Western culture has long been fascinated by black women, but a history of enslavement and colonial conquest has variously labeled black women’s bodies as ‘exotic’ and ‘grotesque.’ In this remarkable cultural history of black female beauty, Janell Hobson explores the enduring figure of the ‘Hottentot Venus.’

In 1810, Sara Baartman was taken from South Africa to Europe, where she was put on display at circuses, salons, and museums and universities as the ‘Hottentot Venus.’ The subsequent legacy of representations of black women’s sexuality—from Josephine Baker, Serena Williams, and Janet Jackson to hip-hop and dancehall videos—continues to refer back to this persistent icon. *Venus in the Dark* analyzes the history of critical and artistic responses to this iconography by black women throughout the diaspora in contemporary photography, film, literature, and dance.

Janell Hobson is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at the State University of New York at Albany.
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