

1b, black legs, 52”

An Exhibition of Artworks

by

Karice Mitchell

A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master in Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

University of Waterloo Art Gallery (UWAG), April 15th - May 1st, 2021

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2021

© Karice Mitchell 2021

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Ib, black legs, 52” is an effort to reconcile with history. Through the recontextualization of black pornographic images, this exhibition serves as a re-imagining of what black women’s futures could be. By creating images that are hyper visible in presentation, yet ambiguous in their representation, these works seek to foster images of the black female body that demand to be seen and understood removed from the historical construction of blackness that has been upheld and perpetuated through white supremacy. Giving the black female body a new meaning, we can begin to cultivate new possibilities for it to be understood differently, and for it to exist in its multiplicity. This show creates space for black women and their sexuality to be unapologetically represented, while also allowing ourselves the grace to acknowledge the historical legacy of racism in an effort to subvert it—ultimately, striving towards reclaiming our agency.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis committee Jessica Thompson and Bojana Videkanic. Whether it was spending countless hours on Zoom pushing me to write this paper or your patience and understanding throughout my moments of weakness your extensive support hasn't gone unnoticed. Secondly, I'd like to thank my MFA cohort for their ongoing support and feedback of my work. Racquel, Maria, Carrie, Jordan and Sara the memories you have given me I will remember forever. To my parents and sisters, I love you more than you can imagine. You've always been sure of my ability to succeed despite me not believing in myself. Without your ongoing emotional support, I don't know where I'd be. Kaylah and Kenadi, you were the comic relief. Lastly, black women deserve the utmost tenderness, grace, care and respect.

I love you.

Land Acknowledgement

The Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge campuses of the University of Waterloo are situated on the Haldimand Tract, land that was granted to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River, and are within the territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.

The Stratford campus is on the territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Ojibway/Chippewa peoples. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author's Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Land Acknowledgment	v
List of Figures	vii
Introduction	1
PART I: The Ghost of the Hottentot Venus	9
PART II: Demystifying Pornography	14
PART III: Hyperexposure, Respectability and Slavery	20
PART IV: Thinking the Unthinkable, Oppositional Gaze and Mobilizing Difference	28
PART V: Real Hot Girl Shit: Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems (Case Studies)	35
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	50

List of Figures

- Figure 1 *Ebony Diptych* 2021
- Figure 2 *Scan from Black Legs Magazine*
- Figure 3 *Ib and 52"* 2021
- Figure 4 *Ebony 2* 2021
- Figure 5 Kara Walker. *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby* 2014
- Figure 6 *Notes found on magazine cutouts in my studio* 2020
- Figure 7 Carrie Mae Weems. *The Kitchen Table Series: Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)* 1990
- Figure 8 Carrie Mae Weems. *The Kitchen Table Series: Text Sheet* 1990
- Figure 9 *Ib, black legs, 52"* Exhibition Installation Shot 1
- Figure 10 *Ib, black legs, 52"* Exhibition Installation Shot 2
- Figure 11 *Ib, black legs, 52"* Exhibition Installation Shot 3
- Figure 12 *(Untitled) Adhesive Vinyl Work* 2021

Introduction

“Black women can no more be defined by the cumulative sum of our pain than blackness can be defined solely by the transgenerational atrocities delivered at the hands of American racism. Because black folks are more than the stench of the slave ship, the bite of the dog, or the smoldering of freshly lynched flesh. In both cases, defining ourselves solely by our oppression denies us the very magic of who we are. My feminism simply refuses to give sexism or racism that much power.”¹

Joan Morgan

¹ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

Ib, black legs, 52" is an exhibition of image-based, installation works that examine the complexities of black female identity. By presenting black female identity as fluid and non-monolithic, this exhibition serves as a space to not only acknowledge the collective trauma that is carried within the black body, but to also subvert how racism has falsely constructed black identity—to begin to foster new meanings for that identity. My current practice involves the re-appropriation of black pornographic imagery in order to reclaim the female body and reframe it as a polyvalent, complex subject that has agency to articulate its own sexualities and desires. All the works in the show seek to disturb uniform views of black female sexuality by removing them from historical archetypes.

The installation of the show consists of four prints mounted on plexiglass, several images printed on adhesive vinyl, and a sculptural piece. Central to every image presented in the show is the presence of brown skin and black bodies. Each image is carefully cropped, only revealing specific areas of the body. The images are sourced from a variety of photos, and they all come together to create a mosaic of black representation, again underscoring the polyvalent and fluid nature of blackness. Two of the images mounted on plexiglass titled *Ebony Diptych* are presented together, each measuring 36" by 72". The two images depict two separate snapshots of the same image of a black female body. Following the diptych is *(Untitled) Adhesive Vinyl Work* which is a collection of images printed on vinyl adhered to the wall. The series of photos are presented stacked on top of one another and side by side which takes up the length of the gallery wall from top to bottom making the collection of images 72" wide and 152" long. Each vinyl image depicts closeups from offcut magazine clippings depicting a range of bodies, each varying in scale and image quality. Situated next to these images on a separate wall is another image mounted onto plexiglass, titled *Ebony 3*, again measuring 36" by 72", depicting a carefully cropped torso from a

magazine centerfold. The final piece, situated on the adjoining wall, shows a female hand that is monumental in scale, mounted onto a narrow band of plexiglass measuring 24” by 96”. These photo-based works all sit in a dialogue with one central sculptural piece in the show. The work is titled *1b and 52*” in reference to the colour code found on the packs of synthetic hair and the length frequently bought at beauty supply stores. This sculptural work features an archive of the synthetic braids taken down from my hair that I collected over the course of two years. The hair is displayed in a plexiglass box on the floor. Intertwined with the synthetic braids is a combination of hair product buildup, dirt and the hair that’s been brushed out of my scalp through the process of taking down a variety of these natural protective hairstyles.



Figure #1. *Ebony Diptych* 2021

Throughout the trajectory of my practice, I have always been attracted to the visual field of pornography, specifically pornography that was curated and marketed to predominately black audiences from the '70s, '80s and '90s. The representation of black women in these magazines seems more fluid than current representations of black women on social media and in popular culture. Furthermore, representation came effortlessly in the context of these magazines—one magazine would feature multiple porn stars who all looked very distinct from one another. Finally, there seems to have been a much wider range of types of blackness as well—from darker skinned to lighter skinned black women, all adorned with an array of black hairstyles. These particular representations of blackness defied the standards of sexual desirability during the time of their publication, and still continue to push the bounds of desirability today. A lot of the magazines I have used throughout the research process are now obsolete, and are seen as collectibles. Due to the ephemeral nature of these publications, I seek to uphold these print works as an archive. Through appropriation and the re-purposing of images, bringing them to the forefront of black female representation in my practice, the images function as a subversion of history to begin redefining and rearticulating black womanhood, broadening the scope of desirability and sexuality, and introducing the desires of black women to the fold.



