Black Matrilineage, Photography, and Representation

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IN MY BOOK

Black Motherhood in the Work of Nona Faustine Simmons

Jonathan Michael Square

In her ongoing series *Mitochondria*, the African American visual artist Nona Faustine photographs herself, her mother, her sister, and her daughter in their shared home in Brooklyn’s Flatbush neighborhood. We see her daughter, Queen, reclined on a plush, eggplant-colored sofa, costumed as a princess for Halloween. We see Faustine’s mother staring pensively at the camera in their living room in crisp natural light. We see Faustine herself fording waves at Coney Island—one of her favorite places in the world, and a site of another of her photographic series, *From My Beach Chair*—with Queen straddling her back. We see Queen holding out a slice of red velvet cake on her sixth birthday.

The series, began in 2008, reveals the intimacy of their familial relationship and the tenacity of their attachment to each other. Its title refers to the

Nona Faustine Simmons,
*Blue Queen*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist. © Nona Faustine Simmons
mitochondrial DNA encoded in human genes, which is inherited from mothers. By tracing maternal lineages through mitochondrial DNA, scientists have identified the Mitochondrial Eve (also known as mt-Eve, mt-MRCA, or the “Eve Gene”) as the most recent common ancestor of all living human beings. This means we can trace the lineage of all mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and so on, to a gene from one woman, estimated to have lived 150,000 to 200,000 years ago.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact location in which the Eve Gene originated, due to geographical changes over time, scientists suggest that the earliest humans derived from the Makgadikgadi Pan, the modern-day Kalahari Desert in Botswana. Thus, the discovery of Mitochondrial Eve highlights the power and importance of women of African descent. From her mitochondria arose humanity’s phenotypical diversity. In other words, without the genes from this African woman, modern humans would not exist.

Faustine’s own maternal lineage, unearthed in a genealogical quest, originated in precolonial Africa and culminates in the present with her daughter, Queen. Through AfricanAncestry.com, Faustine discovered that she descends from the Bubi, Hausa, Fulani, and Tikar peoples of West Africa. She also learned the name of her oldest maternal ancestor: Dido. Born enslaved, Dido worked as a domestic on a plantation in New Hanover County, North Carolina, for most of her life. She may not have engaged in agricultural work, but the coastal plains of North Carolina were constructed on the unpaid labor of enslaved people who worked the region’s hundreds of plantations. From Dido, future generations emerged, living with dignity and regality, as befits the
descendants of a woman named for the legendary queen of Carthage; indeed, Faustine’s mother, like Faustine’s daughter, was named Queen. In the last wave of the Great Migration, Faustine’s parents moved from North Carolina to a pre-gentrified Brooklyn. Faustine can trace a maternal line encompassing her daughter, herself, her mother, her grandmother Maggie, her great-grandmother Martha, her great-great-grandmother Dido, and countless unknown foremothers. It is this maternal lineage that she documents in *Mitochondria*.

Faustine’s creative practice is grounded in unearthing the stories of women—free and enslaved, past and present—who shaped her life. Trained at the International Center of Photography, she received her MFA in 2013 from Bard College, and she has since gained widespread acclaim for her photographic work examining the relationship between place, the Black female body, and the memory of slavery. In her photographs, she reclaims spaces for herself, her family, and other Black women within the Western artistic canon, and reflects on the centrality of Black women to the founding and maintaining of longstanding Black communities.

**Reclaiming Motherhood**

The *Mitochondria* series serves as a corrective to poisoned images of Black women characterized by extremes and stereotypes: the desexualized and masculinized Mammy, the hypersexualized and exploitable Jezebel, the sharp-tongued neck-rolling Sapphire. Far from occupying stereotypical roles assigned to Black...
women, Faustine, her mother, her sister, and her daughter embody their own identities. In this series, they are complex, graceful, and beautiful—adjectives infrequently associated with Black motherhood and femininity.

