

The Butt

by **Erin Aubry Kaplan**

Illustration by **J. Michael Walker**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 15+ * Grades 10+
Genre/s	* Personal essay * Nonfiction
Length	5,701 words
Content Advisories	* Allusions to racism and stereotypes in America * Some sexuality * Some cursing
One Sentence Summary	African American journalist Erin Aubry Kaplan explores heritage, culture, body image, stereotypes, and prejudice in a far ranging, humorous, and poignant reflection on the size of her behind.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * body image * stereotypes * archetypes * Black history * Black feminism * Black female sexuality * self-esteem * critiquing popular culture * genetic heritage * intersection of fashion, design, and prejudice * portrayal of Black women in music
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes * subverting stereotypes * self-acceptance * pride * not hiding who you are

Lesson Planning	
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Victorian Age / story of Sara Baartman http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987 (http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987) * Black Feminist Movement https://youtu.be/X5H8oNhm2o (https://youtu.be/X5H8oNhm2o) * History of Feminism http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/knowledge_base/rubricator/feminism_e.htm (http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/knowledge_base/rubricator/feminism_e.htm) * Black History http://www.history.com/topics/black-history (http://www.history.com/topics/black-history) * Civil Rights Movement http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement (http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement) * US Popular Culture in the 1990s
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <i>Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America</i> by Melissa Harris-Perry * <i>Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics</i> by Bell Hooks * <i>We Should All Be Feminists</i> by Chimamanda Adichie
Author and Artists Information	<p>Erin Aubry Kaplan is a journalist, essayist, and author living in Los Angeles, CA.</p> <p>J. Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7

Author Biography

Erin Aubry Kaplan is a weekly op-ed columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, the first African American in the paper's history to hold the position. Kaplan first appeared in a monthly independent newsmagazine called *Accent L.A.*, a small publication dedicated to a large mission of providing thoughtful, literate, alternative coverage of Black Los Angeles. Kaplan was an original staff writer for *New Times Los Angeles* in 1996, and moved to the staff of the *LA Weekly* later that year. At the *Weekly* she indulged her interest in race matters and a host of other issues—some related to race, some not—with essays and features on culture, politics, the arts and the many smaller, but no less significant concerns therein. She began writing a column for the *Weekly* in 2000 called “Cakewalk,” a forum that showcases her not only as a journalist but as an author and observer of varying scales who speaks as passionately about the history of affirmative action as she does about beauty trends and initial forays into psychotherapy. Kaplan was a 2001 recipient of PEN Center West’s award for literary journalism for the cover essay, “Blue Like Me,” a rumination on the connections between ancient American race struggles and modern-day depression. She was Columnist of the Year in 2002. Kaplan has been widely anthologized in books such as *Body Outlaws* (Seal Press); the *Salon* magazine essay collection “Mothers Who Think: Tales of Real-Life Parenthood” (Villiard); *Step Into A World*, a compendium of journalism and nonfiction by new Black writers (John Wiley & Sons); *Geography of Rage* (Really Great Books), an essay collection reflecting on the April 1992 civil unrest and its long-term effects in South Central Los Angeles and elsewhere; and *Rise Up Singing*, (Doubleday), a collection of essays by Black women writing on motherhood whose contributors include Maya Angelou, Marian Wright Edelman, June Jordan and Alice Walker, among others. The collection won an American Book Award in 2005. Kaplan’s articles have appeared in many publications, including the *London Independent*, the *Guardian*, *Salon* (salon.com), *The Crisis*, *Newsday*, *Contemporary Art Magazine*, the *Utne Reader* and *Black Enterprise*. Kaplan was born and raised in Los Angeles. She holds a B.A. in English and M.F.A. in Theater Arts from UCLA.

Artist Biography

Michael Walker is the founding Locavore Lit LA artist. He has been an exhibiting artist since 1984 and has participated in more than 100 exhibitions, received a dozen grants, fellowships, and residencies, and enjoyed solo shows at the following institutions: the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard; el Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City; the National Museum of Catholic Art and History, East Harlem, New York City; and the Arkansas Arts Center, among others. As a writer, J. Michael is the author and illustrator of *All the Saints of the City of the Angels: Seeking the Soul of L.A. on Its Streets* (Heyday 2008), which was awarded the Eric Hoffer Award for Art Book of the Year and the Independent Publishers Association Award for Best Regional Non-Fiction on the Pacific-West, and is co-editor of *Waiting for Foreign: L.A. Writers on (and in) Guadalajara* (Peregrino Press 2010).

