

Is a Black Woman Worth a Riot?: Body Politics in the Fight for Liberation

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the sexual, financial and physical exploitation of African and African American people during chattel slavery and the Jim Crow Era continues to sway perceptions about how much black lives (or black bodies) actually matter.

Light or dark, old or young, men or women, enslaved people had one thing in common: they were property. None of them had any agency over their bodies. Given how closely notions of masculinity and physical strength are tied together, black men were, in one sense, neutered when fear and deep social conditioning (“seasoning”) prevented them from using their bodies to strike out at their oppressors, while at the same time they were forced to act as studs, literally using their seed to make (human) products for their masters. Even now, there are African American men who believe their social value is based upon their sexual prowess, just as there are black women who are haunted by the notion that there is something vulgar about their physiques.

Black bodies have long been thought to be monstrous. Consider the “Hottentot Venus” (Danish name: Saartjie Baartman) who was put on display in the early 1800s. Scores of spectators in Great Britain and France came to stare at the enormous buttocks and reportedly deformed genitals of the African native who became emblematic of what many white Westerners suspected of black women: their “outsize” features were indicative of a more primitive nature. Baartman and the hefty “mammies” of America were seen as “real” black women—closer to beasts than to refined white “ladies.” This image of blackness, darkness, ugliness and heaviness all comingling in an grotesque mixture is planted deep in the consciousness of Americans and many others, which makes it all the more amusing that almost 190 years after the “Hottentot Venus” made her debut, Puerto Rican Jennifer Lopez

was credited with making the big butt sexy (proving, once again, that any feature or object seen as desirable and black-identified must be popularized by a non-black.)

In America, the favorite spectacles involving black people were not “freak” shows like those in which Baartman took part, but lynchings of black men (and sometimes women) for their supposed crimes, mainly the murder or rape of whites. Photos from the 1930 lynchings of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, were said to have inspired Abel Meeropol to write the lyrics to “Strange Fruit.” In those lyrics as well as the pictures of hangings it is clear that public lynchings were family-friendly activities as evidenced by the images of children alongside their parents, smiling at the sight of “black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze.”

My piece will look to the past as well as examine contemporary fine artists such Kara Walker, Wangechi Mutu, and Stan Squirewell; athletes like Serena Williams; and activists and organizers like Byron Hurt and Beverly Bond who are producing work and starting conversations aimed at undoing the effects of centuries of indoctrination and the internalization of messages of inferiority which have kept black people at a distance from their own bodies and souls.

Keywords: African Americans, slavery, bodies, the “Hottentot Venus”, masculinity, femininity, lynching