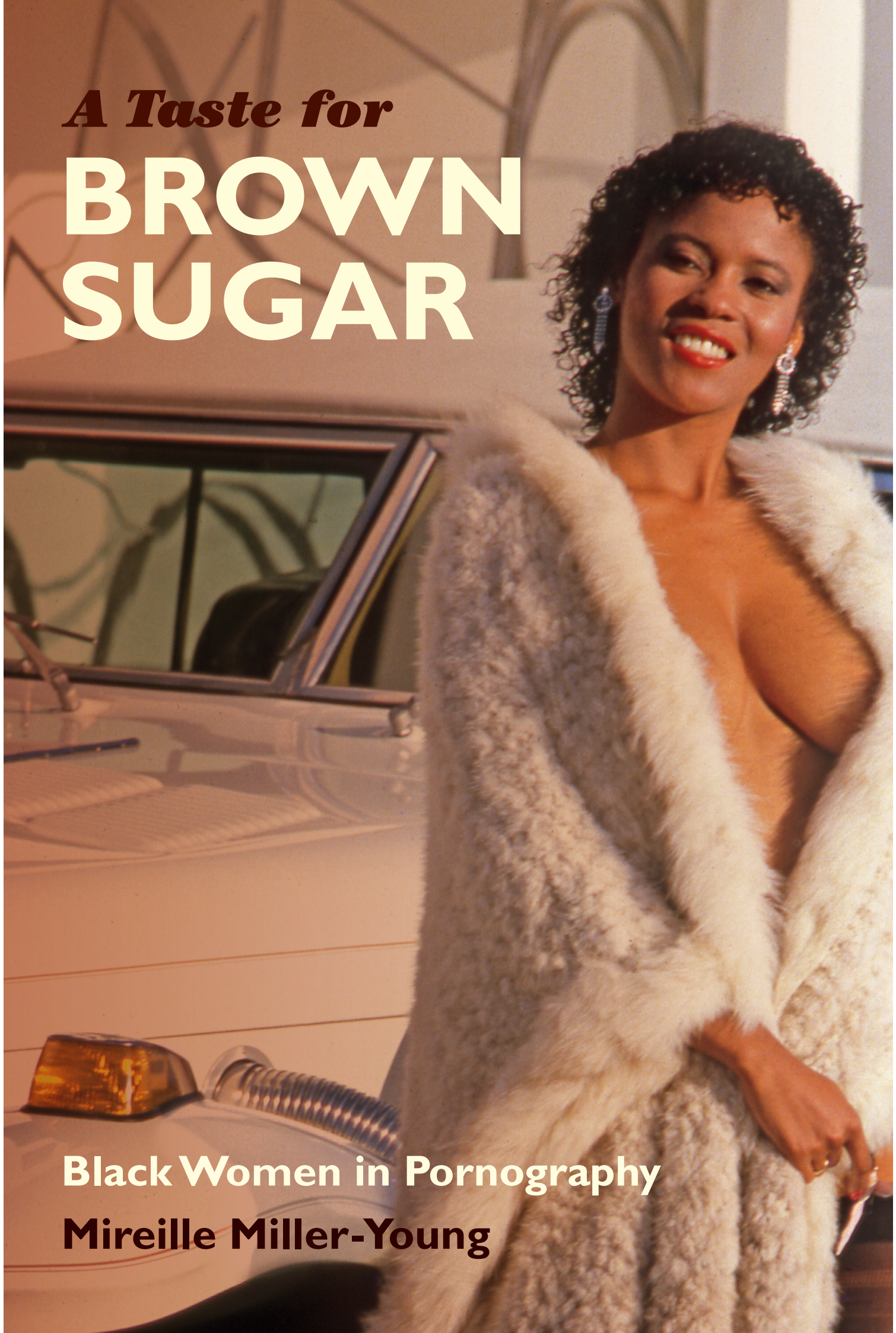


A Taste for

BROWN SUGAR

Black Women in Pornography
Mireille Miller-Young



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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"¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 censured. 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 Amintatta Forna writes: "Images of black women are exploited by pornography and black women are exploited by pornographers."⁷ 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."⁸ 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.”⁹ These black feminist analyses contend that pornographic representation continues a history of sexual violence against black women’s bodies.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.”¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ “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.”¹⁶ For Stallings, black feminists ought not to invest in the moral policing of out-law 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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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.

Acknowledgments

I still remember the exhilaration I felt when I saw my first pornographic image. It was Vanessa Williams's famous layout in the issue of *Penthouse* magazine published in November 1984 when I was eight years old. My friend and I had taken the magazine from her stepfather's secret hiding place in the back corner of a closet when her mother was at work one day. Seeing Williams in an array of erotic poses with another woman was both shocking and titillating. She was the first African American woman to be crowned Miss America, so when the news broke it was a big deal. My friend and I had overheard our parents talking about the scandal and wanted to see what all the fuss was about. The images were absolutely thrilling to me. Williams was so beautiful and, though I did not yet understand fully what the term meant, sexy. I instantly became captivated with everything about sex, and I wanted to see more nude pictures, even though I knew that it was not allowed!

This book emerges from my longtime fascination with porn and the women in the images. In my over ten years of research into the history of black women in pornography, I have been humbled by the generosity and sisterly affection that my informants have shown me and greatly moved by their powerful courage, wisdom, and grace. This book would not have been possible without these incredible women, many of whom I proudly call friends. I am so grateful for the generosity of Jeannie Pepper, Angel Kelly, Sinnamon Love, Vanessa Blue, Diana DeVoe, Lola Lane, Marie Luv, Sasha Brabuster, Sierra, Carmen Hayes, India, Midori, Mya Lovely, Lollipop, Candice Nicole, Lacey Duvalle, Spantaneous Xtasty, Damali X Dares, Lexi, Kitten, Obsession, Ayana Angel, Angel Eyes, Aryana Starr, Capri, Loni, Adora, Precious Tia, Phyllis Carr, Tony Sweet, Stacey Cash, Black Cat, Crystal, Sandi Beach, Honey Bunny, Lady Cash, Monica Foster, Serria Tawan, Dee, Dior Milian, Jade

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A major element of my work has been to unearth the lost archive of black pornography dating back to early erotic photography and film. I wish to thank the archivists and collectors who have helped me to discover a trove of photographs, postcards, film reels, videos, and magazines. I am especially grateful to Catherine Ann Johnson-Roehr, Curator of Art, Artifacts, and Photographs, and Shawn Wilson, Library and Archives Public Services Manager at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. This book would not have been possible without their guidance and generosity.

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In 2007–8 I held a visiting appointment in the Department of Women's Studies at the Ohio State University. I valued the chance to share my work with such an energetic community of scholars who so generously supported it. In 2003–4 I became a Dissertation Fellow in the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara. It was a great honor to be invited to UCSB by the esteemed Dr. Cedric Robinson, and I decided not to leave. The next year, when I won the UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship, I was mentored by Dr. Anna Everett in the Center for Black Studies Research at UCSB. In 2005 I was hired into the Department of Feminist Studies, which has been an ideal space to do the work that I do. I also had the privilege to attend the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture, and Society at the University of Amsterdam in 2001, organized by Carol Vance and Han Ten Brummelhuis. The feedback that I received at the Summer Institute has been crucial for my thinking in this project as it evolved from dissertation to book.

