A Quiet Subversion

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In the last decade new pornographic magazines have appeared on the market that are aimed specifically at Third World men (Swank and Players are the best known). Many Black authors, recording artists, and sports figures are as notorious as white men for their sexist attitudes. What is to be done? Here for the first time, a Black woman directly addresses the issue of the harm pornography does to Black women and appeals to the Black community for action.

In comparison with pressing issues such as South African liberation, infant mortality, and the slow death of affirmative action, pornography may seem a “low man” on the totem pole of Black feminists' priorities. But just as right-wing moves like the Bakke decision and anti-abortion laws serve to reverse the gains of the civil rights struggle, the media are quietly pressing forth dangerous images of Black women, a reverse of our cultural development and self-image.

Hints of Aunt Jemima, Bubbling Brown Sugar, and the “Tragic Mulatto” stereotypes can be seen on billboards, TV, and magazine covers. But today's versions of those stereotypes have gained the dubious addition of black leather and a space in the pornography market. It is important that the images of women born out of the Black Women's Liberation Movement be realistic images. Pornography serves to distort our image.

The history of America is largely one of systematic physical and symbolic exploitation of the Black woman's body. On the slave ships and plantations, she served as an easy target for the slave owners' carnal pleasures. At any time and without provocation, the Black woman could be raped and beaten, without defense. In addition to being the white man's concubine, she was also mated to the “Black buck” in order to produce the best “stock” for next year's slave sale. Again she had no choice in the matter.

Through historical stereotyping, a myth has developed that the
Black concubine was a privileged "house nigger" who wielded power in the "big house" while others worked in the field. More often than not the woman worked in the field like the other slaves, was raped at an early age, and bore children to the white man, without compensation. Although a few Black women earned their freedom or that of their children, the inheritances left them were not enough to give any significant number of Black people anything even slightly resembling advantage in this country.

What it may have left us with is an inherited sense of abandonment and powerlessness. With Black men unable to defend Black women under penalty of death, it soon became a part of the slave culture for them to stand by with only a prayer.

Today we see vestiges of that inheritance in the exploitation of women's bodies through prostitution and pornography and denial of reproductive rights.

The stereotype of the big Black mammy, who wants nothing more from her life than a job in the big house and a shack full of pickaninnies, has helped to make Black women victims of birth-control experimentation and sterilization abuse. Decisions are being made for them by doctors who sterilize them without their consent. Approximately 30 percent of America's married Black women have been sterilized. Far too many television comedy shows portray Black families without fathers, and the mothers on these shows are Aunt-Jemima-looking women with a shack full of pickaninnies. Our children watch these shows and absorb the projected values.

Prostitution has been called a victimless crime. But the fact that the number of Black "working girls" on Prostitution Row is disproportionate to our number in the society bespeaks an economic and cultural crime. Facing the greatest degree of discrimination in education, jobs, and federal aid, some poor Black women have been forced to the streets. Here they sell interracial fantasies to suburban businessmen: Friday Night in the Ghetto. And here they are exploited by the Pimp, the Peddler, and the Police.

Media images have significant bearings on the life choices of many young Black Americans. Young Black girls, through the media and environmental reinforcement, can be led to believe that their only choices are Aunt Jemima or Bubbling Brown Sugar.

During the Black Power Movement, much cultural education was focused on the Black physique. One of the accomplishments of that period was the popularization of African hairstyles and the Natural. Along with the Natural came a new self-image and way of relating. It suggested that Black people should relate to each other in respect-
ful and supportive ways. Then the movie industry put out *Superfly* and the Lord Jesus Look and the Konked head, and an accompanying attitude ran rampant in the Black community. These films preceded a rise in black-on-black crime and undermined activism in the Black community. Films like *Shaft* and *Lady Sings the Blues* portray Black "heroes" as cocaine-snorting, fast-life fools. In these movies a Black woman is always caught in a web of violence. In these movies the "Black Lady of the Night" is glorified.

These movies warranted reactions from responsible Black citizens. "Blaxploitation" was exposed in *Ebony* magazine, and Black actors rose to the challenge of protecting the Black image.*

A popular Berkeley, California, theater recently featured a pornographic movie entitled *Slaves of Love*. Its advertisement portrayed two Black women, naked, in chains, and a white man standing over them with a whip! How such racist pornographic material escapes the eye of Black activists presents a problem. Pornography is a branch of the media that Black-activist feminists have considered a "white market." It is clearly an ignored area that deserves further investigation. The pornography industry's exploitation of the Black woman's body is qualitatively different from that of the white woman. While white women are pictured as pillow-soft pussy willows, the stereotype of the Black "dominatrix" portrays the Black woman as ugly, sadistic, and animalistic, undeserving of human affection.

Black women like Ruby Dee, Maya Angelou, and Cicely Tyson have fought courageously for more realistic images of Black women on stage and screen. While occasionally the entertainment industry concedes to "historical specials" like *Roots* and *Harriet Tubman*, usually they romanticize the image of the battered Black woman. The music industry, for example, offers us an album entitled *The Best Of New York*, recorded by a group called New York City, with a cartoonish cover depicting a Black woman running for her life, being chased by four Black men. And the Ohio Players' album, *Pleasure*, shows a Black woman in bondage!

Some will argue that this is just the white man's device to sell his product, but—Black people buy that product. And what is the Black artist's position? Is he standing by with only a prayer? What is being

* Ed. Note: "Blaxploitation" is the particular name given to films projecting negative, violent images of Black people. Critics said that they were void of historical/social accuracy, and were made primarily to perpetuate white stereotypes of Black people and to exploit Black people's hunger to see themselves on screen. This term is very well known in the movie industry and the Black artistic community.
peddled in the white man's market—Black music or the Black woman's body?

The cover of the New York City album should be a picture of Harlem. Must we wait until the problem is epidemic before we take action? It is the responsibility of Black feminists and Black artists to demand that this be stopped.