

REVIEW ESSAYS

Welcome to the Funhouse:
Critical Theory and the
“Problem” of Interracial
Sexuality—
T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s
Black Venus

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T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 184 pages. ISBN: 0822323400. \$17.95.

The 1990s witnessed the return of a long-enduring narrative within American national life—in short, the transgressive narrative of black-white sexuality. From the allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of several black male ranking military officers and their white female subordinates, to former professional athlete and television personality O.J. Simpson’s trial and subsequent acquittal for the murder of his white wife Nicole Brown Simpson, to the dating habits of black and white media figures such as Whoopie Goldberg, Robert De Niro, and Calista Flockhart, the American public has in recent years renewed its historical obsession with interracial desire, not merely this time to police its unruly effects—

though this sometimes is the result—as to take up the topic as simply another discourse in the whole “polyvalence of discourses,” as Michel Foucault might say.¹ More recently, the exact nature of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings has revisited the “problem” of this deviant sexuality, specifically regarding the agency of the black partner in such a union. A host of writers, black and white, have written passionately on the topic, including Patricia Williams, Annette Gordon-Reed, Joseph Ellis, Ann Ducille, and Nancy Isenberg, among others.

Eschewing this latest focus on black agency, in *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting instead adds her critical voice to the controversial dialogue on interracial desiring unions between black and white men and women by taking a decidedly more geographically removed approach to the topic. Her study contributes both to African-American and French literary studies a critical exploration of the various ways that white male French writers of the nineteenth-century portrayed the black female body in textual productions. The author takes up the provocative insights of Toni Morrison in her 1993 study, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which the Nobel Laureate writes: “As a disabling virus within literary discourses, ‘Africanism has become in the Eurocentric tradition . . . both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. . . . It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear.”² Extending Morrison’s insights to what she calls the Black Venus narrative, Sharpley-Whiting targets primarily literary depictions of cross-racial erotic scenarios between black diasporic women and white Frenchmen. The author contends that this desiring narrative forms “part of the larger discourse of Africanism in general, and French Africanism in particular.” For Sharpley-Whiting: “Sexual and racial differences inspire acute fears in the French male psyche. Fear is sublimated or screened through the desire to master or know this difference, resulting in the production of eroticized/exoticized narratives of truths.”³ Hence, texts that constitute the Black Venus narrative are those that either “conflate the black female body with the sexualized savage,” and/or “have racialized female protagonists as objects of desire and abjection.”⁴ However, given the study’s overall focus, this question of black agency in the context of interracial sexual desire manages to haunt the author’s otherwise deft explorations as a crippling, undermining absence.

As might be readily imagined within an academic climate which has in recent years, and with varying degrees of sincerity, celebrated black women’s critical and cultural production, the current study has much to recommend, and its overall argument is indeed compelling and persuasive. Ironically, the volume’s strongest parts are those in which Sharpley-Whiting leaves off taking up more explicit readings of literary texts (those works directly addressing interracial sex)

and engages “real-life” historical black female personages, such as Sarah Bartmann and Josephine Baker (the latter serving as avatars of the black female primitive). Whereas the former tend toward predictable, if also perfunctory, readings of both well and lesser known literary works, the latter, the chapters on Bartmann and Baker, offer the reader provocative analyses of the various roles black women have played within French national culture. For example, the author’s analysis of the exploitation of the South African woman best known as the Hottentot Venus at the hands of her French male patrons in the early part of the nineteenth-century lays bare the psychosexual dynamics that undergirded Sarah Bartmann’s public exhibitions and subsequent untimely death in 1815. Sharpley-Whiting’s carefully detailed reading of the specific contractual terms in which Bartmann agreed to her own misuse, as well as the humiliating physical “examinations” to which she submitted—performed by the French naturalist Georges Cuvier and his “team of zoologists, anatomists, and physiologists”—adds vitally new information to what is certainly a shameful period in Western cultural history.

