Maternity and Motherhood

Images of maternity and motherhood are universally resonant, yet they too can reveal how notions of black womanhood are constructed differently across cultures and time. Western colonial-era photographs, such as this staged postcard of an African wet nurse and white child, present the African maternal figure as a symbol of the indentured—and previously enslaved—labor force, the equivalent of the American “Mammy” of antebellum literature. The contemporary Cuban artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, who grew up on the same plantation as her enslaved ancestors, usurps the role of the African mother as slave and wet nurse in her self-portrait When I Am Not Here/Estoy Allá. In this photograph, she strings twin milk bottles so that they hang over her breasts and above a boat-shaped wooden bowl reminiscent of a slave ship. However, the image also evokes well-known African traditional sculptures—such as the Kongolese mother and child—that honor the importance of mothers in nurturing and sustaing the family line.

Identities and Social Roles

Common to both traditional African and colonial-era depictions of black womanhood is the image of a woman carrying a pot on her head. While in many African cultures this image most often refers to a woman’s economic roles and contributions toward productivity, it also serves as a metaphor of a woman’s ability to bear great social responsibility with grace, wisdom, and integrity. Read as authentically “African” in colonial-era postcards, this image ironically says less in the West about an African woman’s social identity than about her cultural distance and difference. Contemporary artist Alison Saar extends the visual metaphors embedded in historic images of black women carrying heavy loads on their heads in Gorée, which means “hidden” or “hiding place.” Saar’s placement of a colossal ball of straightened hair that pins her figure to the floor refers to her own responsibility toward family as well as the burden of her culturally mixed heritage, which is as mal- leable and impressionable as the metal sheath wrapped around the figure’s body.

CAPTIONS

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[Image of a woman with a pot on her head]

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