Writer and historian Sarah Knott notes that “mother” is a verb; rather than a static state of being, it emerges out of active caring and nurturing. Yet enslaved mothers were not allowed to mother. “The idea of a black woman being a mother could not be embraced,” says Faustine. It was not unusual for enslaved mothers to be separated from their children—nor, in a perverse twist of irony, to be asked to care for their enslavers’ children. Moreover, in the British colonies, and subsequently the United States, the legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*—meaning “that which is born follows the womb”—rendered the children of enslaved women slaves themselves. Thus, enslaved women were not only laborers but also potential reproducers of more enslaved laborers. In the United States, one of the first nations—along with Britain—to abolish the slave trade, reproduction was a means of amassing a future labor force throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, a formerly enslaved woman, who escaped with her family across the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati in January 1856. Apprehended by U.S. marshals acting under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and unwilling to have her daughter raised in the yoke of slavery, Garner committed infanticide. Against the backdrop of tragic histories like Garner’s, Black mothers caring for their children—as Faustine documents in *Mitochondria*—becomes an act of resistance.

**Reclaiming Place**

Africa—the motherland—is the site at which the umbilical cord was severed in the Middle Passage, and it figures prominently in Faustine’s imagination and lived experience. Sociologist Orlando Patterson famously argued that Diasporic Blacks suffered from a form of natal alienation, which he termed “social death.” Many scholars have rejected this notion, arguing that Black communities were able to maintain institutions from the African continent and construct new meaning in the New World context. Saidiya Hartman, for example, embraces the trauma and kinlessness of the transatlantic slave trade in her seminal work, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Hartman explores the public memory of slavery and how, amid the brutality
of the Middle Passage and the daily ordeal of slavery, enslaved people and their
descendants managed to survive and build a sense of community that endures
to the present day, injecting her personal narrative along the way.⁴

With her photographs, Faustine is, in essence, doing the work of nurturing
community and creating meaning. Like her, many African Americans
have spent time in Africa to help suture the wounds of separation that many
Diasporic Blacks feel, bridge the fissure between Old and New World Blacks,
and learn about their maternal roots. Faustine highlights the preservation of
African cultural elements in American society, using her own presence and
the presence of her mother, sister, and daughter as proof of the strength and
survival of Black people even in the most harrowing circumstances.

While working on Mitochondria, Faustine began White Shoes, a series exploring
the history of slavery in New York City. In all the photographs, she wears
a pair of white pumps that represents the effects of whiteness on the Black
body. Among other locations, she wears them on Wall Street, in a lot bounded
by Water and Pearl Streets that is widely accepted to have been the site of an
eighteenth-century slave market.⁵ In posing nude on this Wall Street block,
she stands in for her enslaved descendants who might have been bought and
sold on this parcel of land. Moreover, by choosing a location on Wall Street,
which has become a symbol of American capitalism and a major tourist des-
tination, Faustine is representing Black women who continue to be subjected
to misogyny, racism, and coercive labor conditions. One of the motivations
behind the series was Faustine’s desire to document Black women’s presence
in Brooklyn so that future residents will know that enslaved women and
their descendants helped found the borough and lived there before they were pushed out by gentrification and other forces of structural racism. In this way, her work is a reflection on the past, present, and even the future, refracted through a radical Black feminist lens.

In *In White Shoes*, Faustine uses herself as a metonym for the presence of enslaved women in the city throughout history. As a Black woman and descendant of enslaved people, she turns the lens on herself, photographing herself nude in sites of slavery around New York, uniting her personal history and African Americans’ collective testimony of enslavement. In so doing, she reclaims sites in New York City where the history of slavery has been forgotten and summons those narratives into our present day, connecting herself to a lineage that extends from the African continent to contemporary Brooklyn. She uses self-portraiture—whether in her artistic series or in selfies that she posts on social media—as a radical affirmation of her beauty and subjectivity as a Black woman and mother who descends from enslaved people.

One work in the series, *Not Gone with the Wind*, speaks to the blurring of past and present, and the permanence and perseverance of Black women. For the photo, Faustine posed partially nude in front of the Lefferts Historic House, the former home of the prominent Lefferts family, in what is now Prospect Park, Brooklyn. The Lefferts were wealthy property owners who engaged in the trade, sale, and purchase of enslaved people until emancipation was enacted in New York State in 1827. Faustine places herself in solidarity with those enslaved people, bare-chested and solemnly positioned in front of the homestead. Sites such as the Lefferts House, often seen as benign landmarks or
tourist attractions, have histories steeped in enslavement. Faustine demands recognition of this history and reminds viewers that Black women’s bodies are integral to understanding these sites.

