



# The Black Female Body: A Photographic History

*Deborah Willis, Carla Williams*

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## **The Black Female Body: A Photographic History** Deborah Willis, Carla Williams

Searching for photographic images of black women, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams were startled to find them by the hundreds. In long-forgotten books, in art museums, in European and U.S. archives and private collections, a hidden history of representation awaited discovery. "The Black Female Body" offers a stunning array of familiar and many virtually unknown photographs, showing how photographs reflected and reinforced Western culture's fascination with black women's bodies. In the nineteenth century, black women were rarely subjects for artistic studies but posed before the camera again and again as objects for social scientific investigation and as exotic representatives of faraway lands. South Africans, Nubians, enslaved Abyssinians and Americans, often partially or completely naked and devoid of identity, were displayed for the armchair anthropologist or prurient viewer. Willis and Williams relate these social science photographs and the blatantly pornographic images of this era with those of black women as domestics and as nursemaids for white children in family portraits. As seen through the camera lens, Jezebel and Mammy took the form of real women made available to serve white society. Bringing together some 185 images that span three centuries, the authors offer counterpoints to these exploitive images, as well as testaments to a vibrant culture. Here are nineteenth century portraits of well-dressed and beautifully coifed creoles of color and artistic studies of dignified black women. Here are Harlem Renaissance photographs of entertainer Josephine Baker and writer Zora Neale Hurston. Documenting the long struggle for black civil rights, the authors draw on politically pointed images by noted photographers like Dorothea Lange, Louis Hines, and Gordon Parks. They also feature the work of contemporary artists such as Ming Smith Murray, Renee Cox, Coreen Simpson, Chester Higgins, Joy Gregory, and Catherine Opie, who photograph black women asserting their subjectivity, reclaiming their bodies, and refusing the representations of the past. A remarkable history of the black woman's image, "The Black Female Body" makes an exceptional gift book and keepsake. Deborah Willis is Professor of Photography in the Tisch School of the Arts, NYU and the author of "Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present". Carla Williams is a writer and photographer.

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