

**A Taste for**  
**BROWN SUGAR**

Black Women in Pornography *Mireille Miller-Young*



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## 2

### Sexy Soul Sisters

#### *Black Women in the Golden Era*

*Sex with Soul*, a DVD featuring a compilation of hardcore interracial sex scenes from the 1960s and '70s, advertises screen-scorching “sepia smoker celluloid” to savvy collectors of vintage erotica. “If you have a taste for brown sugar,” the description reads, “both male and female, then you can’t afford to pass up this classic example of cinema SEX WITH SOUL.”<sup>1</sup> A new aesthetic of black eroticism emerged during the 1960s and '70s, an aesthetic I term “soul porn.” Unlike stag films from the 1920s through the 1950s, soul porn featured a new kind of intimacy with and interaction between white and black Americans. Changing legal frameworks and social attitudes ushered in a fresh willingness to display and view black sexuality and black-white sexual relationships. Pornography, like other media, reflected broad social advances in racial integration and interracial relations. Whereas once black sexuality seemed to be held at a comfortable distance for white consumers, white viewers now saw blacks as militant sexual agents. Yet the genre of soul porn is not only defined by the desirability of black sexual aesthetics for white audiences, and whites’ appropriation and imitation of what they saw as black “soul” during the era. Soul porn is also constituted by black people’s deployment of their own racialized eroticism into sexual media. This confrontation between white desire for blacks and black desire for themselves is embedded in soul porn, and inscribed in black pornographic performances of the time.

As I discussed in the last chapter, pornography has depicted black-white interracial sex since its emergence as an underground photographic and film form. It was not until the 1960s, however, that black erotic models and performers gained significant visibility. Magazines displaying black nudes popped up everywhere, black women began to be featured in *Playboy*, black sexual ephemera were traded widely, and black women and men were often

seen in 16 mm and 8 mm loops, and increasingly in 35 mm theatrically released pornographic films. These media were part of the greater viability of pornography in a time when the social strictures and legal barriers to the production of explicit sexual culture began to collapse. Black pornography during the era was one manifestation of a more widespread and amplified black-authored erotic expression occurring in music, literature, art, film, mass communications, and popular culture. The black body, especially for African Americans, now represented a new image of self-determined and dynamic erotic force. African Americans seemed to be more interested than ever in participating in, and making their own, erotic media.

In the 1960s and '70s, largely white pornographers slowly began to realize the lucrative potential of playing up black racial difference, although it was not until the 1980s that interracial and black-cast porn would be recognized as a commercially viable and specialized niche market. Beginning in the 1960s, black actors were increasingly integrated into largely white-cast pornographic films, and interracial and black-cast 8 mm loops were produced to a greater degree than the previous stag-porn era. Pornography created during this period—often called porno, which I will use here in the spirit of that context—was particularly focused on exposing and exploring sexual taboos in a time when attitudes toward sex were being revolutionized. A central sexual taboo was the crossing of racial borders through new intimacies between blacks and whites.

A sense of agentive black subjectivity flourished during the civil rights and black power era, arousing interest and anxiety among white Americans. Even with a growing base of black porno consumers, the white male gaze continued to determine the fantasies represented in most pornographic media. Thus, porno during this period betrays the powerful ways in which the white fetishization of black sexuality—marked by both titillation and fear—grappled with black people’s changing social status and the progressively resistive politics asserted by African Americans. The production of soul porn emerges from the historical and social sexual politics of the civil rights era, where the objectification of black bodies confronts a newly radicalized black subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

I use the term “soul porn” to describe the assertive aspect of black sexuality that appears in pornography’s representational economy during this period. Soul porn describes both how black people interacted with and performed in porn through the uses of soul, as well as how whites’ fascination with black sexuality is represented in porn through the iconography of soul. Whites certainly appropriated and commodified black sexuality in their production of

soul porn as they comprised porno's major producers and audience. However, black people were also interested in launching and viewing their own sexualities in explicit media, as evidenced by the tremendous outpouring of erotic materials, music, and performance during this period, including raunchy stand-up comedy, drag balls, risqué pinup spreads in magazines like *Jet* and *Hue*, and "shake dance" shows by well-known black burlesque dancers such as Lottie the Body and Jean Idelle. Black sexual identities were shaped differently along lines of gender. Black men's desires had a visible impact in shaping the direction of some porn media, including magazines, loops, and feature films. It is important to consider how the new visibility and erotic agency of black sexuality mobilized in soul porn responded to black men's previously unaddressed fantasies. Black women, though also seeking to explore their fantasies, still lacked the power to decisively shape the marketing of their sexuality in pornography. Nevertheless, as in the stag era, black women intervened in their representation as performers in powerful and important ways.

Most of the black porn actresses during this period, though visible, went nameless, and are today lost to memory. An exception to this rule was Desiree West. The first African American porn actress to gain name recognition and remarkable roles in popular sex films, Desiree West is well known among fans, adult industry movie critics, and avid collectors in online communities like *Vintage Erotica Forums*. Desiree gained a somewhat renewed notoriety as porno and exploitation films from the 1960s and '70s were re-released on DVD and recirculated to both popular and academic audiences during the 1990s and 2000s. Known for her "vaguely Asian" exotic looks, "curvaceous body with huge, firm, naturally hanging breasts," curly-styled Afro, and sassy attitude, Desiree West becomes an icon of black women performers in the era of soul porn, and hence images of Desiree reach beyond her reputation as a figure in the porn industry.<sup>3</sup> Not only was Desiree a stand-out performer, she was also one of the few black women to work consistently through the 1970s and share scenes in feature-length porno films with leading white actors. In 2010 a fan created a YouTube video tribute to Desiree, in which other fans posted comments about her beauty, sex appeal, energetic erotic performances, and unfortunate second-billing status.<sup>4</sup> These observations are reflected in one online biography:

Desiree West was one of the first black porn starlets. . . . Desiree West's voluptuous good looks set the stage for the sexual fireworks that she invariably provided to each film she appeared in. Desiree West was one of the first "wild women" of porn, always ready to push the sexual en-

velope with her nymphomaniacal need for raw, passionate sex action. Desiree West . . . soon had established herself as the black starlet to call on if you wanted some spicy, sensual sexing. She was a very good actress who could handle any sort of part, from down-and-dirty to high-class. Desiree West never got too many starring roles, though, and was relegated to heating up scenes from a strictly supporting level. She never let her lack of top-flight fame affect her performances, however. Desiree West could always be counted on for a hip-grinding, teeth-chattering good time.<sup>5</sup>

Desiree West is remembered as a passionate and versatile sexual performer who helped usher a fan culture around particular porn actresses as movie stars, rather than as nameless bodies. Although Desiree delivered the high-powered eroticism so valued by consumers and critics of adult media, she was relegated to supporting roles behind white actors. Though this fan biography lauds her eroticism, it does not explain how Desiree's secondary status was part of a commonplace lack of recognition for black actresses. Not only did black actresses confront marginalization and occupy a lesser status in porn, the industry's racialization of their sexuality rendered their powerful performances mere fodder for a growing market of interracial and black-cast porn films. By examining black women's performances from the 1960s and '70s, I argue that performers like Desiree West embodied erotic subjectivity, even as they were deployed as props in other people's fantasies. The social context for race and gender relations was transforming, and with it, black women's place in pornography and the wider sexual culture. As so-called sexy soul sisters, black women porn performers were on the front lines of a major cultural revolution in which black desires became newly articulated, and desires for black bodies became newly evident.

### Putting the Soul in Soul Porn

The concept of "soul" in black life is important, if difficult to define. As Lerone Bennett argues, "Soul is a metaphorical evocation of Negro being as expressed in the Negro tradition."<sup>6</sup> Or as the "Queen of Soul" Aretha Franklin defines it, "Soul is black."<sup>7</sup> Soul is a concept that, in fact, "exceeds the power of language to recapture."<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, many have used the word "soul" to capture the melding of the cultural and the political, the sacred and the profane, the collective and the individual, the psychic and the aesthetic, and the dialectic of memory and transformation in black life. It is most often discussed as the

expression of black culture, especially through music, that is lived in a particular kind of embodiment that marks blackness. Although soul is a force that emerges from the African roots of African American culture, circulates throughout the worldwide African diaspora, and continues to define black life today, many critics cite the 1960s and '70s as the generative period, and perhaps demise, of soul.<sup>9</sup> For African Americans, soul emerges out of the traumas of enslavement, the indignities of segregation and disenfranchisement, and the struggles of the "long" civil rights movement that began in the 1920s, accelerated during World War II, and was ferociously fought during the 1960s and '70s.<sup>10</sup> But it was the interaction between the activist, artistic, and intellectual arms of black nationalism (not that these are discrete forms), and the cultural lives of everyday black people who were coming to understand themselves in the revolutionary terms, epitomized by the phrase "Black is Beautiful," that made the soul aesthetic of the 1960s and '70s so unique. Soul is understood to capture the oppositional energy of a time when being black, and pro-black, was bound up with defiance and celebration.

While icons of the "soul era," like the Afro, are now regularly taken up as shallow symbols of black fashion, in the 1960s and '70s they marked a stylistic militancy. Black people asserted themselves by styling their bodies in ways that seemed so dangerous they became targeted for repression by the state and dominant culture.<sup>11</sup> Yet the stylistics of soul, based on these radical embodiments, were also about pleasure—the transgressive enjoyment of a much-maligned blackness. Hence, soul presented a "certain way of feeling, a certain way of expressing oneself, a certain way of being,"<sup>12</sup> that reflected an embodied recuperation of blackness as well as a "desire for a distinctive unassimilable style."<sup>13</sup> Soul also had a representational economy that was used as a marketing mechanism and commodity interest at the time.<sup>14</sup> A range of industries, including pornography, sought to capitalize on soul. Little scholarship exists on the intersection of soul with sexual media as it was created or consumed by blacks or whites during the 1960s and '70s. Moreover, because soul is such a tricky term to undress, it is difficult to say how sexual media took up soul or the appearance of soul, or how these two registers—soul and its simulation—might have worked as one.

### From Underworld to the Golden Age

The intersection of white and black interest in black sexuality produces embedded tensions in the makeshift category of soul porn and provokes important questions about desire, pleasure, and representation. *Sex World* (dir.

