Racism in Pornography and the Women's Movement

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Third World women find themselves in a doubly oppressed position in today's society. They are subject to the racist prejudices of a predominantly white society in power and, in addition, they are oppressed as women.

In this paper, first presented at the Feminist Perspectives on Pornography conference in 1978, Tracey A. Gardner traces the historical and intertwining development of sexism and racism for the Black woman in America, providing a backdrop for understanding the unique way Black and other Third World women are exploited in pornography.

There is a group of women, all-white, marching outside a pornography shop, passing out leaflets, and talking about how men are exploiting and abusing women.

A Black woman, holding a little Black boy by the hand, averts her eyes, embarrassed and angry, when a white demonstrator tries to give her a leaflet and a speech.

The white woman turns back to her group and mumbles, "But doesn't she realize how we're being hurt? If she'd only look at what they're doing to Black women too."

When I began writing this lecture, I said to myself, racism in pornography? So what? Because from my point of view, racism is everywhere, including the Women's Movement, and the only time I really need to say something special about it is when I don't see it—and the first time that happens, I'll tell you about it.

When I talk about pornography and racism, I want you to understand who I am, my feelings and experiences, and what it means for me to be talking to you. I want you to understand that when a person of color is used in pornography, it's not the physical appearance of that person which makes it racist. Rather, it's how pornography cap-
italizes on the underlying history and myths surrounding and oppress-
ing people of color in this country which makes it racist.

The real meaning and dimensions of the crime done people of color in pornography, in sexual assault, in just living in this country will remain inaccessible to white people if you continue to be ignorant or unconcerned about our history.

What I'm going to tell you is not the "Truth," but rather a starting point from which we can begin discussing the issue. It must be understood that I am a Black woman. I cannot represent Hispanic, Asian, or Native American women. I cannot even represent Black women. I am only one Black woman, and you should be listening just as hard to what any other woman of color has to say.

I know that I hold some of the stereotypes that white people have created about other races of color. I'm not going to attempt to make any cross-cultural analysis between different groups of color. No one at this time could do so, with all that still remains buried of our herstories and what we actually feel and experience today.

What I'm going to do is talk about what I have direct experience of—being Black. I hope by opening up my history and feelings and showing their neglected complexity, you will realize how little you know about other races. It is this ignorance which prevents the unification of all women in the struggle to expose and end violence against women.

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What was in the minds of the white European invaders when they dragged Black men, women, and children in chains from their homeland and way of life? Even before the Europeans had "discovered" Africans, their religions had made a clear distinction between black and white. White was purity and morality; black was carnality, Satanic, diabolical. This symbolic use of black was extended to language: blackmail, black market, blacklist, black sheep, and so on.

When white Europeans first came upon Africa, they were amazed by two things: the dark skin of the people and the ape population. They confused the two and wrote about how the apes were like men, and how the African males were beastlike, being half-man and half-ape, with human faces, long tails, and huge genitals. It was even imagined that Africans had sex with apes.

To the Europeans, although Africans bore a physical resemblance to human beings, their living habits appeared to be those of animals. Africans had no recognizable culture, so the white men rationalized that they were doing Africans a great service by introducing them
to real civilization. The white male Europeans enslaved the African people.

Who were these kidnapped Black people? They came primarily from West Africa, a region where tribes and societies were fairly unified, having similar language structures and cultures. West African civilization had well-organized, complex economic and political systems; intricate religions; numerous structures which served various societal needs (such as police and insurance); and highly developed arts.

In some societies in West Africa, the mother and the grandmother were the heads of the family. The father had an essential place, and did much of the providing. Often it was all men who sat on the councils, and the man received his soul from his father. But it was his maternal line that determined his place in society. If parents separated, children went with the mother, not because they were her burden but because their primary affinity was with the mother; it was she who begat them.

To marry, all that was required was the approval of both families. There was no need for the consent of the whole tribe or society, the state as we know it, or any religious body. The African family unit was a large extended family. It was not unusual for children to live with relatives outside the immediate family, especially if those relatives had resources or skills to offer.

Women traditionally managed much of the family’s resources and often were traders in the open market. This earned them their economic independence. If a woman was dissatisfied with her husband, she was able to take her children and leave him. Later if she found another man she liked, she would enter into a new marriage.