This portion of *Black Venus* is rigorously documented and, at times, breathtaking in its comprehensive engagement with the cultural ramifications of the African woman’s systematic abuse as both commodity and fetish-object. The author’s reading and appended translation of a one-act vaudeville production based on the cultural phenomenon of Bartmann’s presence throughout France, entitled *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen*, testifies to the lasting influence of the sexualized black female body on French middle-class gender roles and sexual arrangements between white men and women during this period. In a similar vein, Sharpley-Whiting offers an astute, if surprisingly brief, analysis of just how the early film career of African American entertainer Josephine Baker managed to coincide with as well as facilitate the political objectives of a newly born French colonial cinema in the 1930s. As filmmakers attempted to resuscitate the country’s national pride after having endured the devastating psychological and material losses of World War I, they soon discovered that “the essential black female primitive” performances of the expatriate Baker recalled the glory days of France’s colonialist past. Whether as “a bundle of raw sensuality” or “a happy, innocent child”—two visually arresting personae of the performer’s—Baker shrewdly exploited what the author refers to as France’s “exoticist impulses.” Ultimately, these filmic portrayals of “a derogatory and objectified essence of black femaleness,” one grounded in familiar stereotypes of “constructed primitivity,” functioned for many of the French citizenry as a “distraction” from having to confront their country’s decline in world estimation while simultaneously having to contend with a series of escalating domestic crises.⁵

While the scrutiny the author brings to bear on a small, little analyzed series of literary portraits of black women by well-known French male writers of the

period—for instance, the study looks at works by such authors as Baudelaire, Balzac, Zola, Maupassant, and Loti—are certainly noteworthy, I find these analyses, on the whole, far weaker, and throughout, unsatisfying in their predictable conclusions. Moreover, these readings often take methodological risks that raise concerns not only about critical rigor, but which make agonizingly obvious the inadequacy of well-established critical approaches to literary scholarship in being able, in any productive or nuanced fashion, to analyze the complex intersections between race, gender, and sexuality.

On the matter of methodology, *Black Venus* is nothing if not innovative. The author states that her study's various readings of black female representation comprise "a unique blend of Fanonian and Morrisonian insights and feminist investigations of visibility, sexuality, and the cinema."⁶ Put simply, Sharpley-Whiting is profoundly and equally indebted both to Laura Mulvey's well-known theorization of the male gaze as it pertains to depictions of the female body in classic Hollywood cinematic practices, and to Fanon's political writings on the need for what he calls "sociogenic" analyses—that is, a critical engagement with the lived-experience of racism in explaining the psychological situation of the black. As Fanon puts it in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "The black's alienation is not an individual question," rather, "let us say that this is a question of a sociodignostic."⁷ While the theoretical potential of exploring similarities between the primary subject of Fanonian discourse, black men, and that of feminist film theory, white women, is certainly rich, conflating these two methodological approaches depends on assuming a degree of structural equivalence, and hence interchangeability, between the two that is not without some degree of tension. Mary Ann Doane has persuasively argued that introducing race into psychoanalytic concepts (the theoretical basis of feminist film discourse) would necessarily lead to a radical destabilizing of the very paradigms Sharpley-Whiting seeks to relocate, paradigms of which, on their own, Fanon was highly critical.⁸ This dynamic would cause the originating methodology to which she appeals to resignify in such a way that many of its chief theoretical effects would be rendered virtually unrecognizable. The principle effect in an antiblack context might be much like that of a funhouse mirror, in which shapes and sizes of the bodily images might be clearly identifiable as men and women, blacks and whites, as such, but bear little actual resemblance to "normal" human beings. The Fanonian scholar Lewis R. Gordon provocatively suggests that "if a group is structured in a phobogenic, overdetermined way, to signify hot/active/masculine/white and another group is constructed as cold/passive/feminine/black, then relationships between males and females in such a world may be skewed, with subtexts of transformed sexual meanings (in spite of the normative significance of sex)."⁹ What this means is that when race, specifically blackness, is introduced into an erotic scenario what you see may not always be what you get in terms of *simply* heterosexual or *simply* homosexual erotic entanglements. While it is not yet apparent if such scenarios

would eventually degenerate into meaninglessness—in fact, if Gordon is right, the contrary seems more the case—Sharpley-Whiting's study never hints at the potential repercussions of such a methodological collision. She merely imports those models, without any discernible revision to their overall signifying structure, into her own analysis.

