

SKIN DEEP, SPIRIT STRONG

**The Black Female Body
in American Culture**



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The Body Politic

Black Female Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century Euro-American Imagination

Any account of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with seeing and narrating the body needs to think about a long tradition of European fascination with the bodies of other cultures—particularly, women's bodies from cultures considered exotic or primitive, which are used to define an alluring or menacing other of Western "civilized" sexuality.

—Peter Brooks, "Gauguin's Tahitian Body"

In one of the earliest Black feminist analyses of European constructions of African female sexuality and its impact on the sexual history of the United States, Barbara Omolade makes this assertion:

The sexual history of the United States began at the historical moment when European men met African women in the "heart of darkness"—Mother Africa. They faced each other as conqueror and conquered: African women captives were considered the sexual property of the European conquerors.¹

I began my introduction to the section entitled "The Body Politic: Sexuality, Violence, and Reproduction" in *Words of Fire* with a provocative quotation by literary critic Hortense Spillers that underscores the paucity of analyses of Black female sexuality, including by Black women scholars themselves: "Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe,

unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them."² Spillers's essay, the first scholarly treatise on the silences surrounding Black female sexuality, was written over a decade ago, as was Barbara Omolade's "Hearts of Darkness," which focuses on the sexual treatment of African American women, especially during slavery.

Despite the importance of discussions of the sexual history of the West, the subject of Black female sexuality has been marginalized in the new discourse on the female body, which illuminates important aspects of that history. Since the work of Omolade and Spillers, a small but growing number of essays—including Hazel Carby's "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory"; Lorraine O'Grady's "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity"; Evelyn Hammonds's "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" and "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence"—all provide important correctives to the invisibility of Black women in the considerable corpus of work on the cultural body or the body politic, which constitutes some of the most exciting new work within feminist theoretical discourse at the present time.³

I want to begin this chapter, which provides an overview of Euro-American representations of Black female sexuality, particularly during the nineteenth century, with a quotation from art historian Lorraine O'Grady, who analyzes one of the most visible and frequently studied images of a Black woman in European art, Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (see fig. 1), which was painted in 1862–63.

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of "woman." White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gather in) is what she had better not be. Even in an allegedly postmodern era, the not-white woman as well as the not-white man are symbolically and even theoretically excluded from sexual difference.⁴

Here O'Grady captures Western constructions of womanhood that represent Black women and white women as polar opposites. Racial difference is marked in profound ways through the construction of gendered

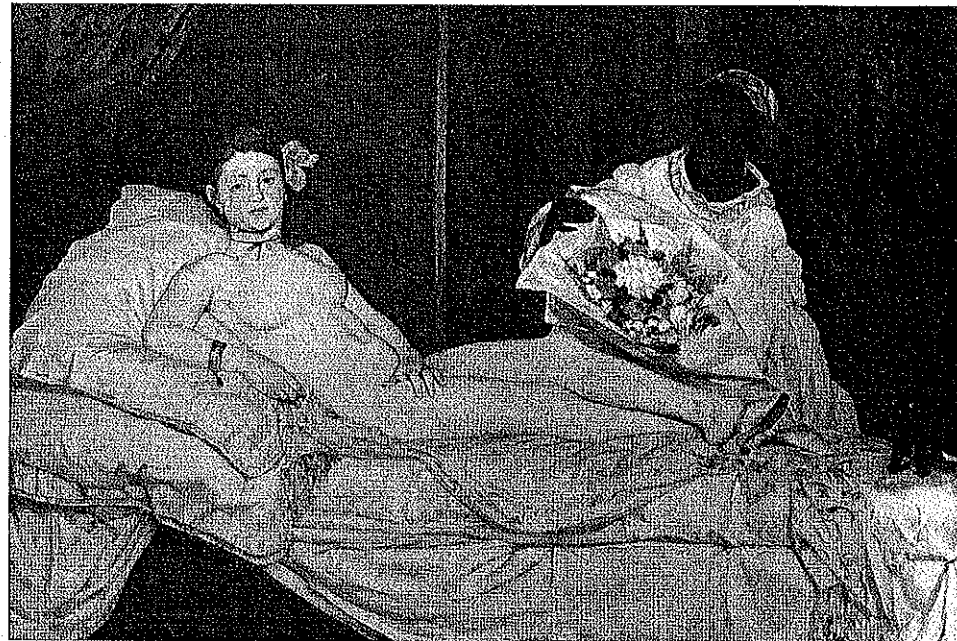


Fig. 1. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. (Courtesy of Musée d'Orsay, Paris.)

differences between Black and white womanhood, especially with respect to their sexuality.

Equally compelling but less well known (and largely ignored by art critics) is a provocative painting (see fig. 2) by Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist, *Portrait d'une négresse* (Portrait of a Negress), which is believed to be the first painting by a European female of a Black woman. It appears on the cover of volume 4 of Hugh Honour's *Image of the Black in Western Art*, in which it is alluded to as "the most beautiful portrait of a black woman ever painted."⁵ This image of a presumably African servant woman with her chest partially bare and a breast exposed, though sensitively rendered, is nevertheless suggestive of the connection in the European mind during the nineteenth century between Black womanhood and sexuality. The obligatory headdress and partial nudity mark her as different from civilized white womanhood. The whiteness of the cloth that drapes her contrasts sharply with the blackness of her body and calls attention to her "otherness" in the realm of the physical and social as well. This association of Black womanhood with hypersexuality, which