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Introduction Brown Sugar

Theorizing Black Women's Sexual Labor in Pornography

You are not supposed to talk about liking sex because you are already assumed to be a whore. —JEANNIE PEPPER

In a private gathering following the East Coast Video Show in Atlantic City in 2002, legendary performer Jeannie Pepper received a special achievement award for twenty years in the porn industry, the longest career for any black adult actress. “It’s been a long, hard road,” she said to the audience of adult entertainment performers, insiders, and fans as she accepted the award from popular adult film actor Ron Jeremy. “There weren’t many black women in the business when I started.”¹ In 1982, when Jeannie Pepper began her career as an actress in X-rated films, there were few black women in the adult film industry. Performing in more than two hundred films over three decades, Jeannie broke barriers to achieve porn star status and opened doors for other women of color to follow.² She played iconic roles as the naughty maid, the erotically possessed “voodoo girl,” and the incestuous sister in films like *Guess Who Came at Dinner?*, *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks*, and *Black Taboo*. She traveled abroad as a celebrity, working and living in Germany for seven years.

In a career that spanned the rise of video, DVD, and the Internet, Jeannie watched the pornography business transform from a quasi-licit cottage industry into a sophisticated, transnational, and corporate-dominated industry. In 1997 Jeannie was the first African American porn actress to be inducted into the honored Adult Video News (AVN) Hall of Fame. By all accounts, Jeannie had an exceptionally long and successful career for an adult actress: she was well liked by her colleagues, and was a mentor to young women new to the porn business. Yet, as her acceptance speech reveals, her experience of being a black woman in the porn industry was shaped by formidable challenges. As in other occupations in the United States, black women in the adult



FIGURE 1.1. Jeannie Pepper during her tour of Europe, Cannes, France, 1986. Courtesy of JohnDragon.com.



FIGURE 1.2. Jeannie Pepper poses in the nude before onlookers outside of the Carlton Hotel, Cannes, France, 1986. Courtesy of JohnDragon.com.

film industry are devalued workers who confront systemic marginalization and discrimination.

Jeannie became a nude model and adult film actress in her twenties because she enjoyed watching pornography and having sex, and she was keen to become a path-maker in an industry with few black female stars: “I just wanted to show the world. Look, I’m black and I’m beautiful. How come there are not more black women doing this?”³ She felt especially beautiful when in 1986 she did a photo shoot with her photographer husband, a German expatriate known as John Dragon, on the streets of Paris. Dressed only in a white fur coat and heels, Jeannie walked around, posing in front of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, cafés, luxury cars, and shops. Coyly allowing her coat to drape open (or off altogether) at opportune moments, she drew the attention of tourists and residents alike. She imagined herself as Josephine Baker, admired in a strange new city for her beauty, class, and grace. Finding esteem and fearlessness in showing the world her blackness and beauty, even in the cityscapes of Paris, Hamburg, or Rome, Jeannie felt she embodied an emancipated black female sexuality.

Still, she remained conscious of the dual pressures of needing to fight for recognition and opportunity in the adult business, especially in the United States, and having to defend her choice to pursue sex work as a black woman.⁴

As Jeannie asserts in the epigraph, she perceived that part of the difficulty of being a professional “whore”—in photographs and films—was the expectation that she was not supposed to talk about or inhabit her sexuality in ways that would seem to exacerbate harmful stereotypes about black women, namely their alleged hypersexuality. Black women sexual performers and workers have had to confront a prevailing stigma: if all black women are considered to be sexually deviant, then those who use sex to make a living are the greatest threat to any form of respectable black womanhood.

“Brown sugar,” this popular imaginary of African American women, saturates popular culture. In songs, films, music videos, and everyday life, the discourse of brown sugar references the supposed essence of black female sexuality. It exposes historical mythologies about the desirable yet deviant sexual nature of black women. Publicly scorned and privately enjoyed, the alluring, transformative, and supposedly perverse sexuality of black women is thoroughly cemented in the popular imaginary. Seen as particularly sexual, black women continue to be fetishized as the very embodiment of excessive or non-normative sexuality. What is most problematic about this sticky fetishism—in addition to the fact that it spreads hurtful and potentially dangerous stereotypes with very real material effects—is that the desire for black women’s sexuality, while so prevalent, is unacknowledged and seen as illegitimate in most popular discourse.

As a metaphor, brown sugar exposes how black women’s sexuality, or more precisely their sexual labor, has been historically embedded in culture and the global economy. Now a key component of the profitable industries of entertainment and sex in the United States, brown sugar played a central role in the emergence of Western nation-states and the capitalist economies. Across the American South and the Caribbean, black slaves cultivated and manufactured sugar that sweetened food, changed tastes, and energized factory workers in the Industrial Revolution.⁵ In addition to physical labor, their sexual labor was used to “give birth to white wealth,”⁶ and was thus the key mechanism for reproducing the entire plantation complex. “Sugar was a murderous commodity,” explains Vincent Brown, “a catastrophe for workers that grew it.”⁷ The grinding violence and danger that attended sugar’s cultivation in colonial plantations literally consumed black women’s labor and bodies.⁸

Brown sugar, as a trope, illuminates circuits of domination over black women’s bodies and exposes black women’s often ignored contributions to the economy, politics, and social life. Like sugar that has dissolved without a trace, but has nonetheless sweetened a cup of tea, black women’s labor and the mechanisms that manage and produce it are invisible but nonetheless *there*.

To take the metaphor a bit further, the process of refining cane sugar from its natural brown state into the more popular white, everyday sweetener reflects how black women, like brown sugar, represent a raw body in need of refinement and prone to manipulation. The lewdness and raw quality associated with brown sugar in popular discourse today thus shows how ideas about black women as naturally savage, super-sexual beings have flavored popular tastes even as they have driven a global appetite for (their) sweetness. While processed white sugar is held up as the ideal, there remains a powerful desire, indeed a taste, for the *real thing*.

The metaphor of brown sugar exposes how representations shape the world in which black women come to know themselves. But stereotypes usually have dual valences: they may also be taken up by the oppressed and refashioned to mean something quite different. Although brown sugar has been used as a phrase to talk about black women as lecherous, prurient sex objects, unlike other tropes such as the Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire, it conveys sweetness, affection, and respect. In African American vernacular speech and song, brown sugar often expresses adoration, loveliness, and intimacy even as it articulates lust, sensuality, and sex (along with other illicit, pleasure-giving materials like heroin or marijuana).⁹ As in the saying, “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” brown sugar is sometimes used by black people to speak to the complex pleasures they derive from their own eroticism. In this book brown sugar references a trope that black women must always broker. Sometimes they refashion this trope to fit their needs. As Jeannie Pepper shows, some black women choose to *perform* brown sugar—the perverse, pleasurable imago projected onto black women’s bodies—in an effort to express themselves as desired and desiring subjects. Given the brutal history of sexual expropriation and objectification of black bodies, these attempts by black women to reappropriate a sexualized image can be seen as a bid to reshape the terms assigned to black womanhood. In this case, brown sugar might be a realm for intervention in their sexualization.

