

# Black womans body and personal identity

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The purpose of this research has been carried out to give an emphasis into how the idea of the black woman's body and personal identity has changed over time. In the 19th century, many black women felt inferior to white women due to the color of their skin and the various different characteristics of the two cultures. However, this research shows that even in that period black women did value their bodies and appearance as they do now in today's time. Through a brief look in history and comparing this today this research brings cohesion into the many thoughts and ideas there have been about how black women were viewed in the past and how they felt about themselves. The research brings these thoughts current to today's time. In conclusion it gives the point that black women have learned to respect their bodies far more than what they use to and have come to appreciate what they have been attributed with in their feminine form.

## Social Science and Cultural Studies

Throughout history there has been a unique idea into how women have felt about their personal identity especially that of their feminine body in comparison to that of other cultures, especially white women. What is well known in this period of time is how the color of a woman's skin had a strong influence in where she would find herself in society. In the 19th century women of color realized that their bodies and even their personal feelings towards their bodies placed them in a specific category. Unfortunately, color had an adverse affect on status and more often than not black women were criticized for their darker skin tone, larger derriere, and ample bosom which in some ways placed a complex onto black women (Cherniavsky 1995).

Furthermore, in this period of time there was an idea known as, " republican womanhood" of which women of color were excluded from being categorized in due to the color of their skin and their different bodily traits as well. This can be seen even within the many women's movements in the 1820's and 30's and with white women's move to try and abolish slavery against black women. Even though many white women made their voices heard it is assumed that their motives where not to bring equality to the skin colors or the body images because they still wanted to have the dominance of these facets over other ethnic backgrounds. What is shown to be profound is that the voices and images of white women were meant to end the idea of slavery period, not racial dividedness (Yancy 2000). This created quite a bit

of adversity onto women of color as they were trying to make their own place in their social world just as white women were attempting to do as well. Some historians state that it was the idea of white supremacy that altered black women's ideas about their bodies. Obviously they had feelings of inferiority about themselves despite the facts that they did their best to take care of themselves and their bodies (Cherniavsky 1995). This very exclusion and isolation prevented black women from having any form of a naturalization of identity with their womanhood in society as well as marring their own sexual identity also. Again, this was due to the fact of the white supremacist way of thinking but because of it, it is found that black women who were in slavery were stripped of their own gender identity and only referred to as "breeders" when it came to the idea of motherhood, a concept that was demoralizing to the true sexual identity of the black woman in the 19th century (Cherniavsky 1995).

The differences between white women and black women and bodily identity then was the fact that white women were given a place due to the abilities of their gender while although black women had the same natural abilities they were denied any acknowledgement, making it appear that the white woman's body was more influential and meaningful in society than a black woman's. As white women were barred from the political aspects of life, black women were barred from claiming any form of womanhood that was relative to a white woman's bodily role (Cherniavsky 1995). Therefore it is easily conceived that in the 19th century there were not only racial distinctions and discriminatory issues but there were also issues of discrimination with the concept of the black woman's own emergence of her

womanhood and sexual identity. Nevertheless, as time progressed from the 19th century ideas and thoughts changed and black women were viewed in a different light, although still facing some very real difficulties and outstanding differences within the social image of their body and character. For example, although they were not ridiculed as much in the latter of the 19th century they still faced the discriminatory issues of being a minority race and therefore their racial identity was often something of an impediment in their social life (Yancy 2000). Even so, despite the exclusion of their own femininity due to the white race being dominate during this era, black women were still finding themselves and going through a transformation with their own body image and how they themselves felt about their looks and where they were placed in a media standpoint. Although during the feminist movement, black women were not as noticed as white women they still showed signs of change such as the site of resistance they developed, semiotic reconstruction of their image, identity transformation in society, and the ultimate transformation of their image period (Yancy 2000). Undoubtedly black women did not sit idly by and face ignorance without trying to change it and bring about their own feminine individuality. This was even the case during the post modernistic period when whiteness seemed to have a voice all of its own accord for the image and appearance of white women. Even though the white woman's femininity was in dominance, the black woman still clung to her initiatives and made an identity for herself through these various racial adversities (Yancy 2000). Furthermore, to validate these claims white Western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and David Hume all were aware of the

oppositions facing black women and men in this time period although they themselves kept racial identity pretty much out of their writings.

Nevertheless, these philosophers pointed out that for a black woman in a white supremacist world, it wholly marred their personal body image in a way to where they were invisible for the most part to society, even though they were fully aware of their own body image and fought to find an identity for their femininity (Yancy 2000). In other words whiteness gave white women privileges that black women could not ascertain no matter how hard they struggled to do so. However, as has been stated history dictates that these positions did not remain forever and has also been pointed out as time gradually progressed so did the view points of those in societies.

Phyllis Wheatley was one woman that lived within black skin but that yet made her femininity and purpose known in a time period that still had threads of white imperialism. It was through her body and her hand that many African Americans were able to start finding individuality within their own body image and color of their skin, especially African American Women (Pharr 1999). It was through the development of black American literature that the ideals of the black body were finally expressed and found a respectful place in society as for many African Americans the literature of black Americans was and is tightly intertwined with their view of their body and their history, in explicably so for black women more so than black men (Pharr 1999).



## References

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