of both sexual deviance from the white perspective and that of disempowerment and servitude from the Black perspective in her re-invention of the figure. Farrington argues Cox's use of her own body serves to draw attention to the absence of Black bodies in Western visual culture. In addition, it consecrates Black bodies in a culture that denigrates and dehumanizes them (Farrington 2017, p. 376). Cox's deployment of her own body to represent a woman who has been stereotyped as deviant encourages Black women to inculcate "self-love" as articulated by hooks. Love, explains hooks, is about knowledge. It is predicated on the amount of work one invests in the "acts of knowing and caring" (hooks 2017). hooks stresses that one's first love is self-love and it "begins with taking that fearless inventory where you're able to go into the attic or the closet of yourself and *see* what's there" (hooks 2017). This journey is arduous, especially for Black women as they often suffer from low self-esteem. Black visual artist Lorraine O'Grady stresses the relevance of this act of seeing oneself. She argues that that Black intellectuals cannot "theorize in a

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Alexander makes this observation in an article named, "Reading" the Black Body: or, Considering My Grandmother's Hair (Alexander 2009).

⁴⁸ For a copy of the artwork see <https://www.lyleashtonharris.com/series/the-good-life-2/>.

void.” In order to name and not to be named by others, as has been the usual practice in the case of Black women, Grady writes that “we must first *see* ourselves [. . .] So long unmirrored in our true selves, we may have forgotten how we *look*” (O’Grady 1994, p. 4). This project of self-love then is not possible till Black women start challenging the dominant perceptions about themselves and start looking at themselves with fresh perspectives. This would enable them to create self-definitions from alternate radical perspectives.



Figure 2. Renee Cox’s *Venus Hot-En-Tot*, 1994; self-photographed. “The artist grants permission to download the artist’s images from the website for non-commercial use or for fair use as defined in the United States copyright laws.”

Cox exerts total control over the artistic gaze on the female nude, which has traditionally been a male and/or racialized gaze, by appropriating the position of both the photographer and the subject. E.B. Meyers, however, complicates this reading and argues that though “Cox controls the conditions under which the picture is taken, she also operates with the understanding that she has very little control over what or the image she produces finally means” (Meyers quoted in Hobson 2005, p. 72). I have certain reservations about adopting such a position. Though the spectator has the power to arrive at their own meanings, I contend that Cox deploys multiple strategies to neutralize the voyeuristic and the colonizing patriarchal (white and Black) gaze that seeks to render such counter images again as “hypersexual” and deviant. Most critics, including Janell Hobson, Debora Singer, and Kianga Ford applaud Cox’s work for squashing stereotypes and foregrounding Black female body and positive representations of sexuality. However, adequate attention has not been paid to the manner in which she makes a Black feminist intervention in her representation of the nudes, which is different from the nudes executed by white and Black male artists.

Most nudes that are executed by the male (white and Black) artists depict the female subject in supine poses placed in domestic interiors or natural setting that serves to highlight the woman’s passivity. Her gaze, shy and welcoming, is aimed at presenting her as a sexual object for

(male) voyeuristic gaze.⁴⁹ Renee Cox subverts all of these conventions in *Venus Hottentot 2000* (Cox and Harris 1994) and *Yo Mama* (Cox 1993). First, as opposed to the passively reclining female figures that are placed in household or pastoral settings, Cox in *Venus Hottentot 2000* (Cox and Harris 1994) is standing erect against a red, Black, and green velvet screen. These are the colors that symbolize revolution as they are associated with Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism and specifically with UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). These were the radical, anti-colonial organizations. Second, traditionally, female nudes are depicted primarily as sexual spectacles while male nudes are associated with activity, heroism, and violence (Farrington 2003). With the use of this particular screen, Cox seeks to not only re-claim Black female sexuality from the white colonial gaze but also indicates her intention to topple the entire project of white colonization and exploitation. Thus, Cox subverts not only the conventions of the traditional female nudes but also reclaims the discourse of activity and valor that are hallmarks of the male nudes. This theme of taking pride in African heritage is further bolstered by Cox's choice of retaining Afro-curly hair that are often loathed in dominant white culture that upholds straight blonde hair as insignia of feminine beauty and attractiveness. Cox is an experienced fashion photographer who has worked for reputed magazines such as *Essence*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *French Glamour*. She deploys her training as a fashion photographer in highlighting the beauty of Black female body. She wears aesthetically appealing make up that enhances the beauty of her eyes and lips. Moreover, she poses with her hand on her hips approximating a bikini model or someone who is participating in a beauty pageant. Instead of deviancy or aberration, Cox's Hottentot is re-envisioned as a sexually desirable, sensuous, and beautiful. Cox dismantles the conventional genre of nude wherein the female is sexually alluring but passive. Cox's Hottentot exudes confidence and oppositional stance. The photograph depicts Cox wearing metallic extensions via white strings on her breasts and buttocks. The white strings underscore how Baartman was objectified and reduced her sexual parts by the European male gaze. This paraphernalia heightens the performative⁵⁰ nature of Baartman's perceived deviance and hyper sexuality and, thus, serves to dismantle this debilitating stereotype. Cox's achievement lies in redeeming Hottentot from stereotype/caricature bind that reduces her complexity. Cox transforms Baartman from a passive victim into an empowered woman who is in control of her own body, sexuality and also representation.⁵¹ To address E.B. Meyers's concern that this alternate image could again be fetishized and appropriated as hypersexual by the dominant hegemonic discourse, I wish to underscore the relevance of Hottentot's gaze in this photograph. Farrington observes that eyes of the woman in traditional female nudes are "either modestly averted or shyly welcoming, and she offers herself up as a feast for the male gaze" (Farrington 2003, p. 16). Cox's Hottentot, however, has an oppositional, confrontational and counter-hegemonic gaze. This Hottentot "looks back" directly at the world with the intention of neutralizing phallogocentric and voyeuristic male gaze instead of inviting it like a conventional nude. Rather than offering gratification to the active male gaze, the nude/photograph is constructed as a space of critical intervention and resistance where Black woman looks back to assert control over her representation, beauty, and sexuality. In addition to exposing the atrocities that Baartman was subjected to, Cox also creates an alternative, empowering paradigm for the present generation to emulate.

Cox's work is both direct and multilayered.⁵² Aimed at countering stereotypes about Black female sexuality and subjectivity, Cox engages simultaneously with the two diametrically opposite hackneyed images, namely the Venus Hottentot and the Mammy, which seek to pigeonhole Black women as one-dimensional beings. Cox renders her Hottentot with a hint of a belly. This serves to

⁴⁹ I am indebted to Judith Wilson and Lisa Farrington for information about conventions of the nude.

