The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body

JANELL HOBSON

I assess representations of black women's derrières, which are often depicted as grotesque, despite attempts by some black women artists to create a black feminist aesthetic that recognizes the black female body as beautiful and desirable. Utilizing a black feminist disability theory, I revisit the history of the Hottentot Venus, which contributed to the shaping of this representational trope, and I identify a recurring struggle among these artists to recover the "unmirrored" black female body.

Introduction

When tennis champion Serena Williams, days before winning the 2002 U. S. Open, appeared on the courts in a black spandex suit, media frenzy ensued. Her black female body, adorned in all its "ghetto" glamour—bleached-blonde braids and a tight-fitting suit that outlined the contours of her posterior, among other things—managed to disrupt (literally and figuratively) the elitist game of tennis. Williams, who defended herself by stating that she wanted to wear something "comfortable" as she moved around the tennis court, was nonetheless attacked in the press for her "tackiness" and "inappropriate" display of sexuality.

This seemingly exaggerated response to Williams's choice of sportswear reveals an anxiety that is best understood within a larger historical context of attitudes toward the exhibition of the black female body. This history—a history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition—variously labeled the black female body "grotesque," "strange," "unfeminine," "lascivious," and "obscene." This negative attitude toward the black female body targets one aspect of the body in particular: the buttocks. Popular exhibitions in the

Hypatia vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2003) © by Janell Hobson

nineteenth century, for example, displayed a South African woman, known as the "Hottentot Venus," for this "strange" singular attraction. Similarly, the attention to and criticisms of Serena Williams's body, alluded to above, call unabashed attention to her generously-sized backside, thus inviting comments such that sexiness was "lewd" and "obscene."

As this brief discussion of Williams suggests, the meaning assigned to this aspect of the black female body has a long and complex history, a history worthy of further investigation. Subsequently, this essay analyzes the prevalent treatment of black female bodies as grotesque figures, due to the problematic fetishism of their rear ends, and considers how an aesthetic based on a black feminist praxis might offer a different way of treating the representation of black female sexuality. In what follows, then, I first revisit the history of the Hottentot Venus, whose derrière shaped prevalent ideas of black female deviance and hypersexuality. Second, I examine discourses of sexual desire *for* the black female backside and how this desire frames the body in terms of sexual grotesquerie while reinforcing aesthetic values that exclude black women from categories of beauty. Third, I analyze how a few black feminist artists—namely photographers Carla Williams and Coreen Simpson—struggle to re-present black female bodies differently. Finally, I consider the role of dance and performance, through the example of the dance troupe Urban Bush Women, in repositioning the black female body—specifically the "batty," or rear end—as a site of beauty and of resistance.

Disabling Bodies

Although mainstream media, and much of contemporary culture, often downplay the role of racism in reactions to black bodies, such views nonetheless reflect a racialized sense of aesthetics that position blackness in terms of grotesquerie while whiteness serves as an emblem of beauty. In considering Immanuel Kant's definition of beauty as the perfect realization of a human being, Noël Carroll notes that the opposite also occurs: nonbeauty, or ugliness, is the ultimate in imperfection. Hence, Carroll suggests, "the moral credentials of [an ethnic or racial] group . . . can be endorsed by means of an association with beauty, or it can be demeaned by being represented as . . . ugly" (2000, 38). However, while Carroll identifies the grotesque figure with denigration, Mikhail Bakhtin recognizes this figure as carnivalesque, which has "the right to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available" (1981, 159). For Bakhtin, the grotesque, carnivalesque body subverts social hierarchies and normalcy.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson reinterprets this carnivalesque body as a disabled body, which "flies in the face of [an] ideal . . . presenting the ultimate challenge to perfection and progress" (1997, 46). In this Kantian summation,

perfection and progress define the body beautiful, and the aesthetic project of altering female bodies—through cosmetics, surgery, or dietary exercises—renders unmodified female bodies, much like disabled bodies unfixed, or "unhealed," by medicine, "unnatural and abnormal." Subsequently, Thomson pairs female bodies and disabled bodies within a feminist disability theory, which recognizes how these bodies are similarly "cast as deviant and inferior" (1997, 19). This particular representation is not unlike earlier racialized depictions of black bodies as "diseased" (Gilman 1985, 101).[1]

These discourses create trajectories of normalcy and dominance that perpetuate black women's "outsider" and "disabled" status. Hence, their "disruptive" bodies provide further justification for their devaluation and discrimination. However, these carnivalesque bodies reflect not necessarily subversive representations, but rather, distorted images, like the ones found in a "carnival" funhouse mirror. Utilizing the mirror as metaphor, we may come to understand how black women's representational history is thus one of "unmirroring," to borrow a phrase from black feminist artist and theorist Lorraine O'Grady. As O'Grady writes, "To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us, this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look" (1992, 14).