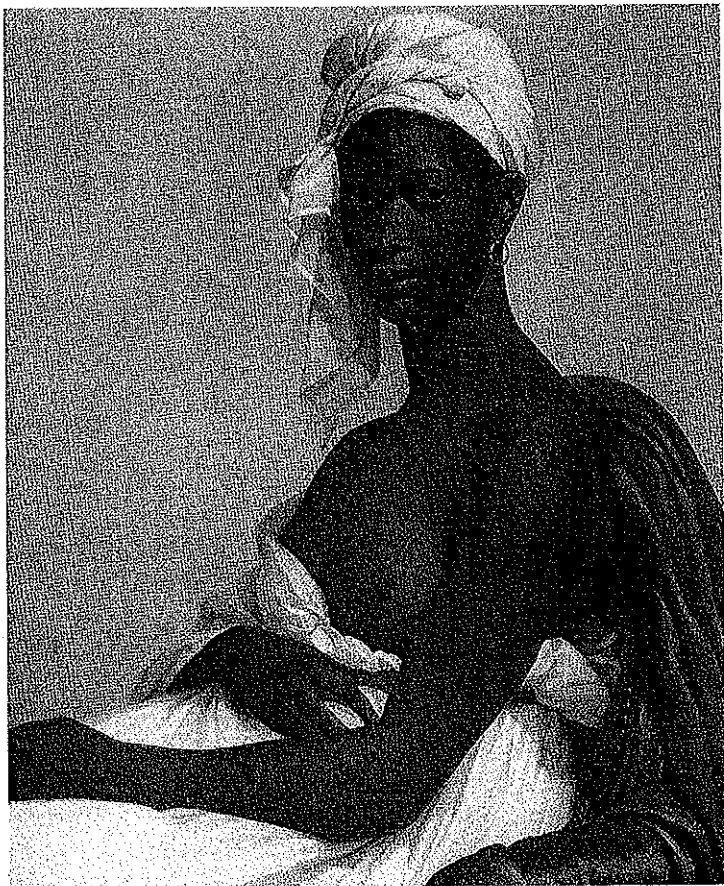


Fig. 2. Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist, *Portrait d'une négresse*, 1800.
(Courtesy of Louvre Museum, Paris.)

her partial nudity underscores, was to persist in the Euro-American imagination long after slavery and colonialism had ended.

The work of feminist historian of science Evelyn Hammonds is instructive because she analyzes the history of the discourse on Black female sexuality, which, she argues, has clustered around three themes:

the construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen—everything that is not white . . . the resistance of black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality

and to the material effects of those stereotypes on black women's lives . . . [and] finally, the evolution of a "culture of dissemblance" and a "politics of silence" by Black women on the issue of their sexuality.⁶

In order to understand these cultural constructions of Black women's sexuality, it is instructive to revisit the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Europeans entered the vast continent of Africa and encountered a people they saw as radically different from themselves. What were the English explorers' first impressions of Africans? It was historian Winthrop Jordan, in his classic study *White over Black*, who attempted to answer these questions: What happened when one of the fairest-skinned nations suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest-skinned peoples on earth? What attitudes did they form about these Black bodies whom they confronted? Perhaps Africans' most startling characteristics, which Europeans spent inordinate amounts of time trying to explain, were their dark skin and their nudity, which would be laden with intense racial/sexual meanings for hundreds of years. Their most salient attributes were savagery, bestiality, lecherousness, and being uncivilized.⁷

One of the most bizarre chronicles in the annals of European racism, which has received considerable attention by scholars and writers over the past decade, occurred during the occupation of the Dutch-founded Cape Colony in southern Africa by the British. For my purposes here, it is useful to consider the cultural context in which this incredible saga took place. In the early years of the nineteenth century, a succession of Europeans visited and described this region's indigenous inhabitants. Before the arrival of the British, however, little was known about the San, Khoikhoi, and Xhosa, who were erroneously and pejoratively renamed Bushmen, Hottentots, and Kafirs. Travelers' tales revealed their peculiar physical attributes, which were intended to disassociate them from the human species. The males were said to have only one testicle and the females a large vaginal flap called a tablier and a fatty enlargement of the buttocks called steatopygia. Their language, composed mainly of clicks, sounded like animal noises rather than human speech to ethnocentric Europeans. Their consumption of raw meat put them in the category of beasts and savages, as well. They were relegated to the lowest place on the scale of human life in the great chain of being, only one rung above the ape.

During an era (1880 and following) of "scientific" theorizing about hierarchies among human species, differences among the races, and the

development of physical anthropology and ethnology, it was necessary for Europeans to “explain” the nature of Africans, whom they saw as racially inferior and profoundly different from themselves—in skin color, hair texture, body type, sexual behavior, religious practices, dress, language, and values.⁸ After Cape Colony was lost, people from southern Africa were literally taken back to England to be viewed as living ethnographic specimens.

Saartjie (“little Sarah” in Afrikaans) Baartman, a South African woman born in 1790, was exhibited with an animal trainer in 1810 as the infamous “Hottentot Venus” in and around London and Paris for over five years.⁹ (See figures 3–4.) She emerged from a cage on a raised platform, was presented as an animal to the European community, and was touted as having “the kind of shape which is most admired by her countrymen.”¹⁰ She was gazed at, heckled, objectified, caricatured, and dehumanized (see figs.). Eventually she was taken to Paris in 1814; had she escaped the curiosity of the “great” comparative anatomist Georges Leopold Cuvier (1769–1832), she may never have become “immortalized.” He examined her “scientifically,” especially her genitalia and buttocks to prove that “Hottentots” were in fact inherently different from other human beings, a separate species. He also commissioned several artists attached to the Jardin du Roi to portray her, and after her death in 1815 at the age of twenty-five, he dissected her and preserved her genitalia under a bell jar in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris (see fig. 5).

