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# ROMANCE WITH VOLUPTUOUSNESS

**Expanding Frontiers:**
Interdisciplinary Approaches to
Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality

SERIES EDITORS:
*Karen J. Leong*
*Andrea Smith*

# ROMANCE WITH VOLUPTUOUSNESS

## Caribbean Women and Thick Bodies in the United States

KAMILLE GENTLES-PEART

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For Elizabeth, my darling daughter

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# ROMANCE WITH VOLUPTUOUSNESS

# 1 THE “THICK BLACK WOMAN”

## Racialized Body Politics and the Marginalization of Black Women

### Reflections of a *Mahgah* Jamaican Woman

I always ate at least three meals a day. Being a graduate student with little disposable income, these meals were neither remarkable nor sophisticated; my daily diet usually consisted of oatmeal for breakfast, cheap fast food for lunch, and chicken with rice for dinner. Regardless of the simplicity and lack of variety of these dishes, I did not want to miss meals, because that would risk me hearing the dreaded words from my mother when I returned home between semesters: “You lose weight!” Many women would welcome these words and deem them a positive assessment of their bodies. However, as a woman from Jamaica, those words were distressing. It was important for me to “keep on some weight”; I did not want to be skinny. I had to “have shape”; I had to have thick hips and round buttocks.[1] So I was careful to eat.

This relationship with my body did not begin with graduate school in the United States; I was always petite and always desired to be as big and voluptuous—and thus as attractive—as my relatives and peers. I was also accustomed to having the deviance of my body being the topic of conversation at family gatherings and being highlighted by members of my community, particularly, but not limited to, females. Aunts, cousins, and girlfriends surveiled my body, liberally and jovially making comments about its small size and shape. Commentary also came indirectly from Jamaican popular culture with songs, magazines, and music videos promoting a body type that was not mine and reinforcing the difference of my body.

Emigration to the United States did little to change the expectation that my body conform to the Jamaican ideal. I was surrounded by mainstream American media prolific with thin images, but in the black Caribbean community of New York City where I resided and among my black Caribbean relatives and peers, a thick body was desirable. On the other hand, however, my body was perceived with admiration among my white American peers in the small midwestern town in the United States where I attended graduate school. My race and foreign accent marked me as "other" in this predominantly white space, but my small body size, which approximated the thin ideal of mainstream America, engendered some acceptance; it was one of the few areas of my person that I knew fit into the dominant discourses of my new home. My thin body did not fit the body type associated with blackness, and to some (both black and white Americans) that made me not "black" enough, and lacking in the erotic sexuality ascribed to black women. However, to many, I became exceptional; my small, "not black enough" body, in combination with my accent, made me foreign, other, exotic.

I am cognizant that being called "exotic" is problematic, as it marked me as different, not normal, a bit of a spectacle. However, this exoticization gave me increased access to mainstream American society. It created the perception that I was less aggressive, less confrontational, less threatening, all issues that I witness many bigger women in my community contending with when engaging with white American spaces, such as academia. In my experience, black women with bigger bodies are not only hypervisible in academia, but they are also marginalized. In fact, they often exist along the Mammy-Sapphire continuum (Henderson, Hunter, and Hildreth 2010). I believe that both ideologies of Mammy and Sapphire construct black femininity in ways that link thick black female bodies to ideas of lowered intelligence: Mammy is the big black domestic worker, Sapphire is her voluptuous, more feisty counterpart, and neither of them is very bright. Perceived along this continuum, black women in academia (and I would argue particularly those with bigger bodies that most align with these popular cultural images of black women) are systemically shut out of the intellectual life of the white-dominated academy of the United States. They routinely receive negative student and peer evaluations that describe them as militant and aggressive, they are often denied tenure as their work and contributions are viewed as less valuable and less deserving of compensation and promotion, their expertise and knowledge are often questioned and challenged (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2004), and they are perceived and treated as the "maids of academe" (Harley 2008), supportive agents whose primary reason for existing is to help others (Bova 2000). I believe my smaller body helped to neutralize and "soften" the threat that Eurocentric imperialism has ascribed to thick black female bodies.