⁵⁰ Historian Marilyn Jimenez explains: "for buttocks to gain significance- racial and sexual- they must be revealed; it is all about performance" (cited in Farrington 2005, p. 223).

⁵¹ Lisa Farrington also speaks of this shift in her article on the nude (Farrington 2003).

⁵² Cox made this observation about her work in an interview with Artress White (White 1998, p. 45).

heighten the sense of the Black woman's maturity as a sexual being. She deepens her engagement with the issues of Black motherhood and the Mammy stereotype in two variations of *Yo Mamma* (Cox 1993). Her counter-hegemonic critical stance could be explained by deploying the title of one of her exhibitions named "Flipping the script." I contend that Cox utilizes the location of the margins as a site of resistance and critical intervention in her bid to 'flip' the maternal, sexual and artistic scripts concerning Black women that have been constructed and normalized by the dominant (read: white and Black hetero-patriarchal) discourse. Cox sought inspiration from her pregnancy when she was enrolled at Whitney Museum to create *Yo Mamma* (Cox 1993, Figure 3). Cox describes *Yo Mamma* (Cox 1993) as a reactionary piece because she states that she was the first (seven months) pregnant woman to have enrolled in the program. Unlike the fashion industry, where she was previously employed, a pregnant woman was seen as an anathema in the 'high art' program. Cox admits that she was scared as she had made a risky career move by leaving the fashion industry. She realized that she could be rejected from the art program because she was married and had kids. Nonetheless, Cox decided to counter the prejudice and created the first version of *Yo Mamma* (*Yo Mamma at Home*, Cox 1992).⁵³ It depicts Cox's naked body with her pregnant tummy and head wrapped in a scarf. Cox describes her expressions in this self-portrait as conveying to the academy and the world at large that "I own the place honey and I'm still having my baby" (Cox cited in White 1998, p. 52). Cox conflates her racial Black heritage through the head wrap with her identity as a woman and a mother via her pregnant belly in the photograph. Her self-portrait represents her sense of autonomy and confidence in multiple facets of her life and personality that make her a whole.



Figure 3. Cox's *Yo Mamma*, 1993. "The artist grants permission to download the artist's images from the website for non-commercial use or for fair use as defined in the United States copyright laws."

⁵³ For a copy of the art work see <https://www.reneecox.org/yo-mama?lightbox=i11c4n>.

Cox continues to weave in diverse aspects of her life as a Black female artist who is also a mother and a sexual subject in another variation of the *Yo Mama* series that was shot after the birth of her second child. *Yo Mama* (Cox 1993, variation of the above discussed piece) is a towering seven-foot photograph that depicts Cox, naked, standing erect in her black heels holding her toddler son. In the sequel of the photograph, named *Yo Mama The Sequel* (Cox 1996), Cox is pictured with her children, one in arms and an older one near her legs. Like *Venus Hottentot2000* (Cox and Harris 1994), *Yo Mamma* (Cox 1993) also challenges the voyeuristic colonizing gaze by staring directly at the spectator with a similar counter-hegemonic gaze. Contrary to the servile, passive Mammy figure enshrined in the popular imagination, Cox looks empowered, dignified, and magnificent. This is the kind of representation that has conventionally been denied to Blacks. Wilson observed that the “sexualized female (femme fatale)” in the nude is often placed in contrast with another clothed female, who represents the “angel of the hearth” as she is shown engaged in domestic activity. Cox, however, ruptures such easy distinctions that deny the complexity of Black women’s lives and experiences. Wallace also contends that the dominant culture treats Black women as simplistic, cardboard like figures who form a homogenous group: “it is not often recognized that bodies and psyches of color have trajectories in excess of their socially and/or culturally constructed identities” (Wallace cited in O’Grady 1994, p. 11). Grady, too, stresses that ““both: and” thinking is alien to the West.” She urges theorists of color to develop a critical apparatus that would “cause a permanent interruption in Western “either: or-ism”” (O’Grady 1994, pp. 11–12). Thus, theorists like Wallace and Grady underscore the need to disregard limiting binaries and develop a comprehensive view of Black subjectivities. Cox developed a concept of “gynecentric aesthetic” wherein (among other things) the “erotic would be expressed as a vital, positive force, divorced from repression and pornography” (Cox 1990, p. 43). Read in the light of these arguments, Cox serves to underscore the complexity of Black female sexuality by conflating things that are conventionally considered to be contradictory. She dismantles the conventional distinction between the sexually attractive nude and the clothed domestic body. Cox’s body is not only taut, muscular, and attractive, it is also maternal. The photograph throws into relief the Black pumps, symbolizing female sexuality, along with a toddler, highlighting Cox’s motherhood. In a patriarchal society, women are conditioned to believe that their own life ends once their child is born. Cox, however, re-presents motherhood as empowering. She argues that it is her way of saying “Girl you can put your pumps on, give your body a good line, pick up your child with pride and move forward” (Cox quoted in White 1998, p. 52). Cox also reclaims the vagina, and by extension sexuality and motherhood,⁵⁴ that has been denied to Black women in white artist Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. While the child underscores Cox’s motherhood, Cox’s vagina, with pubic hair serves to negate the “symbolic castration” (Spillers cited in O’Grady 1994, p. 4)⁵⁵ of Black women. Underscoring the relevance of pubic hair, Hugh Honour⁵⁶ explains that men identify pubic hair as the first sign of their own sexuality. Therefore, traditional female nudes were represented without hair. This absence of pubic hair visually constructed women as passive, weak, and prepubescent girls. Owen-Harts furthers this argument by stressing that “thick cropping of pubic hair can be construed as an insistence on the power of [woman’s] [. . .] maternal sexuality (cited in O’Grady 1994, p. 20). Thus, contrary to a conventional nude, Cox with her noticeable pubic hair comes across as sexually empowered, active, and autonomous subject.

It is important to recognize that Black women artists and writers’ reclamation of the gendered, racialized, and sexualized Black female body could have its limitations. There is a very real danger

⁵⁴ As cited earlier, Alice Walker critiqued Chicago’s work stating that white women deny Black women vagina and by extension motherhood.

⁵⁵ Hortense Spillers observed that “the excision of the genitalia” in *The Dinner Party* “is a symbolic castration. By effacing the genitals, Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject but also hopes to suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place” (Spillers cited in O’Grady 1994, p. 4).