In his detailed report on her, Cuvier asserts that he had “never seen a human head more resembling a monkey’s than hers” and that she moved like a monkey as well.¹¹ Her genitalia, which he presented first to the Academie Royale de Medecine, were later moved to the Musée de l’Homme for the general public to see. Because of his prominence, his writings on Baartman came to be regarded in scientific circles as an authentic description of the African woman more generically. His focus on her genitalia reinforced the European connection between lasciviousness, sexuality, and animal passion among Africans in general, but particularly among African women. In England, on the other hand, it appears that she was remembered primarily as “an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty.”¹² This example also underscores a recurring theme in the “body dramas” that Black women experience. Being Black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women’s sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women’s bodies, in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable. What happened to Baartman

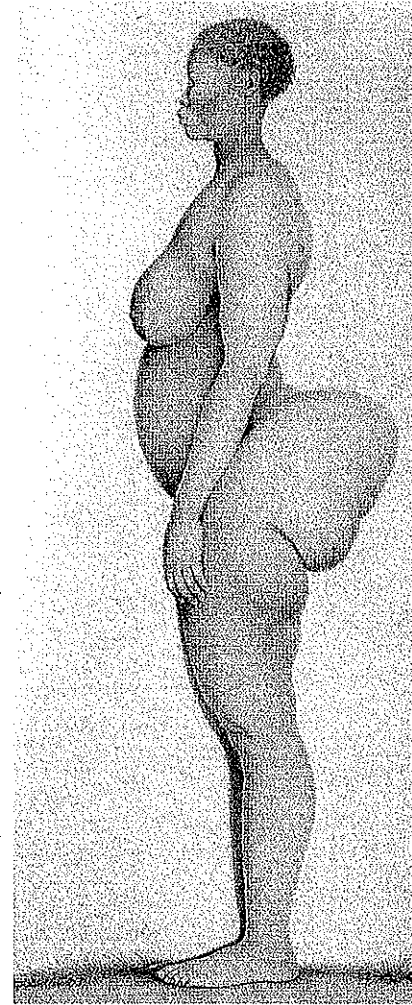


Fig. 3. Nicolas Huet le Jeune, profile view of Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” 1815. (Courtesy of Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle, Paris.)

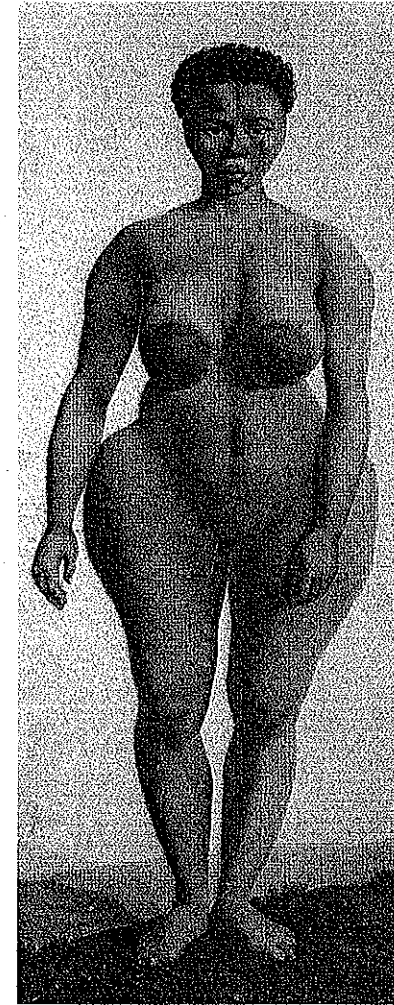


Fig. 4. Léon de Wailley, frontal view of Saartjie Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” 1815. (Courtesy of Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle, Paris.)

is an extreme example of what a critic of Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian women identifies as a long history of European obsession with the female bodies of the exoticized Other, which the quote that precedes this chapter captures (see fig. 8). The Black female also came to serve as an icon for

Fig. 5. The preserved genitalia of the "Hottentot Venus," having been dissected by Cuvier. (Courtesy of Musée de l'Homme, Paris.)

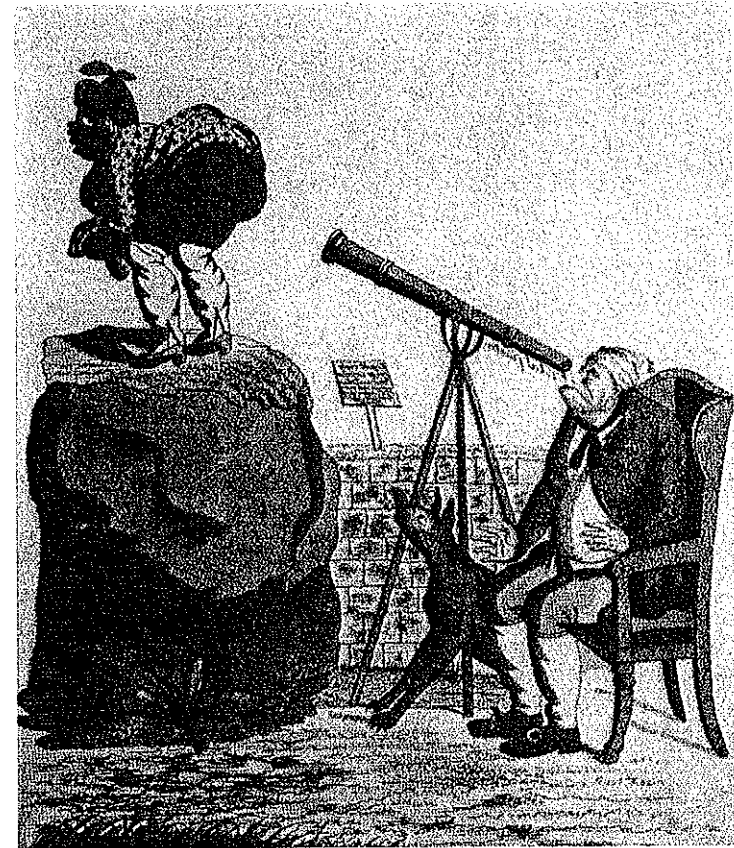
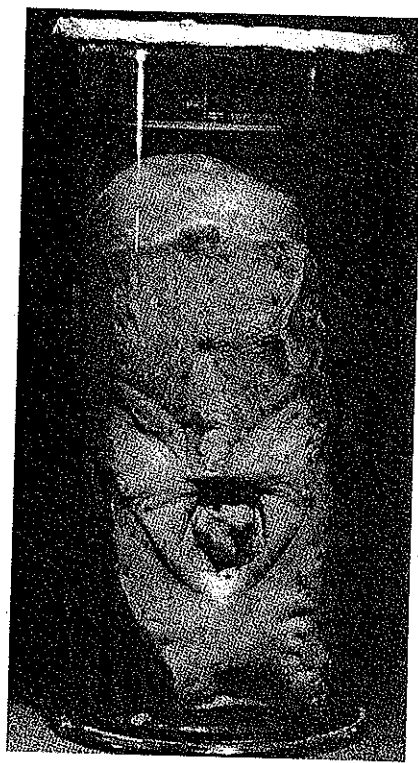