O'Grady specifically refers to a tradition of iconography of black female sexuality that casts black women as simplistic stereotypes, such as the "Hottentot Venus," "Jezebel," "mammy," "Sapphire," "welfare queen," and more recently "quota queen" and "baby mama." Subsequently, these stereotypes—which Patricia Hill Collins identifies as "controlling images" (1990, 72)—distort the ways in which black women see themselves and each other. They also create a process of "unmirroring," in which struggles for black female subjectivity constantly grate against the distorted images of the dominant culture. Hence, those black women artists, in particular, who wish to gesture toward an aesthetic of the black female body find themselves in need of an oppositional stance. Somehow, the creation of a black feminist aesthetic must challenge dominant culture's discourse of the black body grotesque and articulate a black liberation discourse on the black body beautiful.

The Hottentot Venus Revisited

Perhaps no other figure epitomizes the connections between grotesquerie, sexual deviance, and posteriors than the "Hottentot Venus." Saartjie Baartman, the first in a line of South African women exhibited, was brought to London in 1810. It is quite possible that other South African women followed in this trajectory, since Hottentot Venus exhibitions continued well after Baartman's death in 1816 (Gilman 1985, 88; Edwards and Walvin 1983, 181–82). Baartman was put on display, first by Dutch exhibitor Hendrik Cezar, as a mythical and

"strange"-shaped "Hottentot," a display framed by a history of colonial domination. From the little that we know of her history, Baartman was a Khoisan captive from the colonial Cape of South Africa.[2] She may have been separated from her family—including her parents and husband—during warfare between the Dutch and the indigenous population, and was forced to labor as a servant for a Boer farmer, Peter Cezar. What we do know for sure is that, during her labor at Cezar's farm, Baartman caught the attention of Cezar's brother Hendrik, who entered into a contract with her in which she would share in the profits made on her exhibition in Europe.[3]

The existence of this contract might suggest that Baartman acted as a free agent when she left for England at age twenty with Hendrik Cezar and his traveling companion, Alexander Dunlop.[4] However, because no records have been found that provide Baartman's story from her own point of view, we can only speculate about what choices she may have had, especially considering that she died penniless at age twenty-five in Paris.[5] What we also know is that her colonized body—namely, her buttocks, stigmatized in Europe as a condition of "steatopygia" (protruding buttocks)—served as an important symbol of racial difference in her exhibition in London and in French sideshows, and in her later dissection by French anatomists.

Thomson notes that Baartman's London show was framed within a context of freakery, in which other "freak shows" on Piccadilly Circus existed alongside hers. She asserts that "absolutely no distinction existed between this African woman, whose body shape was typical of her group, and the conjoined twins, congenital amputees, or dwarfs who also fell outside the narrow, culturally constructed borders that distinguish the normal from the abnormal" (1997, 72). Thomson thus suggests that the factors of beauty, sexuality, and disability are merely cultural concepts, which are often projected onto particular bodies, viewed and constructed as "deviant." Moreover, as a "deviant" body—by virtue of skin color, femaleness, and body shape—Baartman becomes a "freak" in Europe precisely because she is a "type" of Khoisan woman of South Africa. In this construction of her sexualized and "disabled" body, Westerners can prescribe racial and cultural differences—and, hence, their "superiority" as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures.

The popularity of the Hottentot Venus exhibition gave rise to numerous cartoons featuring Baartman's prominent behind, grossly exaggerated for comical effect. She was even featured on the five of clubs in a special deck of playing cards in 1811 (Willis and Williams 2002, 62). The lesson that audiences in London and Paris learned from attending these shows was not only that Baartman's body was "ugly" and "freakish" but that this "ugliness" was considered "beautiful" in Africa. This is emphasized in the broadsides and advertisements of the show, which described Baartman as a "most correct and perfect specimen of her race" (Lindfors 1985, 133; Strother 1999, 25). The appellation

"Hottentot" also invoked in the minds of her audience travelogues of this period, which described in mythic tales "strange" encounters with these most mysterious of Africans—the "Hottentots." In her study of iconography of Hottentots (the ethnic group Khoikhoi), Z. S. Strother (1999) suggests that this group, first encountered by Dutch settlers, spoke a complicated language with "clicks" and practiced such "abhorrent" customs (according to Dutch standards) as oiling their skins with animal fat, which served as a sun block in the hot climate. In fact, the word "Hottentot" means "to stammer," again suggesting that the Dutch—unable to grasp the complex sounds in this foreign language—made the assumption that there *was* no language and, hence, no means of culture and civilization. As Strother explains, "It is first and foremost because they were presumed to lack true human language that the Hottentot was assigned the role of a creature bridging human and animal realms" (1999, 4). This cultural misunderstanding—motivated by cultural arrogance—constructs an ideology of racial "difference" essentially inspired by a sense of racial "superiority."