⁵⁶ Hugh Honour has been quoted at the length by Lisa Farrington in her article, Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude (Farrington 2003, p. 20).

that these alternate representations of Black female sexuality and this method of engaging with the body parts other than buttocks and genitalia could be again sexualized, exoticized and/or fetishized by the dominant gaze. Rita Mookerjee in her article, "Sex", raises similar concerns in another context when she questions: "How can different kinds of sex be made visible without becoming spectacles? How can sex-positive practices be enacted and validated in both the public and the private?" (Mookerjee 2019, p. 116). This issue demands more discussion than what it has garnered until now. Grady seems to have anticipated this conundrum in 1992 when she was addressing a panel questioning, "Can the naked female body effectively represent women's subjectivity in contemporary North American media culture, which regularly presents women's bodies as objects for a voyeuristic and fetishizing male gaze?" Grady stressed that Black woman's body needs less to be rescued from the masculine gaze than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely (O'Grady 1994, p. 9). Despite the fact that this "recuperative" project might have limitations, it seems to be a necessary stage in Black women's quest to control their representations and sexualities. The Black women artists then should not only "look back" but also turn their gaze inward towards their own pleasure and joy, discussions of which are overshadowed, if there are any, by the focus on issues of appropriation, objectification and oppression in the discourse of Black sexuality studies.

8. Black Sexuality Studies

The issue of Black female sexuality is a complex one and has many co-ordinates. As indicated by thinkers such as Zine Magubane and Sadiyah Qureshi, it behooves us to study the issue in its proper historical context and avoid the pitfall of upholding (unexamined) generalizations. The first segment of this paper examined the manner in which two popular and contradictory scripts are strategically constructed about Black women's sexuality by the hegemonic white hetero-patriarchal American discourse. The diametrically opposite sexual scripts, represented by the iconic figure of the asexual Mammy and that of the deviant and hypersexual Venus Hottentot, had their roots in the history of Black enslavement and continue to impact the lives and representations of Black women in numerous ways. Older stereotypes (re)appear in newer forms such as those of the ideal domestic help, welfare queen,⁵⁷ angry and emasculating sapphire, and hoochie—all of which are diverse and contradictory in nature like their older counterparts. Not only do the contemporary representations of Black women reveal the impact of these older images, their lives are continually shaped by these constricting images and associated histories in the form of limited economic, social, educational opportunities that are granted to these lives that suffer from politics of adultification and subsequently continue to be the lives that do not matter in this oppressive regime. This section culminated by examining the ways in which one of these sexual scripts, namely that of the Venus Hottentot, has been re-envisioned and re-appropriated by Black women artists. While this segment of the paper primarily examines the narratives that were constructed by the dominant discourse and the Black responses to those tropes, the next section of this paper will analyze the alternative and often conflicting scripts about Black female sexuality that were constructed by Blacks themselves.

⁵⁷ The welfare queen is a stereotype that pokes fun at the unbridled sexuality of unmarried/single Black women with multiple kids and derides them for depending on the welfare state and affirmative action for their upkeep.

Thinkers such as Hortense Spillers, Evelyn M. Hammonds and Stacey Patton (2012) have raised concerns about the discourse of ‘silence’ about Black female sexuality that is consciously constructed by Black theorists. Evelyn M. Hammonds (1997) argues that Black theorists choose not to theorize about the issue of Black female sexuality in order to safeguard their reputations and to be taken seriously as producers of knowledge in academia.⁵⁸ This reticence of the academia and that of Black Studies should be traced to the larger social-sexual script that Evelyn Higginbotham theorizes as “politics of respectability” that was constructed by Blacks, Black bourgeoisie in particular (Higginbotham cited in Thompson 2012, p. 3). In order to counter the long and dark shadow of Black enslavement that resulted in the history of rape, stripping, female bodies being routinely put up on spectacle and circulation of the debilitating stereotypes about the aberrant Black female sexuality, the Black middle-class, especially the nineteenth and twentieth century reformers,⁵⁹ decided to uphold sexually subdued, constrained, and prudish behavior as the ideal for Black women. Black women were exhorted to keep their underpants up, dresses down and legs closed. Lisa Thompson contends that “conservative sexual behavior is the foundation of the performance of middle-class black womanhood.” This performance, explains Thompson, “relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence and civility as a way to counter stereotypes” (Thompson 2012, p. 3). Building on Lisa Thompson, Evelyn Higginbotham and Tricia Rose’s scholarship, one could safely argue that a (false) dichotomy is constructed between first, Black women’s attainment of sexual pleasure in the personal realm and the larger public goal of betterment of the race and struggle for Black political rights, justice and respectability. Black women are made to deny their sexuality and appear chaste, pious, and morally upright in order to adhere to further the cause of advancement of the race. Secondly, while prioritizing Victorian codes of propriety for Black women, this script is predicated on the age-old opposition between the body and mind where the sexuality and expression of erotic desire, especially by Black women, is stigmatized in moral and ethical terms. Furthermore, Black women are conditioned to believe that they cannot be intelligent, civil, moral, and/or worthy of respect if they chose to present themselves as sexual subjects. Black women are required to negate their identity as sexual subjects in order to perform the role of the Black lady properly.⁶⁰ The Black lady usually hails from the middle classes, is educated, and is probably an urban professional. Interestingly, in such denial of sexuality and projection of asexuality, this ideal of the respectable Black

⁵⁸ This negation of Black female sexuality is evident not only in the USA but is visible in the French academic world as well. Sharpley-Whiting situates her work on Sara Baartman, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears and Primitive Narratives in French*, as a Black feminist intervention on Black female sexuality. Sharpley-Whiting notes that the French literary landscape is replete with the representations of sexualized Black women. She observes that plethora of historical and literary texts that engage with the meaning of Blackness in the French context. Despite the large number of works that engage with Blackness, Black female sexuality and the “French obsession with blacks and blackness” none of them, writes Sharpley-Whiting, is “feminist” (Sharpley-Whiting 1990, p. 2). She further argues that not only are the theoretical studies on the subject of Black femininity and sexuality in France conspicuous by their absence, the ones that exist often function like “colonizing narratives.” They have a tendency to deploy the Black female body to advance discussions of white female and/or Black male sexuality. She also critiques Sander Gilman’s seminal work on the Venus Hottentot and Black female sexuality in France on this count. She points out Gilman’s work offers no details about the central Black female figure that is Sara Baartman herself and the visual representations of Black female body are meant to further discussions about patriarchy’s fear of the (white) female sexuality. Although she does so in the context of representations of Black femininity and sexuality in France primarily, her critique and concerns are relevant for the American context too.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of the subject and politics of respectability, refer to Lisa B Thomson’s *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Thompson 2012).