Some black women might view Jeannie Pepper, the porn star, as a menace to the hard-fought image of respectable womanhood they have sought to create for more than one hundred years.¹⁰ Nevertheless, even though black sex workers know that their labor is seen to constitute a betrayal of respectable black womanhood, some pursue it. Their reasons may be purely economic: it’s a job, and they must survive and take care of their families, after all. Or, in Jeannie Pepper’s case, their motivations could be to take pleasure in “show[ing] the world” a beautiful and sexually self-possessed black woman. While such a move to represent oneself may be viewed, especially by many in the

African American community, as perpetuating historical and ongoing stereotypes born out of horrible abuse, it is a powerful statement about how some black women redefine what respectable womanhood means for them. For Jeannie, more important than respectability, is respect.¹¹ Respect means being acknowledged and valued for her performative sexual labor and treated as a star. Jeannie Pepper's story illustrates how the perception of black women as hypersexual, which has persisted since the slave trade, has made it extremely difficult to acknowledge that some black women have an interest in leveraging hypersexuality. But it is possible to leverage this treacherous discourse and the black women who speak to us in *A Taste for Brown Sugar* explain how. They use the seductive power of brown sugar to intervene in representation, to assert their varied sexual subjectivities, and to make a living. In the process of making tough choices about how and when to commodify their sexualities, these women offer more complex readings of black gender and sexual identity than now prevail in the academy and popular culture. Porn is an important terrain in which this alternative sexual politics can emerge.

Pornography as Culture and Industry

Pornography is a highly controversial category, not just for its content but because it sparks heated debates about its role in society. Most often pornography is defined as a genre of mass-produced written or visual materials designed to arouse or titillate the reader or viewer. A facet of entertainment culture and a domain of the commercial sex industry since its modern circulation in literature, photography, and film in the nineteenth century, pornography has been powerfully regulated as the explicit, obscene edge of acceptable forms of sexuality. It is also more than a kind of object or media; pornography is an idiom that communicates potent, blunt, and transgressive sexuality operating at the boundaries of licit and illicit, sacred and profane, private and public, and underground and mainstream culture. Hence, as Walter Kendrick argues, “‘pornography’ names an argument, not a thing.”¹² Pornography becomes a map of a culture's borders, a “detailed blueprint of the culture's anxieties, investments, contradictions,”¹³ and a site of cultural contest about social access and social prohibition.¹⁴ Focusing on pornography since the rise of the modern adult film industry in the 1970s, *A Taste for Brown Sugar* analyzes the operation of black women's sexuality—its conditions of production, modes of representation, and strategic performances—in both the industry and idiom of pornography. This book traces the work of

the black female body in pornography as a material object, but it also delves into pornography's function as a cultural discourse about racialized sexuality.

Does pornography really make much of an impact on how we view sex, race, and gender? One argument about porn's relevance is that it is big business with big cultural effects. Many critics have cited the broad impact of pornography on American life since its legalization during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s.¹⁵ With revenues of nearly \$8–\$10 billion a year, the adult entertainment industry is one of the largest entertainment industries in the United States.¹⁶ Pornographic films, videos, and websites are one part of this larger industry that includes exotic dance clubs, phone sex, magazines, peep booths, and sex toys. While Hollywood makes nearly four hundred films each year, the adult industry makes more than ten thousand.¹⁷

This book focuses on photographic film and digital media from the turn of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first, a period during which pornography became a “phenomenon of media culture and a question of mass production.”¹⁸ Indeed, mechanisms of mass production and consumption have become central to the growing convergence of sexual aesthetics and media industries, and their prominent role in defining private fantasies and public spaces. In recent years we have seen this convergence happening within popular culture, from “porno chic” fashion, to reality TV shows such as *The Girls Next Door*, to mainstream films like *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* and *Boogie Nights*, to adult actress and entrepreneur Jenna Jameson being interviewed on *Oprah*. Porn as an entrance into everyday consumer life can be seen as producing what many critics have termed the “pornification” or “porne-tration” of culture.¹⁹ Previously illicit subcultures, communities, and sexual practices have been brought into the public eye through pornography, and in the process they have made their way into other modes of culture, including fashion, art, mainstream film, music, and television. Celebrity sex tapes, political sex scandals, and popular sex panics around issues like youth “sexting” have popularized the idea of public sex as a symptom of a pornographic mainstream media; they ignite worry that what is being projected and amplified is the worst of American sexual experience in terms of taste, values, and politics. Indeed, based on documentaries such as Chyng Sun's *The Price of Pleasure*, one would imagine that the biggest threat to society is not war, torture, poverty, or environmental degradation, but the proliferation of pornography and its representation of “bad sex.”²⁰ Rather than an act of romance, intimacy, or love, bad sex is seen as the product of the narcissistic, self-interested character of our culture. This unfeeling, vulgar kind of sex rubs up against expect-

tations of personal morality and rational social values rooted in traditional, bourgeois views of sex for the reproduction of proper families and citizens. Thus, fears of bad sex expose powerful anxieties about how changing meanings and practices around sex might lead to a downward spiral, a debasing of social life and the nation.²¹ More than a debate about how sex is represented in our culture, porn is a site of moral panic about sex itself.

As an act of speech that speaks the unspeakable, pornography has been defined by what the state has tried to suppress.²² In the process of pushing against censorship and obscenity regulation, porn presses and redefines the limits of the culture of sex. Media technologies have played a leading role in making porn increasingly accessible and part of the public domain. With so many genres and subgenres of erotic fascination making up pornography's "kaleidoscopic variorum" we might even think of it in a plural sense: as *pornographies*.²³ Yet despite its vast proliferation, increased pluralism, and rich potential for the reimagining of allowable forms of desire, pornography's commodification of sex has produced what Richard Fung notes as a "limited vision of what constitutes the erotic."²⁴ That porn reproduces predictable, indeed stereotypical, representations of sexuality for an increasingly niche-oriented marketplace is not surprising given its profit motive. This limited erotic vision may also be the result of sexually conservative regulatory systems, such as obscenity laws, which have defined what may or may not be broadcast via media technologies like television or the Internet or sold in stores, whether locally or across state lines.²⁵ In addition to affecting media policy, the regulation of sexual culture has reinforced severely narrow representations of gender, desire, and sexuality that make it difficult to construct alternative imaginaries, even in supposedly transgressive spaces like pornography.²⁶ Nevertheless, pornography reliably takes up the challenge of subverting norms, even as it catalyzes and perpetuates them. The fantasies it produces offer fertile spaces to read how eroticism, proliferation, commodification, and regulation get played out at the very heart of our public consciousness.

In many ways porn is a political theater where—in addition to gender, sex, and class—racial distinctions and barriers are reiterated even as they may also be manipulated or transformed.²⁷ Race, or more properly racialization, the process by which meanings are made and power is structured around racial differences, informs the production side of commercial pornography in at least two important ways: in the titillating images themselves and in the behind-the-scenes dynamics where sex workers are hired to perform in the production of those images.²⁸ Black women, and other people of color, have historically been included in pornography to the extent that its producers

seek to commoditize, circulate, and enable the consumption of their images. Their bodies represent stereotypes of racial, gender, and sexual difference and the fantasies or deeper meanings behind them.²⁹ Until recently, when black women and men started to produce and circulate their own pornographies, those fantasies were seldom authored by black people.

