

Articles

Bodying Black Goddesses: The Duty of Representation Across Time and Cultures¹

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Conscious states exemplify a perpetual becoming, and the continuous prolongation of the past into the present --Philip Turetzky (1998: 201)

Certain contemporary portrayals of Black female deities which visually magnify the naked body conjure images of Black women from the Trans-Atlantic period. They connect the now to the colonial nineteenth and twentieth century during which a profusion of stereotypes of Blacks were disseminated in a variety of media. They also demonstrate how derogatory images of Black women, which I shall call *archetypal* representations of alterity, have ambiguously transformed. These depictions have proven contentious when decyphered by different viewers. And that they are re-appropriated through generations and across cultures has only compounded today's problem of Black female stereotyping.

Critical assessment of spectatorial response is significant to such representations once they are made public; for what is said against or in support of an image, especially if polemic, reveals the divergent political perspectives of gender and race as they relate to responsible art-making. Though having one's work diffused in media or in a particular venue is a privilege, the duty that comes with it is often overlooked—the duty of accountability. bell hooks urges that:

Committed cultural critics—whether white or black, scholars or artists—can produce work that opposes structures of domination, that presents possibilities for a transformed future by willingly interrogating their own work on aesthetic and political grounds. This interrogation itself

becomes an act of critical intervention, fostering a fundamental attitude of vigilance rather than denial. (1990: 55)

Working through the stages of duty implies that an artist is introspecting, becoming more seeing or sensitised to the pivotal issues of representation. The autodidactic process is a topic beyond the scope of this paper. But as responses to the genres of race and gender indicates, remembering Black women's histories and the complex histories of their bodies during the Trans-Atlantic era is also taken as a serious duty by many.

In this paper, I aim to explore certain processes of stereotyping that create contextual ambiguity, and to rethink representation as a subject-matter relevant to duty. Some historical aspects of slavery and corporeal practices are threaded into the analysis, binding certain moments of the present to the past. I examine several portrayals of dark goddesses and their hypercorporealisation in image, with the purpose of kindling an open-ended discussion concerning the complexities of artist rights to represent others, and the responses of the subcultural groups dissonantly mirrored in image. I use various textual and visual sources, and compare depictions by artists of different backgrounds and periods, to show the shared perception of the Black female body in the western imaginary. I use a few Canadian images as a base, to problematise the commonplace assumption of Canada being less affected by racial stereotypes than Europe and the USA.

Bodying Subjectivity: Hypercorporealisation and Race

Inasmuch as an image may be classified as good or bad (Gilman 1985: 17), in today's vocabulary, *stereotype* usually means a pejorative characterisation of an individual or group. A stereotype is an image that has surpassed the phase of archetypal blueprinting to recur frequently in ordinary culture. It is part of the everyday, a convention recognised immediately or subliminally. But certain scholars consider the methodology of stereotypes complicit in normalising how these images are re-defined across time.

. . . the exclusive preoccupation with images, whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of *essentialism*, as less subtle critics reduce a complex variety of portrayals to a

limited set of reified formulae. Such criticism is procrustean; the critic forces diverse fictive characters into preestablished categories. Behind every Black child performer the critic discerns a "pickaninny"; behind every sexually attractive actor a "buck"; behind every corpulent or nurturing Black female a "mammy." Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racial essentialism they were designed to combat. (Shohat and Stam 1994: 199)

Evidently, my analysis is not above criticism. Perhaps it, too, will perpetuate the cycle of how stereotypes are treated. Doubtless, it plays an inculpable hand in exploiting the bodies of Black women, for I have reprinted some of the very images that have incited controversial dialogues. And whilst my discussion may appear theoretical, my motive stems, not out of theory, but from knowing that, within actual encounters, race-gender stereotypes seen in media are projected onto others in ways that constrain or oppress their experiences of being. These exchanges necessitate individual agency, thus underscoring the power of the social conditioning of stereotypes and their influence on people's notions and behaviour toward those considered different in a particular culture.

Many scholars assert that stereotypes are images that disparagingly essentialise specific groups. Robbin Legere Henderson says a stereotype "is an attempt to depersonalize individuals and thereby deny them the rights and dignity which our society professes to accord everyone" (1989: 6). Jan Nederveen Pieterse claims: "Stereotypes are based on simplification and generalization, or the denial of individuality. . . . They tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. The targets of stereotyping are manoeuvred into certain roles, so that a vicious circle develops, in which social reality seems to endorse the stereotype" (1992: 11). In the same vein, Patricia Hill Collins sees a correlation between stereotypes and their impact in real life on the person or group stereotyped. She calls stereotypes controlling images "designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (1991: 68). Stereotypes therefore incite dynamics that,

through individual or group interaction, have profound social consequences in reality.

