

Lisa Collins

Economies of the Flesh

Representing the Black Female Body in Art

During my first quarter of graduate school a professor asked me and a friend of mine, a white male student, to stand in front of our class on representations of race and gender in popular culture. Somewhat alarmed but also having no reason to doubt her judgment, I got up and stood in front of the blackboard. After an anxious glance to my friend, I looked out. Sixty eyes—and I remember all of them as being attached to white bodies—were scurrying nervously between Nathan and me. The professor then asked the students to call out what they saw. They chose to focus on Nathan. “Tall,” “thin,” and “smart looking” were the comments that I heard. Next the professor asked about me. At this, I tasted my own dread and began to detest the professor and all of the eyes on me. Horror came from my belated realization that what would come out of the students’ mouths would be the product of history, particularly the history of conquest, enslavement, lynching, and rape. Although I knew that my Black female body signified both triumph and terror, I now recognized that both of these referents were enmeshed in systems of visual exposure and bodily violence. Aware that my body was bound in these systems and that the comments would be informed by this history, I fled my body, for I was unsure if the students would be able to observe and remark without doing violence once again. Away in my thoughts, I dreamt of protection from such visibility.

In this chapter I explore the source of this contemporary visual predicament, the brutal history of enforced overexposure of Black women’s bodies, as well as visual responses to it in the context of Western

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art history. Specifically, I am interested in images of the unclothed Black female body (and lack of such images), for it is this figure that until recently has been most stridently denied in museum art by African American artists, precisely because it is overburdened by historical tensions of race, gender, and sexuality. In the early 1990s, art historian Judith Wilson set out to investigate the avoidance of the Black female nude in African American art history. Her initial exploration was suggestive; she discovered no adult Black female nudes created by African American artists during the entire nineteenth century.¹ Only during the twentieth century, she offers, did the Black female body become a “permissible subject” for Black American artists.²

Portrayals of the Black female nude, however, are also rare in comparison to the numerous examples of white female nudes in the larger categories of American and European art history. The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project, a vast archive of over twenty-five thousand images of Black people, contains only one full nude of an African American woman from the nineteenth century, and it was created by a visiting Swiss artist.³ The other nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century nudes of Black women are few.⁴ The use of the unclothed Black female body within the important artistic category of the nude is scrutinized in the first part of this chapter, where I examine historical and aesthetic factors that have so charged the representation of the Black female figure in visual culture. Taking nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century museum and popular art as my subjects, I explore how economies of the flesh—that is, various markets for Black female bodies—have affected the creation and reception of images of Black women in Western Europe and the United States. In the second part of the chapter, I reveal strategies adopted by contemporary visual artists to confront this burdened history by analyzing recent representations of the unclothed Black female body.

The Nude

Avoidance of the Black female nude is striking because the nude has been a central subject in Western art since it was constructed as a subject in ancient Greece. Early nudes, however, typically depicted the male body. During the Italian Renaissance, when artists revisited the art of ancient Greece, the unclothed male body was used to symbolize what were considered to be universal ideals. Heroic action, pathos, triumph, and perfectibility were thought to be communicated by the male nude. Yet

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since the seventeenth century, the male nude has retreated from view, and portrayals of the female nude have predominated. Evidence of the completeness of this shift is that the very phrase “the nude” now conjures up the images of Venus and Aphrodite that line museum galleries.

The female nude has been the subject of much aesthetic and academic contemplation. Formalist art historians such as Kenneth Clark, author of the most widely read book on the topic, tout the unclothed female figure in art as the sophisticated transference of physical desire into beautiful images. For Clark, the successful (male) artist can transform the female body from its “vulgar” naked state to a “celestial” ideal through the means of “symmetry” and “measurement.”⁵ In other words, the female body is profane yet capable of conversion. Feminist art historians frequently understand the female nude—as well as formalist criticism of it—as an attempt to control women’s bodies through various strategies of containment. For example, Gill Saunders argues that “since nudity is the prime signifier of sexuality,” male fears of women’s sexuality surface in and play out on images of the nude.⁶ Drawing attention to the long history of the male artist/female model relationship, Saunders critiques the products of this history for continually portraying the unclothed female body as an “anonymous available object,” one that is perpetually accessible to male intrusion.⁷

Missing from most formalist and feminist scholarship on the nude is a discussion of the unclothed Black body in art. White artists and white models, as well as white viewers, are too often assumed. Although recent revisionist scholarship has begun to explore images of Black people in Western art, few nudes have been discovered by this research, and most of those found have been male. For example, in his survey of Black subjects in visual culture from the American Revolution to World War I, Hugh Honour reveals the repeated use of the seminude Black male figure among abolitionists beginning in the 1780s (fig. 17). In chains, kneeling, and accompanied by the rhetorical question “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” this abolitionist emblem portrays the Black man as grateful for being “‘doubly freed’ from paganism and human bondage.”⁸ This compromised symbol of antislavery thought both relies upon the association of the male body with heroism and triumph and denies its power, for here the potential power of the male body is curtailed by the figure’s bent legs and outstretched hands, a familiar position of humility and submission. Although Honour does not find many examples of the unclothed Black female body in Western art, he points to a reason for her absence. In terms of abolitionist politicking, he suggests that the representation of the Black female body would have been

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Fig. 17. Wedgwood cameo, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, nineteenth century. Jasperware. Smithsonian Institution, National Numismatic Collection, Washington, D.C. Courtesy of Douglas Mudd.



Fig. 18. Token, *Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?*, 1838. Copper. Smithsonian Institution, National Numismatic Collection, Washington, D.C. Courtesy of Douglas Mudd.

even more problematic than the representation of the Black male body because her body could not be positioned to promote solely “philanthropic” thoughts, for it was too closely associated with “libidinal” actions.⁹ Thus, for Honour, the Black female body could not unequivocally signify the promise of freedom, for she was already too entangled in her abused flesh.

