

## Sexualizing the Other

*From Ethnopornography to Interracial  
Pornography in European Travel Writing about  
West African Women*

Wherever they traded, settled, and colonized during the European expansion, European men had sex with indigenous women, and indigenous women's sexuality and interracial sex became ongoing themes in contemporary travel accounts. On the Gold Coast during the era of the slave trade, interracial sexual relations were at least as common as they were in other parts of the world, and European travel accounts supplied direct and practical information on how to get a West African woman and what to pay for her. Pieter de Marees's Dutch account from 1602, for example, included a Fante phrasebook in the back that advised the newly arrived European on how to demand a woman. The literal English translation reads, "I won't listen. You talk a lot. Shut your mouth. Give me a woman who is very sweet. Woman, your vagina inside eat."<sup>1</sup> In 1662, the German Wilhelm Johan Müller described how West African women would offer themselves to European men for a small present or for as little as a bottle of brandy, and stay with the men as long as they lived on the coast.<sup>2</sup> Though the descriptions

vary in length and content, most European travel accounts about West Africa from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries describe West African women's sexual behavior and their sexual relations with African and/or European men.

Many such descriptions of sexual behaviors and acts of West African women in European travel accounts could certainly be described as a kind of ethnopornography, in a broad sense of the word, as sexualized depictions of ethnically "other" women meant to arouse sexual excitement in their readers. As noted by Irvin C. Schick, ethnographic descriptions have often been a "good source of erotica," and, in fact, ethnography and pornography share many common themes and representational practices.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I will discuss and compare a few European ethnopornographic depictions of West African women in a Dutch, an English, and a French travel account from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in an attempt to complicate the concept of ethnopornography and to relate it to the modern genre of American pornography known as "interracial" pornography.

Linda Williams has argued that the genre of interracial pornography is powerful because it plays on specific historical structures of and expectations about race: "all depictions of interracial lust develop out of the relations of inequality that have prevailed between the races. They grow out of a history that has covertly permitted the white man's sexual access to black women and violently forbidden the black man's access to white women."<sup>4</sup>

What makes interracial pornography work, according to Williams, is that the genre plays on modern American hierarchies of race, and it is particularly exciting when it transgresses the line between black and white "that has been most firmly erected by America's history of chattel slavery."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the genre depends on a collective memory of a racial hierarchy in which black women are inherently subordinate to white men and white men have full power over black women's bodies.

Yet, as Schick and others have noted, white men's fantasies about having easy sexual access to and control over black women's bodies are not necessarily limited to American plantation slavery or its aftermath.<sup>6</sup> European expectations of white superiority have a long and complicated history in addition to the lived practice on North American plantations. In fact, as I argue in this chapter, eighteenth-century European travel accounts have a lot in common with modern interracial pornography—particularly in the ways the pornographic descriptions are organized around white men's easy and uninhibited access to black women's bodies. In addition to being early modern forerunners to interracial pornography, though, these depictions

are also, I argue in the following, “classic” eighteenth-century European pornography, which was exported to the liberating realms of the *porno-tropics*.<sup>7</sup>

However, the interracial hierarchy that Linda Williams refers to in her definition of interracial pornography implies more than white men’s easy access to black women’s bodies: it also cites a powerful history of racial degradation. Unlike the eighteenth-century travel accounts that I discuss in this chapter, interracial pornography comes after a century of colonization, scientific racism, and racial segregation in the Western world, but particularly and specifically so in the United States. This era of “full-fledged” scientific racism, I suggest, changed the nature and style of ethnopornography in a direction that helps explain why the transgression of lines between black and white is so particularly powerful in modern American pornography. In the last section of the chapter, I look at one example of an ethnopornographic description of West African women that is informed by a more “modern” scientific/biological concept of race to discuss how this might be read as a more direct historic precursor to American interracial pornography.

Pornography is a contested concept in our contemporary world. The cultural wars over whether pornography is harmful and should be illegal have caused academics and activists to choose sides for or against explicit sexual images and movies, with perhaps the most extreme standpoint being represented by the arguments of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon that pornography not only can lead to but *is* sexual abuse.<sup>8</sup> The following chapter is not a contribution to this ongoing debate about the value and/or dangers of pornography. Nor am I, in this chapter, making an effort to present anything close to an exhaustive history of ethnopornography in travel accounts from West Africa. More modestly, I attempt to raise questions about the genre of ethnopornography. My hope is that a closer look at how European travel accounts sexualized West African women can historicize the concept of ethnopornography, open a discussion of ethnopornography’s relationship with the modern genre of interracial pornography, and help promote what Linda Williams has called a more substantive critique of pornography.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside broader claims about implicit power relations in contemporary pornography, ethnopornographic depictions in European travel accounts can therefore not be separated from their colonial contexts of travel writing. Both the earlier eighteenth-century pornographic depictions of West African women and the later nineteenth-century example of ethnopornography discussed here were, in different ways, structured by European colonial expectations of cultural supremacy. Though the slave trade in