⁶⁰ Lisa B. Thompson explains that the term “Black lady” has been developed from Wahneema Lubiano’s analysis of Clarence Thomas Senate Judiciary Hearings of the 1991. Traditionally lady has both racial and class connotations and the concept of the lady is usually not associated with Black women. Black lady is usually connotes a highly educated, professional Black woman located in an urban set up. Symbolizing the ideology of Black bourgeoisie respectability and racial uplift, there is hardly any reference to Black woman’s sexuality. Despite the fact that she downplays her sexuality, newer racial stereotypes are created where she is targeted as being an overachiever who is sexually frustrated and/or is a single Black woman. For a detailed discussion, read Lisa B. Thompson’s introduction to *Beyond Black Lady* (Thompson 2012).

lady, comes disturbingly close to the illiterate, servile, working class Black Mammy located in the rural South.⁶¹

Since, respectability in the Black worldview became intrinsically linked to sexual repression and restraint, Black women got further divorced from their bodies and discourse of female desire, pleasure and empowerment were relegated to the extreme periphery of Black studies that prioritized narrative of rights and advancement. Hortense Spillers voices this lacuna by critiquing the absence of discourse about Black women's sexuality by arguing that Black women are "the bleached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen and not doing, awaiting their verb" (Spillers cited in Carby 1999, p. 7). The impact of the politics of respectability impacted different forms of Black cultural production like literature and cinema. Lisa Thompson argues that Black literature, especially slave narrative and autobiographies, enshrined Black women who downplayed their sexuality. Black film directors also hesitated to engage with Black sexuality, especially to counter the stereotypical and unwarranted depictions of aberrant Black sexuality in Blaxploitation Era films. Thompson stresses how this hesitation increased manifold if they were required to depict middle class Blacks as sexual beings (Thompson 2012, p. 94).

A change in sensibility came about between 1950s–1970s when writers such as Ann Petry and Gayl Jones turned attention to Black working class women characters and addressed their sexual exploitation explicitly.⁶² This did add to the discourse of Black sexuality studies that was still in its nascent stages. As argued in the first segment of this paper, one notices that rather than engaging with discussions of sexual activity, sexual desire and/or sexual agency of Black women, later Black writers and artists engaged with the debilitating stereotypes and theorized at length about the multifarious ways in which Black women are oppressed and subjected to physical, psychological, and/or sexual violence in the white cis-hetero-patriarchal society. While not completely disregarding Evelyn M. Hammonds and Stacey Patton's observation that discussions of Black sexuality are absent in the academia, I wish to argue that even when there are discussions about Black female sexuality, thinkers tend to focus on issues of rape, incest, AIDS, and that of lesbian sexuality primarily.

The last section of my paper is located at the cusp of another shift that was augmented in the late twentieth century when many contemporary Black female writers decided not to counter the stereotypes of the hypersexual Black female by expunging discussions about sexuality. Instead of denying Black women's sexualities and sexual histories, writers like Alice Walker challenge the sexual script of respectability and sought to liberate the Black female from the constricting dichotomy of being either sexually ideal or deviant. In addition to challenging the stereotypes constructed by whites, they

⁶¹ Patricia Hill Collins in her insightful work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, has also drawn a parallel between the two seemingly disparate "controlling images" about Black women namely, the Black lady and the Mammy. Tracing the history of these images, Collins explains that in the 1980s with the Reagan administration the stereotype of the welfare mother "evolved into a more pernicious image of the welfare queen" and around this time "the welfare queen was joined by another similar yet class-specific image, that of the "Black lady" (Lubiano 1992 cited in Collins 2000, p. 80). Black lady, explains Collins, "refers to middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women" (Shaw 1996 cited in Collins 2000, p. 80). Despite the fact that the Black lady and the Mammy appear to be polar opposites as they fall on the opposite ends of the class ladder owing to a differences in educational and family backgrounds, Collins contends that "the image of the Black lady builds upon prior images of Black womanhood in many ways." The Black lady image is predicated on hard work and achievement of these women as Collins explains "these are the women who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much." This industriousness coupled with working status are the two aspects that enable Collins to draw a parallel between the Black lady and the Mammy figure: "This image (Black lady) seems to be yet another version of the modern mammy, namely, the hardworking Black woman professional who works twice as hard as everyone else" (Collins 2000, p. 81). Collins also argues that the two images appear similar as both give the impression of being the matriarch: "The image of the Black lady also resembles aspects of the matriarchy thesis—Black ladies have jobs that are so all consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated Black ladies are deemed to be too assertive—that's why they cannot get men to marry them" (Collins 2000, p. 81). While not negating Collins's arguments, I, however, wish to stress that Black lady model and the Mammy stereotype are actually predicated on the denial and suppression of Black women's identity as sexual subjects. If there are to survive and succeed in this racialized, sexualized ecosystem that is also riddled with class politics, there are forced to downplay their sexualities.

⁶² I am indebted to Lisa B Thompson (Thompson 2012, p. 5) for these ideas.

dismantle Black sexual script of respectability. Gina Dent and Cornel West's insights on Black sexual pleasure coupled with that of Audre Lorde's theorization about the power of the erotic becomes my frame to explore how Black writers like Alice Walker renegotiate the terrain of Black female sexuality. This paper takes into account Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Walker 1992) and analyses how Walker engages with experiences of joy, pleasure, desire, sexual activity and charts the development of sexual agency in her characters.