SYNOPSIS

In this poignant, humorous and far ranging essay, Erin Aubry Kaplan explores the very personal subject of her behind. Her exploration becomes a lens for examining deep social and cultural norms and issues and understanding the prevalence and function of stereotypes. She also examines black female sexuality and considers what this all means for her self-esteem, body image, and her desire to fit in.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

What does it mean to be at home with oneself? Reflect on this question in your journal for 5-minutes and then break into pairs and discuss your response with your partner.

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “The Butt”:

“Of course, not fitting—literally and otherwise—has always been a fact of life for black women, who unfairly or not are regarded as archetypes of the protuberant butt, or at least the spiritual heirs to its African origins.”

What is an archetype? What are two or three examples of archetypes?

After exploring the above questions, discuss what it means to be “regarded as archetypes” and how might being regarded as such make it difficult to fit in with other people. Consider this question from the author’s perspective as a Black woman and from your own perspective. Discuss your answers in a short essay.

Universal Themes

What does it mean to be objectified? After a class discussion about the meaning of this term, in a three to four page analytical essay, discuss the different ways in which people, and particularly women, experience objectification. Explore ways in which identity stereotypes for people of different genders, sexual orientations, and ethnicities can both divide and objectify people. Look at these issues in the past and present.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
rear, behind, butt, derriere, rump	pretense	preening
puberty	enhanced	coquettish
grants (verb)	tolerably	timorous
core	hollered	epiphany
activated	sullenly	voluminous
declaration	earnest	salient
heir	stereotype/d	politically incorrect/correct
sexuality	potency	passe
woes	irresolution	archetypes
readily	opaque	protuberant
cites	disparagingly	inordinate
dissected	misperceptions	vexed
audible	notions	continuum
profound	empyrean	pathology
capacities	embodiment	farthingale
residue	schism	rotogravure
variance	unadulterated	fetish
endowed	augmented	lasciviousness
knowingness	lucrative	ignominous
defied	lament	social conscience
embittered	demure	monolithic
devaluation	profusion	uncouth
touted	denigrate	connote
periphery	deifying	proclivities

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
irreverent	classist	immutable
impudent	maxims	ostensibly
disdain	denuded	obfuscate

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Identify, list, then write an analysis of the different Black female stereotypes mentioned in “The Butt.” These are mentioned in several different places throughout the essay. How can such stereotypes socially confine and reduce the humanity of Black women? After writing about this, share your responses and discuss them in class. Then discuss other stereotypes about people that can be harmful.
2. What does it mean to assimilate? How and why does Kaplan embrace her butt as a symbol against assimilation? After discussing these questions in class, brainstorm in your notebooks about personal grooming habits and daily rituals you have which are evident of having assimilated with dominant cultural ideas of what is attractive. Do you ever push back against these ideas? How? After writing, discuss your responses in small groups.
3. What is meant by the “feminine ideal”? Is this science based or a cultural idea? Why do people worry about conforming to such an ideal? Should they? Journal your responses for 10 minutes then discuss (or debate) in class.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Is it possible to not believe in an idea or a value that a group or another individual has but subscribe to it anyway? List examples of when this can happen in day to day life then discuss the possible reasons and implications.
2. Research why humans often seek to display wealth (regardless of how much money they have) in the form of material goods from an anthropological viewpoint. What do these items symbolize to ourselves and other humans? Then research, also from an anthropological viewpoint, how and why humans seek to create social and class divisions amongst each other? Why would one group of humans criticize another over the ways in which they’ve chosen to engage – or not – in wealth displays? What is the divisive purpose of the criticism? Discuss these questions as issues in and of themselves and in the context of Kaplan’s essay.
3. In what ways are women subjected to simultaneous social pressures to be sexy and to not be sexually available? How do people apply these pressures at times to judge and diminish women? What effect might this have psychologically?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Short essay: Re-read Kaplan's discussion of Sarah Baartman then research Baartman's story further. How did the reverence displayed by Europeans towards Bartmann simultaneously objectify and demean her – especially considering that Europeans were in the process of conquering Africa? How is Kaplan using this story as an example of how “fetishization” of women's bodies can also at times mask underlying racist and misogynistic attitudes towards black women and women in general? Why is this story key to Kaplan's essay?
2. How does Kaplan discuss Black female role models who have large butts and show them off? How do famous women and women she interacts with regularly affect her differently?
3. Why does Kaplan say that Black people have taken “a white-created pejorative of a black image...”? What message does she hope to convey? Are there other times when people accept others' images of them their detriment?
4. How is the writer's butt made to be a character in “The Butt”? Write a one paragraph response citing examples from the text.
5. Writers often use various forms of wordplay in their works. How does Kaplan employ the use of puns in her essay? Identify at least two puns in “The Butt” and discuss their impact on Kaplan's writing.
6. Who is the woman in the illustration for “The Butt”? Do you think she's Kaplan? Why or why not? What is she doing and what do you think her actions and demeanor mean?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

How is Kaplan's butt both a part of her and a separate character with a will of its own? How does making her butt a character make her essay more powerful? Do you have a body part you feel particularly self-conscious about?