In *Peau noire, masques blancs* of 1952, Frantz Fanon discusses his own experiences as a Black Martiniquais in postwar France (Zolberg 1970: 121). He discerned that, in a predominantly White culture, a Black person acquires identity by White hegemonic patterns and practices of socialisation, which are mainly established from pigment and body differences. In the context of race, Blackness is a "malédiction corporelle," as Fanon says, derived from "l'autre, le Blanc, qui m'avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récits" (1952: 92).² The body begins as a corporeal schema, existing in a specific time and space; but the signifier of Black skin changes the experiences of the body in that spatiotemporality. Fanon calls this conversion a racial epidermal schema (*un schéma épidermique racial*) in which White ideologies and projections of Blackness circulate as cultural signs that alienate and debase Black subjects (1952:92). These signs are internalised by members of a given culture, which includes Black individuals who perennially see self reflected in society as stereotypes of the abnormal, the oversexed and the subhuman. Speaking in first person, Fanon states:

L'évidence était là, implacable. Ma noirceur était là, dense et indiscutable. Elle me tourmentait, elle me pourchassait, m'inquiétait, m'exaspérait.

Les nègres sont des sauvages, abrutis, des analphabètes. Mais moi, je savais que dans mon cas ces propositions étaient fausses. Il y avait un mythe du nègre qu'il fallait démolir coûte que coûte (1952: 96).³

The presence of these epidermally accentuated stereotypes in culture create an ambiguous, antagonistic context for social interaction. Insofar as the Black person may feel dread, belittlement, self-aversion and alienation at the sight of these images, White individuals socialised by the myths of Blackness will profess to embrace Black alterity by interacting with Black persons as they do with the stereotypes. This point Fanon clearly underlines with his mimicking of a Frenchman who claimed to know Black identities by the derogatory paradigms mainstreamed:

“Voyez-vous, monsieur, je suis l’un des plus négrophiles de Lyon” (1952: 96).⁴ In this light, White perceptions of Blackness as they manifest in stereotypes appear psychically masturbatory, gratifying either phantasy or phobia for the White collective imaginary.

Myriad images of dark goddesses also appear cognitively onanistic in how they present Black womanhood to the public eye: for they reduce Black female *subjectivity* to *epidermal body* and *sensual/sexual commodity*.⁵ This limited bodying of subject is signified by nakedness, soma and Black skin—elements that visually dictate a hyper, or scopically heightened, corporeality in which the body, gendered and racialised, dominates in representation; hence the term *hypercorporealisation*. Moreover, the constancy of this coding of Black women’s bodies has become, through time, integral to western ideological rituals of knowing and recognising. Homi Bhabha says that these two processes are intrinsic to the sociopolitical function of the stereotype: “. . . the stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that vasculates between what is always ‘in place’, already known and something . . . that must be anxiously repeated. . .” (1994: 66). Bhabha also relates the stereotype to the concept of ambivalence in which attraction and repulsion co-exist as well as mimicry and mockery of the coloniser-colonised (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2000: 12-13). Bhabha continues: “. . . it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency” (1994: 66). Within the practice of being “*always-already* subjects” who are conventionally known and identified (Althusser 1994: 130), in the past, the Black female was generally recognised as spectacle, and the person observing positioned as a White usually male usually heterosexual spectator. In the contemporary, most of these dynamics still apply. Through a White spectatorship tinged by voyeurism and curiosity, the Black female re-becomes peculiar sexualised spectacle. With the images of dark-skinned goddesses, the gaze formulated by the artist that interpellates the spectator is one through which the represented subject turns into a deformed exaggerated organism, artistically paint-brushed with an anatomy that carnalises person through magnification.

Indeed, race has played a more crucial role since the 1800s in how bodies have been perceived in the western imaginary, hierarchised in political and scientific discourse, interpreted in reality, and represented in material culture. I say “more crucial” in the afore sentence because

slavery, begun in the New World during the 1400s with the European enslavement of indigenous peoples,⁶ grew into a racialised system of oppression that, by the nineteenth century, was advancing industrialisation and modernity in the west. Black slavery was increasingly founded on exploitive gender relations and ethnic-racial differentiation which produced various labour and working classes in North America and the Caribbean colonies. Albert Boime asserts that: "The African slave trade, beginning in the midfifteenth century and continuing for the next four hundred years, was one of the most important phenomena in the history of the modern world, and no single human being attempting to make a verbal or visual statement about it could be free from bias" (1990: xiii).

Furthermore, the Black and White racialisation of the female body in the 1800s differed in semiotic currencies. This differentiation unveils an asymmetrical relatedness in how corporeality was depicted and collectively comprehended. This racial interdependence reflected both institutional practices in slavocracies that measured privilege by skin colour and ideology (Roberts 1994: 4-6). Whereas the female figure racialised as Black stood for excess, disease, deviancy and unrestrained lasciviousness (Gilman 1985: 89), the virtuous female body raced as White took on a tapering shape that signified containment, ethereality, morality, femininity and a spiritualised delicacy. This latter body type, of slim lines and contours, has become the widely diffused norm in western media. But not all White female bodies were considered virtuous. Those exemplifying traits outside of the prescribed racial conventions were also stereotyped as transgressive bodies with negrified proclivities (Rhodes 1994: 65).⁷

In the immediate aftermath of abolition, stereotypes were instrumental in impeding the socioeconomic mobility of Blacks who were still being portrayed as slow-witted slaves, servants and entertainers (Archer-Straw 2000: 12, 38). That these images have circulated for centuries indicates a high degree of cultural absorption. Traces of the interdependence of Black and White bodily opposites from the colonial era can still be seen in certain contemporary Canadian representations.