Anthony Spinelli, 1977), a key example of soul porn that I discuss later in this chapter, uses notions of black sexuality as militant, transformative, and stylistic to shape its racial fetishism. In depicting the coupling of a black woman with a racist white man, *Sex World* both capitalizes upon and flouts the taboo nature of interracial sex. By addressing both interracial sex and racism at the same time, *Sex World* presents itself as both a subversive and politically charged text. Adult filmmakers at the time believed pornography was the epitome of the transgressive energy of the sexual revolution, and had the power to revise sexual norms. These filmmakers saw pornography as a vanguard cultural movement within a new American sexual liberalism because it explicitly confronted the legal and social frameworks that policed sexual expression in film, literature, performance, and political speech. Since the Comstock Law of 1873, all materials depicting sexual matters (including contraception and birth control information) were broadly defined as indecent, immoral, lewd, or lascivious, and forcefully prosecuted. Under pressure from regulators and purity campaigns like the Catholic Legion of Decency, Hollywood enacted its own self-censorship. Pornographers maneuvered around the "smut-hounds" in clandestine networks, but some, often unwittingly, stood up against censorship.<sup>15</sup> A series of Supreme Court rulings beginning in the 1950s narrowed definitions of obscenity and opened up opportunities for pornographers to ply their trade. *United States v. Roth* (1957) upheld the conviction of a pornographic book dealer, but also declared that "sex and obscenity are not synonymous"; only material "appealing to prurient interest" could be prosecuted as obscenity.<sup>16</sup> In 1966 the court determined that obscene materials had to be "utterly without redeeming social value" to be deemed "patently offensive."<sup>17</sup> Because "utterly" left a lot of room for interpretation, this ruling had a huge impact on the proliferation of pornographic materials and also brought about more liberal values in mainstream media.

The old "Comstockery" was further undermined in 1970, when the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography recommended the "repeal of all laws prohibiting the distribution of sexually explicit material to consenting adults."<sup>18</sup> However, a more conservative Nixon administration suppressed the report. In 1973, in the case of *Miller v. California*, Chief Justice Burger ignored the President's Commission report and sided in favor of making it easier for authorities to prosecute for obscenity. The new requirements stated that obscene materials must lack "serious" artistic or social value, be designed to feed "prurient interests," and be judged by "local community standards."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while the *Miller* ruling created opportunities for law enforcement to go after pornographers on the state and local level (and they did, focusing



on adult movie theaters, bookstores, and video rental outlets as well as porn producers and distributors), the ruling was also vague enough that pornographers could advance their industry unconcealed. Consequently, porno producers began to view themselves as producing legitimate entertainment for responsible adults. Maneuvering around liberal but indefinite obscenity statutes and within a social framework of sexual permissiveness and constraint proved tricky. Nevertheless, porn manufacturers seized the chance to test the waters of public values and prurient interests. The culture was changing, and they wanted to play a role (and of course, make a buck).

"One of the most visible components of the sexual revolution of the 1960s," Robert Nye argues, "was the explosion of pornographic literature, films, videos, sex toy emporiums, and live sex shows, in short the commercialization and mass production of items formerly reserved for a few cognoscenti."<sup>20</sup> No longer confined to private all-male gatherings in frat houses and Legion halls, during the 1960s porn films could be seen in adult arcades with their coin-operated peep booths, or projected on the walls of private homes with the newly portable and affordable 8 mm projectors sold to middle-class consumers.<sup>21</sup> Those same middle-class consumers could buy Super 8 cameras and make their own kinky home movies. Exploitation films and softcore pseudo-documentaries of nudist colonies shown in art house and grind house theaters competed with a declining Hollywood by showing ever more nudity and violence, and both competed with television.<sup>22</sup> Even in Hollywood, both nudity and sexual themes became commonplace. Meanwhile, relatively tame but artful burlesque performances were replaced by raunchier topless and nude strip shows. Times Square in New York, like many other city centers, became a veritable red-light district, populated by denizens of the underworld: prostitutes, pimps, johns, hustlers, cruisers, dealers, gangsters, and vice cops. Sparkling night and day, marquees announced X-rated fare to gay and straight audiences. Smut was everywhere.<sup>23</sup>

As pornographic media became available to a broader audience, a "widespread fascination" ensued. According to Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio, in the 1960s, "sex was put on display" in all forms of cultural expression and in daily life.<sup>24</sup> During what became known as the Golden Age of pornography, pornographers in San Francisco and New York City developed feature-length productions for exhibition in theaters. Taking advantage of a cultural and legal opening, and a financially troubled Hollywood, makers of adult movies innovated a new way to put sex on display. Since it was necessary to prove explicit media had "redeeming social importance," pornographers responded

to regulation by innovating full-length movies with plots, scripts, and characters. Rather than splice together a series of sex acts loosely based on a theme or particular fetish, as had been done in previous dirty pictures, pornographers of the 1970s appropriated the narrative style of the Hollywood feature film as a focus for hardcore media. "The pornographic feature is a hybrid of the classic stag and the movie industry's staple melodrama," writes pornography historian Joseph Slade. "It takes the sex from one and the length from the other."<sup>25</sup> In this "most public of the contemporary pornographic formats,"<sup>26</sup> feature porn films exploited prurient interests but were registered as "legitimate" artistic expression. This hybrid form allowed pornographers to operate in legal and lucrative realms of distribution. Some even imagined an eventual integration of hard core into Hollywood, and turned their aspirations for mainstream media acceptance into creative productions, which captured a more sexually liberal, young, and urban audience.

*Deep Throat* was the first feature-length hardcore film to attract a mainstream audience.<sup>27</sup> The film, which starred Linda Lovelace and Harry Reems and was directed by Gerard Damiano, opened in June 1972 at the New World Theater on Forty-Ninth Street in New York City. The first porno to bring hardcore into the arena of popular culture, *Deep Throat* marked what Camille Paglia has called an "epochal shift" in American sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Although prosecuted for obscenity in thirty-two cities and banned in twenty-three states, it was watched by millions of Americans including women, who had been excluded from porn spectatorship in the past. Even respected TV journalist Barbara Walters reflected in her autobiography on watching *Deep Throat* when porno was suddenly cool.<sup>29</sup> The film garnered so much attention from the upper and middle classes, celebrities, and the press that Ralph Blumenthal of the *New York Times* referred to the trend as "porno chic."<sup>30</sup> Made on a budget of \$25,000, the film was said to have made somewhere between \$100 million and \$600 million in revenue.<sup>31</sup> Other pornographers quickly took notice of the lucrative potential of the feature-film medium. Between 1973 and 1975, one hundred hardcore features were produced in America each year, while less than four hundred films per year were coming out of the declining Hollywood film industry.<sup>32</sup> Although they continued to produce loops for public screening and private distribution, porn purveyors saw feature-length movies as a bankable complement to their businesses.

Opening just months after *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door* (1972), produced by the Mitchell Brothers, was the first pornographic feature film to be widely released across the nation. It is also likely the first 35 mm film to depict

a hardcore interracial sex scene.<sup>33</sup> Ivory Snow soap model Marilyn Chambers plays Gloria, a woman who is kidnapped and made to surrender to a series of sexual acts in a bizarre show. “Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness the ravishment of a woman who has been abducted,” a voice announces to a private audience of men, women, and transvestites, all wearing masks, as the show begins. They watch, spellbound, as Chambers is penetrated by a black man, actor Johnnie Keyes. A former boxer, Keyes created an iconic performance of muscular black masculinity overpowering fragile white womanhood in *Behind the Green Door* at a time when interracial sex, especially between black men and white women, remained hugely taboo. The spectacle of a white woman being ravished by a black man was intensified by knowledge of Chambers’s previous role as a squeaky-clean soap model. On the Ivory Snow box, Chambers smiles down at a white baby swaddled in a white cloth. Ads with her image (recalled by Procter and Gamble when *Behind the Green Door* came out) announced that Ivory Soap was “99 and 44/100% pure.” The white, motherly figure of Chambers connoted femininity, domesticity, and racial purity. Moreover, the trope of soap has historically been associated with the capacity to cleanse and purify the (racial) body—in nineteenth-century advertisements, African babies bathed in Pears soap miraculously emerged white.<sup>34</sup> In *Behind the Green Door*, the symbolism of soap and cleanliness underscores Chambers’s pure white womanhood, which becomes subsumed to the “polluting” force of blackness vis-à-vis interracial sex. The film pushes the symbolic registers of racial desire and disgust, using Johnnie Keyes’s erotic labor to embody the sexual danger and excitement black bodies represented for whites at the time.

Though *Behind the Green Door* was the first feature-length porno to show a black man and white woman subvert racial-sexual norms by coupling, it was not alone in doing so. Eight-millimeter loops (stag films without the stag parties) continued to circulate during this period, and a number were devoted to this very forbidden fantasy. Stag films during the 1960s and ’70s consistently prioritized black male sexuality over that of black women because the idea of black men being intimate with white women was so much more taboo. From a number of 1960s and ’70s catalogues for mail-order 8 mm reels, it appears that many more films depicted black male–white female sex than black female–white male or black male–black female sex. For instance, in the Diamond Collection catalogue for films 1–96, 31 of the 96 films include black actors, but only 6 of those 31 feature black women. Hence, black men were the focus of 25 out of 31 films with blacks, and more than a quarter of all

the films advertised in the catalogue. Attention was focused on their penises: “huge 12 inch cock,” “big black dong,” and “black weapon” are described in ads for couplings between black men and white women, as well as between black men and Asian women and black women.

“Black stud” was a term consistently used in marketing materials to describe scenes where black men appeared. In Swedish Erotica reel #85, *Coed in the Van* (1978) featuring Dashiell (Desiree West’s purported boyfriend) and renowned Asian American adult actress Linda Wong, the description tells us that “a good looking black stud spies a gorgeous Oriental girl standing beside her bicycle.” He invites her back to his camper and then “plunges his long black manhood faster and faster to satisfy her panting climax.” Cast as “exotic” ingénue minus the exotic location, Linda Wong’s “Oriental girl” fulfilled a fantasy held by white and nonwhite American men rooted in a long history of sexual exploitation around U.S. military bases in east Asia and embedded in Asian immigration to the United States.<sup>35</sup> Not quite as idealized as white women, and not as disparaged as black women, Asian porn actresses occupied a middle ground of objectification in porno. In this integrationist moment, there was a major fascination for images of interracial sex visualizing the powerful collision between the embodied “weapon” of the black stud and the imagined submissive sexuality of Asian women.

