

***Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* by Michelle Ann Stephens**

Rocío Pichon-Rivière | New York University

Stephens, Michelle Ann. 2014. *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer*. Durham: Duke University Press. 282 pp.; 55 illustrations; \$22.46 paper.



Skin Acts is an ambitious and well-researched study that anyone interested in the intersections of psychoanalysis and critical race theory should read. Michelle Ann Stephens analyzes the performances of four black male celebrities as metaphors for mass subject formation and race war in twentieth-century American culture. The bibliography of *Skin Acts* puts together a history of skin that Stephens unfolds in the introduction of the book, serving as a fascinating overview of the emerging field of Skin Studies. The book stages a conversation between Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Joan Copjec, and Brian Massumi, among others. This necessary work speaks back to the unexamined whiteness of mainstream psychoanalysis, while proposing a psychoanalytical interpretation of race as a discourse. The conceptual gem of the book is Stephens' appropriation of the Lacanian notion of invagination, which she opposes to the phallic as an emancipated form of social touch.

The main argument of the book is that the charisma of four mainstream black male performers in twentieth-century American culture is due to a specific performance of difference that the author calls "skin acts." These skin acts were an increasingly political mode of being onstage that challenged the racist powers of the hegemonic gaze by means of different tricks. The

narrative arc of the book starts in the 1900s with Bert Williams, a black minstrel blackface performer, and one of his plays, *In Dahomey* (the first minstrel show of its kind, crafted entirely by important black figures, some of whom would later participate in the Harlem Renaissance). The second chapter (set in the 1920s and 1930s) analyzes the participation of Paul Robeson as model and actor in a series of modernist works by white artists (including the poet H. D.). Chapter three focuses on Harry Belafonte, an actor and musician of Caribbean background, who would reach the status of a movie star in the American context of the civil rights movement. The last chapter analyzes the figure of Bob Marley as he emerged through the processes of decolonization in the Caribbean. All chapters include an account of the performers' public relationships with women, suggesting a history of (interracial and intraracial) public gender relations.

Stephens pays delicate attention to what she Lacanianly calls the "black letter" as an instance of the [black] unconscious (45). She proposes a retrospective interpretation of the play *In Dahomey*: "*In Dahomey's* script is like a letter from Bert Williams that has taken almost a century to arrive" (69). The rare and forgotten case of black men performing blackface in a Broadway show allows her to use that painted face as a metaphor for Fanon's concept of epidermalization. Stephens invites us to listen to the syncopated voice of Williams as defying the painful sight of his dehumanizing "coon gestures" and to hear in the grain of his music something like the skin of his voice, speaking from behind the mask. Similarly, in the rest of the case studies Stephens invites us to let the performances affect us in forms that go beyond the limited perception that they might have provoked in the original audience through the apolitical codes of the cultural industry. In the case of Bob Marley, for instance, she invites us to be alert to the works of a mass cultural market that reduced a historical subject to a seemingly immortal symbol of a struggle that became an empty signifier, devoid of its singular context. To find the grain of his voice, she extends the archive into marginal texts, such as his wife's biographical account. In this regard, Stephens is proposing a particular kind of phenomenology of the retrospective perception of the archive (one that mobilizes haptic and synesthetic optics, sound, and touch), while bringing the important question about the indetermination of meaning as it can be twisted and inverted by the wrong audiences. Talking about Bert Williams, she raises a question that she calls "the fundamental question of *In Dahomey* as a blackface performance text" (57). It is a question that could still be posed today regarding some of the works of, for instance, contemporary artist Kara Walker: "Can the author, the performer, ever really control the meaning of his letter when the recipient, the audience, can always make the letter mean something other than what the author intends?" (57). The black letter that a skin act offers is one that can only be interpreted with great care and with a sensibility that would be too optimistic to expect from the masses.

Stephens opens her book with a provocative reference to the era of Obama and the post-racial or post-blackness subject (xii). Only in the very last page of the book does she critique this language while analyzing Shepard Fairey's iconic blue and red poster of Barack Obama as an attempt to deracialize his face:

EMISFÉRICA

The black human head is smoothened, virtualized, colorized, and deracinated. Fairey's rendering of Obama is very much an image of The Face, inviting us to write ourselves into a new vision of America as a colorful, multiracial, postracial utopia. This is not just the post-racial body but also a new form of facialization that tries once again to color over the flesh with new codes and signifiers of a mediated blackness, the unreal images of a colorblind gaze. (204)

Today, while we protest police brutality against black subjects and while we bear witness to the massive incarceration of one out of three black men in the U.S., this well-researched analysis of black male performances (and their connections to an audience of American anxieties and fears) is a useful tool to continue the much-needed theoretical work that brings psychoanalysis, affect theory, and mass culture together. It creates a language that can allow us to identify and hopefully undo the symbolic and libidinal circuits of racial and gender oppression in a society that has painted its skin in a colorblind tone.

Rocío Pichon Rivière is a PhD candidate at New York University and an artist. She majored in philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires with an honors thesis on Gilles Deleuze's notion of thinking, in the light of his readings of Bergson, Kant, and Foucault. She is currently writing a dissertation on contemporary Latin American women writers and their political thought at the Department of Spanish and Portuguese language and literatures at NYU. Her art can be seen here: www.rociopichonriviere.com.