Such "differences" between African and European men might suggest that the latter group would "obviously" not find Baartman an appealing figure. As Robert Chambers records in his 1864 history of Baartman's exhibition: "With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said to . . . possess the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots" (Edwards and Walvin 1983, 172). In other words, only men of African descent—specifically the group known as "Hottentots" who were already perceived as existing on the "lowest rung" of humanity (Pieterse 1992, 41)—could find the figure of a "Hottentot" woman attractive. Yet, for all the refinement and civilization of European men, Baartman's exhibition was so popular that satirists often called into question the fascination that European men *did* have for this African woman on display, as in one French cartoon, titled *The Curious in Ecstasy.*

This fascination was the subject of a French vaudeville play *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen*,[6] performed at the Theater of Vaudeville in Paris on November 29, 1814, the same year Baartman debuted in that city. This play mocked French male attraction to Baartman and advocated the "superior" value of French women. It even accused those who "preferred" savage women of lacking patriotism and national fervor. That the play centered on the efforts of an aristocratic woman, Amelia, to "save" her betrothed cousin, Adolph, from the clutches of a "savage Hottentot," indeed to bring him back to his senses, highlights the deep anxieties inherent in the public display of a foreign black woman—even through the guise of humor. The play further implies that any desire for a "Hottentot Venus" was truly "hatred of French women." Because the desire of one supposedly meant hatred of the other, the French popular press, like the vaudeville play, kept reassuring themselves that the "monstrous" form of Baartman provided such a contrast to the "pretty faces" of the women of

their own country (Strother 1999, 31). Note the absence here of white women's bodies—and possibly an absence of sexuality—through emphasis on their facial features.

Such prurient interest and comic dismissal of any possibility of Baartman's sex appeal found a powerful ally in science, which dehumanized her further through the scientific inquiry into her human status and, subsequently, the nature of her genitalia.[7] Napoleon's Surgeon General, George Cuvier, one of the most celebrated naturalists of his time, set about the acquisition, upon Baartman's death, of her cadaver to examine the "racial" features of her body. He subsequently molded a cast of her body and dissected her genitalia, on which he based a two-page description of their characteristics, comparing them to those of primates, which he included in an academic report presented to the scientific academy in France in 1817.[8] Cuvier also preserved Baartman's genitalia in a jar of formaldehyde fluid, which was exhibited, along with her skeleton and brain, at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris as late as the early 1980s. Not only did this treatment of Baartman's private parts usher in pseudo race science—which attempts to locate racial characteristics within the biological body—but it also shaped the ways in which black female bodies are viewed: with an emphasis on the rear end as a signifier of deviant sexuality. As a result, such associations of the black female rear end with hypersexuality and animalistic characteristics emerge not just in pseudoscientific studies of human anatomy but also in popular culture.

While Baartman's genitalia—on exhibit at a natural history museum—shaped discourses on race science, the Hottentot Venus show continued, as previously mentioned. One such Venus entertained guests at a Parisian ball given by a Duchess du Barry in 1829 (Gilman 1985, 88). Still another appeared at a fair in Hyde Park on the Coronation Day of Queen Victoria in 1838. As an observer, T. E. Crispe, recalls in his "reminiscences": "From a Hottentot point of view the beauty of the dusky goddess consisted in an abnormal development, and a strength which enabled her to carry a drayman round the arena without inconvenience. On this *steed* [italics added] of Africa, I, a featherweight, was placed a-straddle, and holding to a girdle round her waist—the almost sole article of her apparel—I plied a toy whip on the flanks of my beautiful jade, who, screaming with laughter, raced me round the circle (Edward and Walvin 1983, 182)." This disturbing and probably fabricated scene of a white Englishman "riding" the backside of a nude South African woman (and this time, the Hottentot Venus "delights" in this performance as a "steed"—unlike the often sullen Baartman who was described as resentful of her treatment on exhibition) carries with it all the sexual connotations of bestiality and female submission. This is also a powerful dramatization of Western imperialism at the dawn of the Victorian era.

Perhaps the persistence of this Hottentot Venus icon led to a recovery of the woman behind the myth, as Saartjie Baartman emerged in late twentieth-century academic discourses of racial and sexual difference in cultural studies, beginning with the writings of Stephen Jay Gould (1985) and Sander Gilman (1985). This reclaiming of Baartman also paralleled South African politics when the post-apartheid South African government began agitating in 1995 for the return of her remains to her place of origin. They were finally successful in March 2002, when the French Senate agreed to support their mandate, and on August 9, 2002, thousands of South Africans assembled for Baartman's centuries-delayed funeral in Cape Town, where her remains were buried at last.

Because of this renewed interest in Baartman, some scholars question the use of her body in theoretical considerations of racial and sexual difference. As Zine Magubane argues, "The question must be asked why *this* woman has been made to function in contemporary academic debates as *the* preeminent example of racial and sexual alterity" (2001, 830). Describing this interest in Baartman as re-objectification, Magubane wonders why Baartman has been selected out of numerous nonwhite subjects similarly displayed in ethnographic exhibitions in Europe and the United States (2001, 817). Magubane alludes to such sideshow personalities as the indigenous Mexican Julia Pastrana, whose hirsute body was recast in an antebellum American sideshow as the "Ugliest Woman in the World," and inquires as to why this "freak" figure has not become an icon in the way that Baartman has (2001, 830; see also Thomson 1997, 72–74).

