

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

Kavon Franklin

Black men being severely beaten or killed with impunity—either by white power groups, mobs, or police officers—preceded Rodney King, Sean Bell, and Michael Brown. Ida B. Wells risked her life writing about the 1892 lynching of Memphis businessmen Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart; more than 120 years later, three women—Alicia Garza, Opel Tometi and Patrisse Cullors—created #BlackLivesMatter after Trayvon Martin’s killer was acquitted; time and again, it has been the victimization of African-American men that has sparked protests within black communities, but who takes to the streets for black women?

Since the early days of Africans in the Americas, black women have been used for sexual satisfaction and profit. They have suckled their own infants with one breast and their mistress’s with the other; endured the sexual attentions of any men who felt entitled to their bodies; and bore children they knew would live out their days as pieces of property—if they would live out their days at all. Black women have been whipped, burned, maimed, and raped at whim, which they have been expected to endure in silence. In many black communities, discussing the abuse and neglect suffered by women *because* they are women is enough to quickly get one labeled a “feminist” which a dirty word (while “womanist” is barely uttered at all, except within black intellectual circles).

In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), Michele Wallace writes about young women activists in her social circle being expected to support “their” men, meaning all black men, and reject feminism (which many of the “conscious” people in her life consider the province of bored, middle-class white women). Wallace is told her duty is to “help the brother get his thing together” (Wallace 522).

Even now, that is the lament: fix what’s wrong with “the black community” by healing the black man’s wounds, which is profoundly wrongheaded. True, it is black men, not black

women, who are most often the victims of these caught-on-camera-but-still-unpunished acts of police brutality, but there is more than one way to be brutalized. Black women have been abused emotionally, sexually, spiritually, physically, and psychologically. They have been damaged. Any movement that glosses over that fact will not succeed, as evidenced by how many racial justice campaigns come on with a great burst of energy and quickly die out. It's impossible to heal a group and simultaneously ignore half of its members, so to paraphrase "Celie" in the film adaption of *The Color Purple*—until the attacks upon the psyches and bodies of black women are addressed and redressed, any effort towards toward black liberation (inside or outside of an organized movement) is going to fail.

Black women have been the sexual playthings of America for some four hundred years. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent), tells of warding off the attacks of her master, "Dr. Flint" who instead of forcible rape tries seduction. Jacobs's grandmother suspects something is amiss and tries to buy her freedom, but Flint declines. "Mrs. Flint," of course, knows her husband is in pursuit of Jacobs and despises the enslaved girl, although sexual relationships between masters and their slave women were commonplace.

"Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves," Jacobs writes, adding, "They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation; and it is seldom that they do not make them aware of this by passing them into the slavetrader's hands as soon as possible, and thus getting them out of their sight" (35).

The only way for an enslaved woman to have value was to "continually increase their owner's stock" (49) as part of the repulsive practice of slave-breeding, which Frederick Douglass notes in an 1846 speech, is viewed as a legitimate venture. It is in this framework, that an archetype is created that last for centuries: the broodmare, a position that gives the enslaved woman some currency, but is later turned against poor black women criticized for popping out babies for random men.

Like broodmares, no one cared if the enslaved women wanted to reproduce. A "colored woman" Douglass writes, who in the "defense of her own virtue, in defense of her own person, should shield herself from the brutal attacks of her tyrannical master, or make the slightest resistance, [...] may be killed on the spot. No law whatever will bring the guilty man to justice for the crime" (qtd in Wright 207). In fact, Harriet Jacobs's owner, after striking her for daring to profess her love for a "free nigger," says, "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?" (39).

For black women, the trauma of plantation life was compounded by the fact that, in many cases, the whites who tormented them were also close relatives. Their masters might be their fathers (which wouldn't stop them from raping them) and the children born of these "relationships" might also be raped or coerced into sex with their white grandfathers, uncles, or brothers. On many a plantation, children "of every shade of complexion" (Jacobs 35) played alongside the masters' white children and although this fomented hatred within the breasts of the plantation mistresses, their jealousy was not enough to bring it to an end.

Jacobs writes of hearing two white women repudiate such amorous and amoral slaveholders by saying, “He not only thinks it no disgrace to be the father of those little niggers, but he is not ashamed to call himself their master. I declare, such things ought not to be tolerated in any decent society!” (35).

But it was tolerated. Black women who resisted paid dearly, including Celia, who in 1855 murdered her master, Robert Newsom. Celia admitted guilt, but claimed she did not intend to kill him—only prevent a rape. At that point, she had allegedly already given birth to several of his children, but resolved to cut off all sexual contact with him. Celia was defended on the grounds that, under Missouri law, she had a right to ward off a would-be rapist; however, the court maintained Missouri’s rape laws did not apply to slaves, and the judge practically instructed the jury to find her guilty, which they did and she was hanged.