West Africa was not specifically colonial in purpose, the travel accounts about West Africa represented a much larger Atlantic system of colonization and plantation slavery in which white men's encounters with black women were structured by both gender and race. As Felicity Nussbaum has argued, any "consumption of the Other woman" was fundamentally embedded in a colonial power relationship.<sup>10</sup>

## Exotic Witches

Travel writing was a popular genre in the early modern era. Accounts from all over the world were printed, reprinted, and translated at a fast pace, and—like early modern pamphlets about witches or murderers on trial—owed much of their popularity to their shock and excitement value. Yet travel accounts were also crucially important for European trading and colonial expansion. Investors, captains, and merchants needed precise and trustworthy information to follow the development of the trade and plan future expeditions, and trading companies served their interests by supporting both the writing and printing of travel accounts, which also helps explain the genre's explosive growth in the early modern era.<sup>11</sup> European travel accounts therefore served two very different, but not mutually exclusive, interests, and trade facts and exotic tales were often placed side by side in the texts. These different interests invested in travel accounts from the early modern era makes them some of the most important historical documents we have on the history of West Africa in the precolonial period, but in this chapter I am not going to read them as sources of a history of West African women. In this chapter they are solely sources of European male perceptions of West African women.

Some subjects were more likely than others to play the part of exotic and exciting sales elements in travel accounts, though, and at least some descriptions of West African women's sexuality and interracial intimacy appear to have functioned as such. As in early modern European travel accounts from other parts of the world, descriptions of indigenous African women's sexuality appeared in the texts, along with descriptions of witches, cannibals, and monstrous animals and peoples. In fact, in earlier accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, West African women were often compared to or described as contemporary European witches. In an account from 1603 describing West African women dancing at the full moon, the German Andreas Josua Ulsheimer wrote, "These women

are very lascivious and very lustful for men of foreign nations. Each year they hold two dances—one when they sow, the other when they reap. They do this for four weeks and always begin when it is full moon. At night they dance most.”<sup>12</sup>

In general, in the early accounts West African women were depicted as simultaneously inviting and dangerous, as when the German Samuel Brun, who traveled along the coast of West Africa from 1611 to 1620, described how the European group he was traveling with had once lost six men who had slept with African women “on account of the black wenches; for the men’s sperm or genitals decayed, till blood and finally death itself followed.”<sup>13</sup>

These simultaneously dangerous and inviting witchlike women were physically different from European women. In some accounts, West African women could give birth without pain and had breasts so long they could throw them over their shoulder to feed their babies on their backs.<sup>14</sup> They were part of a largely unfamiliar and dangerous foreign world, in which all the lands beyond Europe’s borders were described as otherworldly places. As Anne McClintock has powerfully shown, this fundamentally “other” world represented a “porno-tropics for European imagination”—a figurative space onto which Europeans could project fantasies and desires.<sup>15</sup> Since this space had not yet been conquered in the early modern era, it was still very openly a dangerous space, and not one where white men had easy access to black women’s bodies through an intrinsic colonial order or racial hierarchy. In these early accounts of West African women’s sexuality, a larger European colonial ambition was entangled with ambivalence and fear. Not a fear of losing control of what had been conquered—that would come later—but a fear of being engulfed, lost, and swallowed, accompanied by an acute paranoia and a profound sense of male anxiety and boundary loss.

Whether these descriptions of otherworldly physically different women functioned as pornography in Europe depends on their reception. Today’s definitions of pornography, though they vary on other aspects of the concept, agree that an important element that makes a text or an image pornographic is that a description of sexual behavior is intended to cause sexual excitement in the reader or viewer.<sup>16</sup> To decide whether these texts were pornographic, we would therefore need to know about their reception in Europe, which is not a topic for this present chapter. What is more important for the present purpose is the void that was left in this porno-tropic space of travel writing when the witches disappeared.

As the witches and the monsters all but disappeared from the travel accounts in the later seventeenth century, European travel accounts from

West Africa began describing West African women as physically more similar to European women. In fact, in some accounts African women are described as so similar to European women that European men could choose to ignore their skin color in the dark. In Jean Barbot's French-English account from 1679, the women he met in Accra were, for instance, ingeniously dressed, good-humored, and skillful in the art of seducing European men: "I saw several of them richly adorned . . . in such manner as might prove sufficiently tempting to many lewd Europeans; who not regarding complexions, say *All cats are grey in the dark*."<sup>17</sup> Other accounts correct earlier descriptions of monstrous African women, as did that of the Danish Johannes Rask, writing early in the eighteenth century: "Nowhere on the Gold Coast have I seen the exceedingly sagging breasts that Dapper described. In general they have well-shaped decently hanging breasts."<sup>18</sup>

However, the comparatively high level of similarity between African and European women in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts should not mislead us to think their writers found no difference. In these accounts the difference is cultural rather than physical; West African women were no longer witches or monstrous, and their "otherness" came to be defined more specifically as sexual availability. European male travel writers found that, in comparison with European women, the primary difference was that West African women were extremely sexually available, interested in and willing to have sex with European men. Several travel writers even suggested that African women preferred European to African men and regarded it as an honor to have Euro-African children.<sup>19</sup>