Loops formed an alternative and parallel economy of smut at a time when feature films were getting all the attention.<sup>36</sup> Most black actors worked in the stag market more often than in major feature-length pornos. Dashiell, King Paul, Jonathan Younger, Mick Jones, Smokey, and Bob White worked in these film shorts, often sold by mail order and in adult stores. Black actresses Shauna Evans, Flower, Kelly Stewart, Nancy Edwards, Trinket Fowler, and many other unknown women also worked in 8 mm format films.<sup>37</sup> Like black Hollywood actors, these performers faced a lot of stereotyping.<sup>38</sup> But sometimes the films eschewed racial tropes and just focused on the sex. *Bubble Gum Honey* (reel #68), a stag film featuring unidentified black male and female performers, portrays black heterosexuality unadorned with explicit stereotype. It begins with a pretty young woman in the park listening to music on a portable radio. A man flirts with her, they go get ice cream, and they have sex. In focusing on their smiling faces and relaxed intimacy, the film’s eroticism is not drawn from the same dramatic collision of opposing forces fetishized in interracial porn; rather the film reveals a kind of relaxed sweetness, equality, and intimacy. Films like *Bubble Gum Honey* show black sexual subjectivity differently as they hint toward an alternative black erotic imagination and labor.

*Lialeh* (dir. Barron Bercovich, 1974) is advertised as “the first black XXX film ever made,” but that is not true. *Black Is Beautiful* (1970), also known as *Africanus Sexualis*, is the first 35 mm black-cast sexploitation film that I have uncovered, and it is an utter schlockfest. Purporting to educate its audience on “the sexual drives of the black man,” *Black Is Beautiful* is a fake documentary on African sex practices that touts black nationalist and Afrocentric politics. As a “white coater,”<sup>39</sup> *Black Is Beautiful* actually went further than most softcore sexploitation films by showing some explicit shots, but because it depicted simulated sex the film was not quite hardcore. *Black Is Beautiful* is narrated by an African American man playing the role of an expert on African sexual customs and performed by African American actors dressed as rural West Africans. Like classic exploitation “exotics” from the 1930s (e.g., *Ingagi*), *Black Is Beautiful* presents a kind of “ethnological” exhibition of “African” people for popular consumption.<sup>40</sup> Whereas 1930s exploitation exotics sought to capture a white working-class audience fearful (and desirous) of “unbridled black lust” in the figure of “negro as beast,”<sup>41</sup> *Black Is Beautiful* seems directed at harnessing the interest of African Americans at a time when they were deeply concerned with (and active in supporting) Marxist anticolonial struggles exploding all over the African continent, as well as in embracing African aesthetics in black American cultural expression.

The smirking narrator shows how the film, in a completely didactic way, attempts to counter stereotypes for white audiences while also promoting them for black audiences. While purporting to dismantle the myth of the hypersexual black stud, the film actually instantiates it by using supposed African sex practices and gender dynamics as a model for African American couples. While it shows that the myth of the stud was actually a concept that black men (and women) could possibly identify with or take pleasure in, *Black Is Beautiful* uses heterosexist ideas circulating in black cultural nationalist discourses at the time to present a regressive view of black gendered relationships. Although it is completely fabricated, the film’s documentary framing makes the claims of the black sex expert about “marriage customs” and “the family system of Africa” seem empirical. For instance, the narrator describes supposed African sex positions with Afrocentric names like the *wazi grip*, the *abuba arrow*, the *kwango*, and the *mongun och*, as if they really exist, and as if there is one common language in all of Africa. More problematically, when the expert argues that homosexuality in Africa is “relatively rare” save in a few tribes and asserts that African women “take care of their odor so that it



FIGURE 2.1. *Black Is Beautiful*, aka *Africanus Sexualis* (1970).

does not offend,” viewers may begin to understand that this Afrocentric view of black sexuality is firmly set on privileging the desires of heterosexual black men over black women or black gay men. The narrator continues:

The African male is considered the dominant partner and the central force in the marriage. A woman is usually taught by her mother that it is her duty to please her husband whenever he wishes to be pleased. . . . Woman is considered the property and primary possession of her man. Our ancestors felt that the man was master and the woman his slave. Even though we no longer carry to this extent [*sic*], we will not abide a dominant woman. You might say we consider both partners equal. One is just more equal than the other.

In constructing black men as dominant partners in heteronormative, patriarchal relationships, *Black Is Beautiful* echoes the arguments of actual Afrocentric critics like Molefi Asante and Frances Cress Welsing who assert that homosexuality “doesn’t represent an Afro-centric way of life” or amount to a form of genocide imposed by whites.<sup>42</sup> The film represents how black erotica at the time reflected black nationalist concerns about developing black fami-



lies based on heteronormative gender and sexual behavior. In focusing on black male control of marriage, the film articulates a disciplinary fantasy of black eroticism, rather than a liberatory one. As L. H. Stallings reflects, "Sadly, a model of rhetoric created to liberate one faction of people often time lapses into a type of policing of the same group."<sup>43</sup> This confining vision of gendered power was extremely contested in black nationalist discourses, particularly by black feminist and queer critics, yet it animated much of black erotic production. Ironically, black erotica seemed as interested in promoting heteronormative respectability as it was in subverting it.

Movies like *Black Is Beautiful* exploited a "rising black box office" hungry for films that depicted black actors as something other than passive sidekicks and sexually neutered leads, especially as agents in images of sex and violence.<sup>44</sup> In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles's "maverick breakthrough movie" *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* set the mold for the black exploitation film genre, otherwise known as Blaxploitation.<sup>45</sup> Exploitation films had long explored taboo subjects of sex and violence, but rarely from a black perspective.<sup>46</sup> Intensely controversial, *Sweetback* established many of the features for Hollywood's production of similar black-focused films of the period. Reflecting black cultural nationalist sensibilities, the eponymous film's (anti) hero both defies the racist power structure and dominates black gendered relationships in the quest for survival, autonomy, and justice.

The figure of black-man-as-revolutionary-hero that dominates the film's narrative employs courage and quick thinking along with ineffable style and sexual prowess. *Sweetback* provoked debates about the logic and validity of this "revolutionary" portrayal of the protagonist's heroic and glamorous defiance of state power. The representation of black sexuality in *Sweetback* was also debated, with questions about the portrayal of explicit sex and the exploitation of black women by the protagonist. Some saw Peebles's decision to make *Sweetback* a hustler who gets paid to sleep with women in sex shows as perpetuating stereotypes of black men as super spades and black women as whores. Yet *Sweetback* and later films of the genre of black exploitation provided a "more aggressive affirmation of black cultural identity" than was the norm in Hollywood.<sup>47</sup> These films incorporated stereotypes of black violence and hypersexuality but also reappropriated them in order to create new images that many saw as resistive.<sup>48</sup> According to Stuart Hall, "In the ways [these] heroes deal with whites, there is a remarkable absence, indeed a conscious reversal of, the old deference or childlike dependency. In many ways, these are 'revenge' films—audiences relishing the black heroes' triumphs over 'Whitey,' loving the fact that they are getting away with it! What we may call

the moral playing field is leveled."<sup>49</sup> While black men took on white power in this defiant cinema, they also asserted symbolic control over black women.

Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972) was another controversial Blaxploitation film that prioritized black masculinity at the expense of black women in its glamorization of the black-man-as-outlaw. Like *Sweetback*, *Superfly* captured "a new kind of black social realism."<sup>50</sup> It artfully presented the seductions of criminal life through the figure of the black gangster in a narrative that spoke to the insurgent desires of an urban, young black audience in the anxious aftermath of the civil rights movement. *Superfly* tells the story of Priest (Ron O'Neal), a stylish Harlem cocaine dealer who wants to get out of the drug game. But first he must do a final big deal to afford an escape and stick it to the mob boss who controls him. Although the film does not develop the female characters, Priest's black girlfriend, Georgia (Sheila Frazier), and white Park Avenue mistress, Cynthia (Polly Niles), are important figures. While Cynthia establishes that Priest is so successful that he could exceed the confines of the ghetto and access the forbidden fruit of white womanhood, Georgia gives him the quality of being "of the people." While Priest is impatient and domineering with Cynthia, he is patient and loving with Georgia, who unconditionally supports him and shares his vision of freedom from "the man."

Despite *Superfly*'s adherence to representational codes of black male sexual dominance it is critical to acknowledge that the film's famous bathtub scene was the most significant and explicit representation of intimacy between a black couple on-screen up to that point. The scene thus presents a foundation for the assertive and defiant black sexuality found in soul porn. Unlike the sexual scenes in *Sweetback*, which played upon the commodified, masculinist spectacle of black sexuality through the uncompromising, workmanlike talents of the black stud, the couple in *Superfly* seem to be propelled by their own erotic energy.

Beautifully shot by Parks, the bathtub scene captures an autonomous black sensuality based on equity. Priest and Georgia kiss, caress, and have sex in the soapy water. Both partners are equally passionate, and both act with a sense of urgency made all the more intense because Priest's life is in danger. Parks's careful attention to lighting allowed the actors' wet brown skin to appear warm and luminous rather than flat and gray, as in many other films depicting the skin of people of color.<sup>51</sup> This love scene is graphic without being exploitative or tacky; it achieves a sense of realism and beauty in black sexuality as no other Blaxploitation film has. It has been mimicked in many other films, such as *Liaheh* (discussed below), but was never equaled in execution or sentiment during the Blaxploitation era.