Figure #2. Scan from Black Legs Magazine

It took years for me to want to wear braids or hairstyles that emphasized my blackness. Growing up in Aurora, Ontario in mainly white communities, I wanted my blackness to go unnoticed, which often manifested in the ways I styled my hair. I would spend hours in the morning straightening it relentlessly before school, and the slightest bit of humidity in the air would make

waves of anxiety wash over me. I didn't want anyone to know what my natural hair looked like. The way I perceived my hair has had huge implications on the way I see myself, and how I've navigated a need to adhere to particular standards of desirability and beauty. Around three years ago, I shaved it all off. I was tired of my hair dictating my life, and wanted to say "fuck desirability" all together. I finally felt free. This time of having no hair that really helped me set up a strong foundation to begin fostering my own definitions of beauty in relation to black womanhood. To transition back into nurturing my natural hair and promoting hair growth, I decided to start wearing protective styles and my hair has been in braids consistently ever since. Protective hairstyles have allowed me not to fight with my natural hair texture, but instead embrace it, even look forward to its growth. The piece, *1b and 52*" is meant to commemorate those styles since they've allowed me to reach a healthy level of self-acceptance. However, the anxiety associated with my natural hair hasn't all gone away. The act of taking down my hair is often a quiet one, and the days in between taking down my hair and getting it done I go through considerable effort to not be seen. By bringing that process into the open through material accumulation, I make visible the trajectory of self-acceptance, while at the same time revealing vulnerability and anxiety—bringing to the surface the kinds of efforts we go through to hide things like dirt and hair build-up for example. Similarly, to the way that photo-based practice has helped me to reconceptualize representation, my relationship to my hair has helped me redefine my relationship to femininity, expanding and reevaluating my assumptions of black female identity. By highlighting acts black women have historically been silenced for, but that are closely tied to our identity, this show seeks to put such acts to the forefront, and bring new meaning to the black body. The presence of blackness, especially so large in scale, serves as an effort to disrupt the white gaze and the power dynamics within what it means to look and be looked at. My intention for this show is to display a series of

somewhat abstracted images of the black female body sourced from erotic magazines all embodying different methods of installation and display. The black experience has been theorized as a contradictory one. On the one hand it implies to exist as someone misrepresented and invisible, while simultaneously feeling like you're taking up too much space and are continually seen. My intention for this show is to draw on this experience by creating images of the black body that are somewhat ambiguous yet unavoidable, to reimagine black womanhood and sexuality removed from its historically racist and patriarchal construction.



Figure #3 *1b and 52"* 2021

A close-up photograph of a person's hand and forearm. The skin is light brown with visible texture and some minor blemishes. A dark, irregular mark is visible on the inner side of the wrist. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a piece of fabric or paper.

PART I:
The Ghost of the Hottentot Venus

Sarah Baartman is believed to be born in 1789 at the Gamtoos River also known as the Eastern Cape of South Africa, where she belonged to the Khoesan nation.² In 1810 she was taken from her home by two Englishmen and was brought to Europe where she was forced to perform in human freakshows.³ Her body was on display for the entertainment of white Europeans, where her buttocks and allegedly abnormal genitalia were evidence of her ‘deviant sexuality’. She was later subjected to scientific experimentation by renowned anatomist, Georges Cuvier. Even after her death in 1816, her body was continuously examined and mutilated. “Her genitals were dissected and preserved to further highlight distinct racial and sexual differences between African and European races.”⁴ Until 1970, her body remained on display in Paris at the *Musée de L’homme* (Museum of Man). The National African Congress petitioned the French government to have her remains returned to her hometown. The process of repatriating her remains took eight years as the French had drafted a carefully worded bill that would not allow other countries to claim treasures they believed belonged to them.⁵ On March 6th, 2002 Baartman’s body was finally brought back home. She was laid to rest on August 9th, 2002 in Hankey, a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.⁶

This paper does not seek to be a history paper, nor does it want to trace how Baartman’s ghost has continued to haunt black female representation, however it didn’t always start off that way. Initially, my inclination was to use Baartman’s story as a framework to understand how her representation continues to function within contemporary society. However, I’ve had to sit back and unpack that inclination and really try to understand why her story is, and continues to be so

² Some sources argue that she was born almost a decade prior, but most sources state she was born in 1789.

³ Sara Saartjie Baartman (South African History Online 2020) np.

⁴ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark* (New York: Routledge 2018) 1.

⁵ Sara Saartjie Baartman (South African History Online 2020) np.

⁶ Sara Saartjie Baartman (South African History Online 2020) np.

critical to me, and to black feminist discourse in general. It seems that even today for many black feminist scholars, Sarah Baartman represents a default symbol to understand how black women have been, and continue to be, constructed as sexually deviant, often used as a metaphor to emphasize the persistent damaging effects of the racialized fictions surrounding black female sexuality that has been historically perpetuated by colonialism and white supremacy. Since the popularization of her story in the black feminist discourse of the 1990s, the framework around Baartman's body has been diligently re-applied to understand black women's perceived otherness within popular culture. It is also employed in critical reading of the intersections of black women and sexuality. However, can the constant invocation of her experience and story when analyzing contemporary examples of black female representation limit the possibilities for black women to articulate their own pleasures and desires outside of this singular narrative? Not only has Baartman's framework been applied to the representations of black women within popular culture, but the theorizing of Baartman's experience has also been applied to readings of pornography. Feminist discourse that theorizes porn as a way to mobilize black female agency is underrepresented in both gender and race studies, which is why I draw heavily from the work of Jennifer C. Nash and Mireille Miller-Young. In "Strange Bedfellows" Nash interrogates the inclination to use Baartman's experience as a primary metaphor for imagined racial and sexual difference and how that inclination bears potential problematic consequences not only for the reading of pornography, but reading of black female representation in popular culture generally. Nash writes that "the Hottentot Venus acts as an antipornography and black feminist practice, the primary analytic tool used for exposing the racism that continues to haunt the pornographic visual field."⁷ She continues by articulating the harm that is caused by centering the conversation of black female

⁷ Jennifer C. Nash, *Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography* (New York: Duke University Press 2008) 53.

sexuality solely around Baartman's story. According to Nash, the retelling of Baartman's story can and has been used to rally problematic discourses of antipornography, as well as conversations around respectability politics. In turn, the invocation of such rhetoric can distract us from examining black women's sexuality as one of agency and subjectivity. Nash also argues for the need to offer alternatives to the current dominant discourse by offering that black women can adopt a variety of positionalities within pornography, or even more importantly their right to indulge in sexual pleasure. Nash deploys two significant arguments against using Baartman in black feminist thought in an effort to understand modern representations of the black female body. Firstly, she writes that by, "[u]sing the Hottentot Venus to contextualize black sexuality has permitted a pernicious sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism, to seep into its analytic framework."⁸ Sexual conservatism, Nash explains, refers to tendencies in some black feminist circles to foreground black female sexuality as sexual exploitation and oppression at the expense of being attentive to black women's multiplicity and diversity. Secondly, black feminism's tendency to answer the question "is pornography racist?" affirmatively by drawing connections between Baartman's display and the contemporary display of black women in porn neglects to examine how pornography can mobilize (the question of) race to produce a new set of meanings for black female sexuality.⁹ Similarly to Nash, I seek to deny upholding Baartman as the only lens to contextualize contemporary representations of black sexuality. Despite pornography's specific relationship to the racialized exploitation of black women, which have traditionally been tied to the historical mistreatment of black women and the legacy of Sarah Baartman, I understand pornography as a space where black women can reclaim their sexual agency, and where we can begin to reimagine the possibilities of black womanhood. The legacy of racism has no doubt

⁸ Ibid 52.