It was precisely this entanglement that made the image of the enslaved Black female body an important one in abolitionist appeals to women. Forty years after the appearance of her counterpart, abolitionists in the United States adopted an image of a partially clad female supplicant framed by the words “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” (fig. 18). Strategically targeted at women, this image appeared in the women’s sections of newspapers, as well as on popular art forms such as tokens, dishware, and textiles sold by antislavery women at fundraising events.¹⁰ Shown on her knees, bare-breasted, and in chains, this icon explicitly linked nudity with vulnerability and slavery with sexual violence in order to outrage women and press them to agitate for abolition.

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Visual Legacies of the Nineteenth Century

This tension surrounding the Black female body—the fact that the body evokes a racialized, sexualized, and exploitative history—is evident in the few nineteenth-century artistic depictions of the Black female nude. These portrayals are also highly formulaic; the Black female body connotes exotica and erotica and serves as an allegory for freedom and its necessary inverse, enslavement. Most of the extant works are Western European in origin, frequently French, and although the individual works might not have been widely viewed in the United States, they are indicative of a larger cultural climate that surrounded and constructed the Black female body in the West. Underlying the three categories of representation—exotica, erotica, and allegory—is a link between the body and various markets for Black female labor. Literary scholar Hortense Spillers has noted that the enslavement of Black women “relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh.”¹¹ This inhumane economic history has deeply affected art history, for nineteenth-century visual culture consistently linked the Black female figure with slave, sexual, and service economies.

Nowhere is this entanglement of market and visual economies more evident than in the various drawings and paintings of Saartjie Baartman created for French scientific texts and natural history museums. Saartjie Baartman was deceived into being exhibited in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Europeans paid to see the “Hottentot Venus” because they wanted to witness a woman thought to be their opposite on the chain of being.¹² By paying money to view Baartman, viewers revealed their faith in the visual: they were eager to link the idea of African inferiority—which implicitly allowed for the subordination of Black people—with a visible representation of this difference. This trade in money for a stare or a peek at a woman taken from Africa and positioned as a curio in Europe has become the paradigmatic example of the Western exoticization of the Black female body.

Exoticism frequently meshes with eroticism. Thus the second and related visual model for viewing the Black female body was as an emblem of sensuality and an object of lust. During the nineteenth century a few European artists—unlike their colleagues in the United States—attempted to depict what they saw as the sensuality, availability, and desirability of Black women. Jules-Robert Auguste, a French artist active during the first half of the century, created erotic images of frolicking women, Black and white. These charged and sensuous pictures of unclothed women enjoying each other's bodies served as a form of private

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Fig. 19. Jules-Robert Auguste, *Les amies*, ca. 1820–30.
Watercolor heightened with gouache on parchment. Musée
national du Louvre, Paris. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art
Resource, New York City.

titillation for the artist. A wealthy man, Auguste neither exhibited nor sold his work; instead, his images were created solely to satisfy his own visual appetite.¹³ *Les amies*, a watercolor thought to have been completed in the 1820s, shows a naked Black woman playfully poised on the lap of a partially dressed white woman (fig. 19). Contrasts between the brown and pink skin of the women, as well as the “oriental” textiles on which they lie, heighten the lushness of this private and voyeuristic glimpse of interracial play and affection between women.

Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*, however, demonstrated to the French Salon of 1865 that the Black female body need not be undressed to evoke the erotic (see fig. 1 on page 15). Drawing from an established visual legacy of the Black figure as servant in the shadows, laboring for white people and often attending to white women, Manet employed a fully dressed West Indian maid to imbue his painting with illicit sexual-

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ity. Laura, the barely visible Black woman, serves, and serves as contrast to, the stark white female beauty of the wealthy prostitute. Artist and critic Lorraine O'Grady draws attention to the Black domestic's double value in this famous painting. She is, O'Grady suggests, a "two-in-one": both Jezebel and Mammy, the embodiment of both sexuality and servitude.¹⁴ Laura's presence in *Olympia* draws from and continues the visual economy of Black erotic servitude at the same time that it hints at the market economy that most likely pressed her to leave the Caribbean and work in France. Art historian Albert Boime points to the connection between the maid's labor, her body, and her value in a racialized and sexualized economy: "The West Indian maid (identified by her headdress) has been induced to come to Paris for work, and she has been impressed into the service of a high-class prostitute whose very existence depends upon the signs of status that go right to the heart of imperial darkness."¹⁵ Manet's painting signals that the Black woman no longer needs to be undressed in mid-nineteenth-century visual culture for her presence to signify the imperialist-inflected sex trade.

Olympia was unveiled to the French public in 1865, the same year that the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified and slavery was officially abolished in the United States. The end of slavery was frequently commemorated in the visual arts, often in sculpture. Serving as symbols for freedom and liberation, Black figures were frequently depicted in these monuments. Yet not unlike the entanglement between the exotic and the erotic, these allegorical works, particularly those depicting Black women, were also subject to eroticizing in the nineteenth century. Hugh Honour's crucial observation of the link between "philanthropic" thoughts and "libidinal" actions is clearly demonstrated in the Italian artist Giacomo Ginotti's tribute to emancipation. Created in 1877, *Abolition of Slavery* is a life-size marble sculpture that portrays a recently freed young woman whose hands are still bound together with irons but whose ankle chains have just been broken (fig. 20). Importantly, however, the woman's bound hands are strategically positioned to emphasize her maturing breasts, and her eyes are conveniently downcast. These factors serve to create an opportune moment for the viewer to stare unabashedly at the former slave's nubile body, which is covered only by jewels and a dangling Christian cross. In this work, the sexual availability of the young woman is offered as the prize of emancipation. Thus the freedom from bondage that the sculpture's title evokes is trivialized by the artist's eroticization of the newly freed Black female body.

A similar eroticizing of the recently freed female body takes place in the only known nineteenth-century representation of an unclothed

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Fig. 20. Giacomo Ginotti, *Abolition of Slavery*, 1877. Marble. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.



