



Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer

Michelle Ann Stephens

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

In *Skin Acts*, Michelle Ann Stephens explores the work of four iconic twentieth-century black male performers—Bert Williams, Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, and Bob Marley—to reveal how racial and sexual difference is both marked by and experienced in the skin. She situates each figure within his cultural moment, examining his performance in the context of contemporary race relations and visual regimes. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and performance theory, Stephens contends that while black skin is subject to what Frantz Fanon called the epidermalizing and hardening effects of the gaze, it is in the flesh that other—intersubjective, pre-discursive, and sensuous—forms of knowing take place between artist and audience. Analyzing a wide range of visual, musical, and textual sources, Stephens shows that black subjectivity and performativity are structured by the tension between skin and flesh, sight and touch, difference and sameness.

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