

## Preface *Confessions of a Black Feminist Academic Pornographer*

This is the first book about black women's images, performances, and labors in the porn industry. Most criticism of pornography excludes the position of the black female pornographic producer or consumer. Still less discussed are the ways in which black women producers and consumers have sought pleasure, subjectivity, and agency in pornographic representations. This book takes on the important challenge of talking about one of the most controversial businesses (pornography) through the lens of its most marginal workers (black women). To illustrate the sexual economy I am presenting, and to provide readers with a shared vocabulary of visual culture, I have chosen to include images of the films, events, and people I discuss throughout the book.

In over ten years of researching black women in pornography, I have grappled profoundly with issues of representation, racism, and violence in pornographic images. I have been called a pervert and a pornographer not only for writing about the history of black women's images, performances, and sex work in pornography, but for showing images from this history in various presentation formats. In this way, I have joined a history of what Sander Gilman has termed "academic pornographers." When Gilman first published his groundbreaking work on the iconography of the Hottentot Venus and early nineteenth century racial-scientific inquiry into black female sexuality, he was also accused of being a pornographer. Gilman's amply illustrated study, published in the famed special issue of *Critical Inquiry* from autumn 1985, and his own monograph *Difference and Pathology* (1985), displayed images of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman's genitals as they were studied and eventually dissected and exhibited by French scientists.

Although Gilman was accused of "bringing black women into disrepute"<sup>1</sup> by showing these images, his work revolutionized the study of black female

sexuality, inspiring scores of black feminists to theorize (and argue about) Sara Baartman's iconicity as urtext for emergent thinking on racialized sexuality and discourses of black female sexual deviance.<sup>2</sup> Gilman reflected on being labeled an academic pornographer in his foreword to artist Kara Walker's book *My Compliment, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (2007). Responses to Walker's controversial art had ignited similar accusations about her role as exhibitor-purveyor of "negative images" that pandered to the racism of white audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Because this book reproduces and circulates images of black women in pornography, perhaps to the greatest degree ever accomplished in an academic work, I find myself considering Sander Gilman's embrace of the pejorative title of pornographer, and his argument that we must look at and engage in discussion about sexualized images of black women, even if this is at times traumatic. I represent and analyze the complex iconography of race found in pornography, both on behalf of those in the image, and in order to understand the enduring power of these images in our lives.

This is not to deny how sexualized images of black women are saddled with notions of dirtiness, or how they might produce a visceral response in the reader because they reveal a history and an imaginary of the black body as pornographic object. However, as a critic I am interested in challenging my readers to question their probable gut reaction to the images. By offering my own analysis of this iconography, I aim to expose the conflict and inspire conversation. I want to spotlight the ways in which the overwhelming focus on stereotypes and damaging images ignores the people involved in their creation.

The visual representation of black sexuality is a powerful concern for black feminists. Indeed, black visual artists including Kara Walker, Renee Cox, Carrie Mae Weems, Lyle Ashton Harris, Zanele Muholi, and Carla Williams use sexuality, and sometimes their own bodies, in their art in ways that forcefully illuminate how the process of making visible black sexuality necessarily invokes a collective racial trauma.<sup>4</sup> It is in this collective racial trauma that black feminists find ourselves groping for a language to talk about our own pleasure and for a set of practices for living within and against all the contemporary forms of exploitation, alienation, and objectification that make up life under advanced capitalism and sexualized racism.

To accuse scholars who reproduce sexualized images of black women of being pornographers is to follow a line of discourse dating to the 1970s about the role of images and representation in black women's lives. Many members of the academy are concerned that our culture is overwhelmed by, and indeed

teeming with, injurious images of black womanhood. Because these images are so titillating and profitable, they tend to replicate themselves, crowding out the wide, complex reality of black women's lives. This anxiety about the damaging role of images in popular and political culture is so profound for black feminists that it may lead us to censor ourselves for fear of opening up our wounds, allowing taboos to further annihilate our humanity.

A politics of African American women's respectability first emerged in the late nineteenth century in post-emancipation Christian women's activist circles. This "respectability politics" seeks to counter the racist stereotype of the lascivious and deviant black woman by upholding and embodying an image of gender and sexual normativity evocative of a patriarchal ideal of feminine virtue.<sup>5</sup> Black women have adhered to respectability politics as part of an effort to resist and dismantle representations and social structures that cast them as sexually promiscuous, and hence—according to the racist and patriarchal logic of American social life—deserving of rape, abuse, and stigma. In addition to the politics of respectability, black women have learned a "culture of dissemblance," which Darlene Clark Hine describes as tactics of masking, secrecy, and disavowal of sexuality that allow black women to shield themselves from sexual exploitation.<sup>6</sup> The culture of dissemblance produces a cloak of silence around black women's sexual life. These twin cultural traditions—the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance—framed sexuality itself as hazardous and contributed to the sexual policing of black women.

In black communities, those who deviate from respectability and dissemblance politics by participating in nonnormative or nonconforming sexualities, including queer, contractual, or public sexuality, are promptly censored. They are accused of undermining African American claims to citizenship and belonging based on sexual respectability, and of giving cause to harmful discourses of black pathology. In this framework of respectability-dissemblance, black women in pornography—as well as those who write about it—are thought to invite further criticism and control of black women's sexualities.

