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The (Hyper) Sexualization of the Black Female Aesthetic in American Popular Culture

My senior thesis is a psycho-historical exploration of the landscape of black female aesthetic and identity politics as represented in and constructed through American popular culture. Using the function and visual breadth of popular icons such as the Hottentot Venus, Lola Luv and Aunt Jemima, I will examine the ways in which each of these women has been representative of the social norms and cultural expectations which are imposed on Black female identity, as well as further illustrate the psychological and quite visceral impact of said iconography. In order to create a space for discussion of personal and external occupation of the body, I will pose my interpretations of these women in dialogue with the various texts, paying particular attention to the implicit sexual(ized) narratives and their implications.

While I acknowledge the multidimensionality that is each black woman's existence, I feel that it is of the utmost importance that we (people, Americans, black women) create for ourselves spaces in which we examine our representations in one of the greatest national narratives. We must also consider the ways in which the persistence and evolution of each icon etches out and constricts the position of its subject.



The Hottentot Venus" ("Hottentot" being the then common term for the South African Khoi Khoi people and "Venus" referencing the Venus figurines) was a woman by the name of Saartjie Baartman who traveled to London and France beginning in 1810 as a sideshow attraction. Her "peculiar" body (since her death she has been diagnosed with Steatopygia and an elongated labia) made her a particularly fascinating commodity to the scientifically inquisitive European minds of the time. When she was in France, towards the end of her life, she was managed by an animal keeper and upon her death in 1815 her skeleton, genitals and brain were exhibited in a French museum until 1974 when they were taken off display to create a molding duplicate. Her remains were returned to South Africa in 2002 (Nelson Mandela made his request in 1994).

"Angel" a.k.a. "Lola Luv" is one of the most popular video models of our time. Although very little distinguishes her from other women in her profession (which is half of my reason for choosing her) it is the controversy over her alleged buttocks implants that finalized the choice. Interestingly, she shares with the Hottentot Venus the characteristic of emigration from an African country to a Western one to serve as fetishized female bodies.

The Aunt Jemima prototype came to fruition during Reconstruction as a part of attempts to solidify an image of the American South and its Black workers as participating in a contented symbiotic relationship with White Southerners. Both inherently and through the original modes of advertisement Aunt Jemima (originally Nancy Green, hired in 1893) helped in the solidification of this model. Early memorabilia included her (picaninny) children and (Uncle Tom-esque) male partner.