I have not been able to find any indication that pornography existed in African society. This could be because there has not been enough investigation into African sexual practices. Or it could be because Africa was not technologically developed enough to produce pornography. (For pornography to become a common feature of a society, a technology is needed that can reproduce images and the written word on a mass scale.) Or it could be that because of the sex role types particular to West African culture and how the African woman was valued (which is not to say that there were not always ways in which she was oppressed), pornography could not be a natural outgrowth of that culture.

When African people arrived in the New World, they were confronted by a drastic cultural shock. Their families were broken up,
their native tongues outlawed, their customs and arts forbidden. Africans have the distinction of being the only race brought to this land of the free against their will.

The tremendous coping ability Africans showed in surviving slavery was later used by white men in the 1960's as justification for further injustices. Unsettled by the sixties riots, white men tried to explain away the current unrest among Blacks by claiming that the price Blacks had paid for surviving the "unfortunate" institution of slavery was that they had become an immoral and culturally deprived people.

Black folks are not deprived, we are denied. Our culture was not destroyed by slavery, it just went underground, and it is what we stand on. We have been forced to take on white cultural forms in order to survive, but the meaning we give to things is still our own.

Stereotypes are, in part, based on the realities of how people have had to adapt themselves in order to deal with oppression. Take the stereotypes of Black people and sex. There is definitely some reality to it. Black people are really sexy. But you have to put it in the context of our very rich and earthy heritage and our relationship to our land, which was quite different from puritanical Europe.

Writer James Weldon Johnson said,

In the core of the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted, rooted so deeply that it is not always recognized when it shows at the surface. Other factors are obvious and are the ones we dare to deal with; but regardless of how we deal with these, the race situation will continue to be acute as long as the sex factor persists.

American slavery relied on the denial of the humanity of Black folks, on the undermining of our sense of nationhood and family, and on the structuring of Black men and women into the American system of white male domination.

Much of this was achieved through the sexual exploitation, brutalization, and degradation of the enslaved people. Sexual and racial oppression in America are inseparable for both Black women and men. The raping of enslaved women and the castration of enslaved males were common practices.

White men, in their treatment of Black males, were motivated by two other myths of their own invention: (1) Black men are phallic symbols. Just the sight of an African's dark skin told you he had a monster penis. (2) Bigness connoted power, and the measure of masculinity was a man's power over other men and over women. The
size of a penis was a significant factor in determining the latter. White men feared Black men as sexual rivals.

White people, men and women, came out of the puritanical European tradition, which alienated them from their bodies. They were simultaneously threatened and drawn to what they believed to be the uninhibited, guilt-free sexuality of Blacks. The unmentionable sexual feelings as well as the unacceptable acts of aggression of the white people were easily projected onto the enslaved Africans. Thus, many white men who feared that Black men would rape white women were daily raping Black women.

It was said that Black folks could not know love, only lust, whereas white people did not lust, they loved and protected. It was also said, and by many of the same people, “You are not a man until you sleep with a nigger.”

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States, it was common for white men to have two families, one white and one Black. If anything was regarded as wrong about having that second, not so hidden family, it was not that the white man economically and physically forced the Black woman’s sexual services. No, what was wrong was that the offspring made for the pollution of white blood. The crime was to acknowledge that a white man could be in a “relationship” with a Black woman.

What were the societal positions available to Black women? To be the sexual object of the white enslaver was perhaps the best, most protected and rewarding position because the Black woman was then subjected to the abuse of only one man. Then there was being a house servant and mammy, taking care of the white woman’s home and children, while she had no place she could call her own and her children had to look after themselves. She might be a breeder woman who had children every nine months, most of whom she’d never get to know. Finally, there was the position of field mule. If a field mule went pregnant, she was treated special—two weeks before she was due, there was no punishment if she did not finish her work. A Black woman could serve in all these positions in her lifetime.

What were white women doing? Some tried to intercede on behalf of the enslaved people. Most did not. They were oppressed by their own position as mute ornaments in society.

Sometimes white women would confuse who their real oppressors were, and they would be active accomplices in the victimization of the enslaved. Often white women would blame Black women for “tempting” their husbands. There are accounts of white women’s
vindictiveness and cruelty toward Black women. They would pull out their teeth; have them stripped, chained, and flogged until bleeding; drop hot sealing wax on their breasts; damage their sexual organs by various means.