Fig. 7. The "Hottentot Venus," a German caricature from the beginning of the nineteenth century, from John Grand-Carteret, 1909. (Courtesy of C. W. Stern, Vienna. Private collection, Ithaca, NY).



Fig. 6. An engraving of a "Hottentot Venus" at the Ball of the Duchess du Barry, 1829. (Courtesy of Olin Library, Cornell University, Ithaca.)

Black sexuality in general throughout the nineteenth century, as Sander Gilman cogently argues in his influential work.¹³

In a European world characterized by racial mythologizing and rabid racism, the widespread association between Africans and apes reached absurd proportions in the dehumanization and defeminization of Africans in narratives about the "fact" that apes were in fact copulating with them. By asserting a sexual link between Black women and apes, moreover, Europeans marked this group of women as lewd, lascivious, and savage—the antithesis of virtuous, European women. In his study of white attitudes toward Blacks from 1550 to 1812, Winthrop

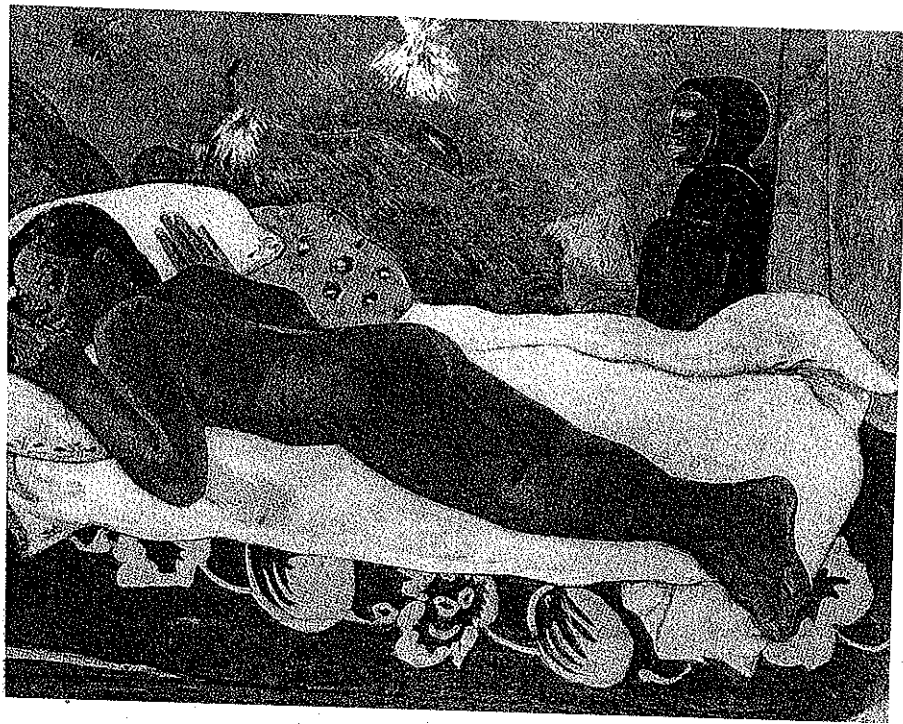


Fig. 8. Paul Gauguin, *Manoa Tupapau (Spirit of the Dead Watching)*, 1892. (Courtesy of Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.)

Jordan analyzes this preoccupation with Black female sexuality on the part of white males.

By calling the Negro woman passionate they were offering the best possible justification for their own passions. Not only did the Negro woman's warmth constitute a logical explanation for the white man's infidelity, but, much more important, it helped shift responsibility from himself to her. If she was *that* lascivious—well, a man could scarcely be blamed for succumbing against overwhelming odds. Further reinforcement for this picture of the Negro woman came from the ancient association of hot climates with sexual activity.¹⁴

Of course, these arguments also emerged to ease white male guilt about the enslavement and oppression of Africans, but such rationalizations,

when aimed specifically at Black women, manifested themselves in two distinct and paradoxical stereotypes—they were disgustingly lustful (Jezebel, according to historian Deborah Gray White) but exceptionally unfeminine.¹⁵ They were alluring but unattractive; they attracted and repelled at the same time.

The profit motive and the insatiable desire for cheap labor during slavery in the New World reinforced the images of African women as beasts of burden, workhorses, and hypersexual. This argument was used to rationalize their involuntary roles as workers and producers of slave children. Their bodies were literally to be used in the fields from sunup to sundown, exploited to fulfill white men's lust and to give birth to slave children who would keep the plantation system afloat.