African American woman created in the United States. During an extended visit in the United States, the Swiss artist Frank Buchser spent time in the Upper South, where he used members of the newly freed Black population as well as his Black mistress, a southern-born, Washington, D.C.–based clerk, as subjects for his art.¹⁶ *Black Girl in a Stream* was most likely created during a summer visit of 1867 (fig. 21). The painting depicts a young woman, possibly his mistress, poised in a secluded West Virginia glade with the sun streaming down on her brown skin and on the creek in which she stands.¹⁷ Like that of Giacomo Ginotti's model, the woman's gaze is conveniently directed away—in this work she is looking sideways at the lush foliage—yet her body is turned toward the viewer to reveal her firm belly and full breasts. The young woman clearly positioned as an object of beauty and desire,

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Fig. 21. Frank Buchser, *Black Girl in a Stream*, ca. 1867–70. Oil on canvas. Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Solothurn. Photograph: Swiss Institute for Art Research, Zurich.

Buchser's painting was exhibited in New York but not sold.¹⁸ Thus, in an era when private collectors were the primary purchasers of art in the United States, Buchser's painting of an idyllic scene, replete with a sensual and available Black woman, was evidently not deemed an acceptable purchase. At the time, American art collectors were beginning to drop their previous objections to depictions of the nude in art. Thus perhaps partially fueling the painting's lack of acceptance was the continuing resistance on the part of the powerful—which had begun during slavery to hide their sexual aggressions—to publicly acknowledging the Black female body as a locus of beauty or yearning.

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Fig. 22. Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, 1867. Marble. Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



The same year that Frank Buchser completed what may have been the first painting of a fully nude Black woman in the United States, Mary Edmonia Lewis, the first documented U.S.-born woman sculptor of African American and Native American descent, completed her own monument to emancipation. *Forever Free*, the earliest tribute to the abolition of slavery by an artist of color, directly responds to the visual legacy of the nineteenth century (fig. 22). Completed in Rome four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, this 1867 marble group shows a partially dressed man standing triumphantly, with his arm, which has just recently been freed from chains, raised toward the sky. Kneeling in prayer next to him is a dressed young woman looking gratefully upward. Unlike either Giacomo Ginotti's tribute to the Emancipation Proclamation, and the sexual availability of the newly freed, or Frank Buchser's eroticization of the former Washington, D.C., clerk,

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Lewis's female figure is categorically removed from the realm of the sexual. Highly aware of the nineteenth-century visual repertoire for Black female figures, which portrayed them as exotic and erotic even within allegorical works, Lewis created a young woman who is neither unclothed nor available to humans. Instead, her childlike female figure is belted and bent over into a position that implies gratitude and devotion to a spiritual power.

Another angle on the American sculptor's strategy of displacement is offered by art historian Kirsten Buick. She suggests that Lewis's use of white marble, as well as her handling of the material to imbue the female figure with long straight hair and "keen European figures," was the result of a conscious decision on the part of the artist to eliminate the subject's ethnicity and, in this way, to remove the female figure from an already eroticized visual economy.¹⁹ Of Lewis's figurative approach, Buick writes: "While their appearance conforms to Neoclassical standards of beauty, the subject matter belies those standards. She erased, even as she called forth, a dangerous ethnicity."²⁰ Given this, the female figure in *Forever Free* can be seen as embodying two strategies of displacement: the shift from the sexual to the spiritual realm, as well as the shift from a "dangerous ethnicity" (blackness) to a safer one (whiteness). Edmonia Lewis's attempt to remove the Black female figure from a racialized and sexualized economy through the suppression of evidence of her race and her sex can be viewed as part of a larger pattern of resistance by Black women to sexual danger.

Culture of Dissemblance

According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, Black women in the United States created a "culture of dissemblance"—a politics of silence, evasiveness, and displacement—in an attempt to protect themselves from sexual violation.²¹ Drawing attention to nineteenth-century narratives by Black women, Hine notes that every female slave narrative contains a reference to rape.²² Combined with the disclosure of this form of terror, however, is another recurrence. Each narrative charts various strategies of resistance to sexual assault, as well as methods to protect women's bodily integrity and private selves. One of the strategies developed from this history is the creation of a "self-imposed invisibility," which can afford Black women a space where they are temporarily shrouded in secrets and silence and thus not overly visible or exposed. Edmonia Lewis's *Forever Free* can be understood as participating in this

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culture of dissemblance, for the freed woman in the sculpture is made somewhat invisible; her blackness is removed from view, and visible markers of her gender are largely hidden. Perhaps wary of the relationship between visibility and assault, Lewis attempted to “veil” her freed woman and, in this manner, protect her from harm.

Darlene Clark Hine argues that Black women’s desires to protect their bodies, escape sexual and economic exploitation, and secure reasonable employment are central to understanding protest and movement in African American history. Likewise, she reveals a learned set of behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that Black women have adopted to counter their sexual vulnerability and protect their inner selves. As evidence of the institutionalization of this culture of dissemblance, Hine points to the creation and growth of Black women’s clubs at the turn of the twentieth century. Concerned with challenging derogatory images of Black women’s sexuality, clubwomen often attempted to accomplish their goals by suppressing their own sexuality.²³ By shunning outward expressions of sexuality, they hoped to build a space where Black women could wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture.