⁹ Ibid 52.

continued to leave its mark on contemporary society, permitting the constant policing of black women's bodies and in turn, black female sexuality continues to be an area of contestation which disrupts black female agency. I seek to deploy a similar framework to Nash's "racial iconography"¹⁰ in order to reject the continued dictating of how black women are represented, and by that rejection attempt to foster a new set of meanings. Despite the contested nature of pornography, and the assumption that it has historically negatively harmed black women, I see it as a field full of potential to begin fostering new relationships between black women and sexuality. Rather than relying on the assumption that all porn harms women, I seek to understand the ways in which it has mobilized sexual representation and capitalize on its imagery to do so. I wish to stress the importance that as black women we have to begin to create a space where we can exist in contradiction and fluidity, allowing ourselves the grace to both acknowledge and reject the power of racism to imagine new possibilities of existence.

¹⁰ Ibid 53.

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a person's face, focusing on the eyes and forehead. The person's eyes are closed, and the skin has a warm, golden-brown tone. The texture of the skin is clearly visible. The overall mood is serene and intimate.

PART II:
Demystifying Pornography

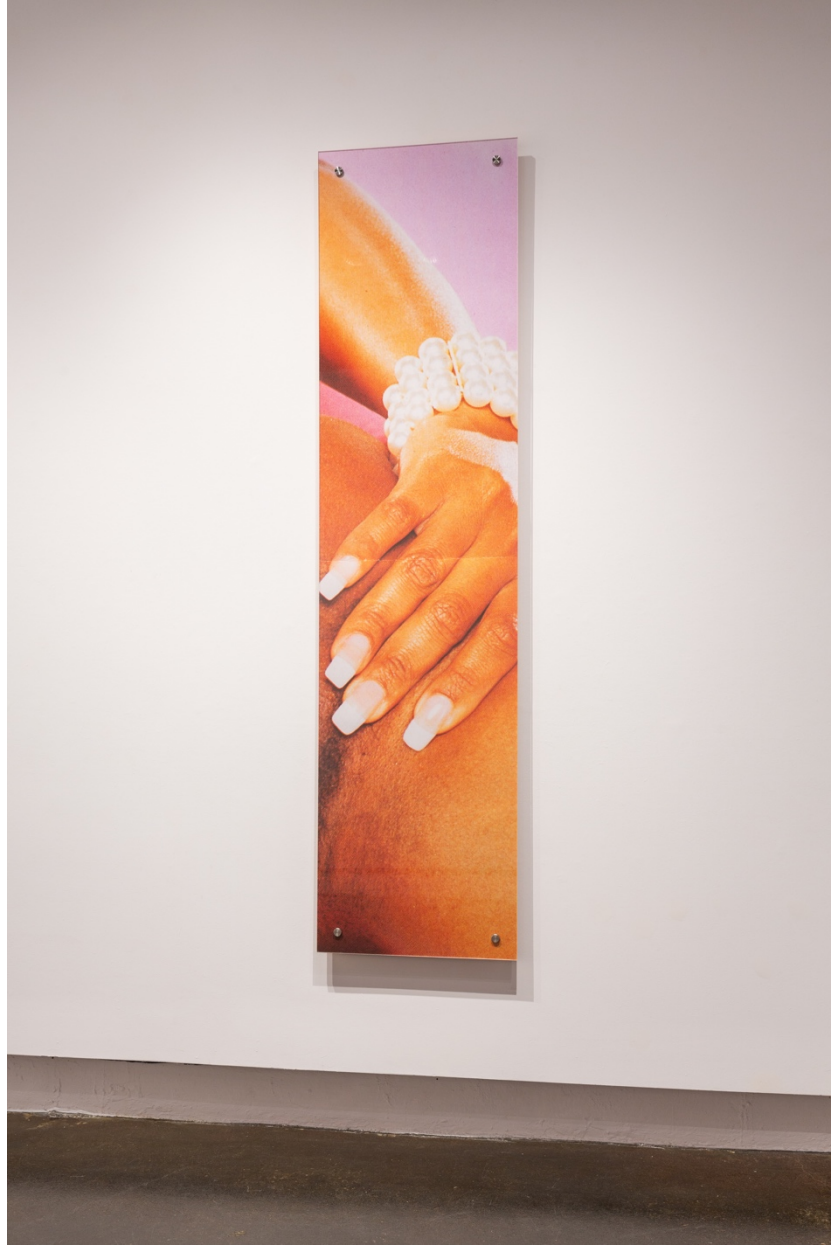


Figure #4. *Ebony 2* 2021

Often repeated criticism of my work is that my integration of pornographic imagery only continues to harm women and perpetuate racism given the context of how the images were presented in the first place. Such criticisms never assume that the women who partake in the creation of the images might actually be doing it from a place of agency. All of these assumptions come from the mystification surrounding porn and sex work itself. Upon researching the historical

trajectory of pornography I have discovered that it has served as a critical field for black women to reclaim agency in representation, and serve as a legitimate source of income at a time when black women had other employment options that didn't align with sex work.¹¹ In recognizing that history, black erotic magazines have become a crucial foundation for my artistic practice and all of my photo-based work to begin re-representing the black body and sexuality acknowledging that sex work has a legitimate place in assisting to mobilize agency and define subjectivity. For Nash, antipornographic feminism begins by analyzing pornography through a heteronormative gendered lens in which porn is assumed to only produce “man-on-woman” fantasies, and only for the voyeuristic consumption of the white male subject. From there, antipornography deduces that all women who participate in pornography alongside men are harmed and exploited because they are women, further asserting that within these gendered representations, “pornography contains a racial hierarchy in which women are rated as prized objects or despised objects according to their colour.”¹² Not only does this assumption not account for queer representation in pornography, but it reads the presence of race in pornography as an intensifier of women's oppression concluding that, “the presence of black bodies in the pornographic visual field makes pornography more sexist.”¹³ Nash argues that assuming that the presence of black bodies automatically subjects these bodies to perform in a way that is racist, fails to acknowledge how pornography can mobilize particular racial and ethnic difference. Consequently, she argues against the idea that, “all racially or ethnically marked women are exploited “as women” and are the most exploited of women.”¹⁴ Antipornography solidifies this argument by comparing the difference in the representation of

¹¹ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (New York: Duke University Press 2014) 48.

¹² Ibid 54.

¹³ Ibid 54.

¹⁴ Ibid 54.

white women versus black women, where white women are seen as ‘soft’ and black women are seen as ‘ugly, sadistic and animalistic’.¹⁵ Nash goes on to state that, “[t]his comparison ultimately yields the insights that pornography is doubly dangerous as it is racist and sexist, and that black women are exploited worse than white women in pornography, with little examination of the processes or mechanism through which black women are represented differently.”¹⁶ Nash asks us to question whether or not the only way black women exist in porn is through a racist framework, and why little to no time is spent on examining the ways in which black women in porn exist outside of what antipornographic rhetoric assumes. In her book, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, Mireille Miller-Young also acknowledges these contradictions, while still carving space for black women to find agency within them:

What I am suggesting here is that, although the pornographic gaze—the visual culture around black women’s sexuality that gives rise to the formal industry of pornography in the late-twentieth century—has, at its roots, a racial and sexual fetishism obsessed with the fascinations and horrors of black women’s difference, this relationship of power can be, and has been, refused, deflected, and appropriated by black women themselves. The idea that black women could insert subjectivity, agency, or even resistance into oppressive and alienating representations like pornography may seem unthinkable. This unthinkable is especially the case for the period under discussion in this chapter, spanning slavery to Jim Crow, when African Americans embraced conservative moral values to counter discourses of black sexual deviance. Because historians have often allied the narrative of black resistance with conservative sexual morality to counter sexual appropriation and abuse, my choice to center the pornographic may seem to risk reasserting the dominant perception of black sexual pathology and inferiority. Yet, to see black women only as spectacles fixes them in a passive role that denies them any chance of articulating their own desires, pleasures, and needs.¹⁷

Miller-Young’s emphasis on tensions in representation echoes Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he describes the black experience as a contradictory one, it is to exist as someone misrepresented and invisible, while simultaneously feeling like feeling as one is taking

¹⁵ Ibid 55.