At the center of the debate about Black women during this period of slavery and its aftermath in the United States, in particular, were arguments about their moral character, which can be seen as an outgrowth of, among other factors, the general preoccupation with women's moral nature on the part of Victorian society.¹⁶ The most persistent theme in the writings of North American white men was the devaluation or defeminization of Black women, which was ironic given the high valuation of American women generally during this time.¹⁷ The notion of woman as saint or virtuous lady in the minds of white men could not have applied to Black women, however, given the need to justify slavery. In fact, the Black woman was devalued not only because of her supposed racial traits but also because she departed from whites' conception of the True Woman—which is indicative of the degree to which prevailing notions about race and gender interacted in the minds of whites (male and female) and resulted in a particular set of attitudes about Black women. Whites felt that notions about the "ideal woman" did not apply to Black women because the circumstances of slavery had prevented them from developing qualities that other women possessed and from devoting their lives to wifedom and motherhood, the proper roles for women. A contemporary historian has commented on this phenomenon:

Femininity and domesticity were not held sacred by slave owners. Such amenities were outlawed by a system of forced labor, where men, women, and children were considered agricultural machinery, valued primarily for their muscle, endurance, and productive capability. . . . Aside from procreation, black women were assigned few exclusively female roles. Wifely service remained rudimentary. . . . Motherhood might be reduced to giving birth, interrupting work in the

field to nurse the infant, and . . . cooking frugal meals for the young. . . . The slave master felt few compunctions to model the black family after the cult of domesticity.¹⁸

Additionally, the "devaluation of Black womanhood" is traceable to the sexual exploitation of Black women during slavery. Moreover, the Black woman's allegedly innate racial traits (promiscuity, filthiness, vulgarity, lewdness, indecency, ugliness) tended to cancel out those uniquely feminine traits that white women were assumed to possess (modesty, purity, chastity, beauty).

These constructions of the sexuality of slave women underscore the tenacity of earlier images of African women. With the penetration of Europeans into sub-Saharan Africa during the fifteenth century, memoirs of travelers characterized African women as grotesque, dangerous creatures who engaged in "deviant" sexual behavior.¹⁹ This included incest with fathers. One even reported having seen them deliver more than seven babies at a time. The most persistent attitude, however, was that they were savage and bestial. The violation of the bodies of enslaved African women resulted from such perceptions. They were branded for identification on the shores of West Africa, were raped during the Middle Passage, and were forced to engage in sex and beaten in the fields of slave plantations. Their experiences on slave ships were different than those of African men. They were placed on the quarter deck, not in the hold, where the men were forced and bound. While their incarceration was not as horrible on one level, because they were not packed like sardines or shackled, as was the case with men, they were vulnerable to the sexual exploitation of crew members, who were not discouraged from molesting them.²⁰ On the auction block, their bodies were exposed, handled, even poked to determine their strength and capacity for child-bearing. One auctioneer introduced a slave woman this way: "Show your neck, Betsey. There's a breast for you; good for a round dozen before she's done child-bearing."²¹ In order to protect her unborn slave child during beatings, a hole was dug in the ground and the pregnant slave woman was forced to lie prostrate and receive her whipping with her stomach tucked away beyond the reach of the lash.²²

One of the most despicable experiences to which slave women were subjected occurred in Montgomery, Alabama, between 1845 and 1849, when experimental and gynecological surgery was performed by the "father of American gynecology," J. Marion Sims.²³ The first book to point out the abuse of these slave women was not published until 1976.

With the inception of slavery in North America, African women

were conceptualized by whites on the one hand as oversexed and also as something other than woman. Furthermore, their moral stature was said to have deteriorated further during slavery. What made matters worse, the myth continued, was that Black men did not fret about immorality in their women and that other Black women failed to censure them despite their outrageous behavior: "A plantation negress may have sunk to a low point in the scale of sensual indulgence, and yet her position does not seem to be substantially affected even in the estimation of the women of her own race. . . . The truth is that neither the women nor the men . . . look upon lasciviousness as impurity."²⁴ Black women did not have to live up to a standard of morality because no such values existed in the Black community. Furthermore, Black men never even had to rape their women, because of their constant willingness to engage in sex. In other words, Black women were so thoroughly debased sexually that they willingly gave their bodies to men, making rape a crime with which they were totally unfamiliar. A southern white woman argued that it was ridiculous that a Black woman, "with the brain of a child and the passions of a woman, steeped in centuries of ignorance and savagery, and wrapped about with immemorial vices," should hold the destiny of the Negro race in her hands, as of course other women have the responsibility of doing.²⁵ The writings of southern white men contain frequent allusions to the Black woman's inherent animalism. The Black-woman-as-animal stereotype, however, is to be distinguished from the more frequently discussed "brute-Negro" stereotype, which was prominent in the minds of Americans, especially southerners, at the turn of the twentieth century but which applied to the Black male. White writers thought that this animal sexuality that Black women possessed did not result in criminal behavior on their part (as was the case with Black men who raped white women) but could be used to justify their sexual exploitation at the hands of white men. In other words, white men could turn to them for the uninhibited sex that was denied them by virtuous, chaste white women. Thomas Bailey, a southern dean at the University of Mississippi, commented on this phenomenon:

Southerners do not ordinarily have the biological and aesthetic repulsion that is usually felt by Northerners toward the Negro. . . . The memory of ante-bellum concubinage and a tradition of animal satisfaction due to the average negro woman's highly developed animalism are factors still in operation. Not a few "respectable" white men have been heard to express physiological preference for negro women.²⁶

Her animality was also manifest in the anger she expressed during quarrels and fights with other women, which were frequent and violent occurrences in the Black community. Savage animal imagery pervades the following description: "Such negroes are raving amazons . . . apparently growing madder each moment, eyes rolling, lips protruding, feet stamping, pawing, gesticulating. . . . This frenzied madness . . . seems beyond control. . . . With the men the manifestations are less violent."²⁷ Animal imagery is also used in William Dean Howells's *Imperative Duty* (1892), a novella about a white girl who learns that she has Negro ancestry, immediately flees to Boston's Black neighborhoods, and ends up at a Black church so she can "surround herself with the Blackness from which she had sprung."²⁸ Her descriptions of the women in the church contain animal overtones:

Rhoda distinguished faces, sad, repulsive visages of a frog-like ugliness added to the repulsive black in all its shades. . . . One old woman . . . opened her mouth like a catfish to emit these pious ejaculations. . . . As the church filled, the musky exhalations of their bodies thickened the air, and made the girl faint; it seemed to her that she began to taste the odor; and these poor people whom their Creator had made so hideous by the standards of all his other creatures, roused a cruel loathing in her. . . . "Yes," she thought, "I should have whipped them, too. They are animals; they are only fit to be slaves."²⁹

The Black woman's ugliness, rather than her sexuality, is emphasized in these references to her animal nature. According to Euro-American thinking, the Black woman's promiscuity and physical unattractiveness—overt manifestations of her animal-like traits—cause her to be devalued because she is unable to reach the standard of feminine beauty and behavior required of "ideal" women.