Black women's images in hardcore porn show that the titillation of pornography is inseparable from the racial stories it tells. A central narrative is that black women are both desirable and undesirable objects: desirable for their supposed difference, exoticism, and sexual potency, and undesirable because these very same factors threaten or compromise governing notions of feminine sexuality, heterosexual relations, and racial hierarchy. Pornography did not create these racial stories, these fraught imaginings of black being and taboo interactions across racial difference, but it uses them. What interests me is the *work* of racial fantasy, particularly fantasy involving black women. Given our racial past and present, what is the labor of the black female body in pornography? As my informants show, the players of pornography's racial imaginarium are the ones who can best discern the crucial implications of these fantasies for black women's sexual identities and experiences. They reveal how some black porn actresses tactically employ the performative labor of hypersexuality to intervene in their representation, "contest it from within,"³⁰ and provide a deeper, more complex reading of their erotic lives.

Working On, Within, and Against

Historically, enslaved black women were marked as undesirable objects for white men due to their primitive sexuality. These women, as the myth went, were so supersexual that they virtually forced white men into sex they ostensibly did not want to have.³¹ Enslaved black women needed their sexual powers because otherwise these unwitting white men would never desire them. This myth concealed, denied, and suppressed the plain sexual exploitation of enslaved and emancipated African American women by casting the demand for their sexuality, both in images and as labor, as impossible. Chief to the racial fetishism of black women in pornography, then, is a *double focus*: a voyeurism that looks but also does not look, that obsessively enjoys, lingers over, and takes pleasure in the black female body even while it declares that body as strange, Other, and abject.³²

Black women are of course aware of this regime of racial fetishism in representation (and the social and legal apparatus that sustains it), which licenses the voyeuristic consumption of their bodies as forbidden sex objects.

As Jeannie Pepper noted, black women are always “already assumed to be” whores. She, then, uses this insistent myth in her own work. That is, Jeannie Pepper employs her own illicit desirability in a kind of sexual repertoire. By precisely staging her sexuality so as to acknowledge and evoke the taboo desire for it, she shows that racial fetishism can actually be taken up by its objects and used differently. Standing nude on the beach in the South of France as throngs of tourists look on, Jeannie takes pleasure in presenting herself as irresistibly captivating and attractive in the face of the denial of those very capacities. In this way, Jeannie Pepper exposes the disgust for black female sexuality as a facade for what is really forbidden desire. It is a myth that can be reworked and redeployed for one’s own purposes.

Jeannie Pepper shows us how black women—particularly sex workers—mobilize what I term “illicit eroticism” to advance themselves in adult entertainment’s sexual economy.³³ Actively confronting the taboo nature and fraught history of black female sexuality, black sex workers choose to pursue a prohibited terrain of labor and performance. Illicit eroticism provides a framework to understand the ways in which black women put hypersexuality to use. They do so in an industry that is highly stratified with numerous structures of desire and “tiers of desirability.”³⁴ Black women’s illicit erotic work manipulates and re-presents racialized sexuality—including hypersexuality—in order to assert the value of their erotic capital.³⁵

In an industry where they are marginal to the most lucrative productions, and where the quality of productions are largely based on demand, black women, along with Latinas and Asian women, face a lack of opportunities, pay disparities, and racially biased treatment in comparison to white women.³⁶ Black women are devalued in terms of their erotic worth, and they are critical of how they are made lesser players in pornography’s theater of fantasy. These women seek to mobilize their bodies to position themselves to the greatest advantage. This mobilization requires a complex knowledge of what it means to “play the game” and to “play up” race by moving and performing strategically. However, because not everyone is able to increase their status in the established hierarchies of desire, black women employing illicit erotic labor face a complicated dilemma: lacking erotic capital, how can they produce more, and in the process enhance their erotic power, social significance, and economic position?

One strategy for black women in pornography is to work extremely hard to carve out space and fabricate themselves as marketable and desirable actors. Their appearance is important to them; they invest a great deal of time and money on self-fashioning and taking care of their bodies in order to achieve



FIGURE I.3. Jeannie Pepper standing before the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, during her European tour in 1986. Courtesy of JohnDragon.com.

competitiveness. Performance is critical; most performers attempt to portray seductive eroticism and sexual skill, which may give them an edge with consumers and added appreciation by other actors and producers. In addition to appearing in adult videos, they actively cultivate themselves as “porn stars,” which includes creating a captivating persona and becoming a savvy financial manager and entrepreneur. Selling themselves as brands or commodities means spending a great deal of time on promotion, including at photo shoots, appearances at trade conventions and entertainment-industry events, and on their websites, social networks, and chat rooms, to foster a fan base. All these spaces are spaces of work and contestation where black women must fight for their worth. Even more important, these primarily young, working-class black women do all this while also acting as mothers, aunts, daughters, sisters, and partners called upon to play important caretaking roles in their families. They are women who use their bodies as resources and their determined intellect as tools to make a living, and sometimes make a name too.

Marginalized and exploited in the labor market, many young, working-class black women today identify the sex industries as preferred spaces to make a living for themselves and their families.³⁷ This is not new. As the history of black sexual labor attests, this choice has been recorded as part of their negotiations of the labor market since slavery and through the Great Depression.³⁸ Black sex workers make a living when they take sex, which is associated with leisure and play, and turn it into what Robin D. G. Kelley calls “play-labor.”³⁹ In commodifying sexuality, play-labor does not necessarily resist or overturn hegemonic institutions of power like patriarchy and racial capitalism. That is not its purpose. Play-labor is one strategy by which black women (and others) try to negotiate the existing political economy by using their corporeal resources, which are some of the only resources many black working-class women may in fact possess. Given that the other options open to working-class black women appear in service, care work, or other contingent labor industries, the “choice” to pursue sex work is of course constrained within a modern capitalist system where all work is exploited work, and black women’s work is super exploited.⁴⁰

Part of a continuum of sex work—including streetwalking, private escorting, erotic dancing, modeling, phone sex, and s/M role play—and part of a history of black women working in underground or gray economies as “mojo women . . . bootleggers, numbers backers and bawdy house operators,” black women’s work in pornography maneuvers within illicit and licit sexual economies to pursue what Sharon Harley describes as “personal and commu-

nity survival.”⁴¹ Their maneuvers are generally prompted by market concerns, like porn’s relatively flexible and high-income work, but also by nonmarket motives, such as sexual pleasure and the enjoyment of erotic performance. Garnering fame in the adult entertainment industry is often regarded by performers as a viable aspiration and a stepping-stone to more opportunities in entertainment. For young black women, attaining fame could also reflect a desire to harness the erotic capital possessed by recognized black entertainers and actresses such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Halle Berry, Pam Grier, and Josephine Baker.

Jeannie Pepper’s identification with Josephine Baker indicates that some black women working in porn understand the historical depictions of their bodies as containing dynamic possibilities for reinterpretation and re-creation through performance. These women *work on* representations of black sexuality by using their own bodies and imaginations. These representations—painful, punishing, or pleasurable—are part of what Asian American studies scholar and filmmaker Celine Parreñas Shimizu terms the “bind of representation.”⁴² As for Asian American women and other women of color in the United States, racialized sexual representation forms black women’s “very self-recognition every day and every minute.”⁴³ Because black women are tethered to ontological concepts of sexual deviance, it is vital to acknowledge hypersexuality as a disciplinary instrument that effects pain, trauma, and abuse in their lives, and which, like other problematic representations of race, gender, and sexuality, is extremely hard to escape.⁴⁴

Black women are not just victims of representation, however. Referencing three black Oscar-winning Hollywood actresses—Hattie McDaniel, Whoopi Goldberg, and Halle Berry—feminist literary and media scholar Rebecca Wanzo shows how many black women entertainers recognize the potentially recuperative nature of their performances. “Familiar with stereotypes about black female identity,” writes Wanzo, “they have attempted to reconfigure themselves as central agents of a particular project and then see themselves as making themselves objects in relationship to this racist history on their own terms.”⁴⁵ Like actresses in the racist and sexist Hollywood film industry, some black actresses in the adult industry also recognize their performances as spaces to negotiate the overdetermined and reductive depictions, and try to engage them on their own terms. White American women are not judged in the same way, nor are they accused of representing the “hypersexuality of white womanhood.”⁴⁶ Yet black women, as individuals, often come to stand for their entire racial group. Not only are black women performers burdened

with representing every other black woman, they are seen to depict only simplistic and denigrating types.⁴⁷ Black porn actresses understand that they are seen as archetypical whores and bad women by both the black community and the broader, categorically white, culture.