This pairing of Pastrana and Baartman, however, assumes that their bodies served similar purposes, apart from their obvious use as examples of ugliness. In making this assumption, Magubane fails to recognize that, while Mexican women, and Chicanas and Latinas in general, are rarely (if at all) stereotyped for being hairy in the style of Pastrana, black women *en masse* are often "known" to have big behinds, à la the Hottentot Venus. Moreover, Pastrana's "freakish" hirsute body does not take on a *racial* meaning as do Baartman's buttocks and genitalia. Pastrana is simply an isolated "freak," and her ethnicity highlights this "difference." Baartman, by contrast, functions as "the preeminent example of racial and sexual alterity" *because* her ridiculed and pathologized buttocks take on a life of their own: not just in the continuation of "Hottentot Venus" shows after her death but in the stereotyping of black female sexuality perpetuated by popular culture. Moreover, popular culture received support and legitimization through science, which culminated in the dehumanized labeling of a people. Baartman's genitalia—until recently left to float embalmed, alongside other jarred specimens such as a white man's brain and a Chinese woman's bound foot (Gould 1985, 291–92)[9]—cast an *entire* race in terms of its sexuality.

This is not to minimize Pastrana's tragedy, for she was also mistreated by science and medicine when her own body was embalmed and exhibited after her

death in childbirth (Thomson 1997, 73).[10] Her particular sideshow exhibition also spawned similar "bearded ladies" freak shows. However, these shows did not follow in a trajectory of racial characterization. Pastrana's freakishness, or "ugliness," was seen as unique, her own rather than racial—even though her ethnicity was read as an ultimate deviation from "white beauty." Baartman, on the other hand, came to signify the "ugliness" of her *race*. It is this connection between blackness and grotesquerie that has haunted many people of African descent, especially those living under the influence of dominant white culture, to the point that a slogan such as "Black is beautiful" seems a radical statement.

Race, Gender, and Aesthetics

Having looked at how Baartman's body came to reinforce an ideology of racial difference, I want now to consider the role gender played in this display. While such distortions reinforce an ideology of racial difference within white supremacist discourse, we may also recognize how gender is key to this racial formation. After all, Baartman's buttocks and genitalia shaped, in the minds of a colonial society, a view of deviant sexuality that could not have been replicated were a "Hottentot" male exhibited in similar fashion. Granted, the black phallus as a symbol of racial "difference" between black and white men elicits similar notions of hypersexuality and "danger." However, as historian Paula Giddings (1995) argues, black men are encoded for deviance insofar as they are primarily *linked* to a race of "lascivious" women who, because of their gender, "were considered the foundation of a group's morality" (1995, 415).

Jennifer Morgan (1997), in her analysis of early European explorers' writings on Africa, supports Giddings's view, arguing that these writers "turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference" (1997, 191). Indeed, these travel narratives, dating from 1500 to 1770, often depicted African women's bodies as mythic and monstrous, in which their exposed breasts and genitalia, appearing animalistic and abundant, supported popular views of Africa's "lack of civilization." This sexual difference cast black male bodies, by contrast, as "nobler" images.

The black male body, albeit a "noble savage," nonetheless provided room for admiration, perhaps even aesthetic appreciation. His female counterpart, in contrast, offered no such possibilities. The body of the black female, the ultimate "wild savage," elicited only "complex interstices of desire and repulsion that . . . conveyed a sexual grotesquerie" (Morgan 1997, 178). This imagery still lingers in contemporary visual culture, as illustrated in late twentieth-century photographs by white French artist Jean-Paul Goude and by white American artist Robert Mapplethorpe. Both photographers feature black bodies, especially black rear ends. These function as fetish objects through the photographers' use of close-ups, fragmented body parts, and doctored images.

Goude's collection of photographs, *Jungle Fever* (1981), for example, reveals his fascination and desire for black female derrières—likening them, in one instance, to those of a "racehorse." Goude refers specifically to his creation of a doll, recast from a life-size model of African-American fashion model, Toukie Smith, who is given a horse's behind in the miniature figure, making of her the idealized "girl horse" of Goude's primitivist desires (1981, 41). His photographs often refashion such bodies through doctored images that attempt to "improve on a masterpiece" (1981, 40). Such an "improvement" renders the black female backside highly exaggerated, grotesque, and comical, as in the 1978 example, *Carolina*. Goude portrays the rear end as a virtual table, on which a champagne glass is balanced as it fills with the beverage, gushing forth from a bottle that our nude model holds in her hands. This subject wears an "exotic" hairstyle and "smiles" for the camera in the pose of a "happy savage pleased to serve"—which suggests her complicity in having her body depicted as a literal object, a "primitive" vision to provide pornographic pleasure and intoxication presumably for a white male spectator.

Mapplethorpe, in contrast, focuses on black male bodies to shape a homoerotic aesthetic of racialized subjects. However, we might consider the different cultural contexts in which these artists emerge. Goude functions within a French culture that has a long tradition of celebrating the highly sensual Black Venus, or *Vénus Noire*, most popularly portrayed by Josephine Baker. American culture, on the other hand, does not have a similar celebration of black female sensuality. The more popular icon of black femininity in this context, the mammy, is often interpreted as *devoid* of sexuality. This may point to certain stereotypes of Americans as seeming more "prudish" or "puritanical" while the French are "sexy," hence their cultural distinctions with regard to the celebration of black womanhood. However, American culture has fixated more on black *male* sexuality, usually depicted as signifying "brute force" and thus as highly phallic. Such cultural distinctions might subsequently inform the work of these photographers. Nonetheless, Goude and Mapplethorpe are compared here because they follow what seems to be a standard representation of grotesque black female sexuality and black male noble savagery.