¹⁶ Ibid 55.

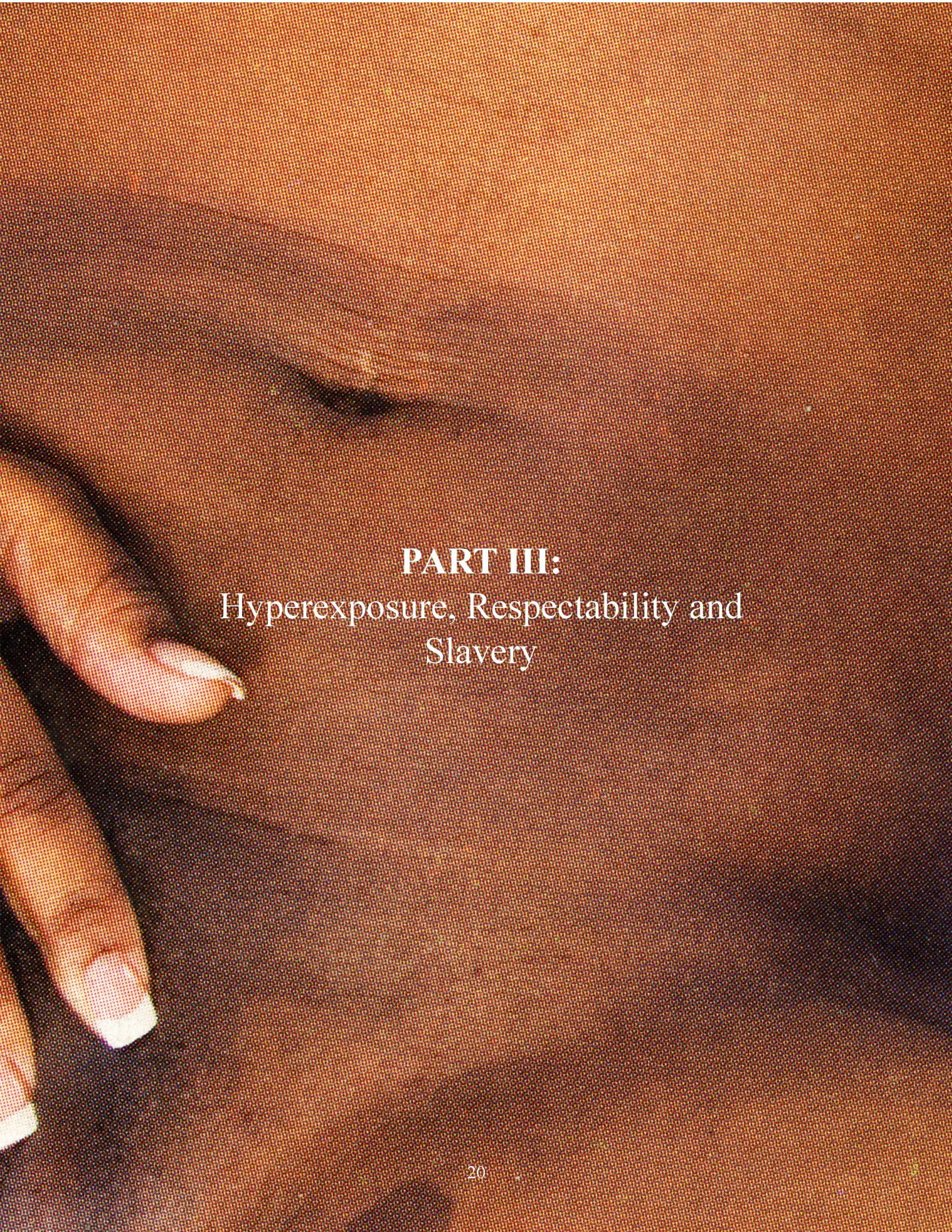
¹⁷ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Duke University Press) 28.

up so much space. My thesis seeks to reclaim the experience Fanon writes about as I confront the viewers, challenging them to approach the work with an understanding that black bodies are constantly expected to carry historical racial trauma, while feeling constantly underrepresented or misrepresented. I want this work to serve as a starting point for blackness, and specifically the black female body, to have new possibilities of understanding and existing. Fanon writes, “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’”¹⁸ Miller-Young acknowledges the responsibility the black body carries of which Fanon also speaks to, however, she seeks not to relegate all black women to a passive role in which they are asked to accept that history will continue to define them. I want the images I create not to carry the responsibility of being representations for all black women, or carry what blackness has historically meant. Instead, I seek to use ambiguity as a visual tool to begin to interrogate why we assume racialized bodies are forced to perform in a hypersexual way outside of the generalizing and essentializing discourse. Fanon goes on to write “[I] am a slave not to the “idea” others have of me, but to my appearance. I arrive slowly in the world; sudden emergencies are no longer my habit. I crawl along, The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*.”¹⁹ I, however, want to use these images as a way to give black women a chance, a chance to use blackness as a means of defining our identity that is fluid and not fixed. It seems almost a little over the top to generalize that all black pornography or black sex work has been built off of Sarah Baartman’s legacy, and furthermore, that the pornography industry is aware of this and actively profiting off of this legacy. While I don’t deny the perpetuation of racialized

¹⁸ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press 2008) 85.

¹⁹ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press 2008) 95.

mythologies that are associated with black female sexuality, this sweeping generalization automatically renders black women subjects to be seen as only hypersexualized and fetishized beings as it doesn't allow for pornography and the black women that participate in it to be examined with nuance.



PART III:
Hyperexposure, Respectability and
Slavery

There is no doubt that black enslaved women were exploited for their reproductive capabilities, it must be made clear that black enslaved women's reproductive abilities were crucial to the maintenance of the exploitation of forced labour. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson writes in her essay "*Black women's Bodies, Ideology, and the Public Curriculum of the Pro- and Anti-Choice Movements in the US*" that, "during enslavement, the wombs of black women were seen as bearers for the plantation – the value machine creating generation after generation of bonded labour – and thus subject to control by the state."²⁰ Because the sexual capabilities of black enslaved women were at the forefront of their exploitation, their bodies determined their value. Furthermore, "their sale as slaves on the auction block was an explicitly sexual, even pornographic process of exhibition, performance, and psychosocial trauma."²¹ However, this is another area of contestation Nash argues against. According to her, there is an assumption in the antipornographic movement that all black women's bodies within pornography are inherently 'overexposed' and 'hypersexualized' due to black women's overexposed representation so closely resembling their enslavement, and its continued particular racialized archetypes (constructing black women as being inherently deviant and overly sexual). Nash writes, "[b]oth black and antipornography feminism take black women's visual 'overexposure' as an analytic point of departure. Rooting 'overexposure' in slavery, scholars argue that white slave owners unmitigated sexual access to black women's bodies rendered exploitation, violation and literal bodily exposure central to black women's experience of their sexuality."²² The nature of unmitigated overexposure of black enslaved women, antipornography equates black women's literal 'overexposure' and nakedness in pornography. However, by conflating these two separate representations of black women without

²⁰ Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, *Black women's Bodies, Ideology, and the Public Curriculum of the Pro- and Anti-Choice Movements in the US* (New York: Routledge 2018) 310-311

²¹ Mireille Miller-Young *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Duke University Press) 31.