Crucially, these women often assert themselves within these archetypes. Performers who not only fit the stereotype, but also boldly put it to work in their performances can be read as having more sophisticated understandings and counterresponses in relationship to representation than previously acknowledged. In discussing her role as the “voodoo girl” in *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks*, Jeannie explained that she chose a role that, though still a stereotypical representation of exotic, supernatural, and hypersexual black womanhood, she saw as an alternative to the then-standard role of the maid: “So I played the part of the voodoo girl. I wanted that part. I was glad to have [it]. I loved the way they dressed me up, with the costume. They made me look very exotic with all the makeup and feathers, and I was running around [acting possessed]. But I didn’t want to play the maids. Those other girls were playing maids. . . . But I like my part.” By playing the exotically fetishized black woman instead of the recognizable fetish of the servile black maid, Jeannie negotiated what she saw as a demeaning representation.⁴⁸ The voodoo girl was not necessarily a positive representation against the maid’s negative one, but it allowed space for Jeannie to take pleasure in what she identified as a more complex performance. Dressed as the primitive, magical savage in a tinsel skirt that looks more fitting for a luau than a voodoo ceremony, colorful neon bangles, and 1980s eye-shadow-heavy makeup, Jeannie’s voodoo girl uses a magic spell to conjure two white men to satisfy her sexual appetite. Jeannie brings erotic charisma and skill to her enthusiastic performance, stretching it beyond its impish and narrow construction. And, as she attests, her choice to perform a playful, mysterious, and (literally) self-possessed female character was a strategic move. Even though this move did not fully dismantle racist regimes of representation for black women in pornography, Jeannie’s tactics for self-representation are important to recognize.

Angel Kelly, a contemporary of Jeannie Pepper in the 1980s, was the first black woman to win an exclusive contract from an adult film production company, Perry Ross’s Fantasy Home Video. An A-list actress like Jeannie, Angel desperately wanted to make choices in her career that would show her in what she saw as a positive light: as glamorous, sexy, and beautiful. However, sometimes the nature of the industry meant that she became mired in the stereotypical construction of black women’s sexuality. Like Jeannie, Angel was pressured to portray a “voodoo woman”:

There is one video called *Welcome to the Jungle*, where I look like an African, I look like voodoo woman [on the video box cover]. I hate that picture. I hated it. I hated it! And that's why I wouldn't do the movie for it. So there was no movie, but there was a [video box] cover called *Welcome to the Jungle* and what [the producer, Perry Ross] did was he just made it a compilation tape. See, they can screw you that way anyway because when they are shooting pictures they got footage on you, and they can take all your scenes out of one movie and put it with another cover in another movie.

As Angel describes, she importantly chose to stand up to the demands of her producer by refusing to star in the production. Yet she did feel pressure to dress like an “African voodoo woman” for the *Welcome to the Jungle* (1988) photo shoot, because as she told me during our phone interview in 2013, “Sometimes if you wanted to work you had to swallow it. I tried to hold on the best I could.” Angel felt bitterly about the experience, noting her lack of power in relationship to the greater power of studios to use and manipulate her images. For Angel, who had on occasion played the shuffling maid to a white family (see *The Call Girl*), negotiating porn work included evaluating the terms of each production and deciding how she might infuse the role with her own desires. Angel expressed to me the pleasures she gained in her work: “I had a chance to play all types of great characters a man could fantasize about. I was surprised that I had as many female fans as I did male fans. I had the opportunity to be a star.”

Black women's counterstrategies of representation involve at times attempting to play the stereotype in order to reverse or go beyond it. At other times they offer alternative, more complex images of black sexuality, or they may refuse the roles altogether.⁴⁹ In my analyses of black women's participation in pornography, I identify where they tell stereotypical stories in their performances, but also where performers appear to tell stories about themselves that aspire to go beyond stereotypes, the “immediately available” stories told about black women.⁵⁰ Illicit eroticism, like José Esteban Muñoz's concept of “disidentification,” describes how cultural workers enact a repertoire of skills and theories—including appropriating or manipulating certain stereotypes—to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”⁵¹ Unlike disidentification, illicit eroticism describes a repertoire of appropriations distinct to the realm of sexual and sexualized labor, available to those whose sexuality has been marked specifically

as illicit, including people of color, and queer folk, including queer people of color. Illicit eroticism conceptualizes how these actors use sexuality in ways that necessarily confront and manipulate discourses about their sexual deviance while remaining tied to a system that produces them as marginalized sexual laborers. For Jeannie Pepper and others, leveraging one stereotype can mean avoiding another. Yet these performers' layered work as black women remains connected to their very survival within a punishing field of representation and labor.

Both Jeannie and Angel tell of their aspirations to be seen as more complicated subjects than the pornographic script allowed. Playing up, against, and within caricature, Jeannie, who delved into a stereotyped role, imagined herself as an actor depicting a woman with power, one who magically and mischievously produces men to service her sexual desires, while generating a kind of glamour and joviality. Imagining a black female pornographic sexuality as joyful, subversive, and attractive, Jeannie's performance asserts *erotic sovereignty*. Her performance attempts to reterritorialize the always already exploitable black female body as a potential site of self-governing desire, subjectivity, dependence and relation with others, and erotic pleasure.⁵² Erotic sovereignty is a process, rather than a completely achieved state of being, wherein sexual subjects aspire and move toward self-rule and collective affiliation and intimacy, and against the territorializing power of the disciplining state and social corpus. It is part of an ongoing ontological process that uses racialized sexuality to assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state. Jeannie's interventions are never separate from the conditions that propelled and shaped her work in the porn industry during the 1980s, including the impact of Ronald Reagan's devastating economic policies on African Americans, and the porn business's interest in capturing white consumers for black-cast products during the video era.

By foregrounding the testimonies of black porn actresses like Jeannie Pepper and Angel Kelly, I hope to explain how black porn actresses might simultaneously challenge and conform to the racial fantasies that overwhelmingly define their representations and labor conditions. Their negotiations offer a view into black women's needs, desires, and understandings, and into the deeply felt conflict between what stories about black women exist and what stories they long to imagine for themselves. Agency, a central concept in feminist thought, is generally understood as a person's ability to achieve freedom or "progressive change" in the context of everyday and manifold forms

of oppression. I draw on postcolonial scholar Saba Mahmood's productive conceptualization of agency as a "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."⁵³ Not eliding the role of subordination, Mahmood reveals agency as existing along a continuum. At times agency enables progressive change or resistive action, and at other times and contexts it is the "capacity to endure, suffer, and persist."⁵⁴

Rethinking the meaning of agency in relationship to black women's sexuality, I propose to open up the concept of agency by moving away from readings of its equivalence with resistive (sexual) freedom. We might instead read agency as a facet of complex personhood within larger embedded relations of subordination. Depending on the historical moment, agency emerges differently and operates along divergent nodes of power. Agency then might be seen as a dialectical capacity for pleasure and pain, exploration and denial, or for progressive change as well as everyday survival. Through my close readings of interviews with black performers in the pornography industry, we can observe their differing forms of agency given changing contexts of representation and circuits of sexual economy.