Analyze why you feel that way then write a short story or essay in which you and your body part are both characters with your own identities. When do you agree and disagree with one another?

Descriptive

Write a short story where the protagonist must choose an outfit and get dressed to go to a place or event of your choice. The story's conflict is in managing to be ready to walk out the door in time to meet someone. Nothing seems to go right. Write about the process, challenges, and personal frustrations of the protagonist in vivid detail.

Analysis

Analyze Kaplan’s exploration of Black female sexuality in America: from her perspective, historical and cultural contexts, and the perspectives of people Kaplan interviewed.

In your analysis, focus on what makes female sexuality complicated and at times seemingly contradictory. Why does Kaplan both embrace and reject overt sexuality? How is her sexuality changed when it is subjected to the judgement of others? Does Kaplan experience sexism? Harassment? Simple appreciation?

Include additional research and recent articles and data in your analysis to create a five page paper.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Read the novel *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* by Bell Hooks.

Writing Exercise

Why is feminism about much more than equal rights for women? How do issues of classicism, racism, and economic inequality figure into the feminist movement?

After reading Bell Hook’s novel, write a short essay analyzing “The Butt” from a feminist perspective. Cite examples from Hooks’s novel and the story.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Go through beauty, fashion, and entertainment magazines in small class groups to identify and cut out depictions of women in advertisements. Make sure to identify ads that depict women of color and particularly black women – but include women who are white, as well.

Each group should then spread out their ads to review together and analyze the following for a written report:

- * Are the women portrayed simply sexy, or have they been sexualized? Discuss the difference.
- * What types of objectification can you identify?

- * Do these ads reflect your idea of a real or average woman? Why or why not?
- * Are the white women in ads portrayed the same way as women of color?

When finished discussing, create a collage with all of the ads. Divide writing the report into paragraphs for group members that will be posted next to the collage in the classroom.

Classroom Activity Two

In small groups of four, research how industrialization and mass production of goods has changed how people dress worldwide. How has clothing become increasingly homogenized?

Next, research discussion on the causes and effects of clothing homogenization. How are people worldwide marginalized when all clothing is made to fit a limited number of body types (ie people who inherited a flatter butt body type instead of a larger rounder butt body type)?

Explore further by asking each member of the group to examine and share information about one of the following:

- * How has the mass production of clothing to be sold cheaply to America and other industrialized nations led to abuse of workers worldwide?
- * How is mass clothing production and the use of synthetic materials causing an ecological crisis?
- * Is the homogenization of clothing changing or otherwise impacting culture around the world?
- * Who is most responsible for clothing related issues? The corporations who make and promote them? The people who sell them? The people who buy them? Why?

After researching and discussing these questions, place a large piece of paper and markers in the center of the group. Draw Earth then write down the group's ideas around the Earth about how clothing could be produced differently – how might a different world function if not dependent on clothing made to fit limited body types and not mass produced?

Home Activity

Interview an adult female friend or family member. Ask her if she experienced a stage where she felt awkward about how she looks, if she ever still experiences this feeling, and how she dealt with it then and now in a healthy way. Write up your interview and share what you learned in class. (You do not need to use real names and only interview someone who is totally comfortable sharing her experiences with you.)

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite the author or artist to speak with your class.

Option Two: Invite a psychologist to come and talk about their work and discuss types of body image issues and how to develop a healthy body image.

Field Trip

Take a class trip to the California African American Museum in Exposition Park, Los Angeles. Ask students to look at whether and how the museum discusses stereotypes about African American women and men. Students should take notes on their observations.

Writing Exercise:

Write a brief essay about your observations regarding the museum's portrayal of stereotypes towards African American women and men. Discuss how your observations has enhanced your understanding of such stereotypes.

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Writing Exercise

In her essay “The Butt,” Erin Aubry Kaplan critiques ideologies surrounding the black woman’s butt. She devotes a portion of the essay to beauty standards. In what ways are beauty standards embedded in American culture? Do you believe such standards are important or necessary? Please explain why or why not in a one- to two-page essay including citations from the text.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3: Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative,

connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.