In fact, one of the most persistent themes in the intellectual history of the West has been Negrophobia, the two major components of which are assumptions about the superiority in intellect and physical beauty of whites, especially their women. By contrast the Negro, especially the woman, is ugly, because of her dark complexion, hair texture, and disfigured lips and nose.

It is appropriate in a discussion of cultural constructions of the Black female body to shift to a contemporary example of depictions of Black womanhood that reminds us that the problem is far from resolved, even among white feminists, who, one might assume, would be freer of

the historical stereotypes and perceptions that permeated earlier periods. The case of Sojourner Truth, a historical figure from slavery, captures what happened literally to Black women's bodies and also illustrates the way in which Black women continue to be portrayed as the antithesis of white womanhood.

Though Sojourner Truth, nineteenth-century abolitionist and women's rights advocate, is the token Black female among the thirty-nine guests invited to the *Dinner Party*, conceived by artist Judy Chicago, it is not surprising that of the many Black women who might have been selected, Sojourner Truth captured Judy Chicago's imagination and became the lone representative of Black womanhood among the impressive array of women from around the world who are depicted here (see fig. 9). In the words of Judy Chicago, "She was an inspiration to all who heard her and a proud symbol of black women's struggle to transcend the oppression of both their sex and race."³⁰ Anna J. Cooper, a contemporary of Sojourner Truth and a fellow activist in the struggle for the liberation of Blacks and women, referred to her as "that unique and rugged genius who seemed carved out without hand or chisel from the solid mountain mass."³¹

At this point, a brief summary of the life of Sojourner Truth, second only to Frederick Douglass in terms of her outspoken advocacy of the cause of women's rights among Blacks during the nineteenth century, is in order. Sojourner Truth, whose slave name was Isabella, was born around 1773, having been brought as a child with her parents from Africa and sold as a slave in the state of New York. At age nine, she was sold away from her parents (as were her brothers and sisters before her) to John Neely for one hundred dollars. Since her former master had been Dutch, she had not learned English, and no one in the family to which she was sold, except for Neely, understood the language she spoke. This led to frequent misunderstandings and punishments, including beatings, for the young Isabella. At one point she was ordered to go to the barn, where her master, who awaited her, stripped her to the waist and gave her the most cruel beating she ever received, without any explanation. She was sold twice more before she was twelve years old. Her last master, John Dumont, raped her and later married her to an older slave, Thomas, for whom she bore five children. Although slavery was ended by law in New York in 1817, her master delayed her emancipation and sold her five-year-old son, Peter, despite his earlier promise to free him. Isabella ran away with her baby and contracted to serve another master for a year. He freed her in 1827. Determined to retrieve her son Peter, who had been sold South, she sued for his freedom in

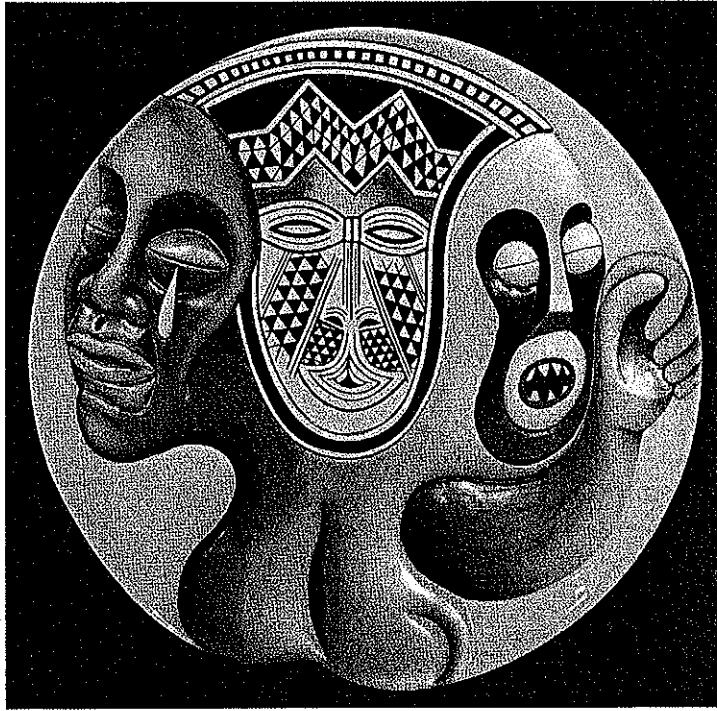


Fig. 9. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1979), Sojourner Truth plate, 1979.

Kingston, New York, won the case, and was reunited with her child. For a number of years, she worked in New York City as a domestic, the major source of work and income for Black women in the North during this period. A few years later, she indicates, she was called by God to the ministry and the abolitionist struggle; in June 1843, she left New York City on foot, leaving behind all her possessions to embark upon a new life. It was during this time that she decided to change her name. Though she could neither read nor write, she became well known in the North as an itinerant preacher and was a frequent visitor at antislavery gatherings. She advocated abolition, women's rights, the protection of the poor, and brotherly love. We know of the details of her life because she dictated her autobiography (*Narrative of Sojourner Truth* [1875]), to Frances W. Titus, a friend, and sold her story following her lectures.