The Naked Nude

Made in 1982 by Maritime-based Hilda Woolnough, the triptych *Another Spring* contains a centre panel of a monstrous goddess, entitled

Venus (Fig.1).⁸ Woolnough had begun her “*Venus series*” in 1978, reproducing goddess images as far back as the Venus of Willendorf of 30,000 BC (Murray 1989/1990). But this panel was conceived as a response to Alessandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* c.1484-86 (Fig.3) (Tippett 1993: 165), in which the main character, a slim curvaceous White deity, floats shoreward on a shell. So light is her body that she moves with the wind, personified to the left by the god Zephyrus (White 1989: 141).

Conflicting views have been given about the Botticellian goddess. Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen claim the allegory in “this pagan scene” is fashioned by a Praxitelean technique of which all anatomical parts are rendered to classical perfection (2001: 160). They call Venus a “nude” that emblematises “the incarnation of sinful lust” and a “naked female body” (Hagen 2001: 159). Certain theorists, however, carefully distinguish *naked* from *nude*. Edward Lucie-Smith says: “Venus is nude and, for all the modesty of her gesture, quite evidently unashamed of her nudity. . . . If an erotic element is present it is deliberately refined and etherealised. . . . Botticelli simultaneously accepts the nude as a subject and spiritualizes it” (1995: 47). David Wilkins and Bernard Schultz state that: “Her pose is based on ancient sculptures, but she is hardly sculptural. The elegance of the figure is set off by the intertwining patterns of Venus’s hair” (1990: 252-253). These descriptions convey a consensus: Venus is sculpted, ethereal, a perfect nude. She shows no signs of indecorousness, this being the important aesthetic nuance. Nakedness signifies a pornographic, immoral, crude body devoid of cultivation. Nudity, however, is exalted in western art. John Berger explains that: “The nude in European oil painting is usually presented as an admirable expression of the European humanist spirit” (1972: 62). Yet an incongruity exists in how nudes were/are produced. Berger elaborates: “The contradiction can be stated simply. On the one hand the individualism of the artist, the thinker, the patron, the owner: on the other hand, the person who is the object of their activities—the woman treated as a thing or an abstraction” (1972: 62).

Whereas Berger locates nakedness outside of representation, Lynda Nead questions whether the nude can be pristinely divided from the naked, since both are of the same source—a physical body. Considering that nakedness can indeed be replicated, the artist’s rendering of body



Figure 1: *Venus* c.1982, Middle panel of *Another Spring*, Hilda Woolnough.

becomes the device that collapses or separates out the nude from the naked. Says Nead: “There can be no naked ‘other’ to the nude, for the body is always already in representation. And since there is no recourse to a semiotically innocent or unmediated body, we must be content to investigate the diverse ways in which women’s bodies are represented and to promote new bodily images and identities” (1992: 16). Nead’s insight implicitly draws the artist’s agency into the picture of production, representation and accountability. The innovation of “new bodily images and identities” is thus left upon the artist to create in a manner that overturns old meanings, visual codes and conventions.

However, Woolnough attempted to promote a new image that would critique male-derived standards of female beauty and disrupt the male heterosexual voyeuristic gaze which traditionally objectifies and sexualises the female body for its own pleasure. But that the allegory is dark, masked and Picasso-like puts the image into a category in which the racialised female body becomes engraved with ‘primitivist’ aesthetics. Avis Lang Rosenberg found that the work had “echoes of Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*” (1982: 11) and that it evoked the grotesque:

The females in Woolnough's drawings have long been anything but vapid: squat, black, bulging, threatening, crouching, seething, massive, hypnotic. For the present occasion she turned to paint, a more fitting medium in which to issue a rejoinder to the European past. Unlovely faces grimacing with wisdom, huge bodies with jutting breasts, gigantic grasping hands, and ponderous feet crowd the shallow spaces in the manner of a bas-relief. . . A savage and stoical Venus presides, more Palaeolithic or pre-Columbian than Renaissance, her horny toenails and damp, smoky crotch her marks of pride and power, not shame. (1982: 11)



Figure 2: *Lives of Lizzie*. Triptych
c.1990, Katrina Thorsen.

Seemingly, Woolnough's deity was to be desexualised in its visual register. But the contextual focus on the "damp, smoky crotch" resexualises the image. The pudenda is what validates the goddess's "power and pride." Not only are the theme and aesthetics at odds with each other; this contextualisation is an old colonial formula used today to reduce Black women to stereotypes of the bestially hypersexed. Maria Tippett

noted this discrepancy and wrote in *By A Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* that:

Countering the ways in which male artists depict women for the pleasure of the male viewer, Woolnough presented what she described as 'A squatting, smelly-toed, and masked Venus.' The chunky, grotesque figure of the central panel of her triptych arouses no sexual desire but mocks the small-breasted sylph-like figures that dance across Botticelli's famous work. . . Woolnough has exchanged one stereotype for another. Venus' ripe breasts, her exposed genitalia, her fetish-like stance indicate her connection to the earth, fertility and regeneration, the very stereotype of cultural oppression that feminists were determined to change. (1993: 165)

Through Woolnough's rendering, the goddess becomes hypercorporealised, her large body seeming cramped in the small quarters of the panel. She sits facing front, boldly spreading apart her legs to the spectator to reveal her loins. The gesture appears obscene, but the allegory's solemn expression recodes the pose as matter-of-fact. The signs constructing body produce an aesthetic ambiguity through which *Venus* is visually articulated as a naked nude. Also, that the allegory's genitalia is covered with pubic hairs signifies a truer-to-life representation of a vagina, one that is *naked*; for a *nude* would display—if not hidden as in *Birth of Venus*—a stylised genitalia, depilated and labially abstracted to signify an abstinent spiritualised body. The massive torso and the face assimilating the African mask script the "primitive" allegory as a nude from a morbid dream. Thus, the explication and the corporeal aesthetics work together to produce contextual ambiguity.