²² Ibid 58.

acknowledging the contexts of how the black female body was displayed further solidifies the argument that black women in porn are hypersexualized. To counteract this problematic argument, black women have been forced to adopt methods of representation that fall into the mechanisms of respectability politics. She goes on to write that, “[b]oth camps extend this “overexposure” framework into our contemporary moment, arguing that black women’s bodies continue to function as cultural spectacles called upon to provide evidence of black subjects’ deviance.²³ This is what leads the politics of respectability to sneak back into the conversation of black female representation, however, this time disguised as being sexually progressive, resulting in “black women strategically avoid describing their own sexuality as a way of guarding against ‘overexposure.’²⁴ On the other hand, like many other fields, the pornographic industry was one where black women weren’t even able to participate legally. Therefore, for a period of time they were not able to earn a living through sex work because they simply weren’t allowed to be seen. This has led to evident wage inequalities within the contemporary pornography industry. For example, black women get paid between \$400-\$900 for a boy-on-girl scene, whereas white actresses get paid between \$1000-\$2000.²⁵ Despite the interest in having black women represented in the industry, they aren’t being paid accordingly. This has often led to a culture of black women needing to assimilate into white standards of beauty to even be considered for casting, creating systemic barriers that prevent black women from mobilizing their difference within sex work. Miller-Young speaks to these systemic barriers within the industry in her essay *Putting Hypersexuality to Work*. She points to the pressures of conformity evident within the pornographic industry by stating that, “[i]f they don’t conform they risk being ghettoized and forced to perform

²³ Ibid 58.

²⁴ Ibid 58.

²⁵ Mireille Miller-Young *Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography* (Sage Publishing 2010) 227.

in lower end sectors of the pornography industry like participating in ‘ghetto porn’,”²⁶ where sneaky allusions to racist archetypes of black women appear.

To counteract these modes of representation that have been systematically forced onto some black women in the industry, respectability is often seen as a starting point in order to foster ‘positive images’ of not only black women, but black people in general. Nash encourages us not to cultivate only “positive images” under the guise of respectability due to the homogenizing effect that such images can have. What is assumed when we insinuate the need for ‘positive’ black representation, and why can’t sex work be included into the framework of positive black representation? Diversity in its most genuine form needs to be at the forefront in cultivating an array of images of black women in visual and popular culture. The push for respectability has historically created a standard to which black women had to adhere to, however what happens when they don’t adhere to this standard? In her book *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, Victoria W. Wolcott argues that the particular forms of respectability politics in African American female experience were linked to both race and class, attempting to provide a rebuttal of white stereotypes of African American female experience.²⁷ She goes on to quote Evelyn Books Higginbotham who defined respectability politics as a way for middle-class and elite black women to seek to, “earn their people a measure of esteem from white America” by striving to “win the black lower class” psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals. This bourgeois respectability received a degree of support from black working class that gave rise to numerous institutions of racial

²⁶ Mireille Miller-Young *Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography* (Sage Publishing 2010) 228.

²⁷ Victoria W. Wolcott *Remaking Respectability: African, American Women in Interwar Detroit* (The University of North Carolina Press: 2001) 6.

reform.”²⁸ Ultimately, this political move led to class tensions and repressive sexual morals within black communities in US. These tensions produced demonization and stigmatization of different sexual ways of being of black women, ways of being that should have been rightfully available to all black women. The assumption that we have to abide by respectability or an effort to counteract hyper sexualization of black women in porn falls on its head because respectability has never granted black women safety or transgressed us beyond the notions of race and blackness. There are numerous examples of ‘respectable’ black women who are still continuously the victims of misogynoir because of the deep interconnectedness of race and misogyny, despite their morals aligning with traditions enforced by white America.

Simultaneously, while black women have historically been objectified for being seen solely as sights of particular social reproduction, black women were also forced to labour alongside black men, assuming more masculine roles. Women’s productive labour is another side of the conversation that gets left out of antipornographic discourse when analyzing the construction of the black female body during the transatlantic slave trade. Black women’s bodies haven’t solely been constructed as hypersexual for social reproduction of life under capitalism, they were also desexualized to propel labour and productivity. In the essay, *Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience* bell hooks underlines how crucial it is to highlight how black male slaves assumed different roles to their female counterparts. Her emphasis on this difference is not to lessen the suffering of the male slaves but to nuance each male and female experiences. She writes “[t]he black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white

²⁸ Evelyn Books Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, (Harvard University Press, 1994) Quoted in, Victoria W. Wolcott *Remaking Respectability: African, American Women in Interwar Detroit* (The University of North Carolina Press: 2001) 6.

male sexual assault.”²⁹ Historically black women have been systematically forced to abide by the archetypes rooted in hypersexuality and/or asexuality. Neither one of these archetypes has ever granted black women safety. Time and time again it has been shown that despite the prominence of black figures in popular culture who fit into the mold of ‘positivity’ or even hypersexuality, their levels of prominence have never shielded them from anti-blackness— this is especially the case for black women which is why representation on both ends is crucial. Nash writes that “[t]he striking lack of sexual representations of black bodies, and of representations of the ‘black body beautiful’ more generally from visual culture, suggests the need for conceptualizing both visibility and *invisibility* in more historically contingent and specific terms.”³⁰ It needs to be recognized that both modes of representing the black body, respectable and hypersexual, function in specific ways, with each having its place in countering the historical representation of the black female body. This is why we need to allow space for both representations to be adopted by black women without scrutiny. The constant policing of our bodies and sexuality whether it’s historical or current, isn’t the main problem, it’s the persistent anti-blackness that has worked its way into defining what our sexuality should mean to us.

The persistent anti-blackness is also manifested in the ways I would define my hair in relation to desirability. In *Straightening Our Hair*, bell hook speaks to this by emphasizing the ways in which white supremacy created such an obsession with our hair. She writes “[w]e talk about the extent to which black women perceive our hair as the enemy, as a problem we must solve, a territory we must conquer. Above all it is a part of our black female body that must be controlled.”³¹ hooks goes on to also address how viewing our hair separate from our bodies causes

²⁹ bell hooks, *The Black Female Slave Experience* (New York: Routledge 2015) 22.

³⁰ Ibid 60.

³¹ bell hooks, *Straightening Our Hair* (New York: South End Press 1989) 2.

us to police it which is closely linked to our need to control our sexuality—more specifically our desire to suppress it. However, the piece *Ib and 52*” somewhat complicates the line of thinking hooks is suggesting. Viewing my hair separate from my body is exactly what has caused me to reckon with it and give it new meaning. Being able to analyze what black hair symbolically represents especially in the context of a gallery and institutional space that have historically been purveyors in pushing respectability, is what informs how I seek to rethink and reclaim the presentation of black hair. Rather than insisting that the link between the institution and respectability has to inform how the hair should be perceived, for me *Ib* is a celebration and a commemoration of a part of my body that is so closely related to my blackness. In *The People’s Mandate*, Angela Davis calls attention to the tradition of people’s art and how it emerged from the struggles of Afro-Americans, women and peace activists. She writes that “it’s essential to explore this tradition and to understand it so it can assist us in preparing political and cultural counteroffensive against the regressive institutions and ideas spawned by advanced monopoly capitalism.”³² These regressive institutions have denied access to black folks and other minority groups of people. *Ib and 52*” along with *(Untitled) Adhesive Vinyl Work* seeks to counter what the institution has historically stood for by reclaiming its space in an unapologetic and visible manner.