**Reclaiming the Body**

Nudity is a key component of Faustine’s creative practice. Undress was an important mechanism of control in slave societies: It facilitated the inspection of bodies for disease and the removal of potential implements of suicide and prevented the hiding of weapons. Coercive disrobing not only severed enslaved individuals’ principal material link to their families, communities, and native cultures, it also magnified their powerlessness, marking their entry into captivity.

While enslaved women were forced to expose their bodies for scrutiny and capitalist exploitation, Faustine undresses in full self-possession. “I didn’t see women like me in art. A body like mine. With complexions like mine. I wanted to place myself as a full-figured, dark-skinned woman within the canon,” says Faustine. Black women are stigmatized for having bodies that are too this or too that. Too thin. Too fat. Too masculine. Too voluptuous. Too muscular. Too flabby. Too ugly. Too sexy. By contrast, Faustine’s state of undress is a statement of self-love and body positivity. She is full-figured and unapologetically bares her curves, including her breasts, in these photos. “It was about growth. It was about acceptance. Becoming a mother was a part of that change. When I became a mother, there was a part of me that wanted to celebrate my body,” says Faustine. With her keen historical awareness, she takes ownership over her body and reproductive capabilities, giving herself the agency that her enslaved foremothers were denied.

As a descendant of enslaved peoples and a lifelong resident of Brooklyn, Faustine uses her body as an archive into which she and her ancestors’ experiences are recorded. In *Of My Body I Will Make Monuments In Your Honor*, she placed life-size cutouts of her nude body as a stand-in for the headstones of lost graves of enslaved women located somewhere in the Dutch Reformed Church Cemetery. Faustine reveals the forgotten history of these women by embodying their presence in the cemetery. As American society continues to reckon with its racist past and monuments of enslavers are toppled or removed, Faustine’s memorialization of slavery becomes even more apt. Black people have historically been forced to put their bodies on the line, sometimes
with deadly consequences. Faustine uses her nude or semi-nude body as a counter-monument to Confederate iconography and as a testament to the legacy of slavery that is literally enshrined in her physical person.

**Conclusion: Celebrating Black Motherhood**

Faustine’s assertion of her naked body in *White Shoes* and focus on familial intimacy in *Mitochondria* can be seen as answers to the legacy of violence and abuse that is foundational to the development of modern medicine. The field of gynecology originated in a series of operations performed, without anesthesia, by Dr. J. Marion Sims on enslaved women. Sims’s legacy endures, and the vestiges of abuse against Black femme bodies still plague the American medical system. Studies have shown that today, a troubling number of medical professionals believe Black people have higher pain tolerances, resulting in disparities in treatment and pain management.

Slavery’s legacy lives on through the subpar medical treatment to which Black mothers are subjected. For example, the world-famous athlete Serena Williams, who suffers from pulmonary embolisms, was not properly attended to during and after the birth of her daughter. If Williams, a multimillionaire Wimbledon-winning tennis star, faced such disparities, imagine the medical treatment experienced by less affluent and notable Black people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, pregnancy mortality rates are three to four times higher among Black women than among white women.
The reasons for such disparity are multifaceted: poverty, the prevalence of chronic diseases, the stress of racism, lack of access to hospitals, inadequate prenatal and postnatal care, and the weight of historical oppression.

Faustine’s oeuvre, a celebration of the grace and beauty of Black femininity and motherhood, is a brave riposte to the continual and blatant undervaluing of Black women present in the medical profession and leveled, for example, in the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report, which explored the deep roots of Black poverty in the United States. The report controversially concluded that the high proportion of families headed by single mothers greatly hinders the progress of Blacks toward economic and political equality. *Mitochondria* and *White Shoes* serve as forms of visual activism and counternarratives to stereotypes outlined in the report. In this reframing, Black women, far from being the source of African Americans’ plight, are a wellspring of creative inspiration and life.

Faustine’s career as an artist did not flourish until she became a mother. She says, “I’ve heard some mothers say that they lost something after the birth of their children. My daughter helped me rekindle my interest in photography. Through her, I found my calling and my craft.” Caring for and protecting her daughter are fundamental to her creative process, and motherhood is a central theme that runs throughout all of her series and her photographic practice. By reflecting on Black motherhood historically, drawing inspiration from her mother and foremothers, and becoming a mother herself, Faustine honed her skills and sharpened her sensibilities as a photographer. In documenting her family and examining Black motherhood, she attests to her own assertion that “every day is Mother’s Day in my book.”

**Notes**


Faustine, interview.