As a result of the Blaxploitation boom, Hollywood studios began “scrambling for black acting talent.”<sup>52</sup> This phenomenon allowed for the entry of black female actors in leading roles, adding another dimension to the mainly crime-based Blaxploitation genre. Black female characters became more prominent narrative figures, not just girlfriends or attendant prostitutes. Their roles combined sex, violence, and action, as they played the femme fatale who always manages to display her stunning black figure in compromising situations. Pam Grier became best known for portraying vampish protagonists. She had a potent “propensity to disrobe” and a “not-to-be messed-with independence and active sexuality.”<sup>53</sup> In films such as *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), and *Sheba, Baby* (1975), Grier not only kicked the asses of the powerful and corrupt while seducing the audience with her stunning physicality and undeniable eroticism, but she also became an important box office commodity. According to the *Washington Post*, in 1977 she was one of the top-three most “bankable female stars in Hollywood,”<sup>54</sup> along with Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli. For Grier, the sexual liberalness of her films was reflective of her personal belief in exploring sexual expression and independence despite the concerns of some in the black community that the films were exploitative. Revealing this sense of ownership over her sexuality and choices at the time, Grier explained: “Just because we were black cinema artists, we weren’t going to deny that we were sexual also.”<sup>55</sup>

According to Cedric Robinson, Blaxploitation depoliticized and caricatured black communities.<sup>56</sup> A degraded cinema, Blaxploitation transformed the energy of black political resistance into commodified eye candy to be fed back to black audiences. Audiences were seduced by images of black revenge and the titillating body of the “Bad Black Woman” vigilante. For Robinson, that Bad Black Woman represented “Hollywood’s fabrication of Black society, all the libidinal desire and social pathology of America’s urban classes.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, her mimicking of revolutionary political figures such as Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver “eviscerat[ed] the original’s intellectual sophistication, political and organizational context, doctrinal commitments, and most tellingly, her critique of capitalist society and its employment of gender, race and class.”<sup>58</sup> As a “false Angela Davis,” Pam Grier’s performance of black woman as cinematic ghetto revolutionary impregnated the exaggerated fantasy of Blaxploitation with authenticity. Grier’s image reinforced black women’s role as objects of sexual voyeurism on a new, more explicit level and portrayed revolutionary women as destroyers and avengers rather than as creators and sustainers of community.<sup>59</sup>

However, Grier’s characters, and those of other leading black actresses of

the genre such as Tamara Dodson, also presented a forceful image of black women as sexual agents. They offered counterexamples to stereotypes of black women in cinema as solely fit to occupy menial, subservient roles as maids and companions. Just as black male figures pushed against a subordinated masculinity, black female figures in Blaxploitation resisted sexual colonization. Although designed to provide titillation, these black female characters use their sexuality to their own advantage, and in the end triumph over the “bad guys.” Often their triumph was politically subversive for the black community; they destroyed the drug traffickers, pimps, and corrupt cops that hurt their communities. Moreover, because these films were based on a genre of action-oriented crime stories, their goal was not to reflect reality but to reference it. In comparison to their male counterparts, these women were never promiscuous—their sexualities were confined to a single lover or were used as tools for the cause.

For Grier, expressing her sexuality through her performances was important rather than gratuitous. It meant *not* denying that as a black woman she *had* sexual desires. Unfortunately, Grier’s articulation of such sexual desires did not translate into longevity in her film career: for many of the black actors, directors, and film technicians of the period, when the fad for Blaxploitation ended, so did their jobs. Nor did such films give rise to more complicated renderings of black women’s sexual politics in later mainstream cinema. Ultimately, the representation of black women in Blaxploitation film was highly ambivalent, reflecting the “double-sided nature” of representation and stereotyping. The roles of black women in Blaxploitation framed them simultaneously as sexual objects and sexual agents.<sup>60</sup> Despite its conflicts, however, the popularity of the Blaxploitation genre showed that black people were hungry for their own defiant sexual images in media.

### Players in Print

While the effacement of black political articulations in the Blaxploitation genre occluded the possibility of a truly “revolutionary” black radical sexual culture in film, the representation of black sexuality for black people remained important. Many blacks, men and women, became more open and public about sexual mores and desires and expressed them in a range of formats—from the highly eroticized album covers of the Ohio Players to pornographic softcore magazines—during the soul porn era. Impacted by the sexual revolution happening in black communities, they sought out sexual media, hard-core and softcore. While they had participated in pornography as models,

performers, and consumers in the past, there was a veritable explosion of black erotica in the 1960s and '70s. Pam Grier appeared in both *Playboy* and *Players*, while Blaxploitation actors Fred Williamson and Jim Brown both appeared in *Playgirl* magazine in the mid-1970s, showing that purportedly straight black men also participated as models in erotic images. In addition, an industry of black gay erotic images by photographers like Sierra Domino provided other images of black male desirability. Unlike the male leading actors who appeared in *Playgirl*, Grier posed nude. By engaging in the commercial sexual culture of print erotica, Grier expanded her noted role as a sexual icon. Joining black *Playboy* models Jeannie Bell, Gina Byrams, Lola Falana, and Azizi Johari, Grier embodied the desire of many in the black community to see black women as national figures of beauty and desirability. Grier represented a version of black women's sexual agency in a period dominated by a masculinist black politics that subordinated black women's sexual identities to the needs of black men.

*Players* was the first widely circulated men's magazine exclusively focused on capturing a black market. Published beginning in 1973 by the America Distribution Corporation, *Players* was more than a nudie magazine.<sup>61</sup> Before 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. Black Arts Movement writer Wanda Coleman was the first editor; her vision of a smart, relevant, black sexual lifestyle magazine infused *Players* with a progressive tone that made the dual focus on political discourse and sexy centerfolds of the magazine a defiant cultural statement.

*Players*, like *Playboy*, featured regular columns about trends in music, movies, and technology, focused on capturing the interests of male readers. Unlike *Playboy*, or any mainstream black lifestyle magazines at the time, *Players* published articles by eminent black writers, critics, and cultural workers and consistently focused on black cultural and political themes. Contributors included Amiri Baraka, Alex Haley, Julian Bond, Huey Newton, and Stanley Crouch. The magazine featured a range of salient articles on Africa, Haiti, and Maoist China, and an exposé on the prison industrial complex alongside news from African American communities in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Miami, and Washington, D.C. Features on leading activists, entertainers, actors, and athletes focused on Dick Gregory, Paul Mooney, Richard Roundtree, Yaphet Kotto, Sammy Davis Jr., Quincy Jones, Vivian Reed, George Benson, and Arthur Ashe. Arts were also a major feature of *Players*, with exposés on black artists such as renowned sculptor Nathaniel Bustion and designer

Jim McDade. Psychedelic drawings by Bob Smith illustrated short stories by writers such as Donald Goines, Iceberg Slim, and Chester Himes. Finally, *Players* emphasized the exciting contemporary cultural productions of jazz, funk, and soul coming out of black communities, as well as the black film boom of the mid-1970s. Reflecting black stylistic trends, *Players* featured the incredible fashions of the period, from Afrocentric versions of bubas, caftans, and agbadas to outrageous polyester suits, platform shoes, and fur-trimmed ensembles. These fashions expressed soul as an urban, vernacular aesthetic that many found to be culturally affirming and innovative.<sup>62</sup>

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. 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.

Readers celebrated this focus on black sexuality in their letters to the magazine. As one letter to the editor read:

Dear *Players*, I just got hip to your black *Playboy* magazine known as *Players*. And I have a lot of skin books or magazines in my household. But this is the best I've ever had and me being black and to see these tender bronze women getting funky . . . man! It was really a sight to behold! This magazine really did something to let the black woman ex-

press herself to the world in this manner. You can believe me, whenever I get the money, I will get your year thing.

—Charles D. Lewis, Los Angeles, California.<sup>63</sup>

As this letter demonstrates, black male consumers of *Players* enjoyed the magazine's focus on black women and regarded these women not simply as tender bronze objects, but as women expressing themselves. These men were also a previously untapped market that advertisers could now target. In the back of the magazine, beyond the cigarette and liquor ads, devices and drugs for penis enlargement and sexual enhancement were advertised, acknowledging black men's anxieties that sharply diverged from myths of their supersexual prowess.

*Players* provided a unique forum for sexual culture and information about sexuality not only to black men, but also to black women. Black female consumers could potentially enjoy the magazine's sexual discourse. Although it was not the intention of the magazine, heterosexual, bisexual, and gay women of color could potentially appropriate the erotic presentations of the women of color centerfolds as a venue for identification and sexual fantasy, and they could use the sexual culture and information for their own needs. Importantly, *Players* also provided a space for black women models to be seen and to work. Pam Grier's layout in the magazine's third issue (March 1974) helped establish *Players* as a venue for aspiring models and actresses. Unlike other pornographic magazines focusing on black women during the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s, such as *Terrific N' Tanned*, *Black Girl*, *Blackbirds*, *Chocolate Candy*, *Chocolate Pussy*, 350, and *Soul*; and white hardcore magazines that featured some black women, like *Blue Climax* and *Ero De Luxe: The Swedish Sex Magazine*; *Players* exhibited many more models of color and benefited from a wider, international distribution. The preeminent symbol of soul porn during the 1970s, *Players* was a vital forum where black consumers could locate images that prioritized black sexual subjectivity in a time when cultural politics and sexual politics were deeply intertwined and transforming.

### Lialeh's Tease

"Sweet, sweet, sexy, Lialeh," sings renowned rock and soul drummer Bernard "Pretty" Purdie over the funk grooves his band lays down in the opening scene of the film *Lialeh*. A woman with a long straight-haired wig, wearing only red thong panties, glides and shimmies between the saxophone, clarinet, congas, guitars, bass, and piano players, lingering around Purdie's drum

set. The film cuts back and forth between the dancer's smiling face and lithe body twisting to the beat, and Purdie's face as he croons the honeyed lyrics. This opening scene of *Lialeh* sets it apart from the rest of Golden Age porno. By referencing Curtis Mayfield's performance of "Pusher Man" in *Superfly*, *Lialeh* signals its emergence from the black film movement of the 1970s. Directed by Barron Bercovich and starring Jennifer Leigh and Lawrence Pertillar, *Lialeh* expresses the cultural sensibility of black performance and aesthetics of the soul era, including the interface of music with black politics and black eroticism. By linking these, *Lialeh* references the energy and interests of the soul aesthetic and the black power cultural milieu. Yet, like much of black exploitation cinema, the film is not only technically shoddy and narratively incoherent, it seems to have been created by white filmmakers for the sole purpose of capitalizing on black people's desires to see their own sexuality on screen. As an example of soul porn, the film reflects an attempt to portray the sexual agency of black people and the erotic potential of relationships between blacks and whites. But like much of soul porn, as well as much of black exploitation cinema, black women are not only objectified, they are marginalized in favor of black men. Here, even the title character Lialeh is sidelined. How does Jennifer Leigh's Lialeh perform within, and perhaps against, the limits of the black woman's role? I begin to answer this question with a description of the film.

Purdie's soulful soundtrack continues to play as the scene shifts to show the introductory credits over the lights of New York's Times Square. Enter Arlo (Pertillar): a black man wearing a flashy zebra coat and a red fedora walking the square, surveying the cityscape, his strut in time with the funky score. The next scene introduces Lialeh (Leigh) as she, wearing a rather demure powder-blue trench coat, rides a bicycle through the city. Arriving at a theater dressing room, she sits at a mirror and gazes at her reflection. She soon begins to apply makeup and puts on a fashionably large Afro wig. Arlo is auditioning women for a sex revue. Frustrated that the auditions are going nowhere, he tells all the women waiting in the wings to leave. Lialeh won't accept his dismissal; she insists that he listen to her song by pushing him down into a chair. As she begins to sing, she sways her thin, sinuous body, and lifts her short red skirt. In a nod to the "casting couch,"<sup>64</sup> she kneels down to give Arlo a blow job. Needless to say, Lialeh gets the job.