9. Female Desire, Pleasure, and Alternate Radical Traditions

Walker raises the issue of Black female sexuality by engaging with issues of rape, incest, and lesbian relationship in *The Color Purple*. Protagonist Celie is raped by her step-father, whom she thinks to be her biological father, since the age of fourteen. She has two children out of this rapacious relationship. Later, she becomes a victim of marital rape and domestic violence when Albert marries her. This epistolary novel traces the growth of a raped, battered, poor, illiterate girl into an economically successful matriarch who enjoys a fulfilling sexual relationship with her female partner, Shug Avery. Walker takes a significant step in unsilencing Black female sexuality when Shug redefines virginity by calling Celie, a mother of two kids, a virgin. Instead of focusing on the physical act of the rupturing of the hymen, Walker associates virginity with the inexperience of sexual ecstasy and orgasm. Patriarchal discourse in conjunction with scientific discourse has always described clitoris as a purposeless organ in contrast to the male penis. During the 1970s, intending to dismantle the denigrating view of the vagina, feminists "equipped with plastic vaginal speculums, mirrors and flashlights taught one another how to explore their sexual and procreative organs" (Bobel 2007, p. 93). Walker too deploys mirror as a device to throw into relief and recuperate the lost Black female sexuality in *The Color Purple*. Shug re-introduces Celie to her own body by giving her a mirror to look at her vagina, something that she has never done before. Gaining knowledge about the female body and sexual pleasure is crucial for this raped Black woman who has been objectified as a tree at several points in her life. Celie's empowerment and growth as a sexual subject cannot be complete until she gains knowledge about the beauty and complexity of her own vagina⁶³ and develops a loving relationship with her own body. Grady, as discussed earlier, has stressed the need for Black women to look, appreciate and reclaim their sexuality and especially their genitalia that has been "castrated" (Spillers cited in O'Grady 1994, p. 4). and/or termed loathsome. This is a step towards developing sexual agency as Black women have been historically "unmirrored" (O'Grady 1994). Black women have been turned into spectacles but never admired, mirrored and appreciated. Grady's concept of the Black bodies being unmirrored recalls Carrie Mae Weems's photographic work *Mirror, Mirror* (from photographic project *Ain't Jokin'*, Weems 1987–1988) to mind.⁶⁴ Weems turns the German fairy tale, "Snow White," on its head by placing a Black woman in front of the mirror. However, neither is the Black woman gazing directly at the mirror nor is her image being reflected back. When the Black woman questions, "Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the finest of them all?," a white female with the wand, representing the magical mirror from the Euro-centric fairy tale disparages the Black female subject by replying, "Snow White you Black bitch, and don't you forget it." The Black female body is not reflected by the mirror but is deployed to evoke the beauty of her white female counterpart, who is ostensibly absent from the visual frame. Therefore, Shug's exhortation that Celie looks at her vagina using a mirror gains an added significance when read in the light of the above mentioned historical and theoretical framework.

Shug further enables Celie to explore how the body can be a source of pleasure for women too. Shug radically asserts the significance of the clitoris, as opposed to the hole, in a woman's attainment

⁶³ Celie realizes that her vagina, which looks "like a wet rose" is way prettier than she thought (Walker 1982, p. 75).

⁶⁴ For the artwork see <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/aint-jokin.html>.

of sexual pleasure. She introduces Celie to alternate sexual practices,⁶⁵ such as oral sex, stroking and/or fingering that center woman's pleasure, thereby, decentering the male penis as the sole source of female sexual ecstasy. Walker explores the layered nature of Black female sexuality by exploring different kinds of fulfilling sexual relationships. For instance, Shug engages in role-play and gender non-conformity in her heterosexual relationship with Albert, which is based on mutual love and sexual attraction. Shug also explores the spiritual dimensions of sexual intimacy in her loving and nurturing lesbian relationship with Celie. Moreover, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker explores the sexual intimacy, pleasure and joy that Tashi and Adam experience not only via intercourse but by indulging in the practice of oral sex, which is considered taboo in African culture. Gina Dent cites Michele Wallace who designates oral sex as "a code for black women's pleasure" (Dent 1992, p. 14). This hints at the transgressive potential of the erotic and that of sexual pleasure to construct an alternate sexual economy that would prioritize Black women's pleasure and disrupt, what Hortense Spillers terms as the "silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (Spillers 1984) about Black female sexuality.

Walker continues to engage with the issue of Black women's sexuality, rapture and sensual desires or rather a denial of all these in recounting the story of Tashi, an Olinkan girl who first appears in *The Color Purple*. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* contributes to the discourse of Black sexuality studies in three ways at least. First, the story of Tashi's circumcision enables me to draw connections between Black women's enslavement and subsequent exploitation of sexual labor in America; their objectification as hypersexual whores, who were also turned into a spectacle in Europe, and the practice of female circumcision in Africa: Controlling Black women's sexualities and bodies lies at the heart of all of these practices that happened across different continents and time frames. It is pertinent to note how African female body and sexuality continue to be put up on spectacle. Like her African foremother, Sara Baartman, Tashi too is subjected to racialized scientific gaze. Her body is turned into a "side show" and a medical spectacle where American doctors and medical staff view her circumcised and mutilated genitals with a sense of awe, disgust and curiosity.⁶⁶

In addition to this, Walker delineates how female circumcision that, she argues, "desexed" women was systematically deployed to control women's sexuality by forbidding them to achieve wholeness of mind, body and soul, and also to make sexual relationship between women impossible (Walker 1992, p. 170). M'Lissa, the circumciser, tells Tashi about her own childhood experience of sexuality when she was uncircumcised. One day M'Lissa surreptitiously watches her mother unwrapping and kissing a doll. She notes that the doll was a "small smiling figure with one hand on her genitals, every part of which appeared intact". Inspired by the doll, M'Lissa compares her vulva to that of the little figurine. She proceeds to "cautiously touch" herself. For the first and probably the last time, she experiences sexual pleasure. The realization that that her body is capable of experiencing erotic pleasure dawns on her: "The blissful open look of the little figure had aroused me, and I felt an immediate response of my own touch. It was so sudden, shocking and unexpected, it frightened me" (Walker 1992, p. 205). The words "sudden" and "unexpected" seem to be carefully chosen by Walker as they successfully convey a sense of the naturalness of the act and the idea that a woman can gain pleasure from her body that too without a man. This was quite unheard of and radical in a hetero-patriarchal society. M'Lissa confesses that if women touched themselves, they would realize the experience of sheer joy and a sense of empowerment, and fulfillment that the *tsunga* was trying to prevent (Walker 1992, p. 205). Thus, the circumciser, M'Lissa's story reveals the manner in which patriarchal society conspires to alienate Black women from their bodies and controls their sexuality and pleasure.

⁶⁵ Shug tells Celie to explore her Vagina. She explains, "right down in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do *you know what* with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lots of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work" (Walker 1982, p. 75).

⁶⁶ When Tashi is admitted to the hospital in order to give birth to her son, a "crowd of nurses, curious hospital staff and medical students" gathered around her bed in order to "peer over" or to see "that creature." Her body became a "side show" in the hospital (Walker 1992, p. 58).

Secondly, like *The Color Purple*, Walker in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* breaks the silence around female anatomy and writes at length about the clitoris, labia majora, minora, and vulva, which are circumcised. She does so in order to define Black women's sexuality from the point of view of women themselves. Walker strives to reclaim Black female sexuality not only by overturning myths that are perpetuated about them but also by recovering the radical knowledge about Black female body that has been strategically suppressed by the dominant male discourse. Walker explores mythical and cultural aspects concerning the Black woman's sexuality in addition to the physiological ones. Walker cites an ancient African myth to explain that clitoris is a symbol of female autonomy and empowerment. It is cut down by patriarchal forces to control women. Pierre, Lisette and Adam's son, is an anthropologist who explains how ancient myths are used to justify female circumcision. He tells Tashi that termite hill is an ancient symbol of the female clitoris. When God, Amma, decided to have intercourse with the female then the "termite hill rose up, barring the passage and displaying its masculinity," thereby, debarring God from having intercourse. God, being all-powerful "cut down the termite hill, and had intercourse with the excised earth. But the original incident was to affect the course things forever [. . .]" (Walker 1992, p. 163). It is no surprise that the act of creation of the world itself began with rape and mutilation of the feminine principle. Pierre establishes how "religion is an elaborate excuse for what men have done to women and to the earth" (Walker 1992, p. 218). Walker, thus, unearths links between Black women's circumcision, patriarchal discourse and religion.