She has become immortalized because of the now-controversial reminiscences of Frances D. Gage, who chaired one of the stormiest

women's rights conventions of the period, which took place in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, and where Truth is supposed to have uttered the now-disputed speech, "Ar'n't I a Woman."³² A detailed description of the circumstances surrounding this now-debatable speech, which also appears in Truth's *Narrative*, contains many details about her physicality and her body, a continuing object of the white gaze, male and female:

The leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban . . . march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of disapprobation was heard all over the house, and such words as these fell upon listening ears: "An abolition affair!" "Woman's rights and niggers!" "Go it, old darkey!" . . . Order was restored and the business of the hour went on. . . . Old Sojourner, quiet and reticent as the "Lybian Statue," sat crouched against the wall on the corner of the pulpit stairs, her sun-bonnet shading her eyes, her elbows on her knees, and her chin resting upon her broad hard palm. . . . ministers came in to hear and discuss the resolutions presented. . . . the atmosphere of the convention betokened a storm. Slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head. "Don't let her speak," gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her bonnet at her feet and turned her great, speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth" and begged the audience to keep silent for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air, like one in a dream. At her first word, there was a profound hush.³³

It is at this point that Truth allegedly delivered the now-famous "Ar'n't I a Woman" speech, during which she supposedly exposed her previously covered right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscle power. It was this image of her that Chicago attempted to capture in a plate from *The Dinner Party*.³⁴

Though Sojourner Truth has been immortalized as one of the invited guests to Judy Chicago's dinner party, and though something of the pain and anguish as well as the strength and triumph (symbolized by the clenched fist) of Black womanhood has been captured in the design

of the plate, it is curious that the overtly sexual imagery that is dominant in the majority of the other thirty-eight plates, especially in the prevalence of images of the vagina, is conspicuously absent (except for the buttocks) from the Truth plate. It is all the more surprising since Sojourner, like many other nineteenth-century Black women, was a victim of sexual abuse. Slave women were also victims of their reproductive capacity, since they were encouraged and even forced to breed like animals. They were also the South's perpetual wet nurses, providing from their breasts milk for Black and white babies alike. In other words, it was the exploitation of the Black woman's body—her vagina, her uterus, her breasts, and also her muscle—that set her apart from white women and that was the mark of her vulnerability. This exploitation also underscores the ways in which Black and white women experienced their gender differently. The absence of this most essential aspect of what it meant to be a slave woman in the nineteenth century—the inability to control one's own body, which the buttocks on the plate do not capture—is an outstanding flaw in Judy Chicago's conception of Black womanhood. Though she constructs Black womanhood in ways that are profoundly different from her images of white womanhood, it is surprising that the Sojourner Truth plate is void of the appropriate imagery that would have captured essential components of the sexual vulnerability of Black women. Alice Walker called attention to "the problem" of the Sojourner Truth plate in this way:

[It] is the only one in the collection that shows—instead of a vagina—a face. In fact, three faces. . . . to think of Black women as women is impossible if you cannot imagine them with vaginas. Sojourner Truth certainly had a vagina, as note her lament about her children, born of her body, but sold into slavery.³⁵

To conclude, male attitudes toward the female and her body have always been, according to John Updike, paradoxically contradictory: exalt and debase, serve and enslave, injure and comfort, revere and mock.³⁶ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of African American women. Perhaps it is true that no other women have been subjected over time to such stereotypical mythologizing about their bodies and their sexuality. According to Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body*, poor Black women are still being mistreated by the medical establishment during childbirth. They are treated as purely physical beings, spoken to harshly, strapped down, told they are not in pain, refused comfort, isolated from their husbands.³⁷

There is an ending to this story that is too extensive to chronicle here. It is a tale of resistance by hordes of Black women, including Linda Brent, whose eloquent slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), is just one example of the ways in which Black women subverted a patriarchal racial structure that attempted to deprive them of autonomy, especially control of their bodies. It includes the moving story of Fannie Lou Hamer, the legendary civil rights activist whose body and soul were subjected to unimaginable indignities during her woefully painful, yet triumphant, life in the Deep South. Their struggles for liberation from racism, sexism, and physical terrorism, which the story of Sojourner Truth recalls, are beginning to be spoken about in louder voices. A significant aspect of these resistance narratives portrays their courageous quest for the integrity of their bodies, which have historically been displayed, beaten, stripped, bruised, penetrated, overworked, raped, and even lynched.³⁸

It is only when we know more about what Black women have endured—at the hands of whites and even within their own communities—how they have fought back, and the ideologies they have had to deconstruct that we can fully appreciate these new songs.

NOTES

1. Barbara Omolade, "Hearts of Darkness," in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 350. See also Sander L. Gilman's important work on European representations of Black female sexuality in seventeenth-century art and science in *Sexuality: An Illustrated History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1989).

2. Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 73–100, quoted in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 359.

3. These essays represent some of the most important scholarly work by Black women scholars to date employing feminist approaches to analyses of Black female sexuality. See also Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (summer 1987): 65–81; Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* (summer 1992): 14; Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 nos. 2 and 3, 1994, 127–45, and "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New

York: Routledge, 1997); Hazel Carby, "On the Threshold of Woman's Era: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., "Race," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 301-15, and "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Black Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20 (February 1987), 9-22; and Patricia Hill Collins, "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

4. O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid," 14.

5. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, *From the American Revolution to World War I*, pt. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 7.

6. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality," 171. Hammonds's article is an important review essay with excellent bibliographic sources. The quote alludes to Spillers's work, cited previously. See also Darlene Clark Hine's pioneering essay, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 915-20; and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's groundbreaking theoretical essay, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251-74.

7. See Jordan's chapter titled "First Impressions: Initial English Confrontation with Africans," in *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 3-43. See also Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), especially the chapter "Libido in Colour," 172-87.