Primitivism and Dark-Skinned Archetypes: From Colonialism to Modernity

Primitivism came into prominence during the Enlightenment, with the onslaught of European expansion (Jahoda 1999: xv-xvi). Colonial dominance facilitated the western appropriation of other cultures Europe considered less developed than itself, and provided Europeans with ample subjects to illustrate, study and later with the invention of the camera,

photograph pornographically under the guise of anthropology (Rhodes 1994: 7; Said 1994; Ewing 1994: 12-14). Primitivist ideologies defined Blacks and numerous indigenous peoples as noble savages, which signified animal, instinctual, salacious heathens, racially and morally inferior to White Europeans (Jahoda 1999: 20-21).

. . . the Enlightenment's declaration of itself as "the Age of Reason" was predicated upon precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe, while the inhabitants of areas outside of Europe, who were considered to be of non-European racial and cultural origins, were consistently described and theorized as rationally inferior and savage. (Eze 1997: 4)

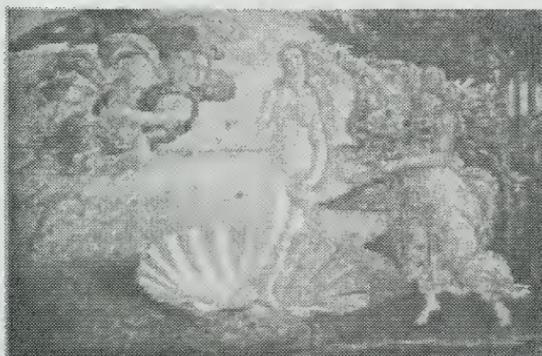


Figure 3: *Birth of Venus* c.1484-86.
Alessandro Botticelli.

Skin colour thus became a highly condensed signifier in the Trans-Atlantic context, determining beauty, morality, sociopolitical privilege, and religious identity. One Christian justification for Black slavery was that Black skin was a "mark of misfortune, and physical labour the penalty for rebellion against God. . . the black was a Noble Savage fallen from grace" (Russell 1983: 55). The turn of the nineteenth century saw the abolitionist movement gaining international momentum; but stronger still was the backlash of slavocrats protecting their "property" interests. Enlightenment ideologies of the noble savage begun to surface in propa-

ganda images that used the Black female body as a corporeal site of ambiguity to quell the conflict between slaveowners and abolitionists. *The Voyage of the Sable Venus* (Fig.4) was such an image.

Fashioned after Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, W. Grainger's engraving



Figure 4: *Voyage of the Sable Venus*
c.1801, W. Grainger.

The Voyage of the Sable Venus was published alongside "Sable Venus, An Ode" in Bryan Edwards' *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* of 1793. Though a replica of Botticelli's Renaissance image, the Blackness of the female allegory changes the visual and political delivery of the theme. In the Trans-Atlantic period, it created an archetypal image of alterity with polysemous meanings. Compared to Botticelli's nymph, the excessive muscularity of the near-naked Black goddess is reminiscent of a well-trained athlete or of a servant whose body has grown accustomed to hard labour. This allegory also stands afloat on a shell, her shoulders framed by White putti who accentuate her sable skin. The Blackness of epiderma emphasises her muscularity; it dominates the image, becoming the platform on which Christianity and vulgar eroticism fuse (Provost 2000: 86). The allegory's body simultaneously represents purchasable sexuality and female

enslavement to slavocrats, Christian salvation and physical freedom to slaves and abolitionists alike. Numerous contemporary scholars have examined this image and the societal climate from which it emerged. Most agree the ode and the engraving only romanticise the brutal context of Black female enslavement (Honour 1989: 33; Dyer 1997: 153; Russell 1983: 55). One scholar stated that, with slavery so popular an international practice in the 1700s, in reality, Sable Venus would not “have been holding the reins to her own destiny” as she does in Grainger’s image (Schiebinger 1993: 129).

Further reinforcing the derogatory stereotyping of Black women were the transactions around the Black female body in slavery which bestialised and demeaned individuals: the exchange of money for person as chattel; bodily exposure on auction blocks in America and at vaudevilles or balls in Europe (hooks 1992: 62; Gilman 1985: 88; White 1985: 29-30); and the forced sexual exploitation which caused Black females – whether prepubescent, teenaged or adult—to be perceived as immoral disease-ridden commodities of prostitution (Gilman 1985: 85; Nederveen Pieterse 1992: 183; Rodes 1994: 90-91). The Franco-British colonies, with their discriminatory institutions, had a part in forcing Black females to play out the negative stereotypes as normative realities. Before the abolitionist law of 1833 (Prévost 1991: 231-232), Upper and Lower Canada were also implicated, thriving as slave societies. White women slavocrats of Montreal’s bourgeoisie did as they wished with their Pawnee and Black female slaves, putting them up for sale and advertising them as chattel in various newspapers (Provost 2000/2001: 88; Trudel 1960). Other White women slavocrats in West Indian colonies were pimps to their Black female slaves: “indeed, white women deemed ‘respectable’ owned and mongered coloured and black prostitutes in port towns” (Green 1976: 21). It is in this international context of bodies being traded and supra-exploited that ideologies of the Black female disposition as prurient were diffused cross-culturally (Edmondson 1976: 6).