Thirdly, Walker unearths an alternate radical tradition of Black female sexualities via the trope of fertility dolls that have been systematically expunged and/or hidden by the patriarchal discourse. Tashi undergoes a mental breakdown after she gets circumcised in order to honor her Olinkan roots. Though she marries Adam and moves to America, she never feels whole again and takes recourse to therapy. She goes back to Africa to meet M'Lissa, her circumciser. Tashi is charged for murdering M'Lissa and is eventually hanged for it. When Tashi is in jail, Olivia brings in potters who replicate ancient fertility dolls. One of them informs Tashi that the word doll is derived from the word "idol." The figures "that have come down to us as mere dolls were once revered as symbols of the Creator, Goddess, the Life Force itself" (Walker 1992, p. 189). Potters also show Tashi a stack of photographs of paintings that were discovered among caves and rocks. These paintings bring to fore the matrilineal tradition where women owned their bodies and derived pleasure by indulging in erotic activities that are considered "sin" or taboo in hetero-patriarchal societies. One photograph depicts a girl "smiling broadly, eyes closed and touching herself. She is remarkably alive." This vitality is significant as the discrepancy between the doll's blissful expressions and Tashi's deadpan and lifeless look, as she slips into depression and trauma after she is circumcised, is too conspicuous to miss. Another photograph shows a figure with her "hand around the penis" of the figure next to her. The next picture depicts a figure with "her finger in another woman's vagina." It is significant to note that all these women are smiling. They are shown to be "dancing, interacting with animals, nestled cozily under trees and giving birth" (Walker 1992, p. 189). Thus, the photographs show women as being happy in their natural states without the surveillance of male dominated society.

Walker explores how Black women exercise agency by preserving this alternate tradition of Black female sexuality and autonomy despite the attempts by hegemonic structures to obliterate it. The potter points out that "when women were subjugated, these images were sent silently underground, painted on the walls of caves and sheltered enclosures of rock" (Walker 1992, p. 189). She points out how all these images were destroyed except the one that shows heterosexual lovemaking. Walker astutely observes that now every little girl is given a doll with "most vacuous face imaginable, and no vagina at all" (Walker 1992, p. 189). Patriarchy's mission of expunging women's history and sexuality, thereby, appears to become complete. However, Walker reclaims this lost history and argues that not only resistance, but women's sexual pleasure and autonomy are also "secret[s] of Joy" that have been suppressed by patriarchy. Apart from serving as carriers of the lost tradition of Black female sexuality, dolls in the text become emblematic of Black women's wholeness, confidence and sense of self, in short everything that women like Tashi lose after genital mutilation. Tashi feels that she can "never

have that look of *confidence*. Of *pride*. Of *peace*” that the “little sacred figure of Nyanda” exhumes. She believes that neither of them can have it “because self- possession will always be impossible for us to claim” (Walker 1992, p. 256). These fertility dolls also become symbolic of the hope of wellbeing and completeness for future generations of Black women. Before being executed, Tashi gifts this precious doll to Mbatu hoping that perhaps Mbatu’s daughter will not be mutilated like them. This gesture gains added significance when read in the light of Cornel West’s theorization of joy. Pleasure, explains West, “tends to be inward.” Joy, however, is connected with “non-market values—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice—values that provide the possibility of bringing people together” (West cited in Dent 1992, p. 1). Tashi’s growth as a subject then could be mapped on these lines. Since she had experienced the power of erotic and sexual pleasure before she was circumcised, she could feel an immense sense of loss after circumcision. Walker charts her growth from a victim then to being an agent who decides to act and speak out against this inhumane practice that debars Black girls from experiencing sexual pleasure and desire. This shift in her perspective helps her to inch towards a quest not only of sexual pleasure but also that of joy in West’s sense. Tashi wishes that future generations of Black women would reclaim their sexuality and experience the wholeness of mind, body, and spirit, thereby, exhibiting the confidence and peace that this fertility doll exhibits. Walker exhibits her commitment to dynamism to bring about change through Tashi’s parting words to Mbatu “*Ache’ Mbele*.” *Ache* means energy and the power to make things happen and *Mbele* means forward. The text, thus, ends on a strong positive note with Black women’s attempt to act and offer resistance to the forces of suppression and exploitation. The text highlights their struggle to carve a better future for their daughters.

While traditional studies have focused on Celie’s rape and victimization in *The Color Purple* and the issue of the female genital mutilation in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, I wish to draw attention to ways in which Walker makes a significant contribution to the discourse of Black female sexuality via characters other than the protagonists. Two of Walker’s characters namely, Shug (*The Color Purple*) and Queen Anne (in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*) are immensely radical and personify Black women’s sexual agency. They challenge and rupture the conventional restrictions posed by the politics of respectability. As opposed to the Black lady model, which was upheld by the Black middle-class reformers and professions, Walker presents Shug as a Blues singer. Cultural critic Hazel B. Carby has theorized about the manner in which Black women Blues singers of the 1920s, like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, constructed themselves as empowered sexual subjects through their songs. Carby also briefly mentions *The Color Purple* while arguing that the character of Black female Blues singer has been deployed in different artistic works to “meditate upon conventional and unconventional sexuality” (Carby 1999, p. 11). Carby designates them as “cultural icons of sexual power” (Carby 1999, p. 18). She contends that the Blues singers firstly, rupture the demarcation between the private and the public spheres by taking their sexuality out from the boundaries of the home into the public sphere. Secondly, Carby stresses that “their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth [. . .] all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body, reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire” (Carby 1999, p. 18). While Carby’s ideas of the physical appeal of the Blues’ singer is compelling, one could argue that physical sensuality may not be adequate to challenge the restricting male gaze as the same visual elements that Carby claims represent female desire, may add to the objectification of the Black woman’s body as a sexual object meant to titillate the male audience. A close analysis of Walker’s deployment of the Blues’ singer wherein she weaves in spiritual aspects with the sexual ones can be useful to further this debate on Black female sexuality and empowerment. Although Carby does not engage with Shug’s character, Shug can be placed in this alternate empowering tradition of the Blues singers who celebrate their sexuality as she loves both Black music and herself. Shug unabashedly celebrates her sexuality in multiple kinds of sexual engagements—heterosexual, homosexual, and self-eroticism. Walker’s radicalism reaches new heights when she presents Shug as the spiritual center of the text. Shug not only rescues and nurtures women like Celie and Mary Agnes, she also dismantles

