

### The Body in Question

Janell Hobson, **Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture**, Routledge, 2005, 180 pp, \$24.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
Tavia Nyong'o  
New York University

Deborah Willis and Carla Williams' path-breaking visual and theoretical survey, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) heralded the arrival of a corporeal turn in black feminist studies, a turn also represented in Kimberly Wallace-Sanders edited collection, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (2002).<sup>1</sup> Janell Hobson's monograph on blackness and beauty therefore arrives at a time when the outline of a history the body that takes into account the differences that race and gender represent has been tentatively established. Her work exemplifies both the promise and predicament of these prior studies. The predicament of these studies of the black female body, as with more general studies of "the body" as such, lies in the trap of trans-historical identity that the body, in its seeming self-evidence and "naturalness," continues to set even for scholars primed with the critical tools of social constructionism and performativity. The insistence upon race and gender as differences that expose the trans-historical identity of an unmarked and therefore putatively European and male body is a step in the right direction. But in the very process of enacting this difference between the black female body and the body as such, such studies threaten to reproduce that same trans-historical identity among bodies raced and gendered as black and female. This predicament is particularly evident whenever, as with Hobson's study, an attempt at historical and cross-cultural comparison is made.

Fredric Jameson once suggested that all historicisms could be mapped onto a continuum of identity and difference.<sup>2</sup> What he meant was that all acts of representing the past experiences of humanity must negotiate the tension between emphasizing likeness to the present and recognizing the intrinsic dissimilarity of the past. When historians lay the charge of "presentism" upon certain scholarships (and in the process often befuddling non-historians who had supposed that we were all of us here in the present) they mean that a particular approach to the past emphasizes its identity with the present over its difference as past, that it renders the past legible on our terms and thus does violence to the past "as it really was." Jameson's wise conclusion was that some presentism was inescapable, insofar as no act of historical reconstruction could ever fully extricate itself from historical identification.

I kept Jameson's admonition in mind as I read Hobson's thoughtful new study of the black female body in popular culture. Unabashedly "presentist" in approach, it ends with a discussion of Janet Jackson's halftime performance at the Super Bowl in 2004. But the book is also unabashedly historical. It aims to

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Skin deep, spirit strong : the Black female body in American culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black female body: a photographic history* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1979).

tackle the stigmatization of black women's bodies -- in particular, the posterior -- by tracking the long and horrifying history of appropriations of the black female body by racist and colonialist imaginaries. Her historical approach is grounded in an argument for the centrality of a single body in the propagation of racialized and intensely sexualized portrayals of black women: Saartjie Baartman, the titular "Venus in the Dark." Since over half the book concerns Baartman directly, and the rest returns to her indirectly, I will concentrate on Hobson's treatment of Baartman as an index of the methodological and political issues raised by the book as a whole.

Saartjie Baartman (1789—1815) was a Khoisan woman who was exhibited in France and England in the early nineteenth century as "The Hottentot Venus." European audiences jostled for a view of her physique, particularly her posterior, which they fetishized as the symbol of a mysterious "Hottentot" sexuality. Baartman embodied a primeval, African essence that contrasted powerfully with civilized European bodies. In enacting disgust and marvel at her, the white gaze ennobled white beauty over the grotesque "beauty" of African savages. That is to say, the cultural relativism that pointed out that to the "Hottentot" she would be considered a beautiful Venus was precisely what allowed the European to mock Africans for finding her beautiful, and at the same time congratulate themselves for cognitively mapping an ironical universe in which all was a matter of perspective. Knowing the racial other's fantastic tastes while retaining a sense of proper taste in the face of that knowledge was a core aspect of colonial fantasy. Underlying these modalities of enjoyment, as Hobson emphasizes, (following to some extent T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's 1999 study, [Black Venus : Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French](#)), was a poorly repressed transgressive desire for the "Hottentot Venus," who in her very excess conveniently symbolized sexuality as such.<sup>3</sup>

Hobson situates the nineteenth-century discourse about Baartman in the context of preexisting discourses of the black or African Venus, showing how the ethnological exhibition of Baartman was also a "scientific" revision of more sentimental eighteenth century visions of the African Venus. Among those she discusses are the William Grainger's 1800 engraving of the "Sable Venus" that graces her cover, and William Blake's image of a suffering female slave created for John Stedman's 1796 account of a slave rebellion in Suriname. Baartman was not the first African Venus, and as Hobson shows, she was hardly the last, being revisited particularly in the twentieth century by a variety of black women artists, from photographer Renée Cox to playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Hobson is most persuasive in demonstrating Baartman's hold on the imagination of black feminist cultural workers functioning in relatively high culture spaces of art galleries and serious drama. Recurrences of Baartman's image in popular culture are much more rare, although Hobson's argument is that an implied historical echo is heard whenever the black female butt is cited, stigmatized, eroticized, or reclaimed.

Hobson also does an excellent job in surveying the historical and critical literature on Baartman's unhappy sojourn in Europe. She brings in references to the now quite voluminous critical commentary on Baartman's cruel exhibition, so reminiscent of the fate of Ota Benga (1884-1916), the African "pygmy" who was exhibited in the Bronx Zoo almost a century later. And she brings the story up to date, detailing

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<sup>3</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, [Black Venus : Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French](#) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

the 2002 repatriation of her remains at the request of the post-apartheid South African government. That repatriation took this long itself speaks volumes to the continued proprietary approach Western ethnological museums take towards human remains.