Josephine Baker

While the Black women’s club movement was gaining strength and influence in the United States, however, the culture of dissemblance was exploded by a young woman from St. Louis. In 1925, Josephine Baker left the chorus lines of New York, where she was limited to performing as a comic, for Paris. There she captured, and was captured by, the city’s mood and became the premier example of exotica and erotica. Crossing her eyes, swinging her hips, and wearing her infamous banana skirt, she was catapulted into her role as icon of hot sexuality.²⁴ One European writer of the period remarked that Baker lent “a whiff of jungle air and an elemental strength and beauty to the tired showplace of Western civilization.”²⁵ Challenging all conventions of prudity and propriety, Josephine Baker was a visual predicament. When the clubwomen were advocating discretion in the United States, she appeared nude in France. While they were downplaying their sexuality, she was flouting hers. When the clubwomen were seeking venues for “dignified” work, she became rich and powerful as a “scandalous” dancer. And, most important, while they encouraged imposed invisibility, she craved visible exposure. And she got it. After her success as a performer in Paris, Baker was con-

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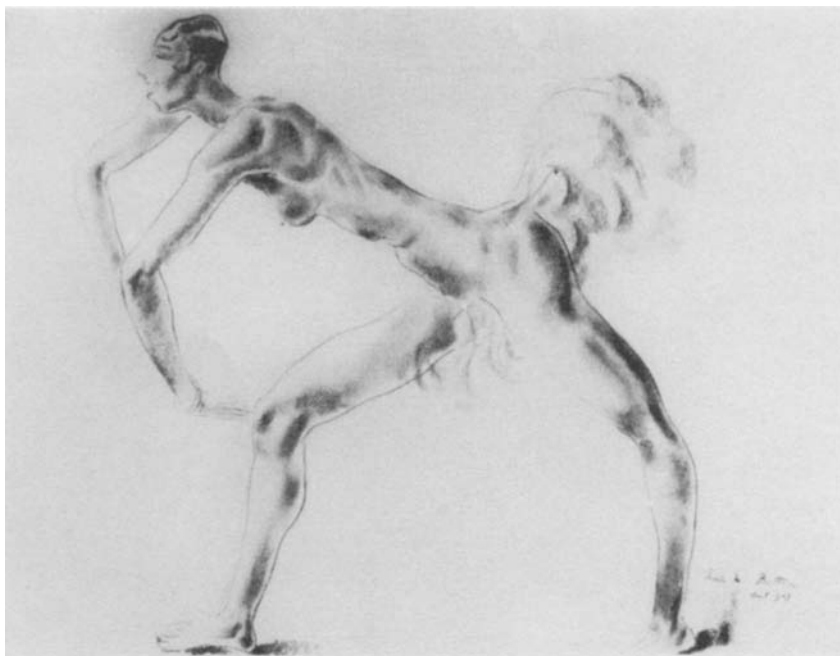


Fig. 23. Jean Isy de Botton, *Portrait of Josephine Baker*, 1929.
Charcoal on paper. Artists Rights Society (ARS), 2002
NY/ADAGE, Paris.

stantly the subject of art and by the mid-1920s had been “drawn, painted, sketched, caricatured, photographed, [and] filmed.”²⁶

It is no wonder that some of these works were saved and now can be viewed in the Image of the Black in Western Art archive. In fact, Frank Buchser’s painting of the young woman in the southern glade and two works that portray Josephine Baker are the only images in the entire collection that depict completely nude Black American women. One of these images, a 1929 drawing by French artist Jean Isy de Botton, shows a dancing Baker wearing only the skimpiest of costumes, a plume of tail feathers (fig. 23). Although her body was famous for its double-jointedness, it is highly contorted in this work. Her super-long arms are turned impossibly, and her legs are of more stature than her torso. However, the real focus of the drawing is Baker’s rear end. With it decorated only by feathers, the picture visually represents a comment made by Baker regarding the wide appeal of her backside. As a young woman in Paris, she exclaimed, “My face and rump were famous!”²⁷ Josephine Baker’s face, though, is not the center of this work; instead, as was the

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case with her predecessor Saartjie Baartman, the focal point is her exposed black buttocks.

Eerily, Baartman and Baker are the two Black women who appear most frequently unclothed in the archive of Black images in Western art. Thus the "Hottentot Venus" and the "Black Venus" are linked by virtue of being the two most visually fetishized Black female bodies in Europe. And although a century passed between Baartman's death and Baker's Paris debut, there are parallels in how they were viewed in Europe. Both were thought to embody exotica and erotica. And both were paid to reveal this difference. Yet there are also crucial distinctions between the two, particularly concerning agency and influence. For example, while Baartman was pressed into being exhibited as a spectacle, Baker wielded control over her performances. After her success in Paris, she largely defined the conditions of her work. In addition, Baker was highly rewarded for her nude and seminude performances and for a time was considered the world's wealthiest Black woman. Finally, whereas Baartman died an early death and was then subjected to a cruel dissection, Baker died triumphantly after a tribute to her fifty-year career and was given a lavish and honorable French funeral.

Baker's legacy, her willingness to market her unclothed body for viewers who were eager to witness what one called "savage grace" and "eroticism personified," creates a visual predicament for artists who admire her brilliance as a performer but who are also contemporary heirs to the culture of dissemblance.²⁸ Painter Emma Amos reveals this tension. In a 1985 print titled *Creatures of the Night*, Amos works to counter Baker's image of sexual availability by taking her off the stage and situating her within the context of the jungle (fig. 24). Since Baker owned various jungle animals, Amos fittingly represents the performer with her preferred pet, a leopard. Although this reconstruction serves to remove Baker from the spotlight and the surface desires of her viewers, it also continues her association with the "whiff of jungle air," an imperialist fantasy of conquest and romance that the performer herself encouraged. Pairing a seminude Baker with a black leopard also works to evoke the grace, beauty, and strength of both, as well as their vulnerabilities in a hostile world. In this print, Amos attempts a revisionist use of the nude; she resituates Baker's body in order to tell an overlooked piece of her story. Here Baker's nudity is used to suggest not exotic sexuality but vulnerability. Emma Amos reveals this concern: "I was asked if I ever did nudes and I said I'd never do nudes of black women, forgetting I'd done her [Billie Holiday] and Josephine. It's meant to pull you in and show how vulnerable they are."²⁹ In her portrait of Baker, Amos uses nudity

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Fig. 24. Emma Amos, *Creatures of the Night*, 1985. Four silk collagraphs. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Becket Logan. (Billie Holiday is depicted on the top left. Josephine Baker is pictured on the bottom right.)

to focus on the underside of female sexuality, to emphasize the danger component of the “pleasure and danger” dyad.