Although Mapplethorpe's white homosexual gaze reduces his black nudes to markers of racial difference, just as Goude's white heterosexual gaze reduces his female subjects, the black male subjects in Mapplethorpe's photographs nonetheless embody erotic desire and a "classical art" aesthetic of male nudity that one can take quite seriously, as in the case of the black and white photograph, *Derrick Cross*. Here, the photograph fetishizes muscular thighs and a taut behind; however, this fragmented aspect of the black male body captures an undeniable sexiness and beauty. Goude, by contrast, is more playful and comical in his treatment of black female bodies. This comical representation, mimicking similar "humor" in depictions of the Hottentot Venus, renders black female sexuality as too deviant, too bizarre, to take seriously.

Subsequently, black female bodies, unlike their male counterparts, rarely receive similar treatment in art. With the focus on their infamous behinds, black women's bodies are typically ridiculed, not adulated. Because of this, it is worth noting that black male bodies are less stigmatized by the label of "deviant sexuality." The locus for black male deviance is presumed to lie not in the body but in black male libidos. Recall that the body of the Hottentot Venus, while serving as a symbol for the grotesque, was considered even more deviant because of her "fellow countrymen's" *desire* for her body. Even then—in the nineteenth century as now—this difference between black and white male sexual desires is only one of degree rather than one of *inherent* racial difference.

This would suggest that white men are considered "deviant" insofar as they desire black women—or white women with large posteriors, who themselves were regarded as "prostitutes" in the late nineteenth century, if they possessed this feature (Gilman 1985, 94–101). Hence, both white men and women, when labeled deviant, were aligned with "black" sexuality. Such associations, however, did not prevent middle-class white women of the period from donning bustles—additional padding on the seat of a dress, which gave the illusion of a large backside. This appropriation of a "big behind"—a sign of grotesquerie, later connoting a sign of luxurious beauty in the bustle—illustrates the complexities of white responses to racial and sexual difference, which elicit both repulsion and desire.

In light of this iconographic history of deviant black sexuality, we find contemporary black male performance corroborating myths of black male hypersexual desire, especially desire *for* rear ends, in the music of hip-hop. Sir Mixalot's 1992 rap, *Baby Got Back*, frames black male sexual desire as more base and raw than white male desire. He declares that he "likes big butts" yet challenges that "even white boys have to shout," a dichotomous construction in which black men are less inhibited in their sexual expression while white men, who—in stereotypical fashion, because they are too wired, stiff, and mechanical to express their "base" desires—require the raw and hypersexual black female body to enable them to "shout." The music video provides humorous re-enactment of this desire, in which an uptight, white-collar, white male struggles to make this "shout," pulling on his tie when confronted with the black female backside. Hence, as a response to dominant culture's view of sexual deviance, Sir Mixalot challenges that black male libidos are not necessarily "more deviant" than white male libidos, only "less pretentious" and more connected to "real" masculine desire.

This so-called "appreciation" for black women's bodies does not necessarily challenge ideas of grotesque and deviant black female sexuality. Interestingly, both the song and video uphold and celebrate the black body precisely because it differs from the standard models of beauty in white culture. The white female body, a "legitimate" emblem of beauty in white dominant culture, Sir Mixalot

exposes for its inauthentic beauty, a product of a mechanized world that disables white men, making it impossible for them to "shout." Sir Mixalot castigates the beautiful white body as a "silicone toy," an unreal and unnatural Barbie doll. In contrast, the black female body, with its well-proportioned "back," serves as the "real" thing, unpretentious and "in the flesh."

On the one hand, this rap performance could be viewed as subversive in its critique of white beauty standards; on the other hand, it reinforces the binary opposition between whiteness and blackness while reducing black women to one essential body part. Black women are still viewed in the music lyrics and video as inherently "more sexual" than their "envious" and "inhibited" white female counterparts, and black men—through their desire for rear ends—are stereotyped as "more real" and more expressive of their libidos than their white male counterparts. Significantly, while the black male sexual expression of hip-hop made it more acceptable for members of the dominant white culture to desire black women openly, it left the "hypersexual" and comical nature of this representation unchallenged. The emphasis on the black female rear end, with its historic and cultural tropes of rawness, lasciviousness, and "nastiness," led, as captured in 2 Live Crew's 1989 album cover, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, to charges of "obscenity" in the mainstream media.

Emerging from this cultural milieu of hip-hop, the body of performer Jennifer Lopez offers a slightly different take on rear-end aesthetics. Her Latina body, already colored as "exotic" in a so-called changing American racial landscape,[11] bridges the desires of black and white men, because she can serve as the "racial other" for both. More importantly, Lopez's derrière does not carry the burden of Baartman's legacy. Whereas Baartman and most other black women's rear ends tend to be viewed in terms of pathological "steatopygia" (protruding buttocks), Lopez can instead function in dominant culture as signifying "kallipygos," or "beautiful backside." Her appearance as "the galaxy's most beautiful woman" on the cover of the September 2001 issue of *Stuff for Men*, while looking over her shoulder in the style of Venus Kallipygos, confirms this point.