Perhaps for this reason, black feminist critics since the late 1970s have largely dismissed pornography as inherently violent and dangerous. Tracy Gardner posits that pornography is "brutal and deadly" for women, and Aminatta Forna writes: "Images of black women are exploited by pornography and black women are exploited by pornographers."<sup>7</sup> Patricia Hill Collins asserts that black women in pornography "embody the existence of victim and pet" and engender a "totally alienated being who is separated from and who seemingly does not control her body."<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker posits the centrality of

the pornographic as an idiom for the sexual consumption of black women during slavery: “For centuries the black woman has served as the primary pornographic ‘outlet’ for White men in Europe and America.”<sup>9</sup> These black feminist analyses contend that pornographic representation continues a history of sexual violence against black women’s bodies.<sup>10</sup> In addition, for Audre Lorde, pornography is the polar opposite of eroticism, and as the epitome of superficiality and individuality, rather than subjectivity and intimate relations, completely lacks the potential for truly progressive political work by black feminists and others.<sup>11</sup>

This book is not a rejection of the important feminist works outlined above. We cannot elide the historical role of slavery and colonialism in producing a scopophilic and coercive relationship to black women’s bodies, one that is foundational to their depiction in pornographic images. Yet there is another tradition of black feminism that I wish to prioritize. This tradition provides a new lens to read the work of pornography on black women’s bodies. Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Jewelle Gomez write: “Even pornography which is problematic for women can be experienced as affirming women’s desires and women’s equality. . . . The range of feminist imagination and expression in the realm of sexuality has barely begun to find voice.”<sup>12</sup> My work takes seriously this charge to find the voices of black women in pornography. I have used ethnographic methods to help these voices be heard—including interviews, participant observation, set visits, and my own years-long relationships with performers, some of whom I call friends. By reproducing these images of black women in pornography, I hope to honor their performances and document their interventions into the complicated history of black women’s sexuality.

I assert that black women in pornography do other kinds of cultural work beyond representing injury, trauma, and abuse. I draw on black feminist critics whose work challenges the silences and erasures of the respectability-dissemblance framework and who show a particular interest in theorizing what Cathy Cohen calls the politics of deviance.<sup>13</sup> For Cohen, marginalized people’s so-called deviant practices and behaviors are productive because they offer the potential for resistance. When “deviant groups” fight for “basic human goals of pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect,” they open up and mobilize a queer politics of dissent with prevailing norms that deny the value of their lives.<sup>14</sup> Like Cohen, Ariane Cruz argues for the queer political potential in deviant acts, theorizing a “politics of perversion” that sees sexual pleasure as a subversive force.<sup>15</sup> “The stripper, prostitute, video vixen, gold digger,

and sexual exhibitionist,” L. H. Stallings contends, “cannot continue to be the deviant polarity to the working woman, wife, mother, lady, and virgin.”<sup>16</sup> For Stallings, black feminists ought not to invest in the moral policing of outlaw women, for this only sustains binaries and deadens the rich and deeply political nature of black sexual expression. What if we explore pornographic deviance as a space for important political work? This means creating new scholarship that looks at pornographic sexuality as not simply a force of abuse, but as a terrain of strategic labor, self-making, and even pleasure in women’s lives.

“By concentrating on our multiple oppressions,” argues Deborah King, “scholarly descriptions have confounded our ability to discover and appreciate the way in which black women are not victims . . . [but] powerful and independent subjects.”<sup>17</sup> Evelyn Hammonds agrees: “The restrictive, repressive and dangerous aspects of Black female sexuality have been emphasized by Black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed.”<sup>18</sup> This book accounts for the exploitative, repressive, and even violent aspects of black women’s representation in pornography as delineated by black feminist critics and the black women informants themselves. Surely, black women’s erotic autonomy is powerfully constrained and assaulted by industries like pornography, and a priori by broader frames of American social life such as racial capitalism, state repression, torture and incarceration, heterosexist and homophobic cultural nationalism, and political disenfranchisement. What remains under-theorized, however, is how black women catalyze sexual freedom in their everyday lives and in their imaginations.

Characterizing porn only as bad representation dismisses an arena in which black women and men are actually working hard to create their own images, express their own desires, and shape their own labor choices and conditions. There do exist black feminists who are also pornographers, who challenge the representational, physical, and psychic violence done to black women’s bodies in pornography from within. This book is about them. Black feminist labors in the porn industry do not simply challenge individual instances of representation; they radically redefine the field of pornography and expand what it can be. Pornography is always wrapped up with questions of commodification and exploitation, and it is these very issues that this book takes up, as it asserts the absolute necessity of conceptualizing porn as a powerful and important site for black women’s own imagination, and yes, feminist intervention. Although I am not working in the adult industry, I do

not entirely reject the label of academic pornographer, as I write this book in solidarity with the black feminist pornographers who have inspired and supported my research.

When I began this project, I believed that issues of representation and issues of labor were separate. However, I have come to see that these issues are profoundly interrelated. As I viewed thousands of sexualized images of black women's bodies, I began to ask how the women in the images experienced these images' production, and how they thought about their own work as image-makers. This book is my attempt to begin a conversation about the vital ways that pornography shapes black women's lives, and how black women also shape the life of pornography.