The history of the traffic in the Black female body causes a crisis of representation, particularly for artists who have inherited the culture of dissemblance. Although Emma Amos has produced nudes of Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday, she works comfortably neither with nor from the nude. The sight of the Black model’s body haunts her, for it conjures up various economies of the flesh. Concerning this visual predicament Amos remarked, “Their figures unclothed reminded me too painfully of the slave market.”³⁰ Likewise in 1995, when asked about her attempts to work with the unclothed Black female body, she responded, “I did not want to see black women with no clothes on. It means something else when a black woman has no clothes on. . . . It means that you are for sale.”³¹ Clearly, visibility for Amos—as well as

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for other heirs to dissemblance—is directly linked to vulnerability, lack of power, and the potential for sexual exploitation. This appears to be the logic behind much of the avoidance of the Black female body.

Recent Representations of the Black Female Nude

The absence of the Black female nude in African American art is telling. At closer look, the avoidance, as well as the rare depiction, of the nude reveal histories of anguish and pride that continue to surround the Black female body. Highly aware of these histories, as well as of their visual portrayals, artists Emma Amos, Alison Saar, and Renée Stout create work that tries to reposition the Black female body within these already established visual economies. They try also to expand the range of visual possibilities by taking the body elsewhere. For example, in order to recuperate the Black female body, both Saar and Stout fuse Western and non-Western histories, concepts, and artistic practices in their endeavors to expand a limited and limiting history.

Influences on Alison Saar's works are multiple and diverse. Her mother's (artist Betye Saar) interests in mysticism, rituals, and the occult, as well as black diasporic, African, and Asian artistic practices are some. In addition, her father's work as a conservator brought her into contact with art and artifacts from all over the globe, including Chinese frescoes, mummies, and pre-Columbian and African art. It was her apprenticeship with her father that led to her sculpting; she learned to carve in order to restore art.³² At Scripps College, Saar studied African, Haitian, and Afro-Cuban art with art historian Samella Lewis and wrote her thesis on African-American folk art. As her interest in African influences on the art of the Black Diaspora parallels the work of art historian Robert Farris Thompson, she also acknowledges his work as a major source of inspiration.³³

Since the creation of her first sculpture in 1981, Saar has grappled with the crisis surrounding the representation of the Black female body. Her first sculpture, *Si j'étais blanc* (If I Were White), takes as its theme a Josephine Baker song about inequality (fig. 25). Thus, like Emma Amos, Saar was compelled to approach the legacy of this highly visible performer. As this initial piece represents a significant break with her previous work—a shift from abstract paperwork to carved figurative sculpture—it seems fitting that this initial piece confronts Josephine Baker, an attempt to battle the problem of visibility up front. However, although the work evokes the “overseen” performer, her bodily presence

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Fig. 25. Alison Saar, *Si j'étais blanc*, 1981. Mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.



is denied; instead, the sculpture depicts a young Black boy seated in a bright red chair. Saar has discussed her choice of figures, and, like Emma Amos, she refrains from working with live models. Similarly, because she is uncomfortable with the easy collapse between the subject of art and its creator, Saar consciously works to avoid this conflation through her frequent use of male figures.³⁴

Although this piece avoids the female form, it makes way for its

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later depiction by turning toward Black Diasporic artistic practices. To expose the horror of Baker's song, Saar portrays the boy with an open chest filled with shards of glass. This filled cavity in the center of the body recalls figurative Kongo *minkisi*, traditional sacred objects from the Congo-Angola region used to effect change. Similarly, the boy's legs are made of cement and embedded with fragments of blue and white tile. Both the glass and tile are found objects, typical of materials used by the Black folk artists Saar admires. Robert Farris Thompson has discovered both white tile and glass at Kongo-inspired gravesites and yards in the United States.³⁵ Glass bottles, he suggests, are often used to "arrest the spirit"; guide it to another world; and, in this way, prevent it from haunting survivors.³⁶ Given this, perhaps the glass shards reveal not only the fallout of a debilitating desire to be white but also the possibility of another more equitable world.

Space between the material and spiritual worlds is a recurring theme in Alison Saar's work. In 1989, she created an installation entitled "Crossroads," which included three nearly life-size figures and piles of stones positioned around a central cross, representing the road between the two worlds (fig. 26). One of the figures is of a nude female spirit who guards the crossroads. The traditional Yoruba concept of the crossroads as a place of potentiality as well as its embodiment, Eshu-Elegba, not only survived the Middle Passage, but was rearticulated throughout the New World.³⁷ Drawing from her interest in these rearticulations, Saar aptly chose the crossroads as the site to represent the Black female body.

As this charged intersection represents a place where different paths converge and where both danger and possibility lie, it befits the presentation of the Black female body. Knowledgeable of Black women's history and representation in the West, Saar works to wrest the body from visual economies that define it solely as *exotica* and *erotica* by situating it within the West African and Black Diasporic notion of the crossroads. Here the body that is often viewed as deviant and exotic in the West is typically, and sometimes stereotypically, seen as natural and life-giving. Saar's figure stands at the crossroads of both traditions, at the intersection of peril and potential.