At the same time the white man was exploiting the Black woman, he was obsessive about protecting the white woman from the Black man. White women were told that the Black man was unnatural and dangerous, having an ape’s penis, which, if it were to penetrate her, would split her vagina and cause permanent damage. The Black man was held up as one more reason why the white woman needed the protection of the white man.

The white man projected his own savagery upon the Black man, and one myth he employed to this end was that of the Pathological Black Rapist of white women.

This is not to say that Black men did not rape white women. They were fed fantasies about white women, that they were a delicacy to be protected, while Black women were trash, thrown out too many times.

But most of the interracial rapes in this country were committed by white men. White men have always had the power: social, economic, political, military, and psychological. Black men had to be more realistic about living out their fantasies. They got killed for just looking. Social writers of that time affirmed the myth that rape was a crime committed exclusively by Black men, and they explained the “rampant raping” by Black men as being the result of the “talk of social equality,” which just excited the “ignorant nigger” and made him uppity. And as late as 1944 a study of white people’s opinions about Blacks showed that they thought that Black people desired—over and above political, economic, and social justice—sex with white people.

After the Civil War, “popular justice” (which meant there usually was no trial and no proof needed) began its reign in the form of the castration, burning at the stake, beheading, and lynching of Black men. As many as 5,000 white people turned out to witness these events, as though going to a celebration. Over 2,000 Black men were lynched in the ten-year period from 1889–1899. There were also a number of Black women who were lynched. Over 50 percent of the lynched Black males were charged with rape or attempted rape.

Actor James Earl Jones said about lynching:

By their lynching, the white man was showing that he hated the Black man carnally, biologically; he hated his color, his features,
his genitals. Thus he attacked the Black man’s body, and like a lover gone mad, maimed his flesh, violated him in the most intimate, pornographic fashion. When a white man makes such a personal involvement and takes the time to strip off or cut off penises and torture, beat and lynch a Black man it has got to be sexual, it’s the result of repressed sex. It’s finding a way out.

I believe that this inhuman treatment of Black men by white men, in reality based to some extent upon the economic threat free Black men posed,* has a direct correlation to white men’s increasingly obscene and inhuman treatment of women, particularly white women, in pornography and real life. White women, working toward their own strength and identity, their own sexuality and economic independence, have in a sense become “uppity niggers.” As the Black man (and Black woman) threatens the white man’s masculinity and power, so now does the white woman.

Eventually lynchings were replaced by police bullets and state executions. In Louisiana from 1900 to 1950, forty Black men were legally hanged or electrocuted for the rape of women, white women. During that time, only two white men were put to death for that crime. Both were immigrants, and their deaths happened before 1907.

Many Black women tried to protect their menfolk from this terrorization, either physically or by trying to expose the lies and savagery of white people. But they had to try to protect themselves as well, for the counterpart to the myth of the Black Man as Rapist was the myth of the Bad Black Woman.

White men still needed slave women on whom to force their “manhood.” As Lorraine Hansberry said, a white man assumes that “if you’re Black you must be selling.” It was thought that a Black man having a relationship with a white woman degraded the white woman. There were laws in almost every state against interracial sex and marriage, which were usually enforced only when the man in the relationship was of color, and it was not until 1967 that the Supreme Court declared these laws unconstitutional. Sixteen states still had these laws on the books at that time. Yet, when a white man had a relationship with a Black woman or took sexual services from her, she was elevated in the world. By the 1950’s the image of the Black woman was still that of a slut who could take anything sexually.

The Black Liberation Movement is restoring the history and dignity of our people. But often it has remained trapped within the mores and attitudes of our white European male oppressors. Its efforts go toward proving that Black folks are *just as good* as whites, rather than showing that we are *different* and that it is not just slavery which affected the sex roles and relationships of Black men and women, but also who we were before slavery. Because of this misleading emphasis, the dominant motif of the Black Movement has been Black masculinity.

Black women are sometimes the target of the Black man’s efforts to restore his sense of power, rather than the white man who has been the one out to destroy it. Sometimes when the Black man is with the Black woman, he is ashamed of how she has been treated, and how he has been powerless, and that they have always had to work together and protect each other. Some Black men, full of the white man’s perspective and values, see the white woman or Blond Goddess as part of the American winning image.

Frantz Fanon said about white women,

> By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. I marry the culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.

So how does a Black woman feel when her Black man leaves *Playboy* on the coffee table?