The stereotype of the Black Venus especially oppressed one young Khoisan woman named Saartjie Baartman (1790-1815). Through coerced performance and display, she became a live stereotype known as the Hottentot Venus. From the Dutch-colonised South-African Cape, Baartman was brought to Europe in 1810 to be lewdly exhibited at circuses and in museums (Gould 1985: 293). Initially in the charge of

Henry Caesar, in Europe she was later given to an animal keeper called Réaux and displayed publicly, sometimes at entry prices competitive to those of exhibited animals (Sharpley-Whiting 1999). At these events, she was indignantly offered candy to sing and to jump, like an animal rewarded to do tricks (Racinet 1888). From the court transcripts of an inquiry launched in November 1810 and instigated by outraged spectators, it is suspected that the animal keeper brutalised Baartman into giving a testimony that masked the abuses she suffered (Maseko *Life and Times* 1998; Chamley 2000: 41). She testified to being happy in Europe and well-treated (Edwards and Walvin 1983: 171-182).

But she was apparently forced into prostitution. When she died in December 1815, Georges Cuvier immediately dissected her, focusing on the structure of her sex and reproductive organs in his monograph. Her genitalia were cut out by Cuvier, jarred, shelved and re-exhibited at Musée de l'Homme for almost two centuries. The cause of Baartman's death was an inflammatory disease which some relate to syphilis, a disease she most likely contracted as a slave/servant prostitute (Gould 1985: 294). Baartman was alienated and debased in a predominantly White colonial Europe that, in spite of promoting Christian morality, nonetheless condoned slavery and the sexually mortifying exploitation of Black people.

Contemporary journalists across the globe have been closely tracking Baartman's repatriation to South Africa in the millennium. Their reports confirm that she was indeed implicated in prostitution ("Bring Back"). One account from 2000 stated that, historically, "anthropologists argued. . . she had been a prostitute specializing in sodomy," and that she was nicknamed "fat bum" (Webster 26). A 2002 news clip revealed that she died "in Paris as an impoverished prostitute" (Butcher 2002: A-15). Finally, an update in *Essence*, June 2002, stated that: "she died poor and diseased in 1815" (Saunders 30). Baartman's coercion into prostitution demonstrates how this particular kind of violence was made to appear as a normative choice of lifestyle for Black women.

From the anglophone literary camp, novels and autobiographies likewise mention stereotypes of Black females as bestially oversexed and diseased, though from different perspectives. African-American ex-slave Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) wrote in her autobiography of 1861 that: "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (49). Jacob

refers here to the forced reproduction Black female slaves were subjected to as “breeders,” a violence against person sanctioned in the colonial context. Sixteen years earlier, in his life narrative, former slave, abolitionist, and civil rights activist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)⁹ wrote about a woman named Caroline purchased by Mr. Covey, a White slavemaster, for the specific role of breeder:

Mr. Covey bought her from Mr. Thomas Lowe, about six miles from St. Michael's. She was a large able-bodied woman about twenty years old. . . . After buying her, he hired a married man of Mr. Samuel Harrison, to live with him one year; and him he used to fasten up with her every night! The result was, that, at the end of the year, the miserable woman gave birth to twins. At this result, Mr. Covey seemed to be highly pleased. . . . The children were regarded as being quite an addition to his wealth. (1845: 37)

Decades later, in the renowned *Lady Chatterley's Lover* published 1928, English writer D.H. Lawrence had one of his main characters say: “I thought there was no real sex left: never a woman who'd really ‘come’ naturally with a man: except black women, and somehow, well, we're white men: and they're a bit like mud” (212). The speaking protagonist is Mellors, a game keeper of the lower classes who has a liaison with Lady Chatterley. The dialogue portrays Black women as salacious and ugly, their complexion resembling “mud” in the eyes of “white men” who will all the same have sex with them. Black women are worded as carnal bodies, their promiscuity, ability to “really ‘come’ naturally,” and unsightliness presented as attributes inherent to Black womanhood.

Published around the same period as Lawrence's novel was Frank Harris's autobiography. It logs his expeditions in Europe and North America and his sexual escapades from boy- to manhood. A literary critic who was part of Oscar Wilde's circle, Harris described the individuals he met on his journeys. One was of a seventeen year old English mariner: “William Ponsonby was not a bad sort, but he talked of nothing but girls from morning till night and insisted that Negresses were better

than white girls; they were far more passionate, he said" (61). In another passage, Harris stated that Ponosby

. . . went on to tell me about one of his colleagues, John Lawrence, who got black pox, as he called syphilis, caught from a Negress.