The tension described above between aspiration and inescapable constraint forms the critical spine of this book. Although it is impossible to decipher what early black pornography actors imagined and desired as they performed during the rise of pornographic photography and film in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is important to think through the foundational nature of early pornography as it set the terms for the later performances, labor conditions, and forms of negotiation deployed by black adult actresses. Chapter 1 examines the fetishization of black women's bodies in early pornography and considers how those bodies served as objects of spectacle, fascination, and disdain within the visual regimes of slavery, colonialism, and Jim Crow. A compulsive desire to sexualize race and to consume sexual images of black women and men intersected with the rise of commercial pornography, creating a distinct genre that I call "race porn." Photographs and films concerning black and black-white sex illuminate how discourses of racial and sexual difference became calcified during this period. Even in the most intimate interactions in early pornography racial-sexual borders are erected, permeated, and then built up again. Deploying what I call a black feminist pornographic lens, I read the archive of early race porn to contemplate the ways in which early black models and actresses may have reached past the confines of porn texts to provide performances that give us a surprising view of black female sensuality, playfulness, and erotic subjectivity.

Chapter 2 explores the performances of black porn actresses, like Desiree

West, during the “Golden Age” of pornography in the 1970s. Not only did large-scale social transformations alter racial-sexual borders in the United States during this period, they also transformed meanings and interactions around pornography itself, such that newly popularized sexual media became an important site for black women. A combination of white fascination with black sexuality and African Americans’ desire to express a new, assertive sexual politics resulted in what I call “soul porn,” a genre that powerfully shaped black women’s performances and labor. Yet as black actresses became agents in the production of an emergent porn industry, they faced the anxieties and subjugations of racial fetishism and were sidelined by the extreme focus on black male sexuality as the archetype for racial-sexual border crossing.

Throughout its history, technological and social forces have continuously altered the landscape of the adult industry. In the process technology has transformed the kinds of texts and modes of production black porn actresses encountered. Chapter 3 investigates how the adult industry’s adoption of VHS allowed for the growth of specific markets for black and interracial video. In this new interracial subgenre black actresses like Jeannie Pepper and Angel Kelly negotiated ways to assert their performances and professional personas into a restrictive formula and sometimes hostile terrain. In the early 1990s, digital media began to shift the production, marketing, and consumption of pornography, just as the rise of hip hop music began to shift the representations, discourses, and aesthetics associated with black female sexuality.

Chapter 4 interrogates how the convergence of hip hop and pornography helped establish the trope of the black working-class woman as “ho.” Deploying this figure, the porn industry maintained a segregated, niche-oriented market for black sexuality based on commercial hip hop aesthetics. In the process, the ho became an inescapable text that black women in porn must decipher, and an archetype that speaks to black women’s battles to prevail in the sexual economy. Using what I call “ho theory,” I analyze the representation of working-class black women’s corporeal labors to insert themselves in the marketplace of desires, and to both take pleasure in and benefit from the fetishization of black women’s bodies. In addition, I explore the roles of black men in hip hop pornography as they are called upon to perform the roles of pimp or stud in their sex work.

Chapter 5 focuses on the labors of black women performers by asking what socioeconomic or other forces catalyze them to pursue pornography as a field of work and site of imagination. How does illicit eroticism, the process by which subjects convert sexuality into a usable resource in the face of

a number of compelling forces and constraints, factor into their motivations to become porn stars? What do black women in porn identify as the most desirable, pleasurable, and powerful aspects of the industry? Because money, sex, and fame are the hydraulic factors in my informants' articulations of the need and desire for this work, it is important to unpack how the realities of the business meet with these expectations.

If chapter 5 is concerned with how aspirations collide with real-life experiences, chapter 6 analyzes these real-life experiences and the particular kinds of entanglements and pressures black porn actresses report as constitutive elements of their illicit erotic work. Former and current black porn actresses speak about the undeniable hurdles pornographic labor poses, and about how they grapple with issues of marginalization, discrimination, and abuse as they seek to promote their erotic capital under tremendous constraint in a business that profits from their objectification and exploitation. Ultimately, these sexual laborers expose how black women are made vulnerable by—yet critically intervene in—the larger sexualized economy of advanced capitalism in the United States. Black porn workers offer an alternative moral economy that sheds light on how marginalized people within industries like porn can cocreate social meanings, challenge conditions, and imagine other worlds.

This book identifies pornography as an important location to think about sexual culture and racial ideologies, particularly in the context of the sexualization of both popular culture and economic opportunities for women. As such, it is necessarily in conversation with feminist critics and provides a launching pad to advance the conversation about the role of pornography in women's lives. Pornography is a hugely controversial topic for feminists. For more than thirty years, feminists have been engaged in a fierce debate, widely known as the Sex Wars, about pornography's role in society. The feminist anti-pornography movement emerged out of radical feminist activism during the 1970s, against what was viewed as the proliferation of explicit, misogynistic images in the media. Antipornography feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon defined pornography as equivalent to gendered violence, believing that pornography was the “subordination of women perfectly achieved.”⁵⁵ For them, pornography commodifies rape and endorses and encourages men's abusive sexual desires and violent behaviors toward women.⁵⁶

Alternately, a diverse coalition of queer, anticensorship, liberal, and sex-positive feminists rejected the claims of radical antipornography feminists, citing porn as a convenient scapegoat for social-conservative attacks on sexual dissent. These critics and activists identified pornography not as a “unified (patriarchal) discourse with a singular (misogynist) impact,” but

rather, as Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce member Lisa Duggan contends, as sexual discourse that is “full of multiple, contradictory, layered, and highly contextual meanings.”⁵⁷ In other words, viewing practices for pornography are varied and dynamic; viewers are not solely abused by porn or trained for violent, misogynistic behaviors. While the adult industry is shaped by the problematics of heteronormative, homophobic, transphobic, and racist corporatist practices, pornography is not a monolithic or static entity. Porn is dynamic, diverse, and open for revision, including by those on the margins such as women, sexual minorities, and people of color.

Black feminists have often followed the antiporn feminist critique described above, arguing that pornography as an industry perpetuates harmful stereotypes about black women’s sexuality.⁵⁸ While these black feminist writers are not wrong, the story is more complex, and black women’s performances deserve a more nuanced analysis. Not only do black women’s representations in porn include portrayals that sometimes undermine stereotypes, black actresses often try to capture something quite different from the meanings normatively attached to their bodies. Moreover, black women in porn often try to revalue their images and work by fighting for better representations, asserting themselves in their roles, attempting to take control over their products, and helping other black women in the industry. Black women in porn also see themselves as a mirror for black women porn viewers. They imagine their relationship with black female porn fans—the group from which many of these performers came—as empowering and challenging to black women’s sexual politics. By including the performers’ voices in the discussion we can address questions that are vital to black feminisms, such as the critical significance of pornography for black women’s sexual labor and its significance for their own fantasy lives.