“It’s a white folks’ thing, and it’s corrupting our men.”

That is what several Black women I have talked to think. Pornography speaks to the relationship white men and women have always had with each other. Because they have been forced to live under the values of white people, the identity of Afro-Americans has been distorted and belittled to the point where pornography also speaks in part to our relationships.

The pornography I am reacting to is *soft-core* pornography, which objectifies but at least retains the woman’s body in one piece. Most women in this country, white and Third World, are unaware of the nature of hard-core pornography and how widespread it is. I know that if any woman of color were to see some of the brutal and deadly hard-core pornography around, she would be outraged by it no matter what the color of the woman being exploited was.

But when you talk about soft-core pornography, it’s difficult for a Black woman to identify totally with what white women feel about it.
Soft-core pornography is an extension of mass advertising and the beauty market; it is the Beauty Queen revealed. Until recently the Beauty Queen was by definition white: fair complexion, straight hair, keen features, and round eyes. Soft-core pornography was the objectification of white purity, white beauty, and white innocence.

To little Black, Asian, or Hispanic girls, growing up with dark skin, kinky hair, African, Asian, or Latin features, everything around them—in storybooks and the media, in dolls in stores—announced that something was wrong with them. They could be whores but not beauty queens. There used to be a lot of Black women who used bleaching creams and stayed out of the sun, and there are still many who straighten their hair because they feel they have to, not because they want to. There also have been Asian women who have had eyelid operations. It is not so much that women of color are trying consciously to become white as that they are trying to look beautiful in a white-dominated society.

This has been changing somewhat. What is beautiful now also includes that which is unusual or exotic, such as women of color. We have started appearing in *Vogue* and in *Playboy*.

Black women were allowed in *Playboy* in the last ten years as a result of the sixties riots, which also won a few Black men the right to wear business suits and carry briefcases and have wives who stayed at home. So, Black women have been elevated from the status of whore to “Playmate.” Now white boys can put them in *Playboy* without damaging the magazine’s respectability too much (though after the first appearance of Black women in *Playboy*, there were some angry letters to the editor saying “get them niggers out!”).

Black men are exploited in pornography too. In 1978 *Hustler* magazine ran a full-page cartoon of a white man sitting on a raised chair and a Black shoeshine boy at his feet who is looking surprised as he is polishing the white man’s gigantic penis.

I have noticed that while white men like Black women “looking baaad” in leather with whips, Black men like Black women in bondage, helpless and submissive. Check out the album covers of groups like the Ohio Players and New York City.

The Black man, like the white man, is buying pornography. He is beating, raping, and murdering all kinds of women. Black women are going to have to deal with him on this. But when we do, we must deal with the Black man as a Black man, not as a white man. In this country it is the *white* man who is producing pornography, and it is the *white* man who is profiting from it.

We need to hear from other races in this country, especially those,
such as the Japanese, who have had their own highly developed tradition of violent pornography. We need to know how all women of all cultures are affected by violence within their communities and in the larger, white, male-dominated society.

Unification of all women in the struggle to end violence against women can happen only if women of color share their experiences, hurts, and confusions with white women. Before this can happen though, white women must understand that while sexism might be the ultimate oppression for many of them, it is only one of the ways in which women of color are oppressed. White women must recognize the ways in which they have bought into the oppression and stereotyping of communities of color.

As a Black woman, I find myself in limbo. My experiences and concerns don’t quite fit—not in the Black Liberation Movement, nor in the Women’s Movement. Because my Black brother and I speak the same language and go back a ways, he usually can hear me, but either he doesn’t want to answer me or he can’t, so he gets ashamed of himself and pissed off at me.

I believe white women have the resources to answer me and, for the most part, would like to, but you don’t hear me because you never take the time to listen; so often you are afraid of me.

But if you’re going to call the white man to task for his racism, it’s your obligation to know who people of color are, and what women of color think of you, the images and concerns we have about white women. Too often what has been between us has not been a relationship but usage. The only times you remember women of color are on the occasions when it would be an embarrassment to be without us. And as women of color, when we’re in need we don’t call on you, because half the time you are part of our trouble, and our association with you makes it more difficult to bring the issue of our rights to our communities of color.

It cannot continue this way. No one wants it to. We must find ways to share and merge our experiences. We must create a movement that really moves for all oppressed people.