"He didn't notice it for three months," Ponsonby went on, "and it got into his system; his nose got bad and he was invalided home, poor devil. Those black girls are foul," he continued; they're dirty devils." His ruttish sorrows didn't interest me much, for I had made up my mind never at any time to go with any prostitute. (1922-1927: 62)

The main aspects conflated here are that black pox or syphilis is a Negress' disease and that Black women "are foul," as Harris mused to himself, prostitutes to be avoided. Such discourses of the Black female body were prevalent in different western cultures throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, helping to anchor the negative stereotypes of Black women as pathological and genital-centric in the western imaginary.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* of 1907 (Fig.5) carried these paradigms into modernity, preserving them by a Cubist style. Some of the literature treating this artwork when it began to be exhibited publicly in the early 1900s called it "Le Bordel d'Avignon" or "Les Filles d'Avignon" (Rubin 1994: 18). *Le bordel* means "the whorehouse;" and *filles* alludes to prostitutes, as does *Avignon*. William Rubin asserts that: "Brothels were apparently not uncommon on streets named after Avignon in . . . large European towns. Other examples include Rome . . . when 'andare agli avignonesi' seems to have been a slang locution for 'going to the brothel'. . ." (1994: 19). The image displays five female nudes crammed into a space with no clear horizon line. The Cubist technique violently renders the allegories' bodies into thick chunky limbs with sharp unflattering angles that articulate primitivism (Foster 1993: 74-76). Three of the five faces are disfigured by dark colours or by African masks which represent syphilis (Rubin 1994:116). The painting is

said to have been motivated by Picasso's exposure to African masks, but also by his visits to prison hospitals and his observations of syphilitic inmates; some had noses eaten away by the illness (Rubin 1994: 130-131). Rubin underlines that syphilis was the scare in the early 1900s, until treatment was discovered: "Lest we forget, syphilis was still very much a fatal disease at the time Picasso painted *Demoiselles*" (1994: 57). *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is therefore loaded with gendered and racial connotations about the Black female body as primitive, prostitudinal and diseased.



Figure 5: *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, c. 1907, Pablo Picasso.

By producing a counter-representation of Botticelli's image in a primitivist style, Woolnough created a grotesque deity whose contextualisation and rendering resemble the problematic paradigms of Black women naturalised in the racially discriminatory colonial context. Other Canadian female artists have created similar images of dark goddesses which have sparked controversy.

Another Canadian-Made Triptych: Mother Africa

Katarina Thorsen's triptych *Lives of Lizzie* c.1990 was displayed during January and February of 1991, and once again in an April 1991 Vancouver exhibition at Fifty-Six Gallery. Thorsen's section, entitled "I Love Titty," venerated, as she explained, Black women as mothers (Rosenberg 1991: D-7; Wilson 1991: B-10). Although meant as an homage to Black maternity, the images flanking the centre panel eroticises the Black female body. The middle image magnifies the head of a Black woman framed by curvilinear graphics. But the one to the left shows a model only wearing a turban, her torso and full breasts bare, dominating the main perspective. The other to the right reveals a naked Black woman giving birth, her face stretched into an expression of ecstasy, her legs parted in labour.

This last panel is the one most reprinted in art texts (Fig.2). Similar to Woolnough's *Venus*, Thorsen's model is grotesquely magnified: her legs and genitalia frontally open to the spectator. This turns the witnessing of birth into a semi-voyeursitic activity. The corpulent body becomes, in a way, desecrated by the scopophilia that promptly directs the gaze to the female sex. As a consequence, the labouring mother turns into an object of visceral genitalic curiosity. In the 1990 publication *Artropolis 90: Lineages and Linkages*, Thorsen said: "*Lives of Lizzie* is my personal celebration of the goddess-Mother Africa" (qtd. in Rosenberg and Varney 106). She went on to explain that:

My paintings are not an apology from a White person. Why do I, a middle-class white mother of two, always paint pregnant Black women with large breasts? My initial response is that I like to promote my daughter's African heritage so that she may grow up self-confident and complete. But it has become much more than that. It's become a personal focus—a ritual celebration of goddess, the creator, and a deliberate spiritual, mental and physical act to keep in touch with the truth, the beauty, and the genetics of all species. (qtd. in Rosenberg and Varney 1990: 106)

Though the parent of a child of “African heritage,” as she claims, Thorsen’s statement is problematic for what it implies—that seeing images of “Black women with large breasts” will help girls of “African heritage” to “grow up self-confident and complete.” Her identity as “a middle-class White mother” whose “personal focus” is celebrating birth and spirituality, but through the medium of Black women’s bodies, further complicates matters.

In her exhibition review, Ann Rosenberg referred to Thorsen’s goddesses as “jive-talking mamas” (1991: D-7), asserting that, for spectators, Thorsen’s identity was crucial to unravelling the context of the images: “The opening was attended by many women who were already irritated by the invitation image.¹⁰ Some became more annoyed when they saw the interpretations of black women’s sexuality and motherliness for the first time and discovered they were created by a white woman” (1991: D-7). Rosenberg recognised the complexity and magnitude the triptych represented. Yet her approach in the review was to favour the artist’s right to free expression rather than to tackle the more perplexing issues of race-gender representation: “. . . Thorsen is being roasted for expression her joy in her own biology and that, it seems to me, is highly unfair” (1991: D-7). Another review indicated that Thorsen was not deterred from making art, given that “the harsh criticism comes from a ‘minority’” (Saenger 1991: 50). But some of the “harsh criticism” also came from non-minorities who thought her focus on birth processes essentialist: “I reject completely the idea that women’s experience and reality can be depicted at all by reducing it to body parts, and reproductive and sexual functions, with no political context whatsoever. . .” (Comment book 1991). And having seen another of Thorsen’s exhibitions which carried the same pieces, one gallery visitor wrote in the guest book: “I am a white male, and I don’t go around painting Black males’ penises. If I did, I sure as hek wouldn’t put it on display” (Guest book 1991).