Similarly criticizing results of homogenizing effects of continuously mobilizing particular representations of blackness, *Against Race* by Paul Gilroy argues that while multiculturalism has been a tool that on the surface seems to embrace blackness, the presence of black bodies is usually exceptional in some way—their presence does nothing to interrogate the status quo. All multiculturalism does is muddy the waters of representation—black people are able to reach a level of stardom where their success is seen as the exception to the rule. Blackness still remains at its

³² Angela Davis, *The People’s Mandate* (New York: Vintage Books 1990) 310.

core something to overcome rather than something that is embraced wholly. Gilroy also stresses the consequence of solely highlighting and representing 'positive images' of black people which usually suggest black people who possess exceptional beauty, athleticism, and talent are often aligned with the standards set by the white gaze:

It is best to be absolutely clear that the ubiquity and prominence currently accorded to exceptionally beautiful and glamorous but nonetheless racialized bodies do nothing to change the everyday forms of racial hierarchy. The historic associations of blackness with inhumanity, brutality, crime, idleness, excessive threatening fertility, and so on remain undisturbed. But the appearance of a rich visual culture that allows blackness to be beautiful also feeds a fundamental lack of confidence in the power of the body to hold the boundaries of racial difference in place. It creates anxiety about the older racial hierarchies that made that revolutionary idea of black beauty oxymoronic, just as it requires us to forget the political movement that made its acknowledgment imperative. It is as though these images of nonwhite beauty, grace, and style somehow make the matter of "race" secondary, particularly when they are lit, filtered, textured, and toned in ways that challenge the increasingly baffled observer's sense of where racial boundaries might fall. In this anxious setting, new hatreds are created not by the ruthless enforcement of stable racial categories but from a disturbing inability to maintain them.³³

What's important here and what Gilroy calls for in his work, is the potential anxiety created amongst black folk who don't have the ability to align with these standards of exceptionality. The question we need to ask is rather than blackness being something we need to overcome, how can we find ways to exist within blackness with agency, and according to Nash potentially mobilize that difference.

³³ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Colour Line* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press 2000) 22.

PART IV:
**Thinking the Unthinkable, Oppositional
Gaze and Mobilizing Difference**

Rather, black feminist theory is supposed to name, shame, resist, destabilize and dismantle the various systems of oppression that impede black women’s agency and full participation in society. I would argue that a starting point for black feminist theory is the acknowledgement and embracing of black women as *different from* all others. Before moving too quickly into a discussion and more importantly challenge of *different from*, I think that it is important to carefully explain the variance between black women as *different* - a designation that has been used to marginalize and suppress black women and their agency- and black women as *different from*-used in historical articulations of black feminism as an instrument of liberation.³⁴

In adopting black feminism, the goal is assumed to be to strive for liberation and equality or wanting to be seen the same or ‘levelly human’ to everyone else. However, “thinking only in terms of being treated equally of the same as one’s oppressors does not allow a radical politics to emerge.”³⁵ I do not wish to aspire to whiteness, moreover, what does it really mean to be equal to white men, white women and black men? Taking a more radical approach within black feminist discourse, Guadalupe Davidson asks these questions in order to disrupt assumptions of equality. What would it look like if as black women we actually mobilized our differences and fully articulated them? My photo-based works sit within this line of thinking, embracing black womanhood as being different from others, which has been a tool used in the marketing of pornography, but still carefully explaining that black women are also different from our historical articulations. Similarly, Nash proposes to “thinking the unthinkable” in black feminist discourse by way of what she calls racial iconography. For Nash “[r]acial iconography provides a productive rupture in the dominant black feminist analytical framework that links the contemporary objectification and degradation of black women in the pornographic visual field to Baartman’s exhibition. In place of a normative reading of racialized pornography, racial iconography asks new

³⁴ Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, *Troubling the Water* (New York: Routledge 2017) 112-113.

³⁵ Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, *Troubling the Water* (New York: Routledge 2017) 115.

questions about black spectatorship and black visual pleasures, attending to the historical and technological specificity of both. In so doing, racial iconography allows black feminists to break with a lengthy tradition of sexual conservatism.”³⁶ bell hooks also emphasizes the need for black women to create oppositional space where they can be named and represented to function as representation to counteract persistent images of whiteness. Within the ability to name and represent ourselves why can’t we begin centering the idea of difference in that representation? bell hooks coins the term oppositional gaze that can serve as “space[s] of agency... wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back. The “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally”³⁷ (hooks, 116). However, what does it mean to embody oppositional gaze while also embodying the other? Miller-Young speaks to the importance of the gaze and the ability for black women to be able to look back in porn. The idea of the black body being able to look back while partaking in sexual activity can be a new dynamic for the black body to exist within oppositional space. Miller-Young also echoes this sentiment by stressing the role that black erotic magazines played in offering a space for black sexuality to be named and represented. She writes “[b]efore its decline in quality in the early 1980s, *Players* was a sort of black *Playboy* in that it presented the seductive image of an affluent consumer lifestyle for men. Unlike *Playboy*, *Players* marketed sex and commodities within a black cultural orientation.”³⁸ She then continues:

The magazine’s monthly feature spreads of models—usually in three to-four-page spreads, including one centerfold—presented a range of black women’s looks and styles. The models’ backgrounds were multinational and multiethnic, as evidenced by the premiere issue’s cover girl, Ethiopian-born model Zeudi Araya. Cuban-born Judit was highlighted alongside African American models including Kimberly, Spice, and Tatum.

³⁶ Ibid 69.

³⁷ bell hooks, *The Oppositional Gaze* (Boston: South End Press 1992) 116.

³⁸ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (New York: Duke University Press) 82.

These women— whether their monikers were real or constructed by the magazine editors— represented a range of skin tones, from deep cocoa brown to light cream, and hair types from straight processes, to wigs, to short natural Afros, to braids. Their bodies differed as well: some women were more voluptuous with large breasts, while others were very petite with smaller busts. None of the models would be considered “fat,” with, for example, large bellies and thighs, and they were decidedly young—their youth was accentuated with coy poses, lace, ribbons, and playful lingerie. The models’ figures were all within gender norms for desirably sized embodied femininity, though some were curvier, reflecting the embrace of alternative aesthetics for women’s bodies in black and Latino communities. The range of beauty found among these women of color models rejected the dominant racialized ideals exhibited in white pornographic magazines. By both spotlighting diverse beauty images and policing the boundaries of what constituted desirable feminine bodies for readers, Players simultaneously expanded and delimited the roles of black women in softcore sexual media.³⁹

Despite acknowledging some of the systemic barriers that have forced black women to abide by white beauty standards as a means to thrive in the industry, it is important to also note the role black erotica has played in allowing space for black sexuality to be represented and establishing itself as different within the pornographic visual field. These tensions within representation of the black body have continuously been the linchpin for my overall practice, and they serve as the foundation for all of my image-based work. Despite some representations being limiting, adopting cis and heteronormative representations as Miller-Young points out, the presence of blackness alone intertwined with sights of sexual desire and pleasure performed as imagery counter the standards of whiteness. She also stresses the wide range of skin tones represented in these magazines—the acknowledgement of darker skinned black women having space within erotic images also speak to how colourism, under white supremacy, continues to function today. All the images in this exhibition work together in an effort to carve out oppositional space for black sexuality in its varying forms to embody that difference and to be represented.

