

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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What You Looking At Me For?: The Black Comedian as Fetish Object

Through numerous descriptions of Africans and indigenous peoples, travel writing and other historical documents reveal that Europeans continually fetishized the bodies of the people they encountered. By thrusting the presence of these “others” into the public sphere, Europeans also created public spectacles out of bodies that did not adhere to a European aesthetic of beauty. This act revealed the West’s obsession with the lives and, most prominently, the bodies of racial and ethnic others. While Africans like Saartjie Baartman and other indigenous peoples may have been some of the first inadvertent ‘performers’ to be fetishized, they have not been the last. People of color on stage, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, have especially been subject to this public specular fixation. The first, rather obvious claim is that performers of any genre are often fetishized precisely because they are in the public gaze, because the public has greater access to them. In this paper, however, I suggest that the meteoric rise to fame of black performers, particularly the black comic, is a direct result of white audiences’ fetishization of the black body. Comedians like Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle have been elevated to the status of pop culture icons – but why? I believe that the fetishistic impulse that was fed by the exhibition of “foreign” bodies both through travel writing and anthropological performances – and later the minstrel show – has been carried over into an obsession with black performers. And like the massive popularity of the minstrel show, this fame arises in part out of the white audience’s desire to view the black body as spectacle because of a subconscious fixation on otherness and difference. But I also believe that the tendency in academic study has been to locate the fetishization of the black body firmly in the past. My argument is that this fixation is just as prevalent in today’s society, and that we as scholars need to work to locate contemporary cultural iterations of this fetish – like the black male comedian – within its historical spectrum.