My thin, petite frame was also better for learning European dance forms such as ballet and modern dance, and I gravitated toward these performance arts. Admittedly, my body was not the ideal type for these dance forms, but they provided a space where the smallness of my thighs, hips, and buttocks were at least accepted (unlike in the mainstream Jamaican dance context, where big buttocks and thighs are prerequisites). Over time, I also noticed that my bigger-bodied relatives and friends in the diaspora no longer completely ridiculed my size; they viewed my body with a sense of ambivalence, of amusement but also admiration. They too noticed the mobility and inclusion (albeit marginal) that my body afforded me in the U.S. environment. They did not want my body, but they realized that it gave me access to American society in a way that theirs did not.

I continued to monitor my weight for years to come, nurturing my petite frame but making sure that I maintained my "shape." I appreciated and wanted to preserve the space created by my body in white mainstream society, but I also wanted a body that was acceptable to my black Caribbean counterparts. This negotiation also extended to my self-presentation, how I groomed and dressed my hybrid body. Growing up in Jamaica, in addition to having the voluptuous body, women were also expected to be of good character, meaning maintaining and projecting controlled sexuality and respectability, always being vigilant of the reputation being cultivated. Of course, this expectation of sexual purity for black Caribbean women contradicts the desire for and highly sensual position of the buttock in black Caribbean body politics (Wilk 1993), but as in many other cultures, women were expected to embody these traits simultaneously. Dress (the style, fit, and appropriateness of clothing and hair) was used as a major signifier of this propriety; women's presentation of self in public spaces was indicative of their social position and worth and was particularly significant in black Caribbean women's body politics.

From a very young age, I understood this politics of respectability. There were unwritten guidelines that prescribed the type of attire to be worn to particular places or on given occasions, as well as the condition that these clothes should be in. For example, I recall there being a clear distinction between clothing worn in public and those donned in the home. In addition to sleepwear, there was a set of comfortable "house" clothes that I wore within the confines of my home and the surrounding yard, and that were never worn beyond the domestic space. I was not allowed to wear these garments "on the road" as they were considered unsuitable for participation in public life. My "good" clothes (usually the newest, most fashionable, or least damaged) were reserved for appearances in public. These garments should be in great condition, with no visible stains, rips, or wrinkles. In fact, clothes donned in public should be well ironed and starched when necessary.

Public attire was also distinguished by occasion. While it was perfectly acceptable for me to wear jeans to markets, fetes, barbeques, and other outdoor outings, they were certainly inappropriate for "special" functions, which in Jamaican culture included balls, award programs, graduations, weddings, and receptions. Additionally, given the prominence of religion in Jamaica, and the high level of socialization that occurs within and around churches, attire for church services and functions was the most formal and exclusive. My "Sunday best" (usually a formal skirt suit or dress with matching shoes and other accessories) could only be worn to church or on very special occasions. Failure to wear clothing that met these standards was a direct indication of poor living conditions, poverty, low class, and lack of propriety. Violating these guidelines reflected negatively on one's class status, especially for women, creating a reputation that had long-lasting and detrimental effects in a society that valued respectability as a significant part of femininity.

My socialization related to dress and grooming did not always translate well into the American culture. While the African American communities I engaged with display similar principles about self-presentation, offering some refuge, the predominantly white spaces that I occupied valued a very different aesthetic. Even after living in the United States for several years, I still do not fully comprehend rules around dress that govern white American communities, particularly for semiformal, formal, and professional contexts. I have been embarrassed more times than I care to remember by being overdressed for events such as weddings, graduations, and award ceremonies that my cultural sensibilities deemed formal. I still recall the thinly veiled patronizing looks and comments I received that expressed a mixture of amusement, pity, and condescension at my overdressed body. On those occasions, the liminality of my body was placed in sharp relief: my small frame engendered admiration, but groomed in the wrong way, it signaled unsophistication and became a *pappy-show* (a site of spectacle). On the other hand, as I began to make adjustments to my dress code in response to my current American contexts, I found myself often underdressed for Jamaican formal events and feeling out of touch with the Jamaican community. Now, for every event, I am careful to take note of whether it is a Jamaican or (white) American setting, to inquire about the host of the event and who will be in attendance, and adjust my outfits accordingly; in other words, I have learned to regulate my dress and self-presentation based on the cultural context within which the function is located.