The narrative strays from here, following the exploits of Arlo rather than the title character, Lialeh. For instance, the next scene shows Arlo kissing a different black woman as they ride in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce through the city. After clearly establishing that Arlo is both fashionable and



a ladies man, the film then shows that he is also political. He gets to “stick it to Whitey” when he goes to meet with the slumlord who owns the theater where he wants to put on his sex show. The secretary, a white woman (Diane Miller) who is eating a hot dog at her desk, looks both disgusted and afraid of Arlo, asking, “Are you going to rape me?” “Is that what you want?!” Arlo angrily quips. When Arlo tries to force his way into the office, the secretary jumps in front of him and takes a martial arts stance, warning that she has a “brown belt.” They circle each other as if they are going to break into a kung fu fight.<sup>65</sup> Wrestling the secretary to the ground, Arlo begins to seduce her with kisses and caresses instead. As she begins to moan, in delight rather than fear, Arlo enacts his revenge. He has “stuck it to her” by putting her hot dog in her vagina. “So long, bitch! Enjoy your lunch!” he says as he leaves her enraged and embarrassed on the floor of the office. By humiliating the racist secretary, Arlo is cast as a defiant hero, even if the act was in fact a form of sexist forced penetration or rape.

Strangely, Arlo, the ladies man, never seduces Lialeh—at least not in person. They have a tepid phone sex scene instead. During a call Lialeh masturbates while Arlo simply walks around his stylish apartment. Arlo even hangs up on Lialeh when another black woman arrives at the door (she is conducting a survey on soul food), and soon they have sex in a rather sensual bubble bath in a direct reference to Park’s famous *Superfly* scene. Instead of hooking up with Arlo in person again, Lialeh has two hardcore scenes of her own. First, Lialeh has a sex scene with a minister following gospel choir practice at a run down, storefront church. Given the sexual conservatism within the black church, Lialeh’s sex scene with the black minister is quite remarkable. Although other hardcore films have used gospel music and religious symbolism in sex scenes, I have not encountered another in which a minister performs a sex scene, or which depicts the sex actually happening between the pews on the floor of a black church. Set to quite well-arranged blues-inflected music, the scene presents Lialeh as the sexual aggressor who seduces the minister. Lialeh’s second sex scene is with the hapless production assistant. They have sex on the dressing room floor just before the big show, which viewers may have forgotten is the plot device, because of the narrative’s incoherent twists and turns. Lialeh again is the aggressor in the scene, but she also shows tenderness, assuaging the PA’s low self-esteem about the small size of his penis.

Finally, the revue begins. Purdie’s band performs and we discover that the song “Lialeh” is actually part of the show. Lialeh’s solo performance is next. Wearing a stylish red strapless gown, a white feather boa, and white gloves, Lialeh begins to sing a low-voiced sultry song. In a low angle shot with the



FIGURE 2.2. Lialeh’s solo dance, *Lialeh* (1974).

stage lights positioned behind her, Lialeh slowly moves her hips and flutters her arms as she begins to remove her clothes in style of a burlesque dancer. A glaring red stage light heightens the drama of Lialeh’s performance, underscoring its “red light” nature as it glistens on her brown skin. As the tempo of her song picks up, Lialeh’s striptease gains fervor. She dances fiercely, dropping down to the floor and pushing her body in forceful, thrusting, push-up like motions as the song climaxes. Lialeh’s performance is impressive, sensual, and even beautiful. At the end of her number, having removed most of her costume, Lialeh descends to the audience and presents her G-string for cash contributions. She shimmies up to a white man, but then petulantly rejects his tip. “That’s a fiver not a c-note,” Lialeh says as she sticks the folded bill in his mouth and defiantly walks away. This final move by Lialeh to establish her desires—to be valued as a performer who deserves at least \$100 tips—undermines the white male consumptive gaze. Like Arlo’s reprisal against the slumlord’s secretary, Lialeh’s uncompromising rejection of the spectator’s cheap tip establishes her as a valuable sexual agent as well as a political agent in her use of sexuality. This is the only time in the film we get a sense of Lialeh’s underlying motivations as a political actor, however.

*Lialeh* ends on an unusual note. In its final scene, two other black women

dancers and three black male dancers join Lialeh on stage. Wearing gold sequin evening gowns, the women dance and sing in a line facing the men. Surprisingly, the men are dressed like Johnnie Keyes's "African" in *Behind the Green Door*: they wear bodysuits with a hole cut to expose their crotch, bone necklaces, and face paint. The performers seem to have fun as they sing and playfully perform a collective striptease. Just as the performance gets going, Arlo appears in the audience asking to see tickets. When he comes to a conservatively dressed white couple, he insists that the white woman (Amy Mathieu) come on stage. When she resists, Arlo actually picks her up, throws her over his shoulder, and carries her up to the stage. There, he forces oral sex on her. The entire group of black male dancers joins in.

The film ends without fully exploring the intriguing and sexy secrets of the main female character, sacrificing her development to the conquests of the black male characters. Lialeh's role is limited, and her sex acts seem more compensatory gestures than important scenes for her character or the plot. The other black actresses (all uncredited) are used solely to help develop Arlo's role. At the end of the stage performance they disappear altogether. Although problematic, *Lialeh* is highly significant to the history of black sexual culture and pornographic feature film. It brings the two forms together in what one critic called a "sophisticated, sensual, fast-moving, and entertaining . . . blaxploitation [*sic*] sexploitation treat."<sup>66</sup>

Yet black film critic Donald Bogle had reservations about the film: "Like most pornographic films," Bogle argues, "*Lialeh* obviously exploits female characters and is often too graphic for its own good."<sup>67</sup> Bogle's prudishness aside, although the female performers mostly serve to support the interests of the men—a common feature of pornographic film—it is also important to consider how these women performers might have exceeded their limited and exploiting roles. The film is ultimately redeemed by Lialeh's engaging Revue Nègre performance, which references a historical musical tradition around black sexuality, but is placed in a black cultural nationalist moment. Jennifer Leigh brings charisma and an otherwise unseen grace to the burlesque scene. Her performance allows the film to exceed any other contemporary film in the black, Hollywood, exploitation, or porno film traditions by advancing a space for the articulation of the hardcore sexuality of black actresses. By capturing Jennifer Leigh's use of sexualized performance, the film creates an important rupture in the silencing of black female sexual desire in American popular culture. This staging of her climactic performance before an audience—black and white, men and women—reflects the performativity of racialized sexuality and underscores its relationship to manipulation and voyeurism. It in-

sists on voyeurism's malleability and on black women's ability to mediate the meanings of their own sexualities. Lialeh's striptease references a long tradition of black women's erotic and burlesque performance. Even her classy red dress and feather boa acknowledge the privileging of images of elegant white women in Hollywood and Broadway, and how black women can in fact appropriate them. Hence, her erotic performance pushes against the historic dichotomy between glamorized white femininity in Hollywood and Broadway and the forced unglamour of black actresses' parts. Her performance represented black women's roles in taking ownership in their sexuality and using it for their own desires for eroticism, visibility, and opportunity.

As a porno, *Lialeh* is not so much "too graphic," as Bogle asserts, but often too awkward and tedious. This is in part due to the below-average quality of the film's production, surely stemming from the constraints of time and money intrinsic to an underground shoot. For example, Arlo's bathtub scene ends up being rather tepid. The lighting and not-so-sudsy water do not capture the sexiness of the exchange in the way Gordon Parks Jr. was able to in *Superfly*. Additionally, poor lighting and sound in Lialeh's dressing room scene add a shoddy and gratuitous quality to the exchange, as if the director realized at the last minute that another hardcore scene was needed to carry the film and decided to cut it in. At the same time, a lot of time and care was put into the score, costumes—including choir robes and elaborate performance outfits—and staging the scenes.

Bogle may not have been open to the graphic nature of the production, but he did acknowledge the camp intentions of this "funny enough" film. Like much of vintage and Golden Age film pornography, humor was one vehicle used to manage the tensions around displaying the hardcore sexual scenario.<sup>68</sup> Here humor serves a political purpose as well, as in the "hot dog scene" in which Arlo's comical yet sexist revenge on the white secretary functions to critique the historic caricature of black men as rapists. Lialeh's snipe at the white male tipper in the audience of the revue serves to destabilize the power of white patriarchal supremacy and upset the notion that black women's sexuality is always available on the cheap. These filmic reversals of power relations address the largely black, urban population who were most likely the intended audience.

## Black Girl in a Sex World

Desiree West's role in Anthony Spinelli's *Sex World* best exemplifies how black actresses performed in porno that mobilized racial conflicts in order to heighten the erotic charge of—and therefore, interest in—soul porn.<sup>69</sup> *Sex World* is like the setting of the TV show *Fantasy Island*, an exclusive weekend retreat where visitors learn that they can forget all their problems, knowing that “every fantasy will be fulfilled,” as one of the *Sex World* guides promises. During the orientation, the guide describes to arriving guests how they should submit to counselors who will probe their erotic predilections, while behind the scenes, technicians use surveillance cameras, computers, and communication systems to arrange sexual scenarios that enact the guests' deepest fantasies. Desiree West plays Jill, a guest who is paired with Roger (John Leslie), a rather pompous white guest who is cynical about the whole enterprise. As her scene reveals, Roger is also a bigot. Jill and Roger have an intense exchange in which Jill aggressively convinces Roger to put his bigotry aside and have sex with her. The *Sex World* technicians have put them together because they believe the key to solving Roger's sexual problem is to, in fact, pair him with “someone he hates.”

The opening of the scene shows Roger in a bathrobe picking up the phone. He asks for the manager, but is instead connected to one of the technicians who is watching him on a surveillance monitor. She asks, “What's the problem?” Roger complains that the room is not to his taste: it features burgundy and black zebra-print paint, large tropical plants, and woven rattan screens. “You gonna have some Zulu race come out and dance for me?” Roger says in a thick New York accent, “Come on! What's going on?” The technician cuts him off just as there is a knock at the door. Roger turns to see Jill standing in a white terry-cloth bathrobe, her hand on one hip, smiling. “What do you want? You here to clean up the room?” Angry, he hangs up the phone, turns to Jill and says, seething with frustration, “Well, if you're going to clean up, clean up!”