Simultaneously entangled within, yet desiring to transcend, the doctrine and dogma that label Black female sexuality as exotic and erotic, Saar's tin-covered wood sculpture depicts a sensual, albeit guarded, woman. Her guardedness is evident in her posture. While one arm is positioned behind the figure's head, making her breasts available and enticing, the other arm cradles her stomach, protecting her from harm. This dual gesture of exposure and protection characterizes the figure. How-

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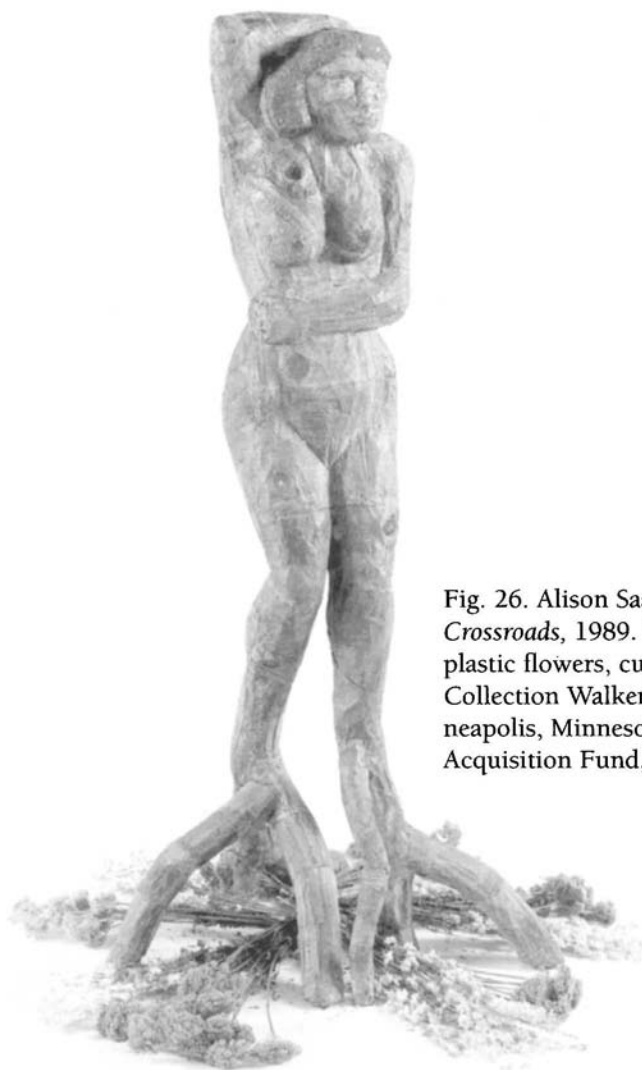


Fig. 26. Alison Saar, *Untitled*, from *Crossroads*, 1989. Wood, copper, plastic flowers, cut flowers, and tin. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1993.

ever, the poetry behind the figure, “Grass Fingers,” by Angelina Weld Grimké, a romantic Black writer, bathes her in overt sensuality.³⁸

Touch me, touch me,
Little cool grass fingers,
Elusive, delicate grass fingers.
With your shy brushings,

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Touch my face—
My naked arms—
My thighs—
My feet.³⁹

The tenor of Grimké's poem exposes Saar's intent. She works to construct an environment where Black female sexuality can begin to escape the sexual and economic marketplace and, for a moment, revel in itself. This is no small feat given that Black female sexuality has been subject to centuries of dehumanizing controls. During slavery, for example, Black women's bodies were viewed as capable of both economic and reproductive labor. Black women were often forced to bear children—the more children, the more labor the slave economy had access to.

Today, however, in this "advanced" capitalist economy, Black female reproduction—particularly of poor women—is seen as a threat to the country's health. In short, Black women's reproductive capacities have shifted from being viewed as a benefit to being viewed as a burden on the national economy. However different plantation and capitalist economies may be, what they have in common is an economic imperative to control Black female sexuality. Alison Saar confronts the legacy of this history, and although she cannot escape it, she attempts to reclaim the Black female body and bring it into view to both remind us of this history and offer us possibilities. The figure's sexuality is evident; Saar endows her with full breasts and a slightly protruding belly. Yet the woman spirit also has inhuman features for her legs turn to roots: she is literally grounded to the earth.

Further symbolizing the potentiality of the crossroads and the woman who guards it is the fact that Saar produced this figure while three months pregnant with her first child. She suggests that the experience of pregnancy increased her interest in spirituality, particularly ideas about "where life came from and where life went after we were done living it on this level."⁴⁰ In this way, Saar's female spirit symbolizes multiple convergences: pregnancy—the conflation of two lives in one body; the site where Western notions and histories of the Black female body meet West African ideas; and most evidently, the place where the spiritual and material worlds connect. In situating the Black female figure at the nexus of multiple histories and traditions, Saar does not remove the body from either visual or market economies—for indeed, the crossroads is yet another economy, a site of bartering and trade—but rather expands the scope of visual potential.

A similar strategy for expanding the representational potential of

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the Black female body is developed by multimedia artist Renée Stout. Alison Saar and Renée Stout share many interests and concerns. Both explore the spiritual world, ritual, magic, mystery, and healing in their work. Both, for instance, were drawn to the grave of Marie Laveau, the legendary nineteenth-century Voodoo priestess of New Orleans. Likewise, both have created work that explores the notion of the crossroads. Inspiration from the work of Black Atlantic scholar Robert Farris Thompson is acknowledged by both artists. Their approach to materials is also parallel. Both use found objects for their evocative power and energy. Discussing her interest in these materials, Saar explains: "I really liked the fact that found metals and found pieces of wood have a kind of history. . . . I liked that these materials had had another function at one time and that that ghost is still hanging around."⁴¹ Stout also collects found objects for their history and memory. Underlying their shared interests in the crossroads and their fascination with discarded objects is a traditional West and Central African belief: "the belief that physical places and material objects contain spirits who can harm or cure, and the belief that deliberate human action can draw on these spirits to influence what happens in the world."⁴²

Renée Stout's path to studying African principles and retentions was not direct. She began her training in painting and worked in a realist mode. However, in the mid-1980s, when she moved from painting to working with found objects and carving from wood, her work transformed. Accompanying this transformation was an increased sense of artistic freedom that enabled Stout to follow her visions and feel protected on her search. Of this profound shift, she states:

This total creative freedom led to another level of awareness, and it almost seemed that my life started getting really harmonious once I started working in this way. I started feeling like there were ancestors watching or saying, "You know what? You're finally on the right path."⁴³

One place where her sense of newfound freedom took her was back to the mysterious *nkisi nkondi* figure that had first enthralled her as a ten-year-old at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. Over the years this figure has repeatedly pulled her back to the museum to contemplate its secrets. The *nkisi nkondi* figure that Stout revisits in Pittsburgh is part of a larger category of Kongo *minkisi* (plural form of *nkisi*). It is not difficult to see how these objects captured the attention of an artist attuned to mystery.