Celia’s case “challenged the idea that a master had unmitigated access to and control over the bodies of his female slaves, an idea that was taken for granted in slaving-holding states dependent on the reproduction of female slaves” (*Slavery and Making...*). Another incident that presented defenders of slavery with questions they didn’t want to answer was the 1856 Margaret Garner trial. Garner ran away from a Kentucky plantation with several family members and when they were discovered in Ohio, killed one daughter by slitting her throat and attempted to kill another one rather than see her children go back into slavery. Abolitionists wanted her tried for murder as it would force a conversation about enslaved persons status as people instead of chattel. Garner was instead charged with destruction of property and returned back to slavery.

Garner’s story is reimagined in the Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, but there are very few contemporaneous accounts of what enslaved women suffered. The abuses of black women, even by sympathetic black men, are presented in a way to underscore that her mistreatment was a slap in the face of black men who were powerless to protect them.

There were several white abolitionists who later went on to lead the women’s movement: Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Sarah Grimké, and Angelina Weld Grimké to name the most prominent, but what about black women feminists? There’s Harriet Tubman, of course, and Sojourner Truth, whose most famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” (or “Ar’n’t I a Woman?”) is under dispute (at least the Frances Gage version) (Wright 211-213), but as far as women whose intellectual talents would be called upon to help lead the movement, beyond Maria W. Stewart it’s hard to think of any. Stewart made only a few speeches in the early 1830s (long before Douglass became the most famous black orator). Her tracts are peppered with Christian pleas, but she also injects straight-ahead, unapologetic feminism.

“What if I am a woman [?]” she asks in a 1933 speech about fighting for equal rights. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free black from Baltimore, played her part in exposing the wretchedness of slave life in her poems and novels, but it was men such as Douglass, Charles Lenox Remond and Henry Highland Garnet who became the faces of anti-slavery activism.

The push for abolition was, of course, successful, but while a select group of black men flourished during Reconstruction, even ascending to the U.S. Senate in the case of Hiram Revels and Blanche Bruce, overcoming the “race problem” was seen as vastly more important than creating a space for black women; so while all African American people were free, black men still embraced patriarchy. The same men who had relied on women for support and comfort during slavery, were now quick to assert that they didn’t need the aid of the “weaker sex.”

Reconstruction is often judged to have come to an end around 1877. A number of factors are often listed: an economic crisis from a few years earlier; the removal of troops from Southern cities; the nefarious actions of President Andrew Johnson. These things were important, but the failure to count black women as equals and as necessary to the fight against injustice was also a factor.

During the so-called Second Reconstruction, also known as the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, women were also pushed to the margins: Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Jo Ann Robinson and Dorothy Cotton to name a few. Likewise, the Black Power Movement, while reveling in the beauty of Angela Y. Davis, did not generally regard women as leaders. No matter how much progress there was, elements of sexism lingered in many of the most important African American-led movements, which undermined them.

That is why there’s a charge of hypocrisy when a prominent white person disrespects black people, as in the Don Imus-Rutgers controversy from 2007, and prominent blacks have a fit. Interviewed on the CBS Evening News, Maya Angelou said, “...at last, we’re going to have a dialogue. I’m telling you. Nelly, P. Diddy, Snoop Dogg, all of those men, who are very intelligent, for the first time—and I include Dave Chappelle—for the first time we are going to sit down and see how have we come so late and lonely to this place” (CBS News). Well, that dialogue, if it existed, was pretty much meaningless. “Bitch” and “ho” remain mainstays in hip hop. Black women are still valued (and devalued) based on their bodies, so there was—despite Angelou’s hope—no movement to create more uplifting art and entertainment.

To make matters worse, after all the years of black women being told they’re only good for their bodies, trademark “black woman features” are being taken away from them and “given” (as it were) to non-black women.

In the late 1990s, Jennifer Lopez became a movie star and then a pop star, but her most lauded “achievement” was having a big butt and not being afraid to showcase it. *Self* quoted Cindy Crawford as saying she didn’t “have the guts to walk around with that butt” and wondering if there was something “cultural” in Lopez’s confidence (qtd in Tracy 82). Maybe so because she did a lot of walking around: on red carpets, at award shows, and on the arms of her many suitors. She had given everyone in America—except Cindy Crawford—butt envy.

Except some of them already had butts—butts that they had tried to minimize for years. Black men are known for their appreciation of a rounded backside, but many black women, particularly upwardly mobile women, were slightly embarrassed of their large bottoms. Still, it was pretty frustrating that a non-black woman was not only showered with

praise for having a feature they had been taught to hide, but to see her talked about as if she were the first woman with a big behind (as Southern women like to call it).

