

*Scarring the
Black Body*

*Scarring the
Black Body*

*Race and Representation
in African American
Literature*

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FOR MY BROTHER BOBBY

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Definitions

scar n [1] a mark left on the skin or other tissue after a wound, burn, ulcer, pustule, lesion has healed; [2] a marring or disfiguring mark on anything; [3] the lasting mental or emotional effects of suffering or anguish; vt scarred, scarring; to mark with or as with a scar; vi to form a scar in healing

Synonyms

n. injury, stigma, trauma, reminder, memento, brand; v. hurt, blemish, wound

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*Scars are a map to one's past . . .
proof that even the worst wounds heal.*

—Vincent of *Beauty and the Beast*

*Scarring the
Black Body*

{ *Introduction* }

Bearing Witness

Reading the Narrative of the African American Body

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy"

Sneaking in late one Sunday morning to the services of a very prominent Baptist church in San Bernardino, California, I took a seat in the rear of the church next to a woman and her two children. Generally, I try to make it to church services on time, but trying to convince a precocious (yet adorable) four year old to put on a suit and tie presents

challenges of its own. Needless to say, I arrive at church when I can, and this particular Sunday I took a seat on the pew with all those other individuals who either arrived late or were too shy or too intimidated to move up front, or who simply found solace in sitting close to the door (presumably for a swift exit). As the minister proceeded to the part of the service that acknowledges visitors—when all eyes visually interrogate those individuals brave enough to stand and endure the scrutiny—I noticed that the woman next to me was starting to doze. Initially I thought, Why isn't this woman at home? Surely she could find a more comfortable place to sleep—one unburdened with the noise of a church choir and the monotonal droning of the announcement clerk. However, as I began to look at her more closely, I noticed that she had very deep scars on her leg facing me. For those of you who don't attend traditional black Baptist churches regularly, it is common knowledge that coming to church bare-legged is against "church protocol." This woman's legs were bare. Also, the marks visible on her legs—what appeared to be large cigarette burns—seemed to have been inflicted on her person with extreme force. There were actually small crevices, potholes (in the terminology used to describe damage to the surface of a street), on her body.

I was quite moved by the language of this woman's body—I felt I knew her story. I considered her life in terms of other women—abused, neglected, punished by the circumstances in their lives. This woman's physical form seemed to embody that narrative. Her clothes were disheveled, her hair unkempt. She seemed tired—her body postured in a resigned way. She appeared seasoned, as if aged by years of existing under circumstances that are inclined to make the young quickly old. Her children looked worn, and they also slept; her daughter had her head in the woman's lap, and her son dozed in the seat in front of her. I cannot recall the sermon for that Sunday because my thoughts drifted toward my interest in bodies and their ability to tell stories: vividly, subtly, powerfully.

I should note here that not every "body" moves me. Coming from the inner city of Los Angeles, I have seen all kinds of bodies in various states of disrepair: wasted bodies seduced by the promises of the street; wounded bodies enslaved to the vices of crack, cocaine, alcohol, and sex; displaced bodies in need of hope, direction, and some

sense of security. There must have been something in this woman's demeanor, in her unspoken deposition, that drew me to her. To this day, she has remained an elusive part of my memory, an ever-so-present image in my investigation of scars and bodies, an unsolved mystery in life's ever-evolving riddle. I now realize I may never know the "real" story of the woman I observed that day. In retrospect, it may not have been the intimate details of her life that interested me; it may have been the story *implied* through her body's language—and *signified* by the presence of those scars on her legs—that piqued my curiosity and made me want to pursue this line of inquiry in greater depth.

On a larger scale, my interest in bodies has primarily centered on the ability of the body to alter certain historical moments in any given social milieu. Our historical record is replete with examples of the body being used successfully by various ethnic groups as a tool to challenge the stifling conditions of economic and social oppression or, at the very least, to challenge our understanding of those historical moments that revolve around the issue of social and political control of subjugated groups. In each of these instances, the body has functioned as a walking text, a fleshly reminder of the paradoxical nature of an American citizenry built around the ideology of difference. In the "bodily" history of the African American community, the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s consistently used the African American body to show television audiences the harshness of the systems of segregation and racism. Etched into the minds of most individuals who witnessed the politics of that era are images of African American men, women, and children being attacked by water hoses and dogs. My reflection at this point is not to rehash that which is already known but to demonstrate the nuances of a historicity based on the signs of the body as text. As Paula Coeey maintains, the body is an important resource for understanding cultural ways of knowing "as these are informed by the relations of and struggles for power."¹ I want to suggest that these "cultural ways of knowing" provide a setting for the examination of African American bodies in the larger social context of struggles for power, an examination that centers on the ability of these bodies not only to "speak" into existence their own humanity but to do so in a way that resists racist or sexist paradigms of subjugated embodiment.

The Call

{ *One* }

Imag(in)ing the Body Wounded

Bodily Inscriptions and Initiation Rites in America's Social Discourse

Narrative, as a process of representation, provides a powerful tool for conceptualization.

- Dana Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*

The Libian dusky in his parched skin,
The Moor all tawny both without and in,
The Southern man, a black deformed Elfe,
The Northern white like unto God Himselfe

- Thomas Peyton (1620)

It is difficult to be sure of how or when, but there is no question that the superficial and metaphoric differences between various groups of human beings adversely affected the ideological figurations of “race” in the Americas. As Dana Nelson notes, “‘race’ has never been a fixed concept,” but an evolving idea intimately connected to the cultural, moral, metaphysical, and biological landscape of America’s history. The instability of the concept, as Nelson sees it, “reminds us that before notions of different races could become ‘common sense,’ the idea of ‘race’ had to be invented, described, promulgated, and legislated by those who would benefit as a group from the concept.” Nelson’s observations prove useful in that they direct attention to the arrant manner in which America’s developing legal and political systems were based on the imaginative tropes of racial difference—par-