Jill responds, “I'll clean your wet cock when we's done, son.” She smiles and kisses the air as Roger looks at her with the sudden realization that she is not the maid, “Oh no! You can't be my trick!” “Surprise, honey!” says Jill as she approaches the bed. “There goes the fucking neighborhood,” Roger mumbles. Sultrily moving to the bed, Jill reaches toward Roger, but he pulls back. “Now look, fat lips, you got the wrong room, and the wrong boy!” Keeping her cool, Jill wryly responds to Roger's abusive words by saying, “Oh, well they told me to go find that honkey boy. Ain't that you?”

Roger is getting nervous. As Jill moves closer he moves back. “Uh uh, but I'll tell you a secret,” he announces. “At Thanksgiving, I went for the white meat—I said give me the breast. Period.” Jill rejoins: “Don't say breast, say *titty*. Live a little.” She smirks with satisfaction as she can see Roger beginning to freak out. He picks up the phone again but the line is dead. “It's just you and me,” she provokes, “Come on, you ain't never had no *black* pussy before?” “Not yet,” he jumps up; “Not now,” he bounds across the bed; “Not ever!” he declares from a chair on the other side of the room. “You don't know what you've been missing,” she breathes, kittenishly stroking the bedspread. “Haven't you ever heard? The *darker* the meat, the *sweeter* the juice.” Jill sits up to face Roger. “Don't you want to see my juice, honey?” she asks. Looking away, Roger stubbornly declares, “I don't want to see nothing from you.” Jill stands up and seductively opens her robe. “Now, this *ain't* too shabby, is it?”

The film cuts from Roger's awe-stricken face to Jill's bust—she wears a white lace bustier—and then slowly pans down her body, stopping at Jill's exposed crotch white framed by a garter belt. The film cuts back to Roger's stunned face, his mouth now hanging open. Suddenly he bolts from the chair to the other side of the room. Jill turns to Roger and stares. “Well,” she pauses, cocking her head to the side, “if I ain't got me a first class honkey bigot here. Ooohweee!” “Now, wait a minute!” Roger declares. “You can't call—I am not prejudiced! I just don't happen to *like* you people.” “Okay, white boy, I'll prove your *spigot* ain't no bigot,” Jill teases as she lets her robe fall to the floor, “Let's get your *foster* out, and see if we can get it *flowing*, huh?” The film cuts to a close-up of Jill's genitals from Roger's point of view. It pans up her body to her breasts then quickly cuts away to Roger's face before jumping back to Jill's face. This shot-reverse-shot structure suggests that Roger cannot take his eyes off Jill's body; he is spellbound. “You are built kinda nice. I'll say that,” Roger almost mumbles to himself, as if ashamed to admit it. “Fucking A, I am Caesar!” Jill says in a louder, more confident voice. Still smiling, undaunted by the cat-and-mouse game, Jill cups her breasts. “These jugs are filled with *honey*. And down here,” she touches her genitals, “is my honeypot. Just for you.” The camera pulls in on her face as she speaks in a slow drawl, “This is home, *Jerome*.”

Finally moving to face Jill, Roger says, “All right, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But what are you supposed to do for me?” “Me? *I's* provides the entertainment, *suh*.” “All right, entertain me. You're supposed to have such rhythm, do a little dance.” In a soft, sweet voice Jill replies, “The rhythm I got ain't in my *feet*!” Placing her hand close to her pelvis Jill coos, “It's about three or four feet *higher*. Between my *thighs* is where my rhythm *lies*.” Jill kneels



FIGURE 2.3. John Leslie as Roger in *Sex World* (1977).

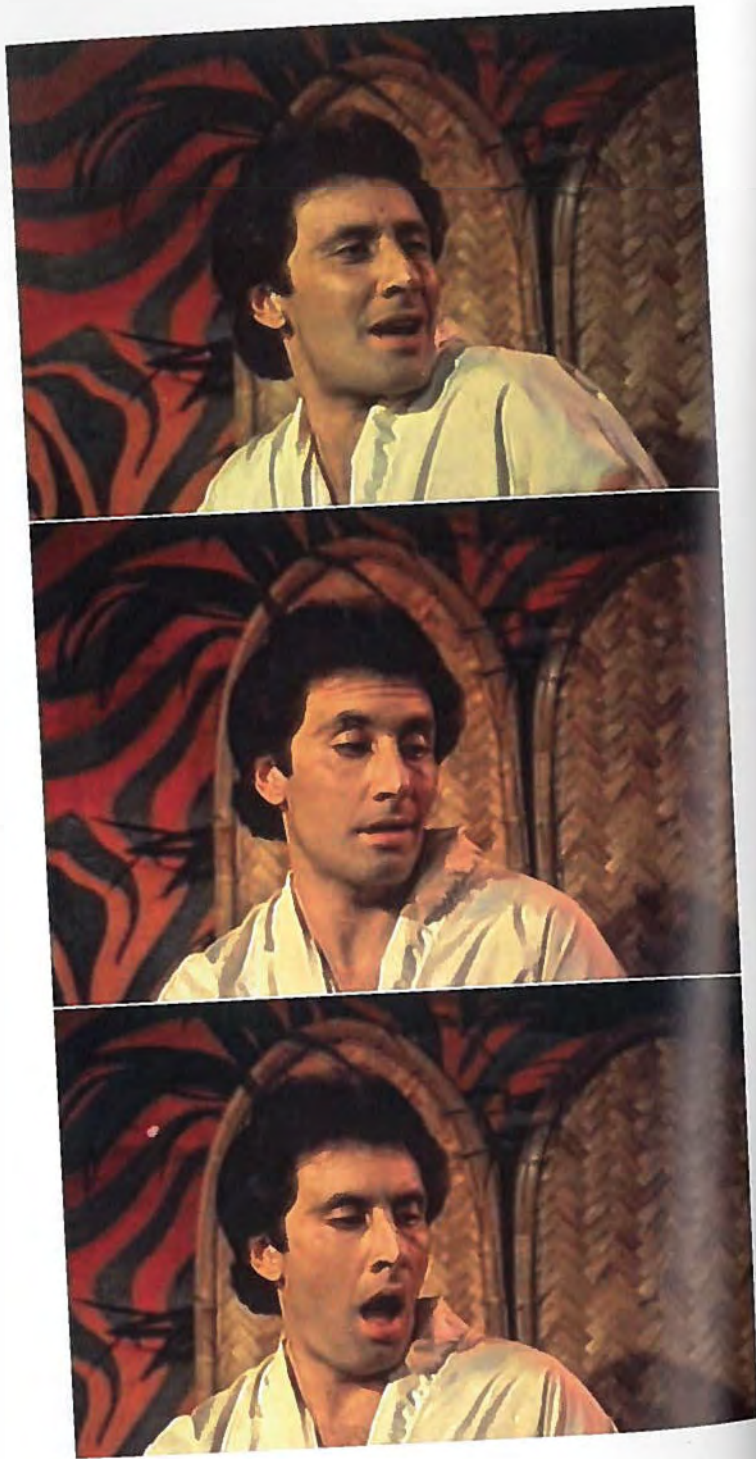


FIGURE 2.4. Desiree West as Jill in *Sex World* (1977).







FIGURE 2.5. Desiree West and John Leslie in *Sex World* (1977).

on the bed and slides next to Roger, her voice almost singing, “*Fine as wine, so divine.*” Jill begins to wear down Roger’s resolve, and she encourages him: “Now that’s the way!” She exposes her breasts. “Ain’t these ’bout the finest tits you ever seen?” She strokes her thigh, “And these *thighs*, tell me, don’t these thighs make your peter *rise*?” Kneeling in front of him, she caresses her butt. “And this ass, ain’t this a *class ass*? Tell me this ain’t the *finest* ass you ever had stuck in your *face*?” “You people do have nice asses,” Roger admits. Jill keeps pushing: “Go ahead, put your hand on it. *Feel* it. Bet you never felt one.” Roger reaches out, tentatively, to touch her. “There you go! Oooh, you got nice hands too. There you go, dip into the *valley*. *Dally* into the *valley* for a while.” Roger rather awkwardly touches Jill between her buttocks cheeks and then smells his fingers. “Hmmm, you don’t *smell* funny. I thought you people smell funny.” “Not this ass! It just smells like *ass*,” Jill says, touching his shoulder and pulling Roger in. “Go on, smell it! Yeah, come on, stick your nose down there!” Shaking his head and pulling away, Roger whines, “I’ll touch it but I don’t want to smell it.” Jill then turns around to face Roger. “Don’t be *mad*. Let’s be *glad*.”

“Come on,” she says, pushing down her bustier to expose her breasts more, “I seen you sneaking a peek at these titties a long time ago. They’re yours. Ain’t nobody gonna know. It’s just for *you*.” Jill finally grabs Roger and pulls him down on the bed.

Throughout the scene, shots cut back to Jill and Roger enthusiastically having sex, culminating in Roger ejaculating on Jill’s chest. Roger is transformed by this sexual encounter with a black woman. In the end, when the rest of the guests are boarding the bus, we see him attempting to bribe a Sex World porter to let him remain at the fantasy retreat, ostensibly with Jill. “I just want to go through again, that’s all,” he pleads. “See, there’s this girl—it might turn out to be serious! Look, cash. If that’s the problem, I got cash!” Jill looks over her shoulder to see Roger’s negotiations with the porter, shakes her head bemusedly, and boards the bus.