By relying on canonical feminist theories of the power dynamics at work between (white) women and (white) men—in which white racial identity is never explicitly theorized but merely assumed—the author risks making it appear that the relationship of misogyny on the one hand to a conjoining of misogyny and racism on the other—as is the case between the black women and the white male writers she analyzes—represent analogical situations, wherein analyses of the latter (white men and black women) can be rendered visible through a reliance on the analyses of the former (white women and white men). This stratagem fails to recognize, in the words of Judith Butler, whose comments are offered in a different context, "the ways in which these [divergent and overlapping] vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation."¹⁰ In other words, it fails to take into consideration the ways that the narrative of white men and white women is in part produced by and dependent upon the narrative of deviance that enshrouds the sexual bonds between black women and white men. The same can be said, to some extent, about the relationship between black women and black men, where gender discourses play a significant role. For this reason it is surprising that in addition to an analysis of the depiction of black women in the writings of white Frenchmen of the nineteenth century there is not a similar, albeit a truncated one, analysis of the way these same writers portrayed black men. By decontextualizing black women from the historical discourse of antiblack sentiment—one in which black men played a defining, not an incidental, role—the author deprives her study of much broader cultural analysis and relevance.

Lastly, I contend that there are troubling implications for the future of African Americanist scholarship when an avowedly feminist-centered endeavor continues to define the sexuality of black women exclusively in terms of objectification and lack. As the author puts it, "Black females are perpetually ensnared, imprisoned in an essence of themselves created from without."¹¹ Predictably, the collective wardens of this penal system are white men. It is this stance in particular that I find perhaps most disconcerting about Sharpley-Whiting's volume. The author's steadfast unwillingness to creatively take up the question of black women's sexual agency, even as depicted by white men, without necessarily compromising her valid investigation of racialized representation is a consistent drawback. Unfortunately, her work hardly represents an aberration. Similar positions recur in contemporary black feminist writing that addresses the topic of representation and black female identity. Evelyn Hammonds puts the matter succinctly in her essay, "Black (W)holes and the

Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." In this work, Hammonds argues that "Black feminist theorists have almost universally described black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage of the dominant discourses, as an absence." Hammonds quotes Hortense Spillers, who suggests in a 1989 essay that "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, mis-seen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb."¹² While such graphic commentary has inspired the production over the last decade of groundbreaking insights as in contradictory and degraded ways that race, gender, and class have intersected to produce black sexuality as "restriction, repression, and danger," very little of this work has dared to take up black sexuality in terms of "exploration, pleasure, and agency."¹³ Ten years ago such insights offered new and exciting directions for African American scholarship. As we stand at the precipice of a new millennium, however, one would hope to have emerged, by this time, far more sophisticated and nuanced engagements with the issue of black desire. Sadly, these works have yet to appear.

As Hammonds suggests, the actual problem may lie with privileging heterosexuality in these critical explorations. Given that contemporary "discussions of black female sexuality often turn to the issue of the devastating effects of rape, incest, and sexual abuse," Hammonds suggests in her own work that "black queer female sexualities should be seen as one of the sites where black female desire is expressed."¹⁴ While Hammonds specifically invokes lesbian sexualities, I would argue that the same could be said for black women and some scenarios of interracial desire as well. Resituating the discussion this way would entail a course refining one's tools of critical analysis, especially the use of the term "exoticism," a complex term which deserves far greater critical attention than I am able to give to it here. A form of objectification, i.e. the treating of one thing as another (for example, treating a person as an object or thing), the author defines exoticism as the "taste for difference, the desire to possess and experience blackness and thus flee banality."¹⁵ Always an effect of unequal power relations, exoticism is thus thoroughly contaminated as a means of promoting egalitarian social interaction between human beings. As Sharpley-Whiting explains it: "White supremacy takes many forms, from extreme hatred of difference to an intensified adoration of *Other* bodies. The exoticist represents the latter supremacist."¹⁶