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Minkisi are sacred medicines and charms thought to enclose spirits that are prepared in Kongo territory (part of present-day Congo and Angola) for both healing and aggressive purposes.⁴⁴ Typically containing things such as leaves, earth, ashes, seeds, stones, herbs, and sticks, *minkisi* can take figurative and nonfigurative forms. When combined with singing, drumming, dancing, and vows, they take on life and can effect change for their owner.⁴⁵ They can influence a wide range of change: from honing business skills to bringing someone back to health to resisting colonization. The *nkisi nkondi* figure, in particular, is a powerful, traditional oath-taking object. Covered with nails and other pointed objects, the figure symbolizes the tyings or nailings of various arguments, lawsuits, vows, and other dealings.⁴⁶

In 1988, Renée Stout activated her fascination with and knowledge of *minkisi* to re-present the Black female body. In so doing, she boldly confronted the entrenched crisis of representation surrounding the body. Like Alison Saar, Stout drew from non-Western artistic practices and blended them with Western ones to confront the quagmire. Named after a burdened Western concept, *Fetish #2* stands five feet and three inches tall (fig. 27). This mixed-media sculpture represents a fusion: the mystery and power of *minkisi* with the figure of Stout's own U.S.-based body. To create the work, Stout cast herself in plaster and then painted the mold with layers of black paint. By casting herself, she avoided the charged and troubled relationship between artist and model and embraced working with and finding inspiration in her own body. In presenting herself as a power figure, Stout resituates the Black female body. The body is rescued from being "overseen" as exotica and erotica because now it is both empowered and protected, for dangling around the woman's neck is a generous supply of *minkisi*-like charms.⁴⁷

In addition, the figure's abdomen contains objects protected by glass. Mirrors and glass are frequently a part of *minkisi*. Often attached to the exterior, as they are in *Fetish #2*, they signify power, what Robert Farris Thompson has called "the flash and arrest of the spirit."⁴⁸ Stout was taken with this aspect of *minkisi*. "I was always impressed with the mystery of what lay behind the mirror. I knew that what was behind the mirror was positive," she says.⁴⁹ Stout has placed a turn-of-the-century photograph of a baby, dried flowers, and a stamp from Niger behind the glass. In this way the woman's belly, the site of her reproductive labor, is positively reclaimed.⁵⁰ And the woman's body is no longer overly available, as it is gently veiled in mystery and grace.

Renée Stout is interested in the presence, meaning, and purpose of Kongo *minkisi*. In *Fetish #2*, she draws upon their use as agents of heal-

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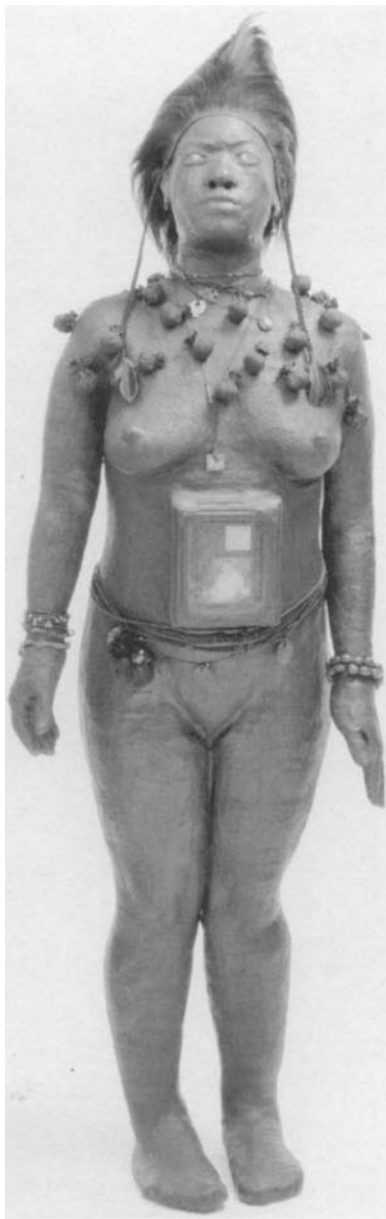


Fig. 27. Renée Stout, *Fetish #2*, 1988. Mixed media. Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas. Metropolitan Life Foundation Purchase Grant.

ing in multiple ways. Not only is her female figure laden with protective bundles and embedded with the power of glass and objects, but the entire process of creating the sculpture, she tells us, became a vehicle for personal protection. “I felt like in creating that piece, if I never created

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another one, I had created all that I needed to protect me for the rest of my life," she explains.⁵¹ Like Alison Saar, Renée Stout positions the Black female figure at the crossroads of histories and traditions to confront the visual legacies of the past and to expand the realm of the imaginable.

The history of various markets for Black female bodies, or economies of the flesh, troubles representations of the Black female body. Since this body has been overseen, viewed as perpetually available, a curio, erotica, and exotica, it is not surprising that its representation has either upheld these confines or been avoided altogether. Since the Black female body has been overly visible—and dangerously so—for so long, it makes sense for heirs of the culture of dissemblance to remove the body, cover it, and protect it from harm. Yet this absence is really not an absence, for it draws attention to itself by attempting to hide. Artists and cultural historians such as Emma Amos, Alison Saar, and Renée Stout are unearthing this entrenched absence by retelling the history of the Black female body and re-presenting it. In so doing, they create space for reflection and change. They enable viewers to reflect upon the economies of the flesh, and, just as importantly, they provide a visual language that continues to address the legacies of the past while encouraging the possibility of a self-determined Black female presence. These artists boldly confront visual predicaments and offer us visual possibilities.