8. Within this context, the Victorian myth of the "dark continent" was constructed and an imperialist discourse of domination developed, which Foucault and others later argued has been a major form of power for colonizers. See Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (autumn 1985): 166-203. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vols. 1-3 (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

9. See Elizabeth Alexander's book of poetry *The Venus Hottentot* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), which reintroduces to Western readers the story of Saartjie Baartman. This imaginary rendering of the psyche of Baartman gives her a voice for the first time.

10. See Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 52-53, for a discussion of the "Venus Hottentot" and illustrations of her. For detailed discussions of this phenomenon, see Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978); Bernth Lindfors, "Court- ing the Hottentot Venus," *Africa: Revista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell Istituto Italo-Africano* 40, no. 1 (1985): 133-48, and "The Bottom Line: African Caricature in Georgian England," *World Literature Written in English* 24, no. 1 (1984): 43-51; Anna H. Smith, "Still More about the Hottentot Venus," *Africana Notes and News* 26, no. 3 (1984): 95-98; Percival R. Kirby, "The Hottentot Venus," *Africana Notes and News* 6, no. 3 (1949): 55-62, "More About the Hottentot Venus," *Africana Notes and News* 10, no. 4 (1953): 124-34, and "The 'Hottentot Venus' of Musee de l'Homme, Paris," *South African Journal of Science*

50, no. 12 (1954): 319-21; Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, (autumn 1985): 213-19, and *Sexuality: An Illustrated History: Representing the Sexual in Medicine and Culture from the Middle Ages to the Age of AIDS* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1989); Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815-1817," in Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, eds., *Deviant Bodies and Critical Perspectives of Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

11. Quoted in Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 54.

12. Quoted in Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 54.

13. Gilman, "Black Bodies," 287-97.

14. Jordan, *White over Black*, 151.

15. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 27-35.

16. This portion of the chapter is a synthesis of a section of my doctoral dissertation, which was published in the Carlson series *Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Darlene Clark Hine (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990). See *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes toward Black Women, 1880-1920*, vol. 11.

17. See bell hooks' chapter "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 51-86.

18. Mary Ryan, "The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity, 1839-1869," *Women and History* (summer-fall 1982): 142-43.

19. For an excellent discussion of early English travel literature and its depiction of Black women, see Jennifer L. Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (January 1997): 167-92. See also Linda E. Boose, "The Getting of a Lawful Race: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman," in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

20. See Jennifer Lyle Morgan's "Women in Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," in Anthony Tibbles, ed., *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* (London: HMSO, 1994), 60-69, for a discussion of the differential treatment of African men and women during the Middle Passage. See also Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), especially chapter 2. The most extensive analysis of gender issues and the trans-Atlantic slave trade can be found in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

21. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 32.

22. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Race and Sex on Black Women in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

23. The details of this abuse appeared in Diana E. Axelsen, "Women as Victims of Medical Experimentation: J. Marion Sims' Surgery on Slave Women, 1845-1850," *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 2, no. 2 (1985): 10-14. The first book to point out the abuse was by British historian Graham Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975); Deborah K. McGregor, *Sexual Surgery and the Origins of Gynecology: J. Marion Sims, His Hospital, and His Patients* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989); Todd L. Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 3 (August 1982), 332.

24. Phillip A. Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 20.

25. Eleanor Tayleur, "The Negro Woman: Social and Moral Decadence," *The Outlook* 76 (30 Jan. 1904): 270.

26. Thomas P. Bailey, *Race Orthodoxy in the South and Other Aspects of the Negro Question* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 43.

27. Howard Odum, *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro: Research into the Conditions of the Negro Race in Southern Towns* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910), 243-44.

28. William Dean Howells, *The Shadow of a Dream and An Imperative Duty* (1892; reprint, New Haven: College and University Press, 1962), 196.

29. Howells, *Imperative Duty*, 197.

30. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1979), 88.

31. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Publishing, 1892). Reprinted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 141.

32. See Nell Painter's biography of Sojourner Truth, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), for a detailed discussion of her assessment of the authenticity of the historical narratives surrounding Truth's legendary speech. See also Carleton Mabee, *Sojourner Truth* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) for a detailed discussion of Truth's speech, 67-82.

33. Frances D. Gage's report of the 1851 Akron, Ohio Convention appears in *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3 vols., 1881-1887, edited by Elizabeth Cody Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, 115-17. Reprinted by New York: Source Book, 1970. A description of the Akron gathering also appears in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Battle Creek, Michigan, 1878), 131-37. Reprinted by Ayer Company Publishers, Salem, New Hampshire, 1988. I am quoting from this version, pp. 131-33.

34. See Hortense Spillers's critique of Chicago's *The Dinner Party* in "Interstices," 77-78, where Spillers alludes to Alice Walker's insightful and extensive critique as well; Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)—An Excerpt," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1981), 42-43; see also Jennifer De Vere Brody, "Effaced into Flesh: Black Women's Subjectivity," in Ann Kibbey, Thomas Foster, and Carol Siegel, eds., *On Your Left: Historical Materialism in the*

1990s (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 184-205, for a discussion of Chicago's treatment of Sojourner Truth and what Brody argues is a "difficult gendering of black female flesh" (198). Brody also makes an analogy between the "spectacle" of Truth baring her breasts and the Venus Hottentot. There is a growing body of work by Black feminist critics on the problematic "use" of Sojourner Truth by various white feminist scholars. See also Deborah McDowell, "Transferences: Black Feminist Discourse: The Practice of Theory," in Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *Feminism beside Itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 93-118.

35. Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own" (cited in note 34), 43.

36. John Updike, "Venus and Others," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (fall 1990), 495. See also the subsequent special issue on the female body, part 2, *Michigan Quarterly Review* (winter 1991).

37. Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 139-55.

38. One of the most outrageous lynching incidents in the South occurred in a rural Georgia county in 1919, when a pregnant Black woman's unborn child was cut from her stomach and stomped to death while she watched. This incident is described in John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).