Interestingly, it was hip-hop culture, which routinely documents black male desire for derrières, that first called attention to Lopez's body. Only then was she noticed by mainstream culture. Dominant culture came to celebrate Lopez's behind as part of a recognition of "exotic" and "hot" Latinas, women perceived as "more sexual" than white women but "less obscene" than black women. In this way, Lopez's body avoids the specific racial stigma that clings to black women's bodies. Despite the widespread appreciation of her endowed anatomy, Lopez has, it is worth noting, slimmed down considerably to conform to white beauty standards.

Struggling to See Ourselves

While Jennifer Lopez's slenderized and fair-skinned body provides her some "access" to whiteness, black female bodies find it more difficult to avoid the weight of racial difference. Because of this perceived difference, which as we have seen, has historical and cultural associations with grotesque and deviant sexuality, black women who have attempted an aesthetic of the body still struggle to articulate an affirming discourse of black female beauty. This struggle involves not only recovering the "unmirrored" body but also reclaiming agency and subjectivity.

In what remains of this essay, I would like to explore possibilities for developing such an aesthetic. To that end, I will consider the work of two photographers and one dance group. Let me begin with Carla Williams. Williams creates "mirrored" images in her work; she specializes in photographing nude self-portraits. While deliberately avoiding what she views as the capitalist, exploitative space of the gallery, Williams produces these intimate images for her own private consumption, although she shares her work occasionally and mostly through her Web site, which she feels provides her some control over their presentation. Williams's self-portraits allow her to envision a vibrant and self-defined sensuality, such as in her black and white photograph, *Venus* (fig. 1). While the title of this portrait seems to evoke the "Hottentot Venus," we might recognize the older archetype of the Greco-Roman Venus, or perhaps Black Venus, in which the "kallipygos" figure, known for her beautiful backside, also possesses the power to gaze from behind at her own buttocks and thus to reclaim her body as an erotic site of beauty and desirability. In *Venus*, Williams does not literally "look from behind"; instead, she captures her image for her own gaze, and subsequently replicates this posture through her camera. She seems to reproduce an image of sensual female nudity commonly found in the work of male artists, and Williams admits as much when she states, "My self-portraits were initially informed by the history of portraits made by male photographers of their wives, lovers, and muses . . . Turning the camera on myself, I sought to capture the intimacy of those unguarded moments" ("Artist's Statement," 2002). However, she reveals her need to recapture a self-portrait of black nudity that transforms the black female body from comical spectacle to one that invites a serious contemplation of beauty and sensuality.

It is when she selects her portraits for exhibition that Williams finds her body subjected to "unmirroring," since she observes, "I realized that my body could never be simply formal, or emotional, or personal. Most viewers would always see a black body regardless of my intent" ("Artist's Statement," 2002). This recognition led to her development of a series of photographs, titled *How to Read Character* (fig. 2). This photo-text installation presented six large, gilt-framed, black-and-white photographs of the artist's fragmented body, accompanied by

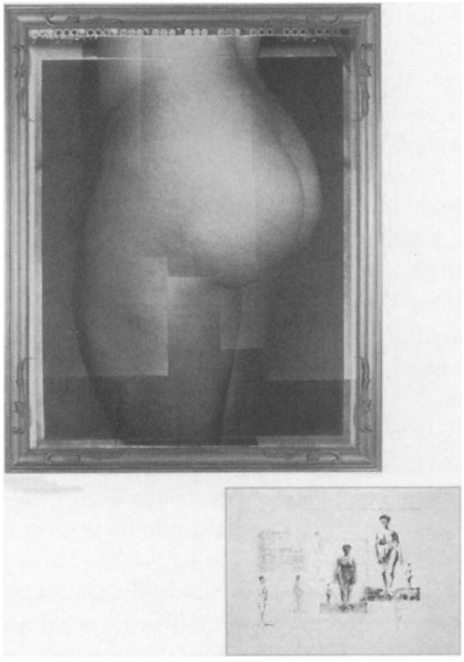

Fig. 1. Carla Williams, *Venus*, 1994.

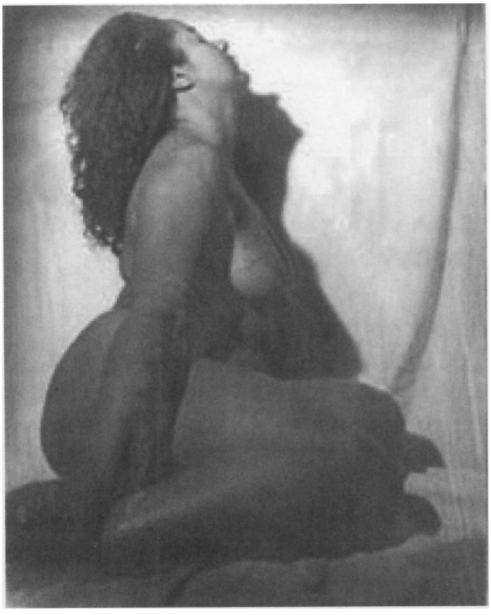

Fig. 2. Carla Williams, Untitled, from series *How to Read Character*, 1990–91.

historical texts and images. Borrowing its title from a late nineteenth-century book on phrenology and physiology, Williams comments on how science has framed the body in a language that "reads" racial and sexual characteristics onto the flesh.