This captivating scene plays out the tensions of interracial desire through the trope of the aggressive black woman who seduces the unwilling, aloof white man. It propels what I have called the “myth of prohibition,” whereby white men’s desire for black women is made visible, instead projected onto the figure of the hypersexual black woman. As the myth goes, white men do not willingly cross racial borders to have sex with black women. Rather, they are compelled to engage in interracial sex by black women who, because their very natures are defined by sex, demand it of them. When white men do become intimate with black women, this discourse asserts, it is because black women tempted them. Saturated with this cultural myth, representations of interracial sex between white men and black women evoke the ways in which black women trouble the mechanisms of denial, concealment, and projection white men have used to legitimate and deflect their race and gender privilege and sexual domination. A colonial fantasy and legacy of American slavery, the myth of prohibition is central to the unconscious tapestry of racialized desire at work in porno like *Sex World*.<sup>70</sup>

Even though Jill is a paying guest at the retreat who is entitled to realize her own fantasy, she is used to fulfill the desires—unacknowledged and disavowed—of another guest, a white man. White characters, including white women, experience Sex World as a sexual utopia. They emerge at the end of the film satiated and personally transformed. One white woman desires sex with women outside of her marriage, while another secretly longs for sex with a black man. Both become agents of their own sexual needs through their encounters with the objects of their desire at the resort. Yet Jill, the sole black female character, is not only subject to the only abusive scenario in the film, her true desires and motivations are left unaddressed. Just as Roger confuses

her for the maid, Jill is used to perform a kind of service for him—that is, she helps him realize that his bigotry is actually unrealized desire. In this way, *Sex World* rehearses a scenario that dates back to the plantation sexual economy, in which black women's sexuality was made available to white patriarchy, objectified and imagined as desirous of the (white man's) civilizing mission.

In many ways, *Sex World* reflects pornography's attempt to fabricate a world of fantasy free of limits, a "pornotopia" where it is "always bedtime."<sup>71</sup> But as theorist Frantz Fanon has shown, racism is inevitably sutured to the modern unconscious.<sup>72</sup> Racism defines the very terrain of our imaginations and dreams. It weds black bodies in particular to physical torment, psychic violence, and emotional trauma, which black people in turn internalize and build identities from. In American culture, porn is a stimulus of a popular imagination stratified and, indeed, haunted, by race.<sup>73</sup> And race is itself defined by sexuality.<sup>74</sup> The racial drama that Desiree West and John Leslie so expertly perform is embedded in the idea that interracial erotic sociality invites conflict. This conflict pervades the scene and marks it with intensity, just as it shows that racialized sexuality can never be untangled from the haunting history of violence against and exploitation of racialized minorities.<sup>75</sup> Spinelli relies on this notion of interracial conflict to mirror the fantasy structure of pornographic film: a conflict exists between the characters, sex takes place, and the conflict between characters is resolved. Aimed at creating a fantasy text from the still illicit nature of cross-racial encounters in 1977, *Sex World* uses Desiree West's performance of the character Jill to articulate desire for interracial sex, though Jill's own desires remain invisible.

Central to the abuse Jill receives in her seduction of the character of the bigot, Roger, is his angry and fearful repulsion of her body. Roger calls Jill "fat lips" and says that, at Thanksgiving, he prefers white meat to dark meat. He continuously moves about the room to escape any kind of intimacy with her. The violence Roger projects onto Jill's body is a function of his sense of identity and control, which when confronted with the exposure of his concealed desires is thrown into question. Despite this violent context, Jill uses her body as the very mechanism to undo Roger's power. Not only does she force him to confront her body by moving close to him, using her body to intrude into his space and revealing ever more skin, Jill uses language to describe her body as a desirable landscape for Roger's exploration. Jill's words seduce Roger, force him to confess a desire kept silent, and expose the lie of his disgust. In the process, Jill recuperates her body from abjection. As the italicized words in the dialogue suggest, Jill uses some words with particular emphasis, and the cadence and rhyme of her speech is a key aspect of Jill's seductive labor in the

scene. Utilizing sexual slang and black vernacular speech, Jill portrays a critical facet of the soul porn aesthetic: soul.

Jill's speech is key to the mechanism of this racial-sexual trespass discussed above. The employment of black vernacular speech for the scene's "dirty talk" necessarily references the concept of soul, as it deploys the spoken word. "Spoken soul," contends Claude Brown, is embedded in the "lyrical quality" of African American everyday life.<sup>76</sup> A source of inspiration of many black writers, the language or "lingua franca" of the black vernacular, Toni Morrison explains, "is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion."<sup>77</sup> Desiree West's performance captures this play and passion for spoken soul, despite their likely origin in a white imitation of black speech. The words were scripted by the filmmaker, Spinelli, and they are so extremely rhymed it is likely that a white writer attempting to ape 1970s black vernacular speech conceived them. Nevertheless, Desiree's performance powerfully animates this appropriation of spoken soul and also deconstructs it. "Between my *thighs* is where my rhythm *lies*," she says, holding "thighs" and "lies" on the tongue. This seductive lyricism entices John Leslie's fearful Roger to "abandon" his racism—which actually *be-lies* his desire—and discover the "open secret" of black women's desirability hidden between Jill's thighs. We see in close-up Roger's face move from disgust to curiosity to unbarred lust thanks to Jill's lyrical and gestural provocations. Desiree West's exquisite performance of the black woman as sexual instigator employs speech and embodiment to show how stereotypes once used to police the racial border come to eroticize its transgression.<sup>78</sup> Desiree's animated and transgressive performance of her scripted lines shows how black female hypersexuality, too, is a confining script that might be used in dynamic ways. If *Sex World's* script painfully shows how white titillation relied upon often demeaning representations and treatment of black actresses like Desiree West, it also shows how black women find ways to work within and against these powerful and limiting roles.

The sexual aggressiveness projected onto black women in soul porn is not confined to the myth of prohibition or sexual stereotypes in popular culture. Instead these popular ideologies were reflected in policy discourses and state interventions concerning black women during this period. According to the Moynihan Report of 1965, black women's roles as heads of households—wrongly defined as a "black matriarchy"—were "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society" and the "deterioration of the Negro family."<sup>79</sup> The Moynihan Report constructed poor, black, single mothers as

the cornerstone of the black American family's instability and social displacement because they supposedly displaced and demoralized black men.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, black women were described as bad mothers who transmitted degenerate patterns of behavior to their children, raising them to become a class of fatherless criminals. Instead of exposing the structural impoverishment and isolation of the black family and community, or theorizing black women heads of households as assets to the black family structure, the Moynihan Report portrayed black women as the cause of their own victimization. In the minds of American liberals and conservatives alike, following the report, young black men were the victims not of institutional racism but of emasculating black women who had too many children and exploited taxpayers' money through their endless consumption of welfare.

Whereas during slavery black women's bodies were reproductive commodities manipulated for private and state interests, in the 1960s and '70s black women's fertility created a problematic surplus workforce for the capitalist economy.<sup>81</sup> Black women's sexuality was framed as a drain on social resources, an economic liability.<sup>82</sup> Black matriarchy discourse deflected attention from the state's role in sustaining black poverty just as black women workers began to fight for greater access to War on Poverty programs such as job training, and to demand more labor options in the postindustrial U.S. economy.<sup>83</sup> Employing sexual stereotypes of black women as aggressively matriarchal and irresponsibly hypersexual, black matriarchy discourses functioned to legitimate multiple forms of surveillance and social control over black life. Sexual scripts likening black female sexuality to social pathology facilitated the intervention of social workers, the police, and others into African American communities. The popularity of these discourses among liberals and conservatives made projecting the state's failure to stop widespread social unrest, massive inequality, and urban decay onto black women easy.<sup>84</sup>

Black women's sexuality was a useful target for whites' concerns about a black political insurgency. As African Americans pushed back against institutional racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia at home and against American imperialism abroad, they inspired a range of groups to launch powerful political movements to claim civil and human rights and demand a more just national politics. These new political alliances showed that cross-racial, black-white collaboration and intimacy were not only possible but desired. The collapse of de jure and de facto racial segregation across the states was a result of this new interracial sociality, which had important sexual implications. Racial segregation, the legal norm since *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, had in fact "rested on the deep seated fear that social mixing would lead to sexual

mixing."<sup>85</sup> While segregation did not prevent white men from gaining access, often violently, to black women's bodies, or black and white couples from risking arrest to be together, it did function to normalize fears of sexual mixing across the color line. Additionally, antimiscegenation laws criminalized marriage and sex between whites and people of color. Alongside the horrific practices of lynching, vigilantism, and intimidation, laws against interracial marriage and sex operated to minimize potential threats to white racial purity, property, and political power. In the 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court found that these laws violated the equal protection and due process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. According to the court they were clearly "designed to maintain White Supremacy" and therefore were "unsupportable."<sup>86</sup>

However, though interracial sex and relationships became legal for black women and white men during the 1960s, cross-racial intimacy still registered as a forceful moral concern. Indeed, sexuality on the racial border was still coded in many representations as a perversion that needed to be avoided at all costs. Interracial eroticism was bound to an ineluctable fear linked to a long history of proscription and punishment. It also provoked a powerful disgust projected onto the racial Other, or for black people, onto the racial Oppressor. For black women, fear of racial betrayal also shaped the taboo of interracial eroticism. While black men like black power activist Eldridge Cleaver could claim sex with white women was an opportunity to display their superior virility to dominant white men—he even called rape of white women "an insurrectionary act"<sup>87</sup>—for black women, pursuing sexual relationships with white men was much more fraught. It meant betraying black men, their families, and the entire black struggle.

Unfortunately, Desiree West was not willing to discuss her career, which approximately spanned the years 1976–79, or her performance in *Sex World* for this book. Nor did I uncover interviews with her during or after her time as an actress and model in the adult industry. However, it is fascinating to note that rumors abound about her, one being that she was actually a member of the Black Panther Party. Fan blogs say that because the police were after her due to her illicit work with the Panthers, Desiree used various pseudonyms to protect her identity: Rayha Teresee, Dee Dee Willing, Patty Lester, Pat Lee, Patricia Lee, Pat Desado, and Susie Sung Lee, though it was common for actors to use multiple pseudonyms or for directors to make them up for specific films.<sup>88</sup> In the tell-all *Skinflicks*, then active director David Jennings recalls a story in which Desiree, whom he called "the Black Panther porn star," showed up to a shoot with her boyfriend Dashiell, a black man who performed

in some loops during the 1970s, sometimes with Desiree. Desiree was in a rage because poor directions had caused the couple to get lost coming from Oakland to San Francisco.