This unwillingness of the author to imagine a more critically flexible, if also personally emancipatory, approach to the concept of exoticism, as other scholars have recently attempted—among them Cass Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum—is just one of the limitations of the present study.¹⁷ Another is automatically confusing any expression of erotic desire for difference with an inherent fetishistic need to possess and therefore to deny another person his or her humanity. Such readings are not merely reductive, they often harbor within their forcefully stated arguments, it occurs to me, a barely concealed hostile investment

in repathologizing contemporary sexual arrangements between differently "raced" consenting adults even as they superficially reference events and figures located in the deep historical past. Sharpley-Whiting's perspective on the matter surfaces mostly clearly in her analysis of an 1884 short story by famed French author Guy de Maupassant. For instance, in this particular chapter, titled, "Can a White Man Love a Black Woman? Perversions of Love beyond the Pale in Maupassant's 'Boitelle'" —a title, I might add, with little regard for historical or geographical specificity—the exoticist and the racist represent two sides of the same coin. Shockingly, the author concludes her rather cursory analysis of this complex story with a dismissal. She writes, not only smugly, but also with an air of superiority: "There is no love here; there are only perversions of love."¹⁸ Without an appeal to context, analyses of this sort that are premised upon blanket condemnations of interracial sexual unions cannot possibly render visible the subtle negotiations engaged in by black and white partners to distinguish their generally consensual and loving bonds from those bonds that are coerced and dehumanizing. Nor is such criticism able to discern that often similar negotiations play a significant role in the representational strategies of the various authors who depict such partnerships as well.

Let me not be misunderstood here. In no way am I attempting by this critique to "project modern notions of romance upon unions born of trauma, of dependence and constraint," as Patricia Williams has so eloquently written regarding the alleged intimacies between our country's third President and his black female slave. Nor am I hoping, to continue with Ms. Williams, to "use easy claims of love as a further deflection from confronting the infinitely more painful emotional hierarchies with which our peculiar institution has left us battling still."¹⁹ Nothing I have written in these pages should be construed as trying to suggest that sometimes these depictions do not carry traces of the "wrong" type of objectification and stereotyping. It is just that such aspects (which form some part of every literary work) should not then be turned around and seen as detrimental to the text's overall worth, and thus totalizing in its value to the critic, to the reader, as well as to the production of knowledge we are everyday generating about one another and about the past. It seems to me that if anything would represent a "deflection," in Ms. Williams words, from having to confront our shared past as blacks and whites, then certainly select passages in Sharpley-Whiting's volume would qualify. For according to recent scholarship by historian Martha Hodes in her book, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (Yale UP, 1997), the history of black-white sexual relations in the U.S. does not tell a uniform story. We can only imagine the same would be true elsewhere in the West. Hence, each of the literary texts that Sharpley-Whiting analyzes takes place within the context of unions between consenting adults that vary tremendously from one to the other. As such, all exhibit a degree of internal complexity, as do all unions, those intraracial and interracial, that the author's

various readings consistently overlook or minimize. The reason Sharpley-Whiting is able to do this, I would argue, is because, at bottom, she considers the concept of objectification, as perhaps do most people, self-evident in the context of black-white relations—in other words, politically and ethically reprehensible. Because she fails to consider any sexual scenario between blacks and whites in which it might be mutually desirable for one partner to reduce another partner to his or her body—to use the body as one would perhaps use an object for the sake of arousing one's pleasure—Sharpley-Whiting's *Black Venus* cannot begin to make crucial distinctions between more intimate relations, such as those between lovers—even "black" and "white" lovers—and those between abuser/abused relations. For the author, the two are interchangeable. In other words, the use of the body as an instrument of pleasure by another, even with that person's explicit consent, is, in every instance, for Sharpley-Whiting, dehumanizing, and should therefore be categorically deplored. As such, the author is unable to imagine, as Cass Sunstein writes, "that objectification and a form of use are substantial parts of sexual life, or wonderful parts of sexual life." That is, that "[w]ithin the context of equality, respect and consent, objectification—not at all an easy concept to define—may not be so troublesome."²⁰

By limiting her exploration of black female representation to an especially narrow interpretation of white male exoticism, and hence to scenarios in which black women appear collectively as the "lubricious, venal black/mulatto . . . muses in the French literary and cultural imagination," Sharpley-Whiting's *Black Venus* replicates, with mixed results, this tendency within black feminist scholarship of relegating black female sexuality to discussions of absence, lack, and silencing.²¹ I agree, then, with Evelyn Hammonds, who suggests "that we [black and nonblack critics of African American literature] need a methodology that allows us to contest rather than reproduce the ideological system that has up to now defined the terrain of black women's sexuality."²² That said, the subtitle of Sharpley-Whiting's text—*Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*—firmly links it to a still growing body of critical works that have since become cornerstones of a flourishing, and still oppositional, black feminist tradition.