I continue to stand out as one of the few persons who "dress up" for my job as a professor. Students, faculty, and staff frequently comment on my style, but also on the level of smartness that characterizes my everyday office wear. Of course, interpreted within the context of the Jamaican culture, my dress is relatively moderate and even borders on conservative, but when viewed through the prism of white (predominantly middle-class) sensibilities, I am an outlier. I am fully aware that my choice to at least partially perpetuate the Jamaican standards for self-grooming exacerbates my simultaneous hypervisibility and erasure in my majority white institution, giving fuel to existing discourses that foreground my body but ignore my intellect. However, this problematic and complex visibility fostered by the intersection of race, class, gender, body size, and dress is preferable again to the invisibility that plagues many black women who are located in academic institutions shaped by Eurocentrism and imperialism. Therefore, similar to my negotiation of body size and shape, I am ever conscious of my grooming, wanting to foster a type of self-presentation that affords access (though problematic in some instances) into Jamaican and dominant American social and cultural spaces.

In this way, my body is a major site for my negotiation of belonging and subjectivity in the United States. My body size and dress are corporeal manifestations of my multiple and simultaneous registers of otherness and belonging as a black Caribbean woman living in the United States; indeed, my shape, size (as well as my hair and complexion), the general presentation of my body, and my careful management of them are reflections of my diasporic identity and my struggle for inclusion in the multiple and sometimes conflicting spaces I traverse.

My experience is not simply anecdotal; it is a common narrative within the black Caribbean diaspora. Surveillance and regulation of women's bodies (though based on a bigger body type) occur in the English-speaking Caribbean as in the global North. Unlike some popular and scholarly belief, however, this surveillance to maintain a bigger ideal is neither healthy nor innocuous. Rather, these processes have fostered disordered eating habits such as an obsession with eating, as seen in my case, as well as the consumption of copious amounts of weight-enhancing dietary supplements, such as ingesting "fowl pills," hormones given to chickens to make them plump.

Women from the English-speaking Caribbean thus come to the United States already habituated to pursuing an ideal beauty. However, migration requires these women to engage not only with beauty discourses cultivated in the Caribbean but also with those fostered outside their cultural homes and norms, specifically the Western beauty ideals of the United States. Furthermore, both sets of beauty regimes are tied to ideologies of value and personal worth and are used to create and police boundaries of dominant spaces. Black Caribbean women entering the United States therefore are not only negotiating issues of body image engendered by Caribbean and American pressures to maintain a certain body; they are also contending with discourses and practices around the body that aim to marginalize and exclude them from economic, social, and political spaces in the United States. *Romance with Voluptuousness* is an examination of the negotiation of these processes. At the heart of this book is an attempt to understand the ways in which beauty regimes are exercised, experienced, and resisted through the body of immigrant black women in the United States.

*Romance with Voluptuousness* sets out to map black Caribbean women's differentiated experiences with their voluptuous beauty ideal in the United States. The term "romance" draws on Belinda Edmondson's definition of the concept as the idealization of ideas and archetypes, in this case those that have come to represent Caribbean society and Caribbeanness in European American and intra-Caribbean discourses (1999, 2). As Edmondson explains, "'Romance' of particular tropes and paradigms identified with an essential Caribbeanness (such as carnival and cultural hybridity, to name two of the more striking examples) marks the process by which concrete ideological-political issues are mystified into regional symbols divorced from their ideological context" (2).

One such ideological trope is that of the voluptuous black woman. Using the actual reports of women, *Romance with Voluptuousness* explores the "romance" that black Caribbean women in the United States have with this idealized beauty standard of the Caribbean and how they embody it in their own lives. Furthermore, this work examines the women's experiences with upholding these constructs in the United States and the cognitive and performative strategies they use to negotiate hegemonies of beauty and their real-life implications. This book is not a historical analysis of voluptuousness, nor does it offer an explanation of the place of the curvy figure in contemporary Caribbean body image. Rather, using the personal accounts of real women, the text explores how black women with heritage in the English-speaking Caribbean participate in, perpetuate, and struggle with this beauty standard of the black Caribbean while living in the United States. It foregrounds the complicated ways in which these immigrant women negotiate beauty standards in the diaspora and offers a different vantage point from which to view their migration experiences.

### The "Thick Black Woman" as Controlling Image

During the colonial period (between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), European travelers writing about Africa drew on and contributed to a European discourse on black womanhood that ascribed a big body to all black women and used it as a signifier of otherness and lesser culture and intelligence. The depiction of colonized black women in these writings presented them as having monstrous (big), unwomanly bodies that were dangerously, aberrantly hypersexual, and not intended to be beautiful and admired (as the delicate bodies of their white counterparts).