One of these photographs depicts her derrière, which is paired with an image and written description of Saartjie Baartman. By creating this bridge between history and the present, between her body and Baartman's, Williams calls into question her self-representation as it negotiates the gaze of her viewers, who cannot quite escape the historical meanings inscribed on her body. As she explains, "I hope to suggest to the viewer that such precedents, while seemingly absurd and outdated, still contain a great deal of resonance and power with respect to the way that we read and respond to contemporary images of African American women" ("Artist's Statement," 2002). Despite this response, Williams frames her body—literally, in gold, through the use of gilt frames—as a gesture toward an aesthetic appreciation.

Williams also gestures toward a project not just of "seeing ourselves" but also of seeing each other as black female subjects. This struggle to redefine historic images requires, in part, black women to resist the defensive "policing" of each other's bodies and sexualities. This strategy perhaps dates back to the era of black "club women" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who often defended themselves from depictions of lascivious black female sexuality in the dominant culture by adhering to rigorous, highly moral values (Giddings 1984). Such values often pitted bourgeois black women against their working-class counterparts. One way that black middle-class women located themselves within the boundaries of respectability was in the "quieting," rigid presentation of their "too large behinds," which needed to be tucked in and made as invisible as possible. When black women failed to adhere to this behavior, and indeed, even called deliberate attention to this part of their anatomy, they were seen as encouraging dominant culture's labeling of their bodies as deviant and grotesque. Coreen Simpson dramatizes these tensions in her black-and-white photograph, *Club Savage*.[12]

In this image, one black woman looks with disapproval at another black woman, who displays with pride her endowed behind, outlined by her tight-fitting dress. Simpson contrasts the two women, presenting the presumably judgmental "policing" black woman—a "club woman"—in conservative dress. This pairing of the "club woman" with the "savage woman" (hence, "club savage") allows us to witness black women's complex struggles for sexual representation, as portrayed in the horrified gaze of the "club woman" and the unabashed display of the "savage woman." Simpson's critical assessment calls for all black women to question the "shamefulness" and negative views of their behinds.

The "Batty" as Site of Resistance

The title of this essay is an obvious pun on the phrase, "body politic," yet the choice of "batty," the Jamaican vernacular term for the rear end, requires explanation. The "batty," in Jamaican culture and to a larger extent in West Indian culture, is taken rather seriously and given certain reverence in discourses of beauty and sexual desire. Whether in working-class Jamaican dancehall settings or in carnival street scenes in Trinidad and the Caribbean Diaspora of Brooklyn, Toronto, or London, black female batties are let loose and uninhibited in glorious celebrations of flesh and sexual energy. Even though such displays have historically been characterized as "riotous and disorderly" (Barnes 1997, 290), such movements of the batty, in the contexts of dancehall and carnival, invite a public discourse that challenges colonial constructs of "decency" and "white supremacy." Hence, "batty" implies for me a more liberatory and unashamed view of the body.

The batty can thus function as a site of resistance, rather than reinforcing shame and self-deprecating humor. This is captured, for example, in the Jamaican legend of Nanny of the Maroons. The legend is as follows. A fugitive slave in the eighteenth century who forged her own community in the Jamaican rainforests with other fugitives known as maroons is credited with defeating English armies by catching their bullets in her buttocks and hurling back their ammunition.[13] In this myth, Nanny's batty, much like those of our contemporary Jamaican dancehall "queens," suggests possibilities for the black female body as a site for decolonization. She also serves as a powerful contrast to the enslaved black woman, whose exploited sexuality fueled the economies of slavery and colonialism through forced reproduction and labor, and to the Hottentot Venus, whose powerful batty was diminished by freak show display and scientific dissection.

The dance troupe Urban Bush Women is one contemporary example continuing in this path of resistance. Perhaps drawing on such histories, this troupe provides an important discourse on the "batty" that attempts to develop an aesthetic of the black female body, as well as to establish this part of the anatomy as a site of resistance, through their 1995 dance piece, *Batty Moves*. Choreographed by the group's founder, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, this performance captures the sensibilities of a ballet and modern-dance trained performer who "got tired of tucking and holding and apologizing" for the movements of her buttocks in these Western-based dance forms (Asantewaa 1998). As such, the performance constantly fluctuates between the gestures of ballet—such as pliés and arabesques, which require the strict, rigid, and disciplined nonmovement of the derrière—and the butt-accentuated moves in Afro-based and Caribbean dances.

Batty Moves begins with a line of dancers, dressed in form-fitting leotards, positioning their backs to the audience. As a result, they find themselves in the position of "object," in the stance of a Hottentot Venus on exhibit. However, this historical body undergoes transformation as each dancer moves and poses in ways that suggest that their batties will no longer function as fetishes but as expressive extensions of their mobile, energetic bodies. Indeed, this point of transformation occurs when one dancer, reflecting on this performance, decided, upon hearing an audience member "gasp" at the sight/site of her body: "I'm going to shove it in your face, so you can just take it!"[14]