the Eurocentric patriarchal notion of God as being a white man who is old, tall, and blue-eyed. She, instead, re-defines God as a force of nature who is liberated from the sexual dichotomy of the male and female form and is “it.”⁶⁷ God, she claims, is everywhere and especially inside oneself. Unlike the dominant white Christian worldview, Shug stresses that God does not judge any kind of sexual feelings (including lesbian love).⁶⁸ Audre Lorde’s conception of the erotic adds to our understanding of Shug’s radicalism and conception of sexual autonomy. Lorde conceptualizes erotic as power and deepest knowledge that is accessible to all. Lorde stresses that “our erotic knowledge [. . .] empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence” (Lorde 1984, p. 57). Unlike most Black women who are raped, battered and fail to revel in their sexuality, Shug engages with her body and sexuality in a much more enriching, fulfilling, and pleasurable manner and teaches other women to do the same. Shug is able to successfully harness the power of the erotic and, thus, she develops a critical consciousness that is oppositional in nature and has the potential to change the sexual scripts that Black women inherit and are made to follow. Shug’s actions such as redefinition of virginity, celebration of the power of the vagina and other female sexual organs, focus on self-pleasure and empowerment through unorthodox and unconventional sexual activities like masturbation, oral sex, role play, and exploration of her own bisexuality could then be seen as her attempt to create sexual scripts that are non-normative, liberatory and/or subversive in nature. Such scripts would alter the ways in which Black women relate to their sexualities and experience pleasure. They would enable them to experience the immense joy and empowerment that they are capable of.

Shug appears to be prototype of Queen Anne, who possesses a fluid sexuality that enables her to experience orgasmic pleasure in variety of ways other than a heterosexual relationship. Queen Anne is also immensely radical and empowered sexually as she is capable of attaining orgasm easily or, in Tashi’s words, “carelessly” (Walker 1992, p. 169) while being engaged in most mundane activities. Pierre describes that Anne can experience orgasm doing almost anything such as riding a horse, or by rubbing against her favorite trees or while sitting “against warm, smooth boulders” (Walker 1992, p. 170). Pierre stresses that Anne was having sex, making love, even while she was masturbating. However, in those instances she had partners that were not other humans. Pierre characterizes Queen Anne as being pansexual. Pierre observes that man has only one external sexual organ and, thus, can experience sexuality in a limited fashion. He not have sex with the earth in way Queen Anne “could come against the earth itself if it rose a bit to meet her” (Walker 1992, p. 170). Contrastingly, women, he stresses, are capable of making love to everything and attain pleasure in multiple and diverse ways. Queen Anne, thus, emerges as an exemplar of female sexual autonomy in Walker’s text. Despite the fact that her racial identity is not revealed in explicit terms,⁶⁹ her narrative leaves an indelible mark on Tashi. She emerges as a radical model that Black women could emulate. Thus, like Rene Cox’s Venus Hottentott, Walker’s Shug and Queen Anne emerge as actors who exert control over their sexualities and serve to remap the terrain of Black female sexuality.

One could conclude by arguing that though the iconography and continued influence of the Venus Hottentot emerges as a painful reminder that Black female body has been sexualized, exoticized, fetishized, bestialized, and colonized, raped, and enslaved by the dominant hegemonic discourse, Black women writers and artists re-member the dis-membered Black female body and reclaim it from radical subversive points of view. They create counter images of Black women that empower them. Also, by engaging with the alternate radical traditions of Black female sexualities via the trope of fertility dolls and Black female nudes that have been neglected, expunged and/or hidden by the patriarchal

⁶⁷ Shug asserts that “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God [. . .] God ain’t a he or a she but a it [. . .]” (Walker 1982, p. 196).

⁶⁸ “God love them all feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ‘em, you enjoy ‘em a lot more” (Walker 1982, p. 196).

⁶⁹ Walker only mentions that Queen Anne studied at Berkeley and was raised at a little island in Hawaii by parents who were pagan and worshipped earth. They taught her that it was not mandatory for her to get into a relationship with a man, unless she wants kids (Walker 1992, p. 169).

discourse, Black women intellectuals urge Black women to tap into the power of the erotic and create empowering selves and identities by reclaiming their sexual agency.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Tapan Basu, the editor, Tara T. Green, the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. I also wish to thank the Central University of Himachal Pradesh for granting me leave to enroll as a doctoral candidate in the University of Delhi.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Alexander, Elizabeth. 1990. The Venus Hottentot (1825). In *The Venus Hottentot Poems*. Minnesota: Graywolf Press, pp. 5–10.
- Alexander, Elizabeth. 2009. "Reading" the Black Body: Or, Considering My Grandmother's Hair. In *The Black Body*. Edited by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah. New York: Seven Stories Press, pp. 31–39.
- Bernier, Celeste-Marie. 2008. *African American Visual Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bobel, Chris. 2007. Women's Sexuality: Discovering the Clitoris. In *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives*. Edited by Judith Lorber. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Carby, Hazel V. 1999. The Sexual Politics of Black Women's Blues. In *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*. New York: Verso.
- Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. 1967. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Random House.
- Chicago, Judy. 1974–1979. *The Dinner Party*. Ceramic, Porcelain, Textile. New York: Brooklyn Museum.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Lisa Gail. 2002. *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past*. London: Rutgers.
- Cox, Renee. 1990. A Gynocentric Aesthetic. *Hypatia, Feminism and Aesthetics* 5: 43–62. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810155> (accessed on 7 June 2019). [CrossRef]
- Cox, Renee. 1992. Yo Mama at Home. Digital Ink Jet Print on Cotton Rag. Available online: <https://www.reneecox.org/yo-mama?lightbox=i11c4n> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Cox, Renee. 1993. Yo Mama. Digital Ink Jet Print on Cotton Rag. Available online: <https://www.reneecox.org/yo-mama?lightbox=i21sj9> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Cox, Renee. 1994. Hot-En-Tott. Photograph. Available online: <https://www.reneecox.org/hottentot-venus> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Cox, Renee. 1996. Yo Mama The Sequel. Digital Ink Jet Print on Cotton Rag. Available online: <https://www.reneecox.org/yo-mama?lightbox=i31hmp> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Cox, Renee, and Lyle Ashton Harris. 1994. Venus Hottentot 2000. Available online: <https://www.lyleashtonharris.com/series/the-good-life-2/> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Danquah, Meri Nana-Ama. 2009. Introduction: Body Language. In *The Black Body*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe. 2017. *Black Women, Agency, and the New Black Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Dent, Gina. 1992. Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction. In *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Edited by Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 1–19.
- Diawara, Manthia. 1988. Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance. *Screen* 29: 66–79. [CrossRef]
- Diawara, Manthia. 1990. Black British Cinema: Spectatorship and Identity Formation in Territories. *Public Culture* 3: 33–48. [CrossRef]
- Farrington, Lisa E. 2003. Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude. *Woman's Art Journal* 24: 15–23. [CrossRef]
- Farrington, Lisa E. 2005. *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African American Women Artists*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Farrington, Lisa E. 2017. *African American Art: A Visual and Cultural History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. 2010. Elizabeth Alexander. In *Faces of America: How 12 Extraordinary People Discovered Their Pasts*. New York: New York University Press.