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
2. Quoted in Sharpley-Whiting, pp. 6–7; see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 7.
3. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 7.
4. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 12.
5. Sharpley-Whiting, pp. 106–108.

6. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 5.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 11.
8. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Especially see the chapter, "Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema." While it is clear the author is familiar with Doane's essay—she references it in her incisive, and to me, quite correct, critique of Gwen Bergner's reading of Fanon's supposed textual abuse of black women, "Who Is that Masked Woman? Or, The Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*," *PMLA* 110, no. 1 (1995): 75–88—she fails to take seriously Doane's warning on this matter. See Sharpley-Whiting's "Anti-black Femininity and Mixed-race Identity: Engaging Fanon to Reread Capécia," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 155–162. At one point in this essay Sharpley-Whiting accuses Bergner of "demonstrating a blindness in her crusade to uncover Fanon's sexist-patriarchal, 'invisibilizing' penchants" (p. 156). Interestingly, this criticism, with only slight alteration, might be rewritten to refer to the author's engagement with interracial sexuality in *Black Venus*.
9. Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), p. 74. These remarks appear in Chapter Four, "Sex, Race and Matrices of Desire in an Antiracist World."
10. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 18.
11. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 10.
12. Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. by Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 142.
13. Hammonds, pp. 144–145.
14. Hammonds, p. 147.
15. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 88.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.
17. Cass Sunstein's remarks appear in his review of Nadine Strossen's *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (New York: Scribner, 1995), which appeared in *The New Republic*, January 9, 1995, 42–46. Later that year, Nussbaum took up Sunstein's comments for an essay she titled, simply, "Objectification," which subsequently appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (1995): 249B91. This piece has been reprinted in Nussbaum's recent collection, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). My citations of Sunstein are taken from Nussbaum's essay. I'd like to note, here, however, that, prior to Sunstein and Nussbaum's efforts, one of the first critical attempts I can recall to problematize the concept of objectification was by cultural critic Kobena Mercer. In a series of brilliant essays he wrote in the late 1980s taking up the controversy generated by the white gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's black male nude studies, Mercer chronicled his own rethinking of this term in a way that was both courageous and critically productive. See Mercer's essay, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
18. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 90. This statement is not without some precedent. Lewis R. Gordon—with whom the author, along with Renée T. White, has co-edited an anthology on Fanon (see footnote 8 above)—makes a very similar statement in his analysis

of the exoticist in his book, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (New Jersey: Humanities International Press, 1995), in which he writes of the exoticist: "His expression of love for blacks is therefore rotten at its core" (p. 119). However, whereas Gordon is far more detailed and specific in his definition of this term (a term whose exact properties require some degree of critical engagement), Sharpley-Whiting's rather loose usage recalls commonsense meanings, all of which are pejorative. This, I find troubling. In order to make an assessment of such relations the critic must first make, as Martha Nussbaum has argued, an appeal to context. For Nussbaum, "all types of objectification are not equally objectionable, that the evaluation of any of them requires a careful evaluation of context and circumstance, and that, once we have made the requisite distinctions, we will see how at least some of them might be compatible with consent and equality, and even be 'wonderful' parts of sexual life" (p. 218). Lewis Gordon offers similar remarks about Fanon's political writings in his essay, "The Black and the Body Politic: Fanon's Existential Phenomenological Critique of Psychoanalysis," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. However, at no point in *Black Venus* does Sharpley-Whiting make an appeal to the context of interracial intimacy in her various readings.

19. Patricia Williams, "What's Love Got to Do With It?" *The Nation* (November 23, 1998), p. 10.
20. Quoted in Nussbaum, p. 214.
21. Sharpley-Whiting, p. 2.
22. Hammonds, p. 144.