As the witches disappeared, West African women seem to have stopped being dangerous; their sexual availability is not ambivalent or destructive, as in the earlier accounts. Instead, I want to suggest, the porno-tropic space of the travel accounts was now a space that was perfectly fitted for the export of pornography, as if the disappearance of seventeenth-century monstrous bodies and witches had left a textual void that some travel writers opted to fill with pornography (another genre of exotic writing). In the following I will focus on two specific examples of such an "export" of eighteenth-century European pornography to the realm of travel writing, and suggest that to understand how these specific sexualizations of West African women worked in their texts, we need to relate them to contemporary European pornography as well as place them in the context of other examples of ethnopornography in this anthology.

## Exporting Pornography to the Porno-Tropics

The two examples that I will discuss here, the Dutch William Bosman and the English William Smith, are both remarkably similar to contemporary eighteenth-century European pornography. In both cases the implicit reception by European male readers is unmistakable, which suggests that the explicit intention of arousing sexual excitement is central in making a text pornographic. The first text was written as personal letters directly to an uncle in Amsterdam; the other was presented as a conversation between two European men on a European ship leaving Africa. As I will discuss, both authors make a number of hints and suggestions to the readers that suggest that the material is meant to be titillating. Equally important, the subject matter discussed in the two travel accounts are classic themes in eighteenth-century European pornography; in both cases the author delves at length into the subject of prostitution and the habits and practices of prostitutes and courtesans, which was the defining theme of pornography in the eighteenth century. As the Greek word suggests, “porno-graphy” had developed specifically as the genre of writing about prostitutes.<sup>20</sup>

The first example of European pornography being exported to the realms of travel writing is William Bosman’s account of an institution of “public whores” in West Africa in his 1704 account *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*.<sup>21</sup> Bosman’s account was one of the most widely read and cited northern European travel accounts about West Africa in the centuries that followed.<sup>22</sup> His description of prostitution on the Gold Coast is set in a fantasyland in which European men had very easy access to African women’s bodies. In his universe, both class and age are suspended in the encounter between European men and West African women; all West African women are sexually available to European men.

Bosman describes prostitution in general but also, more specifically, relates a longer description of an institution of “public whores” that I think is of particular interest for this present discussion. Bosman was one of three travel writers who mentioned this institution of public prostitutes, the other two being the Dutch Olfert Dapper (1668) and the French Jean Godot (1704), and, as historians Adam Jones and Emmanuel Akyeampong have both remarked, there are some differences among the three accounts.<sup>23</sup> The three travel writers agreed that it was the practice for a West African community to buy an enslaved woman and make her a public prostitute through an initiation ceremony. They also agreed that she was paid very little or nothing for sexual relations with male members of the

community. However, the accounts did not agree whether only bachelors or also married men were allowed to visit the public prostitutes, and they differed on how the initiation rite took place. Bosman was the only one of the three travel writers who included the information that during the initiation rite the enslaved woman had to simulate sexual intercourse with a young boy in public in the marketplace: “The Novice is smeared all over with Earth, and several Offerings offered for her success in her future Occupation. This over, a little Boy, yet immature for Love Affairs, makes a feint or representation of lying with her before all the People; by which ‘tis hinted to her that from this time forwards, she is obliged to receive all Persons indistinguishable who offer themselves to her, not excepting little Boys.”<sup>24</sup>

Now, why did Bosman include a young boy imitating having sexual intercourse with the initiated public prostitute? Emmanuel Akyeampong has explained Bosman’s deviation from the other two accounts about public prostitutes in West Africa with the fact that social institutions never replicate themselves exactly, and that therefore “public prostitution” would also never be quite the same in two different places.<sup>25</sup> Adam Jones has not specifically addressed the differences between Bosman’s account and the others, but he has mentioned elsewhere that Bosman did at times employ “*poetische Freiheit*” (poetic license) to entertain his readers.<sup>26</sup> However, a broader look at Bosman’s account suggests not only that he probably had personal reasons for including a young boy as an active sexual agent in the initiation rite but also that his descriptions of West African women’s sexual behavior were shaped by a male sexual fantasy in which all women are willing and easily available, and sexual intercourse has few social consequences for men or women.

Bosman was sixteen when he left Holland for West Africa. His account consists of a series of letters to his uncle back in Amsterdam, and in several places the text functioned as pornography in the male-to-male communication between Bosman and his uncle. The connection between the two men is particularly clear when Bosman lapses into personal and direct communication with his uncle, as when he describes how prostitutes in Fida (Ouidah) receive many customers during one day in their small huts and therefore must be very tired in the evening, and adds, “If Livia was alive, I should ask her whether this is not sufficient to satisfy her.”<sup>27</sup> Bosman does not mention who Livia was, but she was probably a European woman that his uncle also knew. For our present purpose the content of the question Bosman would have asked Livia is of greater importance. In his porno-tropic fantasy Bosman assumed that slave prostitutes in small huts



on the side of the road were seeking and gaining pleasure from customers, who pay them very little and whom they have not chosen to have sex with. And with this knowing reference to a shared pool of sexual knowledge, Bosman drew his uncle into his fantasy.