³⁹ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (New York: Duke University Press) 83.

Another important element to the history of *Players* magazine is the history of the publishing house that produced it. Founded in 1959 by two Hollywood publicists, Ralph Weinstock and Bentley Morriss, Holloway House Publishing Company gained an unexpected success. In the late 1960s it became a pinnacle of black literary publications of adult and erotic paperbacks.⁴⁰ The two white publishers recognized the crisis of the lack of representation spurred by the civil rights movement of the time, and sought to develop an industry catering to large-scale black readership.⁴¹ Despite the origins of the publishing house in white ownership and the fact that the two prioritized profit margins over genuine black representation, Holloway House did foster space for black voices. In fact, Wanda Coleman, a radical black female L.A. poet became the first editor of *Players* back in 1972.⁴² *Players* was initially created as, “the first black-themed *Playboy*-style magazine,” and was used to promote their other Holloway House titles by featuring black nudes.⁴³ Despite it being short, Coleman’s time at *Players* provided an important direction to the magazine making it, “an avant-garde publication, featuring cartoonists, photographers, painters, musicians, and writers from all over the globe. The first issue hit the newsstands in November of 1973 and featured everything from an article by Huey Newton on hustling to an interview with Shaft star Richard Roundtree and a nude pictorial of Miss Ethiopia of 1969, Zeudi Araya.”⁴⁴ Coleman left in 1974 due to the strict rules and guidelines set by the owners of the publishing house which began to downgrade the quality of the magazine. However, during the magazine’s transformation, another black writer by the name of Emory “Butch” Holmes II joined *Players* as

⁴⁰ Justin D. Gifford “*Harvard in hell*”: *Holloway House Publishing Company, Players Magazine, and the invention of black mass-market erotica: interviews with Wanda Coleman and Emory 'Butch' Holmes II* (Oxford University Press: 2010) 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

the first assistant editor.⁴⁵ After less than a year, he quit, again due to the restrictive measures set by the owners, only to return later with a plan to use *Player* as a vehicle to reach American prisoners and soldiers—readers usually ignored by mainstream publications. Taking a cue from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Holmes adopted a posture of compliance, all the while transforming the magazine from the inside into a forum to explore issues of black history, art, and politics.”⁴⁶ Despite the tensions between the black editors and the owners of the publishing company, *Players* at its roots strived to be a black erotic publication that successfully intertwined representations of black sexuality with popular culture, art, and politics representing the nuanced complexities of black existence from black voices. In the effort to uphold black erotica as an archive with specificity to *Players*, it is important to note that it was far more than a publication featuring nude images of the black female body, it was also a magazine that emphasized black creativity which spoke to and connected with a wide black readership.

Another complexity when analyzing the representational mechanisms of *Players* magazines brings forth is the interplay between black experience and capitalism. As pointed out throughout this paper, black women’s representation was enmeshed with various forms of racist, class and gender politics all of which intersect in the black body. In “*What is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?*” Robin D. G. Kelley poignantly asserts that, “race and gender aren’t incidental or accidental features of the global capitalist order but rather they are constitutive to the rise of capitalism.”⁴⁷ Despite *Players* being founded to fill a void in black representation, ultimately, representations of the black body become profitable, rather than being a genuine focus on platforming black voices—a fallout that leads to compromised authenticity due to profit-based priority, again reinforcing the constitutive nature of race and capitalism. It is precisely in these tensions between multiple interactions of forces that bare down upon

⁴⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley *What is Racial Capitalism and Why Does it Matter?* (University of Washington Nov 7, 2017).

the black female body that my work operates. Through finding a space of agency in-between, against and inside such forces, my work reveals all such tensions and demands that the black womanhood is recognized in its political potential.



PART V:
**Real Hot Girl Shit: Kara Walker and Carrie
Mae Weems (Case Studies)**

Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* (also titled *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*) was a site-specific work presented at a former sugar compound in Brooklyn New York in May of 2014.⁴⁸ Standing at 75 feet tall, the sculpture depicts a sugar-coated part mammy archetype part sphinx, adorned with undeniable, almost caricature-like, black features. The breasts, buttocks, and vagina of the woman depicted in the sculpture can't go ignored given the overwhelming scale of the work and the presentation of the nude. However, what seems to continuously draw people into this monumental piece, along with the grand presentation of the work itself, are the reactions of the viewers interacting with it, and the discourse on the historical significance and presence of the black female body.



Figure #5 Kara Walker. *A Subtlety* or *The Marvelous Sugar Baby* 2014

If you google “A Subtlety selfie” a slew of images will pop up of viewers taking photos of the work jokingly holding up the sculptures breasts and buttocks or pretending to touch or lick its

⁴⁸ Roberta Smith, *Sugar? Sure, But Salted With Meaning* (The New York Times 2014) np.

vagina, the response of the work overwhelmingly seemed to be sexually explicit in nature, the response to *A Subtlety* becomes crucial to acknowledging the work itself in discussing how it still operates as a subversion of the black female body. In September of 2020 after returning to my studio after evacuating it for 5 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered that some of my magazine clippings had been written on. The notes read: “Black women are gorgeous” and “I’d eat that for days”, which was conveniently written right next to a woman’s vagina. Not only was I really taken aback by what was written, but furthermore, I was doubly offended that someone who had access to the building was callous enough to enter our studios, go through my belongings, and write on something that didn’t belong to them. In a similar way to the posters of the Walker selfies, felt completely comfortable being captured in an act of overt racism and sexism, the combination of white supremacy, a sense of entitlement and a sharpie created an act of bodily violence towards the women in the images, and to me, as I struggled to feel comfortable working in the space again. This raises the question as to why people feel so overwhelmingly comfortable sexualizing and commenting on the black body.



Figure #6. Note found on magazine cutouts in my studio 2020

The Kitchen Table Series is regarded as one of Carrie Mae Weems' most prolific works. In the series, Weems' places herself in a domestic space, the kitchen, where she documents herself in many different instances of her daily life. It shows Weems as having varying expressions, emotions and relationships with other people, placing her in a position of a friend, a lover and a mother—ways in which black women, historically, haven't been shown. By relying on performance-for-camera, autobiography, and text, Weems successfully confronts how black identity has been perceived throughout history which underlines how it is constructed today. For Weems photography is a tool to understand and grapple with issues of identity, race and gender.

Her work adopts a performative aspect as she often uses her own body and text to navigate through these complex issues. The black female body is the starting point of the work as the artist she poses and provokes varying questions in each series.⁴⁹



Figure #7 Carrie Mae Weems. *The Kitchen Table Series: Untitled (Woman Brushing Hair)* 1990

⁴⁹ A.M Weaver, *Carrie Mae Weems: History and Dreams* (New York: Aperture 2009) 24.