Before she started working in porn, Jeannie Pepper was a porn fan. She had watched sex films in X-rated theaters and imagined seeing more black women like her represented. Yet she also knew that such a move into the industry would mark her with a deviance that was overdetermined by the historical construction of black gender and sexuality. While Jeannie has remained critical of the limits placed on black women in the adult industry and by black respectability politics, she found affiliation with the iconic celebrity of Josephine Baker. Baker, for Jeannie, represented a story of financial success, glamour, mobility, autonomy, and sexual rebellion. Baker, like Jeannie, was an erotic performer who became an icon. It is crucial to understand the attractions that draw black women to the pornography business. I suggest that porn work is part of a long struggle by black women to *occupy* their bodies.⁵⁹

The primary methodological interventions of this project are twofold: first, I converse with porn actresses directly, listening to their voices and taking seriously their descriptions of their experiences; second, I read the complexity of their performances in pornographic imagery. Even as more attention is given to the workings of race in pornography, few have endeavored to learn about porn's meanings by looking at the self-presentations and self-understandings of black women working inside the industry.⁶⁰ Over more than ten years of fieldwork, I conducted ethnographic research with nearly sixty black women, and more than forty others involved in the porn business. My research included directors, producers, distributors, agents, crew, and actors. I talked to black women porn performers while they made dinner at home, signed autographs at industry conventions, networked and partied at social events, and prepared for sex scenes on porn sets. As a black woman, I discovered an affinity with my informants that unsettled the traditional methodological division between researcher and object of study. My informants trusted me, called on me, and embraced me in their lives. I also became an advocate for them: I brought my informants to speak to my classes, published their essays, and strategized with them about how to overcome career and family hardships. What I found during this decade of fieldwork and personal interactions challenged the views I had at the start.

For instance I, like many people, thought that women in porn were primarily survivors of sexual abuse who got off a bus in Hollywood and were whisked away to Porn Valley by some shady pimp. Reading nostalgic accounts of the "Golden Age" of porn in the 1970s, I also imagined film sets to be an updated version of *Boogie Nights*, where playful orgiastic sex ensued between people who really didn't care much if the camera was rolling. Instead I found no single story for the women that enter the porn business. While some admitted coming from abusive or neglectful family backgrounds, others spoke about having grounded and loving single or dual-parent households. Where I expected to see unmitigated eroticism I found work sites that were decidedly desexualized, where cast and crew moved about with workmanlike focus to get their movies made on time and, ideally, under budget.

It is only by talking to those involved in the production of pornography that we can move past some of the myths and categorical generalizations about the business and its controversial products. As a historian, I wanted to know more about how black women became part of pornography, and what the changing regulatory, technological, and social contexts of porn's development over the past century or more meant for black women's representations, working conditions, identities, and aspirations. In hunting down long-lost

vintage pornographic images in libraries and private collections, I soon realized that there was a vast missing archive of black pornography and erotica, and that black women performing in pornography prior to its deregulation would unfortunately have to remain unknown and, to an extent, unknowable.

As a feminist, I wanted to understand how mainstream pornography, which appears to be so extremely focused on addressing white heterosexual male pleasure, is actually experienced by the women involved in making it. While it was not possible to track down black adult film actresses who worked prior to the 1980s, I discovered that the women I did contact were willing, if not eager, to talk about their experiences and to be understood. Like Jeannie Pepper, they knew that even to speak about their lives and work would challenge the stigma and silence around these issues for black women. Yet my informants fiercely desired to be seen and heard, to tell their stories and explain their performances, especially to another black woman. I had no choice but to see and hear them. This book is my attempt to recover and redress an untold dimension of black women's sexual lives, by letting them speak for themselves.

Notes

Preface. Confessions

1. Gilman, "Confessions of an Academic Pornographer," 28.
2. For black feminist work on the iconicity of the Hottentot Venus and about Sara Baartman herself, see for example: Alexander, *The Venus Hottentot*; Parks, *Venus*; Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*; Willis, *Black Venus 2010*; Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*; Chase-Riboud, *Hottentot Venus*; Maseko, *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*; Magubane, "Which Bodies Matter?"; Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Qureshi, "Displaying Sarah Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'"; and Nash, "Strange Bedfellows." For other work on the Hottentot Venus, see Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*; Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus*; Bancel et al., *Human Zoos*; Skelly, *No Strangers to Beauty*; Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile and The Mismeasure of Man*; Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'"; and Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies."
3. See Saar's statements in the anonymous article (credited to Juliette Bowles Harris), "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes"; also Gilman, "Confessions of an Academic Pornographer," 29.
4. See for example, Walker and Vergne, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.
5. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.
6. Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West."
7. Gardner, "Racism in Pornography and the Women's Movement," 105; Forna, "Pornography and Racism," 105–6.
8. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 144–45.
9. Walker, "Coming Apart," 42.
10. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 137.
11. Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."
12. These feminists all signed on to the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) Amici Curiae Brief to the U.S. Court of Appeals protesting the passage of the Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinance, which would have criminalized pornography, in Indianapolis in 1985. The FACT Brief was originally filed in April of 1985 and published

as “Brief Amici Curiae of Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 21, no. 1 and 2 (fall 1987–winter 1988). Here I am citing the FACT Brief that appears as appendix A in Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 207–47, 235–36.

13. Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance.”
14. Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” 30.
15. Cruz, “Pornography,” 223–24.
16. Stallings, “‘Mutha’ Is Half a Word!,” 6.
17. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness,” 312.
18. Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” 309.

Introduction. Brown Sugar

Jeannie Pepper, personal interview with author, December 8, 2002.

1. Pepper, “A Special Achievement Presentation Award to the Legendary Jeannie Pepper, from 1982 to 2002, Twenty Years of Hot Sizzling Sex.”
2. I use first names when discussing porn actresses throughout this book because not all actors take on last names for their personas, and those who do often do not use them. Using performers’ entire professional pseudonym or just their first name allows me to maintain equality in how they are discussed.
3. Jeannie Pepper, personal interview with author, December 8, 2002.
4. Sex work is defined by Ronald Weitzer as “the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation. It includes activities of direct physical contact between buyers and sellers (prostitution, lap dancing) as well as indirect sexual stimulation (pornography, stripping, telephone sex, live sex shows, erotic webcam performances).” Weitzer, “Sex Work: Paradigms and Policies,” 1.
5. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.
6. Davis, “Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle!,” 117.
7. Brown, “Eating the Dead,” 117.
8. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 43.
9. It is precisely for this lyrical ambiguity as both bawdy and loving, both dangerous and attractive, that the words “brown sugar” have been taken up by artists, entertainers, and poets. See, for example, the song “Brown Sugar” from *Sticky Fingers* (1971) by the Rolling Stones.
10. See, for example, hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy.”
11. Stallings, “Gender Realism, Poor Black Women, and the Politics of Hoin’ and Hustlin.”
12. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 31.
13. Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 164.
14. On the history and social implications of pornography, see also Mowry, *The Bawdy Politic in Stuart England, 1660–1714*; Hunt, “Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800” and “Pornography and the French Revolution”; and Ferguson, “Pornography: The Theory.”
15. Escoffier, *Bigger than Life*, 1.