On the Gold Coast, Bosman recounted, both men and women marry late, and single women outnumber single men. Men marry as soon as they can afford the bride price, but women wait as long as possible, because they can live more “free and pleasant” lives when unmarried, “being now at perfect liberty to admit the embraces of any or several men if they please.” Women are not disregarded or “rudely accounted whores” if they have sex before marriage, and even after they are married they seldom content themselves with only one man.<sup>28</sup> In general, according to Bosman, women on the Gold Coast had an extraordinary sexual appetite, which was partly due to their “hotter” nature, and partly to the institution of polygamy, which forced many women to share a man. Even with strict punishment, it was almost impossible to keep the women from adultery: “They are continually contriving how to gain a Lover, and would rather suffer Death than forbear the delicious Sin.” The men, however, were afraid of being punished for adulterous relations, and would therefore try to refuse the women, but the women would throw themselves at the men and tear off their clothes or seduce them in secret during the night.<sup>29</sup>

In Bosman’s account, the distinction between prostitutes and other African women is quickly erased. In some places, Bosman wrote, they have no public whores, but this is no problem for the young men, “for there is no want of Unmarried Women, and they without any distinction, than that of being too young, are a’most all Whores, tho’ they indeed don’t bear that name.”<sup>30</sup> When a European man wanted to have sex with a West African woman, age was the only limiting factor; class or marriage status was no hindrance. Bosman related a boastful story of visiting the king of Fida (Ouidah), who had given his daughter in marriage to an English trader. Jokingly Bosman told the king that he should have offered him the princess first, to which the king supposedly replied that “though his Daughter was married, she was yet at my service, if I desired her, since one word was sufficient to call her home.” In a direct remark to his uncle, Bosman thereafter replies, “What think you, Sir, are not this King’s Daughters very cheap?”<sup>31</sup>

Inside the textual male-to-male communication between Bosman and his uncle it is not surprising to find that a young man is specifically chosen to imitate a sexual act with a prostituted woman in a public marketplace. Just as prostitutes are satisfied by their customers and young women want

to stay unmarried to have sex with whomever approaches them, I suggest that Bosman's little boy in the initiation rite was a figment of a sixteen-year-old boy's imagination, coherent with the pornographic theme and undertone of his text.

A second example of European pornography exported to the tropics is found in William Smith's English account *A New Voyage to Guinea* from 1744.<sup>32</sup> After mentioning African women only a few times in the first several hundred pages, Smith added an appendix to his account in which he compared courting and sexual behaviors in England and on the Gold Coast. Possibly because he was uncertain whether the subject would offend readers in Europe, he presented his opinions as an interview with a Mr. Charles Wheeler, with whom he claimed to have conversed on board a ship returning to Europe.<sup>33</sup> Mr. Wheeler had been a factor for the Royal African Company on the Gold Coast for ten years, and William Smith had decided to write his story, since it could not be "displeasing to the reader." The conversations with Mr. Wheeler depict the Gold Coast as a male sexual fantasy world like Bosman's, where African women are readily available, sexual relations have few social consequences, and where, in going beyond Bosman's version, women and men benefit equally from sexual liberation. As in much modern interracial pornography, women's bodies are easily available for men's sexual pleasure.

Smith's Mr. Wheeler told the story of how he visited an unnamed king on the Gold Coast who in addition to his wives had many concubines. According to Mr. Wheeler, it was customary for kings and other "grandees" to offer a visiting European one of his concubines to sleep with for the duration of his visit. The first time this happened to Mr. Wheeler, he politely asked for the reasoning behind such a practice, and the king answered that it was to keep him chaste and regular. When Mr. Wheeler then suggested that fornication was not the way to make a man chaste, the king asked, "Why . . . is it a sin to lie with a woman?" Mr. Wheeler confirmed that if you were not married to the woman, it was considered a sin, which compelled the king to ask if Mr. Wheeler had never slept with a woman. Mr. Wheeler declined to answer that question, and the king then insisted, "Take her, take her, he said, you seem to know what use to make of her." The king presented with a "young lady in her prime," and Mr. Wheeler and the king's concubine then retired to a private room. Mr. Wheeler described how beautiful the concubine was, how easily and naturally they had sex, and, he went on to say, "in that situation I soon forgot the complexion of my bedfellow. . . . Greater pleasure I never found, and during my stay, if

paradise is to be found in the enjoyment of a woman, I was then in the possession of it.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to being beautiful, the king’s concubine was also sexually liberated, well mannered, and intelligent (she had been educated by a French doctor who had stayed with her while visiting the king).