Hobson's emphasis on identity, however, skirts a major zone of contention regarding Baartman's repatriation. Hobson cites but disagrees with the opinion of African feminist Zine Magubane, who argues that Western critics, including Western black feminist critics, ignore Baartman's ethnic particularity in their portrayal of her as a representative black female body.<sup>4</sup> Hobson judges this emphasis on Baartman's Khoisan ethnicity, rather than her race, to be "misguided" in view of "the increasing racialism of scientific and popular discourse that developed in the nineteenth century, which eventually collapsed race into the binary categories of "white" and "black.""(23) It appears that it is Hobson who is misinformed about the specific history of South African racism, in which alongside White and Black, "Colored" and "Indian" categories were also proliferated by apartheid. As the Khoisan activists who championed Baartman's return stressed, the construction of the so-called "Colored" category under apartheid shunted people of a variety of ethnicities and mixtures into a single catch-all group considered neither white nor black. While descendants of Khoisan peoples today exist across the South African racial spectrum, including many who were considered Black under apartheid laws, Khoisan leaders still consider their rights to collective representation as the modern-day descendants of the "Hottentot" to be threatened. They have rallied around Baartman as a symbol of their specific historical stigmatization as the "missing link" between primate and man, an ethnological status that led some eighteenth century naturalists, as Hobson admits, to rank the "Hottentot" below the "Negro" in the great chain of being.

Part of the problem is the absence of a robust articulation of indigeneity to match Hobson's sophisticated treatment of race and gender. A moment's reflection would suggest that a woman exhibited in the early nineteenth century could not have been solely responsible for the dissemination of Western attitudes towards black women in general, if only because, by the nineteenth century, slavery and the slave trade had already utterly transformed Western society, particularly New World colonies, for over three centuries. An African woman as such could hardly have been a novelty worth paying money to see in London or Paris in 1815. A "Hottentot," however, might be. Hobson's explanation of the tension between black African and "Hottentot" as one of race versus ethnicity misstates the significance of the latter insofar as the Khoisan are not merely an African ethnicity, but specifically the indigenous ethnicity of the Southern tip of Africa, a people displaced first by Bantu migrations from West and Central Africa over a thousand years ago, and subsequently by white colonists from The Netherlands and United Kingdom in more recent centuries. As a contemporary Khoisan leader expresses the view

The Khoisan definitely don't feel that they are accommodated in the broader South African society as a people [...] According to the constitution, we enjoy the same

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<sup>4</sup> Zine Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the 'Hottentot Venus'," Gender and Society 15, no. 6 (2001).

individual rights, but as a group we are not yet recognised as a people. We are not recognised as the first indigenous peoples of South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Like Native Americans in the U.S. and Aboriginals in Australia, modern day Khoisan leaders emphasize claims to land and dispossession that intersect with but are not reducible to the claims South Africa's black majority. Without necessarily taking the position of advocacy, it would seem crucial to more fully grapple with this predicament of identification, with some claiming Baartman as specifically Khoisan, other as South African, other as African, and other as transnationally black. These differences must be negotiated rather than overruled from a North American vantage-point, for that would reproduce the extant power differential between those of us positioned within the Western academy and the majority of the world's peoples.

Emphasizing Baartman's indigeneity alongside her race also suggests fruitful points of contact for an intersectional feminist analysis. Hobson herself notes that among the women exhibited in Europe in the same era as Baartman was Tono Maria, an "indigenous Brazilian" marketed as a "Venus from South America." (46) To emphasize indigeneity as a factor is of course not to minimize race, and certainly not to ignore colonialism. It is rather to call attention to the difficult task ahead for critical race and feminist theorists who would seek to develop a more robustly global political imagination, reaching across categories established by colonization, slavery, and segregation.

The identity "Black" is of course a political one, and is not always best thought of as representing a "race" as conceived of by Western scientific racism. It was adopted by South Asians in the United Kingdom in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, and by some who prefer to discard the apartheid-era label "Colored." Such political uses of "Black" as a coalitional category places some pressure on the ability to speak confidently about the "black body," insofar as Black may be then as much about consciousness as embodiment. Forms of black consciousness require a vision of historical memory, and Baartman's narrative certainly provides a powerful symbol for the construction of black feminist identities in the present. But ironing out the complexities of her difference from us, on the grounds that she "was made to represent the African race in its entirety," is to miss the point, I wager. (57) There is in fact no "African race" to be represented in part or entirety, only a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups from a continent called Africa. African intellectuals, male and female, who have sought to point this out to their allies in the West have been repeatedly chastised for ignoring the racial binary of the world that seems so obvious from the West. But such chastising — often genuinely motivated by an impulse towards world-wide black solidarity — should now give way to more tolerant and inquiring explorations of how race, ethnicity, and difference are lived on the continent and in diaspora.

To her credit, Hobson actively desires such an alliance between black women in the Diaspora and third world women in Africa and elsewhere. When her work moves to discussions of the Caribbean, and the resignification of the buttocks as the pleasurable, dialogic "batty" in the performances of Urban Bush Women, her sensitivity to cultural nuance and complexity serves her well. Her final chapter on

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<sup>5</sup> Cecil le Fleur, chairman of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference Council. Quoted in Chris McGreal, "Coming home," *The Guardian*, 21 Feb 2002.

photography and film considers the ability of feminist artists to develop reparative approaches to black female embodiment, an analysis that very much extends the work of Willis and Williams. Despite my differences over her interpretation of Baartman's legacy, I find much to commend in Hobson's book. It is needed at a time when the very basis of feminist and anti-racist alliance is under such urgent debate. Any such alliances, we might agree, will need to come through greater recognition of both difference and identity.

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