Perhaps the most iconic figure in this regard is that of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus. Baartman, a South African slave, was brought to Europe in 1810 for the purposes of "displaying her enlarged genitals and buttocks" (Mason 2013, 687). Her body was exhibited across Europe as the epitome of African and black female sexual abnormality. As Simone Alexander (2014) states, in Western eyes, Baartman's deviant body shape and race fueled ideas of her "presumed hypersexuality" and subhuman qualities, and served as the basis for her exploitation and denial of citizenship; as "a member of the Khoisan herder tribe, Baartman, as a result of her endowed figure—her fleshy buttocks—her 'excess flesh,' became the object of desire and derision, fear and adoration. Baartman's inability to attain citizenship was a foregone conclusion, since her body, in many ways did not correspond to the national (read white) body" (24).

These traits—big buttocks, deviant sexuality, bestiality—were not only limited to Baartman; these ideologies about large posteriors intersecting with the notion of racialized inhumanity have been extended to *all* women of African descent. As Janell Hobson says, the long-lasting effect of these exhibitions of black women's bodies in European and American culture is that "black women *en masse* are often 'known' to have big behinds, à la the Hottentot Venus" (2003, 93, emphasis in original). Hobson continues: "Baartman . . . came to signify the 'ugliness' of her *race*. It is this connection between blackness and grotesquerie that has haunted many people of African descent, especially those living under the influence of dominant white culture, to the point that a slogan such as 'Black is beautiful' seems a radical statement" (94, emphasis in original).

These "monstrous," dangerous bodies were also used to signify and justify black women's only utility as producers of crops, bearers of children, and thus their dispensability in modern, capitalist society. This construction of the black female body as one built for functionality, for labor, was employed to affirm Europe's use of black slave labor (J. Morgan 1997, 168). In addition to the construction of black women as dangerous, the "Hottentot Venus" image also gave primacy to black women's "muscular capabilities, physical strength, aggressive carriage and sturdiness" and presented them as "devoid of feminine tenderness and graciousness" (Beckles 1999, 10). In other words, the image simultaneously perpetuated the masculinization of black women.[2] The "thick black woman" is therefore excluded from discourses of feminine beauty in the West.

The prevalence of the "thick black woman" ideology in contemporary white society—the idea that all black women are voluptuous (and thus not up to the standard of white beauty)—is a way to preserve the beauty ideology of the West as the domain of white women without overtly using racial discourses. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006), in contemporary U.S. society, where the logic of color blindness reigns, racial inequality is perpetuated through strategies that mask racism by highlighting instead cultural and individual difference. This "new racism" functions to maintain the contemporary racial structure through subtle, institutional practices and helps to underscore white privilege without incriminating whites (Bonilla-Silva 2006). The idea of the "thick black woman" in mainstream American beauty discourses plays into this colorblind racism; by accepting and propagating the idea that black women are voluptuous and not thin, dominant American society can exclude black women from accepted categories of beauty without using race per se. Their bodies can be dismissed under the guise of cultural standards of beauty that do not align with those in the mainstream of the United States. In this sense, black women, including those of the Caribbean, can be marginalized as different without overtly using race; while race is central to black women's exclusion from beauty categories, the emphasis on their deviant bodies allows dominant society to explain their marginalization in nonracial terms.

Additionally, the idea that black women cannot and do not need to fit into dominant U.S. standards of beauty further dehumanizes them by recuperating a form of the "strong black woman" rhetoric. In her contemporary form, the "strong black woman" is "a motivated, hardworking breadwinner" who is "smart and sacrificial" with a "seemingly irrepressible spirit unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. . . . [She has the] ability to simply shake off or get past the formidable obstacles that face [her]" (Harris-Lacewell 2001, 3, 6). This superwoman is prolific in the white American imagination, fueled by the real experiences of black women, who seem to miraculously maintain their households in spite of poverty, and is prominent in African American popular culture. Through the media, the symbol of the "strong black woman" has been rehearsed and venerated to the detriment of real women, who are expected to emulate these ideological foils (Harris-Lacewell 2001). Through this "strong black woman" trope, black women are reified as indomitable and undaunted by oppressive systems but simultaneously indelicate, unfeminine, and ultimately "other" (Harris-Lacewell 2001; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Lau 2011).