The concubine in Mr. Wheeler’s story is remarkably similar to a stereotype in contemporary eighteenth-century European pornography that Kathryn Norberg has called the “libertine whore.”<sup>35</sup> In her study of French pornography, Norberg found “whore” biographies or confessions to be increasingly common in the genre during the eighteenth century. The libertine prostitute was usually presented as the narrator of her own story—which is different from Mr. Wheeler’s story, in which he speaks on the concubine’s behalf—but otherwise she fit the stereotype perfectly: she was well-read and sophisticated, and, like Norberg’s prostitutes, her sexual appetite was “moderated by a healthy dose of philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> She was woman of “a good natural judgement,” and had she been white, Mr. Wheeler would have asked the king for permission to marry her.

As Lynn Hunt has argued, until the mid- or late eighteenth century, European pornography was almost always an adjunct to something else. Most often early modern pornography employed explicit descriptions of sex or sexual organs in order to criticize religious and political authorities, the shock of references to sexual organs or acts serving as provocation, satire, and cultural criticism.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the story of Mr. Wheeler and the king’s concubine is a direct criticism of English sexual, marriage, and courting practices, which connects Smith’s ethnographic description of West African women directly to the genre of contemporary eighteenth-century pornography in Europe. After they had sex, Mr. Wheeler and the concubine had several conversations in which they compared English and Gold Coast practices, and focusing in particular on the faults of the former.

Mr. Wheeler’s first concern was to argue for the practice of polygamy. Not only was polygamy in accordance with the bible, where the patriarchs of the Old Testament all had many wives, there were also practical reasons to import the practice to Europe. Polygamy made women strive harder to please their husbands but never forced men to have more wives than they wanted. Most men had only two to four wives, which was enough to make it unnecessary to seek “variety” outside the home.<sup>38</sup> Also, Wheeler continued in more general terms, men in Africa were much less sexually repressed than European men. The long, painful waiting and courting period that European men had to go through before they could marry and have sex with a woman did not exist in Africa, and the king’s concubine

agreed with Mr. Wheeler's criticism of English courtship, in which the young men based their decisions about whom to marry on the woman's wealth and family and not on "nature." She suggested that the European courtship routine would cause young men to "court away" their love for a woman before they got married.<sup>39</sup>

On the Gold Coast, Mr. Wheeler recounted, young men were free to gain sexual experience before they settled in a marriage. An unmarried man could either visit a prostitute or buy a slave woman in the market, "cohabit with her as long as he pleases, and then sell her again," and, unlike in Europe, prostitutes on the Gold Coast were modest and chaste. They slept with only one man at a time, and only in private, unlike European whores, who will "admit as many to be present at the act as please" and lie with men in the fields and in the streets.<sup>40</sup> A young man on the Gold Coast could also simply approach any one of the young women around him, since "the women of this country make no scruple, if they have the opportunity to meet the embraces of a man." Young women on the Gold Coast were not brought up to believe that sex was a sin, as European women were, and therefore they never turned down a suitor, which meant that rape was unheard of. Imagine, Mr. Wheeler continued, if only young men in Europe could purchase a concubine and live with her as long as he wanted and then sell her again. This would be much better than men's common practice to "cuckold their neighbours, debauch their daughters, and get with child with their own maid-servants."<sup>41</sup>

In Bosman's and Smith's accounts, West African women were not just available to European men but were hypersexual and willing. Unlike in the earlier accounts, these West African women were physically similar to European women, and it was not the ethnic "otherness" of the women that gave the texts their pornographic potential but the extreme availability and willingness of West African women. Bosman and Smith's porno-tropics were worlds in which marriage was not a prerequisite to getting access to women's bodies. In the encounter between European men and African women, European male expectations of cultural supremacy connected powerfully to colonialism, and there was no question ideologically: African women were available to European men not always because they were culturally inferior but because they were both Africans and women. Surely the "exotic," porno-tropic scenery of the descriptions shaped the extreme willingness of the depicted West African women, but in these two accounts West African women's bodies are (in hindsight) surprisingly similar to European women's bodies: had the concubine only been white, Mr. Wheeler