- Gilman, Sander L. 2003. Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature. In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Edited by Amelia Jones. London: Routledge.
- Gordon-Chipembere, Natasha. 2011. Introduction: Claiming Sarah Baartman, a Legacy to Grasp 2011. In *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*. Edited by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. 1994. Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6: 126–45.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. 1997. Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence. In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Edited by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New York: Routledge, pp. 170–82.
- Harris, Lyle Ashton. 1995. *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*. London: ICA.
- Hobson, Janell. 2005. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, bell. 1981. Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, pp. 51–86.
- hooks, bell. 1989. Talking back. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, pp. 5–9.
- hooks, bell. 1990. Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness. In *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, pp. 145–53.
- hooks, bell. 1992. The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, pp. 115–31.
- hooks, bell. 2017. Tough Love with bell hooks Interview by Abigail Bereola. Available online: <https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/books/a14418770/tough-love-with-bell-hooks/> (accessed on 8 August 2019).
- King, Deborah K. 1988. Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology. *Signs* 14: 42–72. [CrossRef]
- Lee, Shayne. 2010. *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*. Lanham: Hamilton Books.
- Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*. 1814. French Print: Available online: <https://whgbetc.com/mind/hot-venus.jpg> (accessed on 8 April 2019).
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.
- Magubane, Zine. 2001. Which Bodies Matter?: Feminism, Post Structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the “Hottentot Venus”. *Gender and Society* 15: 816–34. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081904> (accessed on 12 August 2019). [CrossRef]
- Mookerjee, Rita. 2019. Sex. In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21st-Century Feminist Theory*. Edited by Robin Truth Goodman. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 109–20.
- Moss, Thylas. 1998. *Tale of a Sky Blue Dress*. New York: Avon.
- Nanda, Shaweta. 2014. Re-Claiming the Mammy: Racial, Sexual and Class Politics Behind ‘Mammification’ of Black Women. In *Discursing Minority: In-Text and Co-Text*. Edited by Anisur Rahman, Supriya Agarwal and Bhumika Sharma. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Nochlin, Linda. 1971. Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? In *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, 1st ed. London: Routledge, pp. 145–78. [CrossRef]
- O’Grady, Lorraine. 1994. Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity. Available online: http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_Olympias-Maid-Reclaiming-Black-Female-Subjectivity1.pdf (accessed on 8 July 2019).
- Okediji, Moyo. 2006. *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation*. Edited by Michael D. Harris. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Olson, Joel. 2004. *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. 1996. The Rear End Exists. *Grand Street* 55: 10–18. [CrossRef]
- Patton, Stacey. 2012. Who’s Afraid of Black Sexuality? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. December 3. Available online: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Whos-Afraid-of-Black/135960> (accessed on 7 May 2019).
- Pereira, Malin. 2007. The Poet in the World, the World in the Poet: Cyrus Cassells’s and Elizabeth Alexander’s Versions of Post-Soul Cosmopolitanism. *African American Review* 41: 709–25. [CrossRef]
- Pereira, Malin. 2010. *Into a Light Both Brilliant and Unseen: Conversations with Contemporary Black Poets..* London: University of Georgia Press.

- Phillip, Christine, and Elizabeth Alexander. 1996. An Interview with Elizabeth Alexander. *Callaloo* 19: 493–507. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299216> (accessed on 26 May 2019).
- Pilgrim, David. 2012. The Jezebel Stereotype. Available online: <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/jezebel/index.htm> (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- Qureshi, Sadiya. 2004. Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’. *History of Science* 42: 233–57. [CrossRef]
- Scully, Pamela, and Clifton Crais. 2008. Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London. *Journal of British Studies* 47: 301–23. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25482758> (accessed on 10 August 2019). [CrossRef]
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. 1990. *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Singer, Debra S. 2010. Reclaiming Venus: The Presence of Sarah Bartmann in Contemporary Art. In *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”*. Edited by Deborah Willis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Snyder, Carol. 1980. Reading the Language of ‘The Dinner Party’. *Woman’s Art Journal* 1: 30–34. [CrossRef]
- Spillers, Hortense. 1984. Interstices: A Small Drama of Words. In *Pleasure and Danger*. Edited by Carol S. Vance. Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, pp. 73–100.
- Spiller, Hortense. 2003. Introduction: Eating Peter’s Pan: Eating in Diaspora. In *Black, White and in Colour: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tesfagiorgis, Freida High W. 1993. In Search of a Discourse and Critiques That Centre the Art of Black Women Artists. In *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Edited by Abena P. A. Busia and Stanlie M. James. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, Lisa B. 2012. *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and New African American Middle Class*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Walker, Alice. 1982. *The Color Purple*. London: Phoenix.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s). In *Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Hardcourt.
- Walker, Alice. 1992. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Wallace, Michele. 1992. Afterword: Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visual in African American Culture. In *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Edited by Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 333–46.
- Wallace, Michele. 2004. Black Women in Popular Culture: From Stereotype to Heroine. In *Dark Designs & Visual Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Walters, Wendy W. 2010. Elizabeth Alexander’s Amistad: Reading the Black History Poem through the Archive. *Callaloo* 33: 1041–58.
- Weems, Carrie Mae. 1987–1988. *Mirror Mirror. Ain’tJokin. Photographic Series*. Available online: <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/aint-jokin.html> (accessed on 16 August 2019).
- White, Artress Bethany. 1998. Fragmented Souls: Call and Response with Renee Cox. In *Soul: Black Power Politics and Pleasure*. Edited by Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green. New York: New York University Press, Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfg2m> (accessed on 1 June 2019).
- Willis, Deborah. 2010. Introduction. In *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her “Hottentot”*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Wilson, Judith. 1992. Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden’s Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art. In *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Edited by Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, pp. 112–22.