This resolve of the dancer reflects her need to resist this disapproval of her rear end, to in fact, "shove it" all the more, as a defiant gesture that dares to claim the black female batty as visible, pronounced, sexy, *and* beautiful. This resistance is not just an individual protest. Rather, she expresses defiance of a historical tradition that degrades black women's bodies. One by one, each dancer performs and defines for herself, through spoken-word language and dance moves, the body beautiful, finally culminating in a group dance—rigorously thrusting their behinds toward the audience throughout the entire performance—that reclaims the powers of the batty in communal affirmation. Borrowing Jamaican slang for the title of this piece, Urban Bush Women not only celebrate the sexual provocations of black women's rear-end-shaking dances in Jamaican dancehall settings but also create an African diasporic discourse in which black women, across the Atlantic divides, can begin a cultural exchange in which their behinds figure prominently in the arenas of hip-hop, reggae, soca, and calypso. While these male-centered music forms objectify black women's backsides, often in extreme, misogynistic language, black women—through their dance moves—nonetheless negotiate dance spaces to assert their sexuality. In response to Urban Bush Women's performance of *Batty Moves*, dance critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa (1998) notes, "They took back, from men on the street and society in general, the power to name, direct, praise, or critique their buttocks" (Upbeat Program).

Across the diaspora, black women often begin in girlhood to center their sexuality by performing with their backsides. Whether in the African-American ring game, "Little Sally Walker," where young girls are encouraged to "shake it to the east, shake it to the west," or in the similar Afro-Caribbean "Brown Girl in the Ring," who is urged to "show me your motion," these circles of black girls provide a female-centered space for affirmation and pleasure in their bodies, even as these scripts prepare them later for the male gaze. As adult women, this display becomes not only more sexualized but racialized as well, as black women find their bodies subject to misinterpretation and mislabeling by the dominant culture. Not only that, but these bodies no longer respond to self-motivated desires and expressions but to the requests of others—whether to black male desires in such hip-hop shouts as "shake what your Mama gave ya" and such

soca-calypso demands as "wine yuh waist," or to other black women's policing call to "tuck it in."

We may need to recreate that circle of women—first enacted in childhood—who reaffirm that our bodies are fine, normal, capable, and beautiful. We may also need to enlarge that circle to include men, who can challenge their own objectifying gazes, and non-blacks, who can overcome the equation of blackness with deviance. Most of all, black women, who have been unmirrored for so long, must confront the prevailing imagery of grotesque derrières and black female hypersexuality to distinguish the myths and lies from our own truths and the ways in which we wish to represent ourselves. Only then will we be able to follow the lead of Serena Williams, proudly displaying our behinds while continuing our winning streak.

Notes

I am grateful to Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, major influences on my work on the Hottentot Venus. I am also grateful to Carla Williams, who provided much-needed information on the illustrations included here, both in correspondence with me and in her book, coauthored with Deborah Willis, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002).

1. Specifically, Gilman notes that the skin of African people, because of its dark complexion, was viewed in the early nineteenth century as a sign of leprosy, since—in comparison to white skins—black skin appeared to be "discolored."

2. Saartjie Baartman's ethnic origin is disputed. George Cuvier (1817), who dissected Baartman's cadaver, described her as belonging to the "Bushman race," known as San. Z. S. Strother (1999) believes that the term "Hottentots," referred to in European travel narratives, describes the Khoikhoi tribe. Biographical accounts of Baartman are provided by Gilman (1985), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (1999), and the 1998 film *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, directed by Zola Maseko.

3. For details on legal records pertaining to Baartman, see Edwards and Walvin (1983, 171–82).

4. Alexander Dunlop, who was originally included in the contract as an exhibitor, later backed out, fearing that Baartman would not be an attraction. See *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998).

5. Cuvier declared that Baartman died of smallpox, complicated by alcoholism.

6. A translation of this play—originally titled *La Venus Hottentote; ou la haine aux françaises*—is included in the Appendix of Sharpley-Whiting's *Black Venus* (1999). In addition, the second chapter in this book provides a close reading of this play.

7. Having become obsessed with the question of whether or not a "hottentot apron," which indicated an over-development of the vaginal lips, existed among Khoikhoi and San females—as was rumored by early European travelers in regions of South Africa—French natural scientists endeavored to prove that such existence illustrated inherent biological differences between Africans and Europeans.

8. This report is included in the *Notes of Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* (1817).

9. In his essay "The Hottentot Venus" (1985), Stephen Jay Gould describes his encounter at the Musée de l'Homme with Baartman's genitalia, stored in a fluid-filled jar, which sat on a shelf above a jar featuring scientist Paul Broca's brain. Gould also describes another jar featuring a dismembered foot, labeled as belonging to a woman from China.

10. Pastrana's child was stillborn, and he was also exhibited posthumously alongside his mother.

11. Latinos/as are suddenly recognized and made visible in contemporary discourse as a third "racial" category, despite the fact that their various communities encompass racial shades of "white" and "black."

12. An analysis of Simpson's photograph is included in Willis and Williams (2002, 71–72).

13. A historical account of Nanny of the Maroons in Jamaica is included in *Spirits of the Passage* (1997), edited by Madeleine Burnside and Rosemarie Robotham; also Jamaican author Michelle Cliff includes this local legend in her novels. See, for example, *Abeng* (1984) and *Free Enterprise* (1993).

14. The interview of this dancer is included in the video *Women's Work* (1996).

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