Kim Kardashian is the other non-black star to become famous in large part to her largest part. And, no, no one cared if it was real. That's the type of silliness the noughties brought in: "fake cakes." Within the last ten years, even people with naturally big butts have plumped themselves up. For a long time the notion of a butt implant seemed too weird for the average person, and it still is, but there are a number of famous women (B-list, C-list and lower) and many more would-be models who see that large butts are must-haves and are willing to go to dangerous lengths to get them.

So strangely, this feature that for centuries has been associated with black women has been made famous by a Puerto Rican and an Armenian.

Donna Britt couldn't have predicted that when she wrote a 1992 article about how black women have been "terribly abused" due to their "bodacious behinds." Because of hers, she was teased as a child and felt self-conscious as an adult as did many of her middle-class friends.

Then she saw Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" and despite her disdain for the objectification of women, she felt there was something empowering about it.

As absurd as it sounds, "Baby Got Back" is one of the most body-positive hip hop songs to ever crack the charts, and one of the few where a man explicitly states his preference for women who look like Florence Griffith Joyner and not Madonna or any stick figure in Cosmo (and, therefore, placing black beauty on a pedestal and mocking white women held up as sexpots). Britt ultimately decided the positives of Mix-A-Lot's message outweighed the objectification of the song. She enjoyed seeing "Baby Got Back" on MTV (a channel that not that much earlier played very few black videos) and appreciated that someone was saying, in however a crude way, "black women with 'bodacious behinds' are beautiful."

"It's not always easy loving a part of yourself that society deems unfashionable, overtly sexual, or just too much," Britt writes.

She's talking specifically about butts, but she could have just as easily been referring to lips, or "soup coolers," as they're called when they're really big and cover a large portion of someone's face.

Minstrels performing in blackface in the 1800s often colored their lips pink and in old racist memorabilia there are plenty of drawings of coal-black people with enormous red lips. Yet when Angelina Jolie burst on the scene, also in the late 1990s, she was praised for having big lips. Other white people had them prior to her emergence (rock stars Mick Jagger and Steven Tyler; soap stars Lisa Rinna and Hunter Tylo) but she was the one credited with inspiring so many white women to "fix" their lips and the craze she created can be blamed for ushering in so many trout pouts.

Before a “black feature” is acceptable, it has to be popularized by a person who is not black. Type in the name of any popular black actress and one of the top results will be “[actress name] ethnicity.” People don’t seem to wonder if either Jennifer Lopez or Angelina Jolie has a black great-grandmother, but there’s a desperate need to be assured that any “pretty” black woman is also something else. “Real” black woman must be dark, nappy-headed, with noses that are too wide and lips that are comically large. The supposed ugliness of “real” black women didn’t bother all the white men who had sex with their slaves who weren’t mixed with anything or all those who, long after slavery, continued to travel to the “bad” part of town for companionship. There were powerless white women they could have had their way with if they’d wanted to, but obviously they didn’t as witnessed by the fact that if ten African Americans are in a room, there are often ten different shades.

Artist Kara Walker comments on the “happy darky” myth in *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a massive Sphinx-like structure made of sugar and located for a time at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York. With the piece, Walker evokes the sugar cane plantations worked by slaves in the Caribbean. Her sculpture wears a head rag and has her very large butt in the air, but, despite that, she is regal. She lords over all those who come to pay homage. *A Subtlety* is the ultimate celebration and refutation of Mammy in that Walker, a black woman, conceptualized the project and directed artists to construct it for her (incidentally, they were white) while she swooped in give orders.

Walker’s work seems to be a tribute to all the unknown, uneducated, and unloved women who helped build this country and got nothing for their troubles except heartache. The Mammy—all enslaved women, really—remind us that black women were once known for their hard work. Despite the Reagan Era “welfare queens” charge, many black women have and continue to work hard. The feminist conversations regarding women being allowed to work seemed ludicrous to them since most of them have always *had* to work. Like the mother in Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” there are a number of “large, big-boned” women with “rough, man-working hands” in every family—people who were working moms before that term was in vogue (395).

Until fairly recently many black women didn’t have time for femininity as it’s defined by Western standards. They were too busy working. Even now, when the charge of not being womanly is aimed at a black woman, it can seem racially provocative.