What exactly was the clash in perspectives that created the polemic?

Still too fresh in the Black imaginary are the historical conditions of Black women’s bodies during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade—a history

of utter trauma and mortification to the body that inescapably dialogues with contemporary depictions of Black female corporeality. One gallery visitor wrote to Thorsen in the 1991 comment book: "Paint your own tits." And after attending the exhibition, Janisse Browning wrote:

The artist. . . exoticises Black women in paintings with erect, larger-than-life breasts, sometimes with splayed open vaginas that invite the gaze of onlookers. Her representations. . . magnify the sexual prowess of Black women. Such images construct and reinforce dangerous stereotypes that already exist in many White people's imaginations. After expressing my disdain to the artist and her supporters at an opening last April, I realised how concretely power relations are reproduced in image-making. (1992: 33)

Browning's perspective reverts to the psychovisual I/eye of certain spectators whose gaze accesses the historical knowledge of the colonial ideologies and stereotypes that tyrannised Black women's realities.

This psychovisual I/eye permits spectators to read aesthetics in multiple and critically conflicting ways. For instance, a viewer may be seduced by the veneer of a representation, but concurrently revolted by the messages symbolically articulated in the content. Browning further admitted that her reading of Thorsen's goddesses occurred through the historical knowledge of Black women as fetishised bodies since slavery (1991: 15). Making parallels between the practices of representation in the colonial past and the neocolonial present, she claimed that: "People of European descent in North America have continually interpreted, re-interpreted, represented and mis-represented people of African descent—in their education systems, in media and advertising, and, yes, in their art" (1991: 15).

Thus the historical memory of Black women's corporeal mortification was one significant factor Thorsen's works appear to have reinscribed through ignorance. Also, for many, Black slavery seems not a thing of the past, but a horrific practice just abolished yesterday. Another factor overlooked was the history of White projections onto Black persons and their experiences, and the sociopolitical repercussions of these

projections over time. Such a dynamic reverts, once more, to using stereotypes—and not actual people—as the models for social interaction. This was clearly underscored in a viewer's response to Thorsen:

I think the paintings *are* beautiful—but it's this seductive quality that I find disturbing. People see the beauty, but also forget about the stereotypes they can reinforce in some people's minds. If I saw these paintings in the Black museum my grandfather and mother founded, perhaps my reaction would be different. But—of course—we're in Vancouver, where people like myself are a minority. And when "others" see people like me, they unfortunately tend to associate us with the *representation* they've been exposed to. (Guest book 1991)

Surfacing, therefore, from the exhibition was the mix-up between Thorsen's hypercorporealised manner of revering Mother Africa, certain viewers' knowledge of the historical realities of the bodily abuse and exploitation of Black women in cultures ruled by White slavocracies, but more crucially the continuance of White projections of stereotypical representations onto Black realities. Blackness and nakedness, as they entered the west and gained new definitions that justified colonisation and slavery compete with the context Thorsen strives to establish. The reductive corporeal stereotypes of Blacks diffused in the aftermath of slavery and in current times, also disrupt the forum of Thorsen's exhibition. Some thought the goddess triptych positive and "spunky" (Rosenberg 1991: D-10); but to others, *Lives of Lizzie* conjured colonial aesthetics that glorified in its evocation the real-life sexual denigration of Black women during the Trans-Atlantic period. Moreover, as apolitical feminine art, the triptych was considered by numerous viewers as a lauding of this problematic history in the contemporary, divorced from historical memory, from the critical remembering of the slavocratic rituals that consistently presented Black persons as animalised bodies, and from political conscience.

The Duty of Representation: Last Remarks

Although innocently conceived, within a larger sociohistorical framework, the triptychs continue the legacy of White reinscriptions and psychically onanistic perceptions of Black female alterity as *essentially* dark, carnal, sexual bodies. Furthermore, the making of such works denotes ownership (another controversial issue manifesting as cultural appropriation); for the artist comes to own the alterity of phantasy or phobia by shaping it, defining it, and bringing it to life in material mediums. This aspect is raised by Peter Wilson whose review stated that:

Thorsen had painted the images. They were hers. And – while it was true she had to accept the fact that they hurt, upset and angered some people—there was no requirement for her to justify or to recant or to go back to the studio and start creating approved, politically-correct images.

In a free society that's all you get when it comes to art—the right to protest and the hope that someone will listen to that protest. (1991: B-10)

This privileged space of making, defining, and naming relates to hegemonic systems of power (Foucault 1966), which certain artists choose to be unconcerned about. To trouble with how these structures locate them, and facilitate their power to fashion and concoct, is seen as political self-work too crippling to the creative process.¹¹ Says Carrie Jane Singleton:

The social and political advantages of being “white” are clear. Race privilege allows whites to choose to hear or not to hear what others say, and further, whites choose to respond or not to respond. The power of being white is the power to decide, to be self-defining and therefore, to define others. (1989: 14).