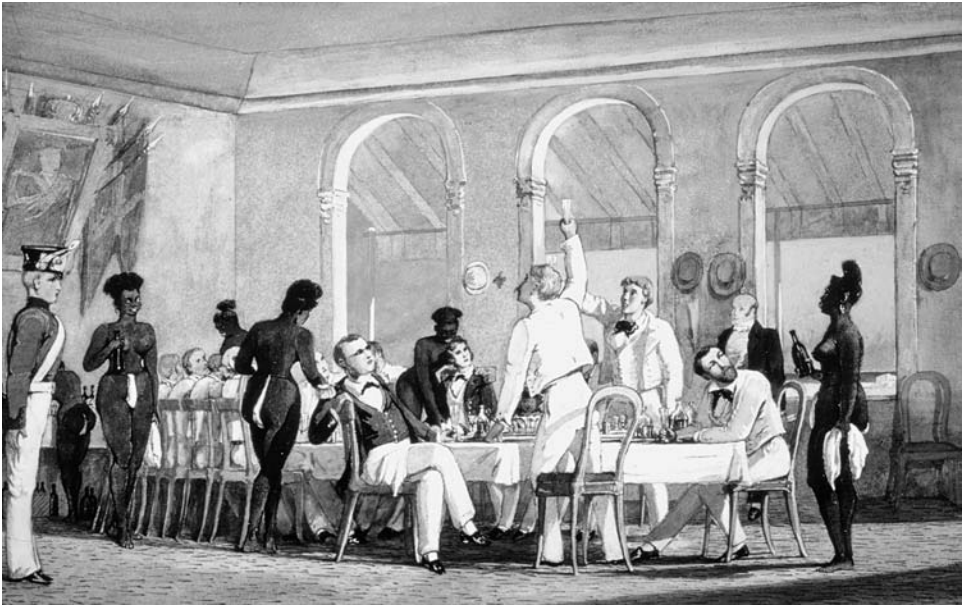
would have begged her from the king. He probably would have gotten her too, in a porno-tropic utopia where even a sixteen-year-old sailor such as Bosman could get to marry a king's daughter "cheap."

White male fantasies—such as Bosman's and Smith's—of easy access to black women's bodies did not begin in the modern era. From the very beginning of early modern European expansion, European colonialism carried and employed masculine connotations and symbols: a virgin America was conquered; a mysterious Orient was unveiled; and a dark Africa was penetrated.<sup>42</sup> In travel accounts the outcome of the European Expansion was discursively given for centuries as upright and dressed men encountered naked and virgin lands and peoples. European colonialism always came with expectations of sexually available indigenous women. White male fantasies did not stop with Bosman and Smith, either. In the next historical phase, ethnopornographic depictions of West African women's sexual behavior would be shaped by centuries of modern scientific-biological racism that would take the sexualized descriptions of "other" women to a whole new level before the genre of modern American interracial pornography appeared on the scene.

### Degrading Black Women's Bodies

As Sander Gilman has shown in his work on sexual and racial stereotypes, the sexualization of prostitutes, Africans, and children achieved its modern meaning in the specific historical context of nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>43</sup> As Lynn Hunt has argued, this was not only the time when the genre of European pornography lost its political connotations and changed to a commercial "hard-core" business, but also the time when racial differences were studied intensely by scientists, and modern racism related racial difference to pathology. In Europe this process of defining race in its modern scientific form was in important ways linked to specific studies of African women's bodies, defining the sexualized African women as deviant and degraded, at the very bottom of any social hierarchy.<sup>44</sup>

In this same historical period some descriptions of easily available West African women display a racial degradation that, I suggest, speaks more directly to the modern genre of interracial pornography. One example of this modern ethnopornography is a watercolor by the French prince of Joinville, François d'Orléans, who visited the last Danish governor, Edward Carstensen, for lunch at Fort Christiansborg in present-day Accra



**FIGURE 7.1** The prince of Joinville's watercolor of a lunch at Christiansborg in January 1843. Copy at the Danish Maritime Museum at Kronborg Castle in Helsingor, Denmark.

in January 1843 (see figure 7.1). The prince was on a Grand Tour of the Atlantic world—after Africa, he went on to Brazil. He represented the French state seeking to expand its colonial territories, and he depicted relations between white men and black women embedded in a clear colonial order informed by a modern concept of race.

The prince of Joinville painted himself centrally seated with his back to the sea, watching one of Governor Carstensen's men making a toast to the king of France. The watercolor represents a familiar colonial order with powerful white upper-class men in control of themselves and their subaltern subjects. Unbent and proper, Joinville has his eyes focused on the toasting man while a naked woman is bending over to serve him. Unlike the bearded lunch guest at the end of the table, Joinville apparently resisted a closer look at the serving women. At some point, however, he must have turned to inspect the women. Indeed, the women seem to have been the most memorable attraction of his visit to Christiansborg. In his diary of his travels in Africa he described their hair, skin, and smell in a way that echoes nineteenth-century ideas of biological race. Remarking how

the women's skin was particularly soft—did he touch them anyway?—he leaped from the particular women who served him at Christiansborg to all Africans and “negroes” in general and described their peculiar and irreducible smell:

I have never been able myself to endure the odour of negroes of either sex; but I have known people whom it quite intoxicated, and who were always trying to get reappointed to Senegal, so as to get back to it, in spite of having their health shattered by African fevers. All these young ladies' coquetry had gone to the dressing of their wooly hair, which was clipped, like garden shrubs, into the most fanciful shapes, and to the fineness of their skins, which were as soft and shiny as satin. This resulted from the daily baths they were in the habit of taking, rubbing themselves also with fine sand. But, unluckily the rubbing could not get rid of the negro scent.<sup>45</sup>

In Joinville's description African women are passive servants with whom European men could become intoxicated, and all Africans are grouped together by sharing the same odor. Their difference from Europeans is not merely cultural, in the sense that it can be transformed or removed. Bathing and rubbing can transform their skin to satin, but nothing can erase a smell of difference, and when white men and black women stand close, as in the watercolor, the colonial order is shown as fixed and irreversible.