NOTES

1. Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," Gina Dent, ed., in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 121. In her article, Wilson notes that inspiration for her exploration of the Black nude came from the late art historian Sylvia Ardyn Boone.

2. Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over," 114.

3. Personal correspondence with Karen C. C. Dalton, Director and Curator, Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive, Harvard University, 7 Oct. 1996.

4. These nudes largely depict African women and women of African descent not living in the United States.

5. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1956; reprint, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 71.

6. Gill Saunders, *The Nude: A New Perspective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 73.

7. Saunders, *The Nude*, 74. For another feminist analysis of the nude, see Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992).

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8. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, *From the American Revolution to WWI*, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 64.
9. Honour, *Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 1, 166.
10. Phillip Lapsansky, "Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images," in Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 206. For more on abolitionist imagery, see Jean Fagan Yellin, "The Abolitionist Emblem," in *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3–26.
11. Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984; reprint, London: Pandora Press, 1989), 76.
12. Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (autumn 1985): 212.
13. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, *From the American Revolution to WW I*, pt. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 153.
14. Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Sexuality," *Afterimage* 20 (summer 1992): 14.
15. Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 4.
16. Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), 209.
17. It's likely that the model was his mistress, a woman he called "Phryne" in his diary. For more on this relationship, see David B. Dickens, "Frank Buchser in Virginia: A Swiss Artist's Impressions," *Virginia Cavalcade* 38 (1988): 6–7. Also see Rudolph P. Byrd, "American Images for Circulation: The Black Portraiture of Frank Buchser," in William U. Eiland and Laura Mullins, eds., *Frank Buchser: A Swiss Artist in America, 1866–1871* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 1996), 46.
18. Honour, *Image of the Black*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 166.
19. Kirsten Buick, "The Ideal Works of Edmonia Lewis: Invoking and Inverting Autobiography," *American Art* 9 (summer 1995): 14.
20. Kirsten Buick, "Edmonia Lewis in Art History: The Paradox of the Exotic Subject," in Leslie King-Hammond and Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, eds., *Three Generations of African American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox* (Philadelphia: Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, 1996), 14.
21. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and The Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 37–38.
22. Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 38.
23. Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," 44–45.
24. Donald Bogle, *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 48.
25. Bogle, *Brown Sugar*, 48.
26. Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, trans. Mariana Fitzpatrick

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(New York: Harper and Row, 1977; reprint, New York: Marlow and Company, 1988), 66.

27. Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 71.

28. Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 51.

29. Lucy Lippard, "Floating Falling Landing: An Interview with Emma Amos," *Art Papers* 15 (Nov.–Dec. 1991): 15.

30. Mildred Thompson, "Interview: Emma Amos," *Art Papers* 19 (Mar.–Apr. 1995): 23.

31. bell hooks, "Interview with Emma Amos," *Artist and Influence* 14 (1995): 34.

32. Judith Wilson, "Hexes, Totems and Necessary Saints: A Conversation with Alison Saar," *Real Life* 19 (winter 1988–89): 36.

33. bell hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 30.

34. hooks, "Talking Art with Alison Saar," 30.

35. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983; reprint, New York, Vintage, 1984), 135–42.

36. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 132.

37. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 18–33.

38. Born in 1880 in Boston and raised in a family of both Black and white activists, Angelina Weld Grimké was named after her great-aunt, the noted white abolitionist and suffragist Angelina Grimké Weld. Literary scholar Gloria Hull has posited that the Black poet held romantic, albeit "thwarted," feelings for women. See Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 138–41.

39. Angelina Weld Grimké, "Grass Fingers," in Countee Cullen, ed., *Caroling Dusk: Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), 38.

40. Text accompanying the piece at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

41. Wilson, "Hexes, Totems and Necessary Saints," 38.

42. George Lipsitz, "Diasporic Intimacy in the Art of Renée Stout," in Marla C. Berns, ed., *"Dear Robert, I'll See You at the Crossroads": A Project by Renée Stout* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, 1995), 9. Lipsitz cites Theophus Smith's work as informing his own. See Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

43. Curtia James, "Interview: Renée Stout," *Art Papers* 18 (July–Aug. 1994): 3.

44. Anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey writes that *minkisi* were first seen in West Central Africa by westerners in the fifteenth century and were almost immediately recognized as a threat to Christian authority. In addition, these objects took on increased importance as the crisis of the shaping of colonial structures gained force in the 1880s, when Portuguese, French, and Belgian authorities all attempted to create colonial systems in the region. See Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi," in Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael D. Harris, *Astonishment and Power: Kongo Minkisi and the Art of Renée Stout* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, 1993), 30, 33.

45. Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art," in Robert

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Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 37.

46. Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art," 38.

47. Michael D. Harris discusses how Stout's figure "straddles the tradition of the female nude, the self-portrait, and that of ritual fetish objects" in his article "Ritual Bodies—Sexual Bodies: The Role and Presentation of the Body in African-American Art," *Third Text* 12 (autumn 1990): 87. Also see his essay "Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme: The Art of Renée Stout," in MacGaffey and Harris, *Astonishment and Power*.

48. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 118.

49. Renée Stout, quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song That Named the Land: The Visionary Presence of African-American Art," in Robert Rozelle, Alvia Wardlaw, and Maureen McKenna, eds., *Black Art—Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 132.

50. In her discussion of *Fetish #2*, Africanist art historian Marla C. Berns notes that Stout's work shifts the focus of the *nkisi* from a "source of communal strength and agency" to one of "self-empowerment." Likewise she points out that Stout adapts "the aggressive, menacing and explicitly male aspects of the *nkisi nkondi* figure for her own (female) purposes." See Marla C. Berns, "On Love and Longing: Renée Stout Does the Blues," in "Dear Robert, I'll See You at the Crossroads," 27.

51. Renée Stout, *Kindred Spirits: Contemporary African-American Artists*, prod. Clayton Corrie, dir. Christine McConnell (Dallas: KERA-TV, 1992), videocassette.

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