Ignoring the channels of privilege, particularly as they interweave with individual agency, is to volitionally turn a blind eye on one's duty and on the asymmetries in western culture that permit problematic images of Black females to be re-disseminated and projected onto Black experiences in reality through small singular acts.

The examples presented here have shown that the problem of White ideologies of Blackness cut across time and geography, being both a national and international conundrum, affecting both history and the contemporary, collective racial perceptions and racialised realities. White definitions of Black bodies and of Black ways of being—i.e., oversexed, diseased, subhuman, inferior—continue to be mass-produced in images and re-internalised in popular culture. These reductive colonial stereotypes have become the ones most familiar to the neocolonial mainstream. And it is through these stereotypes that White hegemony claims to be negrophilic, embracing Blackness, yet in a superficial manner that allows Black subjects to be re-othered and exoticised. The recurrence of these hypercorporealised images of the Black female body in western media indicates how seriously the artist takes the duty of representing alterity. Even more, in a western democracy where one can choose to ignore criticism, change comes slowly.

For centuries, the west has inscribed and devoured sexualised images of Black female corporeality. It is in this cycle of occidental time and space that stereotypes of female Blackness are epochally turned over, remade from good to bad by White hegemony, redefined from positive to negative to positive again and so forth, a cycle which reveals that the problem of how Black females are bodily represented, especially under the guise of "goddess," is far from being resolved.

Notes

1. Acknowledgements. I wish to thank Jennifer Besse for references, as well as Katie and Dave P. for bits of information that have enriched my analysis. A special thanks to Sarah Greig for her time and feedback on the sections regarding artists and duty. Also a thanks to Tony Bardach who generously shared his archives with me.

2. English translation: ". . . the other, the white man who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (Markmann 1967:111).

3. English translation: "The evidence was there, unalterable. My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me,

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angered me. Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates. But in my own case, I knew that these statements were false. There was a myth of the Negro that had to be destroyed at all costs" (Markmann 1967: 117).

4. English translation: "I want you to understand, sir, I am one of the best friends the Negro has in Lyon" (Markmann 1967: 117).

5. For a discussion on the commodification of the Black body in contemporary ads, see Anoop Nayak, "Frozen Bodies: Disclosing Whiteness in Häagen-Dazs Advertising," *Body & Society* 3.3 (Sept. 1997): 51-71.

6. See Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, trans. Herma Briffault. 1552. Rpt. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992)

7. See also Whitney Chadwick, "Fetishizing Fashion/Fetishizing Culture: Man Ray's *Noire et blanche*," regarding the White model Kiki in Paris during the 1920s. *Oxford Art Journal* 18.2 (1995): 9-10.

8. The aesthetics of Woolnough's goddess resembles that of Francis Picabia's in *Femme à l'idole* c.1940-43. See the painting in Sara Cochran's groundbreaking essay "La peinture de Francis Picabia pendant la seconde guerre mondiale/Francis Picabia's Wartime Paintings" *Art Press* 222(mars 1997):49.

9. See "The Abolitionist," <http://afgen.com/slave1.html> and "Biographical Sketches," <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/malesupp/bio.htm>.

On the invitation was a pair of breasts, vivisected and printed beside the title "I Love Titty": A Celebration of the Female Breasts as Lifeforce and Sexual Focus. Tony Bardarch's archives.

10. On his website, "On Cultural Appropriation," Ron Stacey claimed that: "Artists in their works mustn't concern themselves with boundaries of convention, racism, sexism, religion, chauvinism etc., except perhaps to expose the human vagaries involved therein. To do so is to be not an artist, but a propagandist." This passage reads as the depoliticisation of an artist's responsibility to work through complex issues. See his full essay at <http://www.aabc.com/lotos/forum/approp.htm>.

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Figures

Fig.1. *Venus* c.1982, centre panel of triptych *Another Spring (after Botticelli's Primavera)* c.1982. Hilda Woolnough. Acrylic on masonite. 121.9 x 61 cm. Private collection. Rpt. from Maria Tippett. *By A Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1993. 165.

Fig.2. End panel of triptych *Lives of Lizzie* c.1990. Katarina Thorsen. Mixed-media on canvas. 48 x 108 in. Private collection. Rpt. from Archie Graham. "Busting at the Seams in Passionate Protest." *Vancouver Sun* (20 October 1990): D-10.

Fig.3. *Birth of Venus* c.1484-86. Painting by Alessandro Botticelli. Tempera on canvas. 5'9" x 9'2". Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Rpt. from Denise Hooker, ed. *History of Western Art*. Toronto: Boxtree Ltd., 1989. 140.

Fig 4. *Voyage of the Sable Venus* c.1801. Engraving by W. Grainger. [Replicated after a painting made 1763]. Rpt. from Hugh Honour. *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. IV.1 Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989. 34.

Fig.5. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* c. 1907. Painting by Pablo Picasso. Oil on canvas. 96 x 92 in. Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Rpt from William Stanley Rubin. "The Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*." *Studies in Modern Art 3: Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994. 99.

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