As Serena Williams was preparing for Wimbledon in 2015, the *New York Times* published an article examining her body type and wondering why her “rivals could try to emulate her physique, but most of them” chose not to do so (Rothenberg). The gist of the article was that most of the other tennis players interviewed (all white) decided they got too much pleasure in being “feminine” to contest with Williams in the muscle department. The coach of player Agnieszka Radwanska says Radwanska refuses to bulk up because “she’s a woman, and she wants to be a woman” (Rothenberg). To be sure, there are plenty of women who are nervous about being too muscular, either because they don’t like the way it looks or because they think it might make them less desirable; however, to target Williams for her body struck several *Times* readers as racist and sexist. One of the letters to the editor explains the backlash: “In blogs, tweets, article comments and even television commentary, Williams

is continually described as a man and compared to African wildlife. Her supporters consequently defend her with all of their might” (Tredway).

Serena Williams shrugs off criticism, but it’s irksome that instead of celebrating her talent, she’s always denigrated for not being feminine, although, as the article notes, she sells her own fashion line on a shopping network, has been on the cover of *Vogue* and “is regarded as a symbol of beauty by many women” (Rothenberg).

The *Times* reporter doesn’t say what kind of women. The sense is that her look is appreciated by some (mostly black) and off-putting to others (many of whom are white). Some people who don’t care for her physique don’t necessarily think it’s bad—just different as black women have historically been seen as different. In some ways, their “ugliness” has served to show just how lovely and delicately formed other women were, but what Williams and every other black woman who refuses to make herself “acceptable” is saying to young girls (and grown women struggling with body image) is that they have the power to reject those who tell them their butts are too large, lips too big, and thighs too “thick.” While holding her head high in spite of a barrage of hate mail, Williams, like so many other black women who are refusing to making being a size 2 their life’s goal, shows that black bodies, like black lives, aren’t any less valid (or beautiful) for being black.

One woman whose blackness, or Otherness, effectively rendered her a nonperson was Sarah (or Saartjie) Baartman; a Khoi from South Africa most commonly referred to as the “Hottentot Venus.” Baartman was the star of an 1810 exhibit in London, which cost two shillings and was advertised as the “Greatest Phenomenon ever exhibited” in England (Chauveau). Her nickname was telling. The first word in that moniker refers to the derogatory name the Dutch had for the Khoi people and the second is intended to be a joke since Baartman had steatopygia which resulted in enormous buttocks and she also had an elongated labia (the “Hottentot apron” it was called), so she was as far from the European standard of beauty as one could get.

Mystery surrounds Baartman’s early years. She’s thought to have been married at one point and the mother of children who died. In South Africa, she worked for the Dutch Hendrik Cesar and eventually came to know army surgeon Alexander Dunlop. The two men took Baartman to Europe to be part of the booming freak show circuit.

Once in London, she was placed in a cage and showcased to look as primitive as possible in a tight, flesh-colored dress intended to make her appear as if she wasn’t wearing anything at all. Some patrons pinched her or poked her with their canes to determine if her butt was real and in 1814, she was sold to an animal trainer who took her to France where she performed for private audiences. She died in 1815 and George Cuvier, an anatomist interested in the link between apes and humans, dissected and studied her body. It was only in 2002 that her remains were retrieved from a storage room in France and returned to her homeland for a proper burial.

Baartman is now a heroine of black history. Poems are written about her, as are numerous articles bemoaning how mean white people were for gazing at her, and how

deranged Cuvier must have been for carving her up. Yet, she was hardly the only “freak” of the nineteenth century. John Merrick, the “Elephant Man” was a brief attraction in the 1880s; armless people, legless people, dwarfs, “pinheads,” conjoined twins, bearded women, and many other, as we might say in our more considerate age, “differently formed” individuals were parts of exhibits.

So why is the “Hottentot Venus special? To answer that, one must understand the burdens of being in a black woman’s body. For so long they have been praised for certain features in one moment and ridiculed for them in the next. Their butts are sexy; their butts are gross; their bodies are full figured; their bodies are fat, disgusting.

The disrespect and persistent attacks on the bodies and minds of blacks have their roots in slavery, as Frederick Douglass points out during a 1846 speech in England, during which he says, “it is necessary to resort to these cruelties, in order to *make the slave a slave*, and to *keep him a slave*” (“Reception...”). It also makes sense that the features that differ the most from the “ideals” are the ones that the dominant society is the quickest to deem ugly.

For black women, there remain enemies within and without; what they see in the media and what they hear on the streets. They are never enough and always too much, and yet, expected to be strong black women.

So they are. In another paraphrase from *The Color Purple* all their lives they have to fight and, though damaged, manage to survive the deprivation and degradation that goes along with being in a black woman’s body.

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Suggested Citation

Franklin, Kavon. "Is a Black Woman Worth a Riot?: Body Politics in the Fight for Liberation." *Trespassing Journal: an online journal of trespassing art, science, and philosophy* 6 (Winter 2017). Web. ISSN: 2147-2734

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