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The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America

Charmaine A. Nelson

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Nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture was a highly politicized international movement. Based in Rome, many expatriate American sculptors created works that represented black female subjects in compelling and problematic ways. Rejecting pigment as dangerous and sensual, adherence to white marble abandoned the racialization of the black body by skin color.

In *The Color of Stone*, Charmaine A. Nelson brilliantly analyzes a key, but often neglected, aspect of neoclassical sculpture—color. Considering three major works—Hiram Powers's Greek Slave, William Wetmore Story's Cleopatra, and Edmonia Lewis's Death of Cleopatra—she explores the intersection of race, sex, and class to reveal the meanings each work holds in terms of colonial histories of visual representation as well as issues of artistic production, identity, and subjectivity. She also juxtaposes these sculptures with other types of art to scrutinize prevalent racial discourses and to examine how the black female subject was made visible in high art.

By establishing the centrality of race within the discussion of neoclassical sculpture, Nelson provides a model for a black feminist art history that at once questions and destabilizes canonical texts.

Charmaine A. Nelson is assistant professor of art history at McGill University.

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