The women in the watercolor are stereotypes; they are almost identical, and they should not be considered realistic renderings of Gold Coast women but rather an ethnopornographic French male fantasy. In fact, the image is ethnopornographic in the modern sense of the concept; it refers not only to an inherent racial hierarchy that would prevail between the races in the modern period but also to the degradation of African women's bodies: their hair is like garden shrubs, their smell is appalling. The ethnopornographic intentions of the image are obvious. The man at the end of the table invites the viewer to participate in his undisguised gaze at one of the African women, and the women's exotic underwear that shows both hips and buttocks would have been considered provocative in both Gold Coast and European society. Unlike the completely naked French woman in Édouard Manet's more famous lunch setting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* twenty years later (1863), the West African women in Joinville's lunch image do not return the viewer's glance.<sup>46</sup>

The only similarity between Manet's and Joinville's images is the scene—dressed European men having lunch with naked women—the differences

are more striking. Manet's naked woman participates in the lunch, and, like the men, she is in a relaxed posture on the grass. Her complete naked whiteness, though placing her in a vulnerable and subordinate position to the properly dressed men (one still with his hat on), connotes cleanliness and purity. In contrast, in Joinville's setting the exotic hair and underwear sexualizes the women in an ethnopornographic sense, referring to the exotic and "other" bodies of the African women. The barriers between black and white are in place on all fronts. The black are women, subservient, naked, and sexually available. The men are not just white but most are also dressed in shining white (and pure) clothes in contrast to the black women. When the serving woman bends over and is—inappropriately?—close to the French prince, as he turns his head away, the image plays specifically on the breaching of the modern (in)transgressable racial barriers that the image is structured around. According to Joinville, European men were especially attracted to the unique smell of African women, and he employed a perceived biological and bodily difference in West African women specifically to arouse sexual desire.

This nineteenth-century sexualizing depiction of West African women speaks to broader developments in the perception of black women in the modern era. As McClintock and Gilman have noted in different contexts, Africa had become the "quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly," and Africans—women and men—were "icons for deviant sexuality."<sup>47</sup> The social categories falling into place by the nineteenth century, controlling and reconfirming imperial and colonial control, produced an image of the native, African, woman as "needing control," and in that process, the European man became her polar opposite.<sup>48</sup> "Miscegenation" became an integrated word in late nineteenth-century vocabulary on sexuality, and the racial dividing lines between white and black on which modern interracial pornography plays were solidified by a pathologizing of black women's bodies.

## Conclusion

At least some early modern European travel accounts from West Africa have much in common with the modern genre of interracial pornography as Linda Williams has defined it: they play specifically on fantasies of white men's easy and uninhibited access to hypersexualized black women's bodies. Yet when we read travel accounts such as those of William Bosman and



William Smith as ethnopornography, we not only need to consider them as examples of a particular genre of ethnopornographic writing but also, simultaneously, as “typical” eighteenth-century European pornography. Their sexualized depictions of West African women are strikingly similar to other early modern European pornography in their focus on prostitutes and in the ways that the sexualized depictions of West African women are used as political and social criticism. In short, early modern ethnopornography has connections to both modern interracial pornography and to eighteenth-century European pornography.<sup>49</sup>

However, as I have suggested in this chapter, modern American interracial pornography plays on fantasies of much more than white men’s simple access to black women’s bodies. In my comparison of the eighteenth-century ethnopornographic descriptions with an example from the nineteenth-century Gold Coast—the watercolor by the prince of Joinville—I argue that modern ethnopornography refers to an “othering” of West African women of a whole different caliber: color was no longer something that could disappear in the dark (as in Jean Barbot’s account from 1670); race had been essentialized and pathologized. If we then add a century and a half of racial degradation and segregation, and a specific lived historical practice of race relations in the United States, then it is not surprising that the racial hierarchies transgressed in modern American interracial pornography are loaded with powerful collective pools of meaning.

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## Notes

- 1 English translation in Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones, eds. and trans., *Pieter de Marees: Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 258. The translators and editors of de Marees’s account give the following explanation to the last part of the sentence: “the verb *di* (Fante: *dzi*) means ‘to eat,’ but also ‘to have sexual intercourse.’”
- 2 English translation in Adam Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History, 1599–1669* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Coronet Books, 1983), 157.
- 3 Irvin Cemil Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alterist Discourse* (London: Verso, 1999), 79, 77.
- 4 Linda Williams, “Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 302.
- 5 Williams, “Skin Flicks,” 271.