16. I use the terms “pornography industry,” “porn industry,” “porn business,” “adult industry,” and “adult entertainment industry” interchangeably. These terms refer to the system of production, distribution, and consumption of adult media, products, and performance labor as discussed in this book. They include the people, technologies, modes of exchange and marketing, trade organizations, communication entities, and work sites and labor norms that allow the industry to function. Whereas these terms have different valences outside of the industry, with porn/pornography industry sometimes taking on negative connotations, especially in the writings of antiporn critics, I use all of these terms because adult-industry professionals use them as well. Adult industry or adult entertainment industry is often used in professional settings, and porn more informally, but there is great diversity and fluidity in their use by my informants. My use of porn/pornography industry instead of adult industry in places is not meant to undermine the legitimacy of the entity that I am naming, though I acknowledge that “pornography” is a highly problematic term, tied to its connotations with obscenity, and defining it is an extremely subjective enterprise.

There is no clear information about the revenues of the adult entertainment industry because companies are private and do not share their financial data. It has been extremely difficult for researchers to develop accurate numbers, and most estimates are controversial. According to *Top Ten Reviews*, in 2006, revenue from video rentals and sales was \$3.62 billion, and Internet porn sales earned \$2.8 billion. Cable TV, Pay Per View, mobile phone, and in-room hotel rentals were problematically lumped together with phone sex revenues at \$2.19 billion. These numbers have surely shifted in the last few years as new mobile technologies increase the consumption of Internet-based porn, and the financial crisis diminishes revenues for the adult entertainment industry across the board. See Ropelato, “Internet Pornography Statistics.” See also statistics from 1997–2003 in Schlosser, *Reefer Madness*; Rich, “Naked Capitalists; and Slade, *Pornography and Sexual Representation*.

17. Williams, *Porn Studies*, 1; Weitzer, “Sex Work.”

18. Paasonen, *Pornification*, 2.

19. On pornification see Paasonen, *Pornification*, 8. On “pornetration” see Hebdige, “Flat Boy vs Skinny.”

20. On “bad sex,” see Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public”; and Rubin, “Thinking Sex.”

21. Attwood, “Reading Porn,” 99; Lumby, *Bad Girls*, 117.

22. Laura Kipnis argues that pornography, “in essence, is an oppositional political form.” Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 123. See also Mowry, *The Bawdy Politic*. Both authors discuss pornography as a dimension of free speech and speech critical of state and social authority.

23. McClintock, “Gonad the Barbarian and the Venus Flytrap,” 115; Williams, “Porn Studies,” 3. See also Juffer, *At Home with Pornography*; and Attwood, “Reading Porn.”

24. Fung, “Looking for My Penis,” 161.

25. Arthurs, *Television and Sexuality*, 41–42.

26. Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, “Pornification and the Education of Desire,” 8.

27. Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*.
28. On racialization, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*. For scholarly studies of pornography that examine race, see Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*; Fung, "Looking for My Penis"; Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border"; Bernardi, "Interracial Joysticks"; Hoang, "The Resurrection of Brandon Lee"; Penley, "Crackers and Whackers"; Nash, "The Black Body in Ecstasy"; and Cruz, "Berries Bittersweet."
29. Hall, *Representation*.
30. Hall, *Representation*.
31. Davis, "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle."
32. Hall, *Representation*, 268.
33. Adrienne Davis uses the term "sexual economy" to theorize the important interaction between enslaved black women's sexual expropriation and the political economy of the antebellum era. I find it a useful concept to describe the historical and continuing relationship between sexual knowledge, sexual power, and the political economy in advanced capitalism. See Davis, "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle."
34. Green, "The Social Organization of Desire," 32. See also Brooks, *Unequal Desires*.
35. Brooks, *Unequal Desires*, 29.
36. While this work focuses on black women, I reference research I conducted with Latinas, Asian women, and black men. Adequate research has not been done on any of these groups, and unfortunately this study cannot address the specific experience of these sex workers or the complexity of their relationship to black women. Asian men and Latinos are rare in the heterosexual sector of the pornography business and little work has been done on them either.
37. On the growing significance of the global sexual marketplace for black women see, for example, Kempadoo and Doezema, *Global Sex Workers*; Kempadoo, *Sun, Sex, and Gold*; Wekker, *The Politics of Passion*; Collins, "New Commodities."
38. Harley, Wilson, and Logan, "Introduction." See also Blair, *I've Got to Make My Own Livin'*; Hicks, *Talk with You like a Woman*; and Dill and Johnson, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place."
39. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!*, 45–46.
40. Marx, *Capital*.
41. Harley, "Working for Nothing but a Living," 51.
42. Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 30.
43. Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 22.
44. Wanzo, "Beyond a 'Just Syntax,'" 137.
45. Wanzo, "Beyond a 'Just Syntax,'" 138.
46. In a conversation between myself and Xavier Livermon, assistant professor of African and African Diaspora studies at the University of Texas at Austin, we discussed how the ingénue-meets-sexpot performance of Britney Spears would never stand in for all white women's performances. Viewers understand she is just one person in a range of varied representations offered by other entertainers and actresses like Lady Gaga or Julia Roberts. Xavier Livermon, conversation with author, December 8, 2011.
47. Wanzo, "Beyond a 'Just Syntax,'" 137.

48. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

49. Hall, *Representation*.

50. “Complex personhood,” writes Gordon, “means that the stories people tell about themselves . . . are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching towards.” Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.

51. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

52. In developing this concept I draw upon Bataille’s discussion of sovereign subjects and eroticism. I also relate erotic sovereignty to Alexander’s concept of “erotic autonomy.” However, for me, erotic sovereignty conveys the processual desire to reclaim the body and eroticism for a range of purposes and in the always existing context of sexual economy, racialization, and racism. See Bataille, *Eroticism*; Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

53. Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent,” 203.

54. Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent,” 217.

55. Dworkin, “Against the Male Flood,” 523.

56. Russell, “Pornography and Rape,” 50. See also Dworkin and MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights*, 36. More recent work by antipornography feminist critics like Gail Dines and Robert Jensen argues that a culture of abuse created by porn has saturated U.S. national culture, hijacked our values, warped our identities and sexual practices, and now threatens to “ruin” sex itself. See Dines, *Pornland*; Jensen, *Getting Off*; Boyle, *Everyday Pornography*; Paul, *Pornified*; Sarracino and Scott, *The Porning of America*.

57. Duggan, “Introduction,” in *Sex Wars*, 7.

58. Walker, “Coming Apart”; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Forna, “Pornography and Racism”; Gardner, “Racism in Pornography and the Women’s Movement.”

59. Although it is not within the scope of this book to fully account for black female pornography consumers or spectators, their critical readings of pornography are important because they impact the subjective experiences of black women porn producers.

60. Tirrant, “Is Porn Racist?”; Dines, “Yes, Pornography Is Racist”; Hernandez, “Rethinking Porn. Really”; Shabazz, “Ghetto Gaggers”; Rivas, “Porn Stars of Color Face Racial Inequality and Wage Gap Too”; Snow, “Interracial Sex Still Taboo for Many Porn Stars”; Goff, “Is the Porn Industry Racist?”; Stewart, “Porn Performers Agree.”

Chapter 1. Sepia Sex Scenes

1. It was common for stag-film producers and salesmen to release more than one version of a film, and as a result there is another version of *The Golden Shower* titled *Miss Park Avenue Takes a Bath*. Dave Thompson describes the latter film as having some of the same footage in his book, *Black and White and Blue*, 112, 114, 117–18.

2. I use this term to describe a range of facial manipulations used by black performers like Bert Williams and George Walker, as discussed by Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent*, 235–38.