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Elodie Silberstein, *Animality and Humanity in French Late Modern Representations of Black Femininity*. New York: Routledge, 2022. xi + 139 pp. Illustrations. \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032135427; \$47.65 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003230793.

Review by Brett A. Berliner, Morgan State University.

In the last few decades, the experiences, receptions, and representations of Black women have been central to the study of Blacks in French history and culture, and this scholarship has been useful for challenging the very categories of analysis we use to understand France. In a new intervention in this scholarship on Black women, Elodie Silberstein wishes not to detail much more about the lives of iconic Black figures in French culture such as Sara Baartman, Josephine Baker, and Grace Jones, but to use these figures to expand our analytic frames to understand how Black women are a “prism” (p. 5) through which we can understand France’s relationship to the natural world. In *Animality and Humanity in French Late Modern Representations of Black Femininity*, Silberstein, a scholar of visual culture, argues that “estheticized, spectacularized and eroticized modes of representation [of Black femininity] have naturalized and glorified patterns of dehumanization and species hierarchization” (p. 7). In five case studies of visual practices, Silberstein asks fresh and poignant questions about Black women’s representations, the wider context of these representations, and what they tell us about the human and non-human animal world in French culture.

Silberstein’s first case study centers Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” to explore “the performative display of human and non-human animals in the late 18th- and early 19th-century French aristocratic and *bourgeois* interiors” (p. 24). To investigate this topic, Silberstein analyzes an article and accompanying imagery of Baartman in the *Journal des dames et des modes*, which in 1815 detailed a showing of Baartman in a private home for a socially elite audience. When Baartman entered the home, women, the article explained, were horrified and exercised a “pathologizing gaze” (p. 30) on the Hottentot Venus’s body. Silberstein does not expand on the context of early nineteenth-century entertainment, especially that of the showing of wondrous bodies; rather, her contribution is to place Baartman in the context of interspecies experiences, namely the petting zoo and fads celebrating exotic animals in Europe. The physical touching of Baartman, especially by women, Silberstein argues, can be understood in the context of social elites who exercised their power and entitlement by petting non-human animals as well as Black children, as seen in European art. The display of Baartman was, then, an opportunity for women to “assert their vilifying and domesticating gaze over the animalized black body” (p. 37).

Silberstein's second case study begins with a spotlight on Josephine Baker but then quickly pivots to Chiquita, her cheetah. Introducing the idea of "animalistic glamour," Silberstein asks what "modes of spectatorship" (p. 45) were invited when Baker appeared with her big cat. Such spectatorship, Silberstein suggests, was paved centuries before when Louis XIV tamed, caged, and spectacularized animals both for the very pleasure of looking at them and to represent dominance over human and non-human animals alike. By the early twentieth century, the French bourgeoisie accessorized themselves with exotic big cats to convey their own "ideas of wealth, ruling power, and high social standing" (p. 50), ones predicated on, suggests Silberstein, dominance over both "racialized human and non-human animals" (p. 59). Luxury brands, like Cartier and Vuitton, employed these tropes visually in advertisements to make their exclusive products, especially those associated with the colonies, chic.

Silberstein lingers on Baker in her next case study, which starts with the visually arresting image of the star singing in a gilded bird cage in the 1934 movie *Zouzou*, to ask new questions about women and animality. Music hall stars, we take for granted, were decorated with feathers, but Silberstein asks why, and at what environmental cost. The procurement of feathers was so rapacious that some bird species were exploited to near extinction. Furthermore, Silberstein argues that the showgirl, so adorned, was very much "a form of sexual imperialism" (p. 68), economically, politically, and ideologically. As feathers increasingly lost their relevance in symbols of military and masculine prowess (hard power), they became signifiers of "frivolous femininity" (p. 76) and the soft power of shaping tastes and culture.

Taking another chronological leap, Silberstein next focuses on Grace Jones in the late 1970s and 1980s, mainly to examine Jean-Paul Goude, Jones's lover and producer, whose visual imagery of the "re-enactment of...conquest over racialized women and wild non-human animals resonated" (p. 86) with the French. Goude, Silberstein relates, was influenced by colonial imagery and the Vincennes Zoo, both of which were arguably apparent in his 1978 performance piece, "Grace in Cage." On Halloween, 1978, Grace Jones "sang *Do or Die* to an encaged tiger" and then, snarling, she opened the cage with the lights darkened. In the span of seconds, she replaced the tiger with herself in the cage, where, naked, she continued to sing, while also chewing raw meat. Silberstein suggests that the performance, memorialized in photographs, represented a history of "entitlement and eroticized...conquest" (p. 97).

In a final example of animalistic glamour, Silberstein analyzes the twenty first-century fad of owning dinosaur fossils and using them to advertise luxury items. This effects the representation of Black women, Silberstein explains, through absence: "[d]epictions of dinosaurs targeted at an upper-class market have erased the black body while heavily drawing on long-established discursive and visual tropes in which the black body has been central" (p. 108). In analyzing a 2013 Louis Vuitton window display featuring a dinosaur with a light-skinned mannequin riding it side-saddle, ostensibly to shill expensive handbags, Silberstein connects this image to pictures of Josephine Baker and Chiquita, Goude's images of Grace Jones, and the imperialist tropes embedded in natural history museum displays. Channeling these esthetic conventions, the display, Silberstein concludes, "negated the black body" (p. 119) in visualizing the modern upper-class (white) woman. Modernity was further highlighted in the commodification of dinosaurs: their use and possession suggest how far humankind has come in its racial and species exceptionalism.

The global North has a long history of exploiting people and ecosystems. How this rapacious imperialism and capitalism has been justified can be traced, Silberstein argues, through the “evolution of the representations of black femininity” (p. 128). In doing this tracing, Silberstein ranges widely over time, highlighting continuity over centuries in the visual record of Black femininity. She challenges us to look at the representation and, typically, subordination of the Black female body in visual culture and asks an important question: what cultural work is being done, especially as it relates to racial and species exploitation and exceptionalism? Her questions are insightful and the imagery she cites is rich for analysis. As an historian not formally trained in visual culture, I would like to see a wider source base used, most notably audience responses to imagery and deeper historical contextualization of her case studies to scaffold her analysis more widely and deeply. That aside, Silberstein’s work will challenge all of us to think more broadly about the visual world and what it means to human and non-human animals.

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