- 6 Schick, *Erotic Margin*; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Felicity Nussbaum, "The Other Woman: Polygamy, *Pamela*, and the Prerogative of Empire," in *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 7 On the concept of "porno-tropics," see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 21–24.
- 8 See Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979; repr. with new intro., New York: Dutton, 1989); Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); or Linda Williams's response to MacKinnon in Williams, "Skin Flicks," 11.
- 9 Williams, "Skin Flicks," 12.
- 10 Nussbaum, "Other Woman," 140.
- 11 For an introduction to the field of historical travel writing, see, e.g., Peter C. Mancall's introduction to *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 12 English translation of quote by Andreas Josua Ulsheimer in Jones, *German Sources*, 33. Ulsheimer's account also contains both cannibals and devils. In Hans Jacob Zur Eich's account, women are dancing around "the evil one"; see Jones, *German Sources*, 266.
- 13 Samuel Brun cited in Jones, *German Sources*, 72. See also Johann von Lübeling (1599–1600) in Jones, *German Sources*, 16.
- 14 See Jennifer L. Morgan's work on monstrous African women in early modern travel accounts in *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 12–49.
- 15 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22–24.
- 16 See, for example, "pornography" in *Britannica Concise Encyclopædia* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2008).
- 17 Jean Barbot originally wrote in French, but he later settled in England, where his travel account from West Africa was published in English. Quote from P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712, Vol. 2* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1992), 496.
- 18 Johannes Rask, *En kort og sandferdig rejsebeskrivelse til og fra Guinea* (Trondheim, Norway: Jens Christensen Winding, 1754), 130; translation mine. Rask stayed in West Africa from 1709 to 1712.
- 19 See, for example, Jean Barbot in Hair, Jones, and Law, *Barbot on Guinea*, 85.
- 20 Lynn Hunt has noted that the word "pornography" was first used specifically to describe writing about prostitution; see Lynn Hunt, "Pornography and the French Revolution," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 303. In Kathryn Norberg's chapter in the same volume, "The Libertine Whore: Prostitution in French Pornography from Margot to Juliette," she concurrently noted, "The prostitute plays

- a particularly important role in the history of pornography; she was present at its birth"; Norberg, "Libertine Whore," 225. Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), also has a history of the word.
- 21 William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London: J. Knapton et al., 1967); original published in Dutch in 1704; first English edition published in 1705.
  - 22 Within thirty years of the first Dutch edition, Bosman's account was printed three more times in Dutch, two times in English, once in French, and once in German. See John Ralph Willis's introduction in Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, xix.
  - 23 Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Sexuality and Prostitution among the Akan of the Gold Coast c. 1650–1950," *Past and Present* 156 (August 1997): 144–73. Adam Jones, "Prostitution, Polyandrie oder Vergewaltigung? Zur Mehrdeutigkeit europäischer Quellen über die Küste Westafrikas zwischen 1660 und 1860," in *Außereuropäische Frauengeschichte: Probleme der Forschung*, ed. Adam Jones (Pfaffenweiler, Germany: Centaurus Verlag, 1990), 128.
  - 24 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 212.
  - 25 Akyeampong, "Sexuality and Prostitution," 155.
  - 26 Jones, "Sexuality and Prostitution," 130, 141.
  - 27 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 214.
  - 28 Both quotes from Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 211.
  - 29 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 206.
  - 30 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 206–4.
  - 31 Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 346.
  - 32 William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1967). Smith was in Africa twenty-five years after Bosman, and he might have adopted some of his pornographic tone from Bosman, since he also borrowed about half of his account of West Africa from him. See Adam Jones, "Semper Aliquid Veteris: Printed Sources for the History of the Ivory and Gold Coasts, 1500–1750," *Journal of African History* 27 (1986): 217.
  - 33 The language and tone of the appended story is very similar to the rest of William Smith's account, which, combined with the fact that he speaks warmly of the practice of polygamy both in the main text and in the appendix, suggest that he was not just reporting Mr. Wheeler's views but probably also shared them. See also Jennifer Morgan's reading of this part of Smith's account in Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 45–46.
  - 34 Smith, *New Voyage*, 251–54.
  - 35 Norberg, "Libertine Whore," 225–52.
  - 36 Norberg, "Libertine Whore," 235.
  - 37 Hunt, "Pornography and the French Revolution," 10. See also 30 and 35.
  - 38 Smith, *New Voyage*, 244.
  - 39 Smith, *New Voyage*, 255–60.

- 40 Smith, *New Voyage*, 250.
- 41 Smith, *New Voyage*, 246–48.
- 42 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), both contain good introductions to works on gender and the European expansion.
- 43 Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 37; and Yvette Abrahams, “Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- 44 Hunt, “Pornography and the French Revolution,” 42; and Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 38.
- 45 Translated from the French by Lady Mary Loyd in *Memoirs (Vieux Souvenirs) of the Prince de Joinville* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 276–77.
- 46 Several copies of Manet’s painting are accessible on the net; see, for instance, Wikimedia, accessed April 7, 2019, [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Édouard\\_Manet\\_-\\_Le\\_Déjeuner\\_sur\\_l’herbe.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Édouard_Manet_-_Le_Déjeuner_sur_l’herbe.jpg).
- 47 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22; and Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 83.
- 48 Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 107.
- 49 In a further study of ethnopornography in early modern travel accounts, it would be interesting to do a more systematic comparison of pornography in Europe (perhaps set both in metropolises and in the country?) and in the porno-tropics.