Figure #8 Carrie Mae Weems. *The Kitchen Table Series: Text Sheet* 1990

Not only is the visual nature of the work crucial to the understanding of it, the text that accompanies this series is just as important. Weems uses the text to narrate the subjects in her photos as she concurrently points to emotions between the people in the photos, revealing them to be complex and diverse individuals. What Weems does is take representation into her own hands, countering the stereotypes often placed on black women. In her essay, *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life* bell hooks theorizes about the power of representation and suggests that the act of reclaiming photography can be a powerful humanizing tool for black resistance. She writes, “[c]ameras gave black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in

the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical discussion of the relationship of black like to the visual, to art making, make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic. Before racial integration there was a constant struggle on the part of black folks to create a counterhegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images. All colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination recognize that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle.”⁵⁰ In her work, Weems’ mobilizes her difference as a black woman to disrupt the confinements blackness has been subjected to as a result of the historical legacy of racism and white supremacy. Angela Davis also stresses the importance of photography in helping black folks redefine themselves through visual language. Quoting prominent photography critic Gisele Freund, Davis writes that, “the medium's importance is not only related to its capacity to develop as an art form but also... ‘its ability to shape our ideas, to influence our behaviour and to define our society.”⁵¹ If racism is to be conquered, photography facilitated by black photographers has to play a crucial role. “Afro-American photographers must play a special role in the process of redefining the ideologically tainted imagery of their people. This process involves not only their own technical expertise, not only their aesthetic and social sensitivity, but also, in a very fundamental sense, the end of their socially imposed invisibility.”⁵² Not only has photography served as a field of reclaiming more complex and humanizing depictions of blackness which is exactly what Weems’ work accomplishes, it has also served as a medium that provides comfort in the hope that it can influence the behaviour of others. Presenting a range

⁵⁰ bell hooks, *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life* (New York: The New York Press 1994) 57.

⁵¹ Angela Davis, *The People’s Mandate* (New York: Vintage Books 1990) 358.

⁵² Angela Davis, *The People’s Mandate* (New York: Vintage Books 1990) 358.

of different and specific narratives of their own experience allows black women not to be seen as a monolith, pushing the viewers to question assumptions that have inherently been associated with black female identity.

Conclusion

Paying close attention to the ways in which pornography can serve as a field for black women's agency, it has become essential to my work and art practice. Rather than allowing the history of our (black women's) construction to dictate what our bodies should mean to us, it has pushed me to think more radically about black women's futures and continue to push "thinking the unthinkable".⁵³ As I stated at the beginning of this paper, I had to unpack why I was initially so insistent on applying Baartman's framework to my work and analysis of contemporary forms of representation. It just seemed like a traditional black feminist practice. However, when I was introduced to the framework of racial iconography through Jennifer C. Nash's work, and understanding the close relationship black women have historically had to pornography through Mireille Miller-Young, their writings have produced a whole new realm of possibilities of understanding of black identity for me. Rather than simply adopting a normative black feminist practice in my thinking, it has been much more challenging to push myself to think in more complex ways. Allowing myself to think of sexuality and race in polyvalent ways and embracing contradiction, has fostered a space where I can acknowledge the history of black women's representation while also beginning to imagine and hope for new possibilities of existence. In his essay "Racial Consciousness and Social Revolution" Aimé Césaire speaks to the importance of embodying blackness to enact real social revolution. He writes, "[s]o, before launching the Revolution and in order to launch the revolution —the real one —the destructive tidal wave and not the trembling of surfaces, one condition is essential: to break the mechanical identification of the races, to tear up superficial values, to seize in us the immediate Negro [le nègre immédiat], to plant our negritude like a beautiful tree until it bears its most authentic fruits."⁵⁴ What would it look like to simply stand strongly and proudly in our difference? *Ib, black legs and 52*" is an effort

⁵³ Ibid 64.

⁵⁴ Aimé Césaire, *Racial Consciousness and Social Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2020) 89.

to embody that difference as a means of reclaiming subjectivity. As Maria del Guadalupe Davidson argues, it is important to formulate a language that can articulate our difference while simultaneously state what we are different from. As a black woman and black artist, I have no doubt had my moments of weakness, whether it's being a racialized person in the institution or having to navigate life with constant reminders of looming white supremacy, however, I simply refuse to give racism the power in dictating the way I should act or get in the way of articulating my own sexual desires.

**“As a black woman
I used to feel like the world wanted me to stay in my little box
And black women often feel underestimated
I wanted us to feel proud of not only the show but the process
Proud of the struggle
Thankful for the beauty that comes with a painful history and rejoice in the pain
Rejoice in the imperfections and the wrongs that are so damn right
And I wanted everyone to be grateful for their curves , their sass, their honesty
Thankful for their freedom”⁵⁵**

Beyoncé, *Homecoming*

⁵⁵ *Homecoming*, Live performance by Beyoncé, Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, California, April 14, 2018.



Figure #9. *1b, black legs, 52''* Exhibition Installation Shot 1



Figure #10. *1b, black legs, 52''* Exhibition Installation Shot 2



Figure #11 *1b*, *black legs*, 52" Exhibition Installation Shot 3



Figure #12. *(Untitled) Adhesive Vinyl Work 2021*

Bibliography

- Césaire, Aimé. “Racial Consciousness and Social Revolution” *Global Modernists on Modernism: An Anthology*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 2020. Print.
- Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe. “Black women’s Bodies, Ideology, and the Public Curriculum of the Pro- and Anti-Choice Movements in the US.” *Gender and Education*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2018. pp. 310-321. Web.
- Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe. “Troubling the Water” *Black Women Agency and the New Black Feminism*, New York: Routledge, 2017. Print.
- Davis, Y. Angela. “The People’s Mandate” *Women, Culture & Politics*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. “*Black Skin, White Masks.*” New York: Grove Press, 2008. Print.
- Gifford, Justin D. “Harvard in hell”: Holloway House Publishing Company, *Players Magazine*, and the invention of black mass-market erotica: interviews with Wanda Coleman and Emory 'Butch' Holmes II.” *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2010, pp. 111-137. Gale Academic OneFile. Web.
- Gilroy, Paul. “Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line” Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2001. Print.
- Hobson, Janell. “Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture” New York: Routledge, 2018. Print.

hooks, bell. “Black Female Slave Experience” *Ain’t I a Woman*, New York: Routledge, 2015.
Print.

hooks, bell. “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*,
New York: New Press, 1994, pp. 54-64. Web.

hooks, bell. “Oppositional Gaze” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End
Press, 1992. Print.

hooks, bell. “Straightening Our Hair” *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, New
York: South End Press, 1989. Web.

Kelley, D.G Robin “What is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?” UW Simpson Centre
for Humanities, 7 Nov. 2017, University of Washington, Seattle. Lecture

Miller-Young, Mireille. “A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography” New York:
Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

Miller-Young, Mireille. “Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in
Pornography.” *Sexualities*, vol 13, no. 2, 2010. pp 219–35. JSTOR. Web.

Morgan, Joan. “When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it
Down” New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 2000. Print.

Nash, C. Jennifer. “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism”
Social Text, vol 26, no. 4, 2008. pp 51-76. Duke University Press. Web.

“Sara “Saartjie” Baartman” *South African History Online*. 2013, np. Web.

Smith, Roberta. "Sugar? Sure but Salted with Meaning" *The New York Times*, 2014. np. Web.

Weaver, A.M. "Carrie Mae Weems: History and Dreams" *Aperture*, no. 197, 2009, pp. 24–29.
JSTOR. Web.

Wolcott, Victoria W. *Remaking Respectability: African, American Women in Interwar Detroit*.
The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.