Although it is unlikely that Desiree was actually a Panther, the Black Panther Party first emerged in Oakland in 1966 and had a very strong presence there through the 1970s. Deemed “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” by J. Edgar Hoover, its national network was infiltrated and dismantled by the FBI’s counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) in a matter of years.<sup>89</sup> From 1974 to 1977, during the height of Desiree West’s career in porn, Elaine Brown became chairwoman of the Black Panther Party. Having run for Oakland City Council in 1973 and 1975, Brown was widely known throughout the city. She was a powerful symbol of black women’s leadership in the face of the institutionalized racism that depressed the Oakland ghetto.<sup>90</sup> Brown also symbolized black women’s resistance against entrenched sexism in the black community, including in the Black Panther Party. She was part of a larger movement of black women who were standing up to the “militant ‘brothers’” of the black liberation movement. According to Linda La Rue, many black men bought into the “myth of patriarchy” and enacted a form of “sexist colonialism” in the lives of black women.<sup>91</sup> An emergent black feminist consciousness proliferated among black women across the nation that was deeply critical of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” as well as black men’s sexism.<sup>92</sup> Thus, while it is unlikely that rumors about Desiree West being a Black Panther are true, it is more accurate to say that she was located in a social context where radical antisexist, antiracist, and anticapitalist black nationalist and black feminist politics were very much in the air. For whites, particularly those that lived in San Francisco like Jennings, or who, like Jennings, seemed to lament interacting with blacks, the image of strong and self-defined black women like Desiree West was certainly perceived as a threat.

As Jennings’s comments convey, Desiree must have experienced racism as part of her labor in the porn world. Given the known masculinist leanings of black power discourses at the time which were so prominent in black communities like Oakland, she may have experienced sexism and patriarchal attitudes from within her own community as well. These dual constraints of racism and intracommunity sexism, alongside the continued economic marginalization and exploitation of black women’s labor during the period, most likely shaped the way in which Desiree West negotiated the porn industry as a black woman, even as one of the few black actors with notoriety during the

era. Desiree might have known that for a black woman to use her sexuality for her own profit (and possibly pleasure) at that time, particularly in interracial sex scenes with white men, was a dangerous act. Performing, in addition to being a form of economic survival, could have been one way for Desiree to resist racial militancy, or to even express a critical perspective about how black women should be portrayed. Despite Desiree’s likely experience, she comes off as an attitudinal black woman rather than a sexual rebel in Jennings’s story. The director describes how he had to work around Desiree’s demand that Dashiell not ejaculate on her face at the climax of the scene. This seems like a reasonable request from a woman who not only knows what she is comfortable with, but feels that she can speak up to control, to an extent, her performance and her labor. Viewing her as a complainer, however, Jennings employs a lens that many whites used to interpret black people—outspoken women in particular—who embraced radical politics.

Some years ago, I had the chance to chat with John Leslie during the annual Adult Video News Convention in Las Vegas. Leslie, who remained active in the adult industry as an actor, director, and producer from 1975 until his passing in 2010, is widely respected as one of the most significant players in adult film over the past forty years. I asked Leslie, not on tape, about what it was like to perform in that famous, and to my mind highly racist, scene in *Sex World* with Desiree West in 1977. He laughed, saying that it was all in fun. The scene, to him, was a playful parody of sorts, and Desiree was down with the joke. For Leslie the scene was part of an exciting time in adult film, and Desiree was a consummate performer. If she was uncomfortable with the script, he was not aware of it. Yet, we could ask, would Leslie have been aware of Desiree’s feelings, or even sensitive to them? The film required a black actress to be the object of his joke, to turn the bigot into a lover of blacks and thus underscore a supposed lack of white culpability in racism, because after all they really do like “you people.” Without Desiree’s voice it is impossible to know just how she did feel on set and about Leslie. She could have been wary about his intentions and his politics, suspicious about the nature of his and Spinelli’s joke, indifferent, or altogether enchanted with her character’s meaty role as the savvy challenger to Leslie’s arrogant and abusive Roger. Nevertheless, Desiree’s fluent performance of soul-porn aesthetics is remarkable given the racist industrial context of 1970s porno, and the extreme racist dynamics of the scene.

Because Desiree West performed extensively and worked with many well-known white actors like John Leslie, John Holmes, and Paul Thomas, producers must have seen her as bankable and her costars may have viewed her



as easy to work with. It is possible to imagine that Desiree might have tried to explore her sexuality through her work as an actress in porno. She appeared in girl-on-girl sex scenes with several popular white actresses such as Annette Haven and Sharon Thorpe. In *The Egyptian Princess* (a 16 mm reel), Desiree plays a slave to Annette Haven's princess, but the sex between them is reciprocal. The idea of playing the slave to a white actress portraying African royalty might have been a bit hard to swallow, but Desiree brings a sensuality of the exchange that shows that adhering to a black cultural politics of representation was perhaps not always her core political issue. Always forcefully erotic in her performances, Desiree used pornographic performance to portray herself as comfortable circulating in both black and white sexual worlds despite their real-world entrapments. Even if she might have worked in the adult industry solely for the money, as many performers did and, according to my interviews with women performing since the 1980s, continue to do, this does not exclude Desiree from mobilizing her own desire for mobility and transgression in her work. Desiree's desires on set may have also included minimizing abuse, pushing back against offensive roles, and finding a way to avoid criminalization at a time when it was legal to watch but not to film pornography. Whether it was to pursue the pleasures of sex, of performance, of mobility, or of earning an income and protecting herself from other far-worse forms of exploitation, Desiree West's role in both black-cast and interracial porno was to portray the aggressively sexual black woman, a role that she clearly understood how to execute. Her performances of this role communicated undeniable agency, complexity, and subjective intensity—even if her personal narrative of these experiences remains less attainable than fan narratives circulating around her.

With the emergence of soul porn, black audiences had unprecedented access to black erotic images. These images reflected the desires of black people to see themselves as self-determined and sovereign erotic subjects, rather than servants for white fantasies. Nevertheless, soul porn, especially when created by white directors, did precisely that—it showed the newly assertive and politically situated black sexuality through a white male gaze of fear, anxiety, pleasure, and titillation. In this way soul porn shows the continuity of racial fetishism in pornographic production, from its emergence to the present period. Yet the new social and political contexts of civil rights and black power necessarily fostered an altered image of black sexual difference, one that reflected black people's own dynamic performances of eroticism and desire for a black gaze. As the period of social and political eruption and invention began to shift and give way to a backlash of sexual and moral conser-

vatism in the 1980s, VHS emerged as a new force in the adult film industry. The rise of this technology, in the midst of accelerated state and social reactions against pornography, fostered a new interest in black sexuality evacuated of the agency expressed by black performers in the 1970s. Unlike soul porn, black porn of the 1980s was a creation of pure market interest.



90. Mumford, *Interzones*.
91. Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!," 278–80.
92. Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!," 281.
93. By my use of the term "race porn" I do not mean to suggest that it was similarly manufactured or had similar goals as the "race films" of the era, made primarily by black directors (like Oscar Micheaux) for black audiences with themes of racial uplift and black middle-class values. I use "race porn" to delineate the centrality of racialization as a process created in the making or viewing of such material, particularly racial desire. On "race films" see Gaines, *Fire and Desire*.
94. Penley, "Crackers and Whackers," 313.
95. Penley disagrees with Peter Lehman's reading of "fleeting moments of humor in porn," instead seeing humor as much more critical to the overall structure of the stag (Penley, 314). Here I am interested in both possibilities in race porn: that humor structures the "dirty joke" and that humor offers more "fragmentary pleasures" for the viewer, and in my examination, the performer/sex worker herself. See Lehman, "Revelations about Pornography," 3–15.
96. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 7.
97. Penley, "Crackers and Whackers," 316.
98. Freud, *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*, 92–97.
99. Freud, *The Joke and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*, 92–97.
100. On black women as trickster figures see Stallings, "'Mutha' Is Half a Word!"
101. Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*.
102. Russo, "Female Grotesques."
103. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction," 65–70.
104. Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 92–127; Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 120–35.
105. Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 130–31.
106. Williams, "'White Slavery' versus the Ethnography of 'Sexworkers,'" 126–27.
107. Here by asserting this actress's role as a sex worker I disagree with Linda Williams that "the word 'sexworker' is . . . anachronistic for the period" and "has a euphemistic tinge of political correctness that does not fit the historical attitudes towards women who performed sex for hire from the teens through the late sixties and toward the women who can be seen to repeat those acts in the stag film archives" (124). I use sex worker precisely because it describes their work. I make clear that these sex workers are also actresses and performers, but that as participants in pornography they were likely prostitutes or involved in other kinds of sexual labor and performance. Williams seems concerned that the term "sexworker" does not capture the degree to which these women were constrained by their position. The women working in stag film may have been coerced, but using this term highlights their labor in ways that are obscured by a sole focus on their victimization. The term "sex worker" has been expanded over the years by feminist theorists and activists to include a variety of persons involved in the sex industry in various historical periods. I argue that the term allows for complexity and difference among sex workers rather than proscribing one identity, experience, or narrative.

108. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

109. This tactic is seen in the performances of other actresses at the time. For instance, consider Candy Barr's refusal to perform a blow job on another actor in the stag film *Smart Aleck* (1951).

## Chapter 2. Sexy Soul Sisters

1. Hotmovies.com, "Sex with Soul." See also video compilation *Sex With Soul*, Historic Erotica, 2005.
2. Of course, the civil rights movement was also a time when the black middle class actively sought to disassociate with what they saw as the problematic sexual deviance of the working class and in the process sought to police the gender performance and sexual behaviors of homosexuals, sex workers, and other "deviants." However, I aim to open up these gender and sexual performances and behaviors of the black working class as examples of how, despite the will of political elites such as Adam Clayton Powell and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., African Americans were expressing and exploring sexual issues, identities, and practices in new ways. On gender and sexual policing during the civil rights era see Russell, "The Color of Discipline."
3. Rare Celebrities, "Legendary Ebony Porn Actress Desiree West-Biography."
4. The video was removed from YouTube, most likely for violating YouTube's policy of censoring nudity. Many fans had commented on the YouTube page as well as on other blogs on which the video was posted, but those comments have also been erased due to the removal.
5. Excalibur Films, "Desiree West Biography."
6. Bennett, *The Negro Mood*, 89.
7. Green and Guillory, "By Way of an Introduction," 1.
8. Green and Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style,'" 259.
9. Green and Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style,'" 259; see also Tate et al., "Ain't We Still Got Soul?"
10. Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," 1235.
11. Davis, "Afro Images," 23–31.
12. Bennett, "The Soul of Soul," 114.
13. Green and Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style,'" 251–52.
14. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*.
15. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds*.
16. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 287.
17. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 287.
18. Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 19–21.
19. Duggan and Hunter, *Sex Wars*, 19–21.
20. Nye, *Sexuality*, 381.
21. Slade, "Erotic Motion Pictures and Videotapes," 107.
22. Some argue that violence was a substitute for the constraints on showing sexuality in film. See *American Grindhouse*; Sconce, *Sleaze Artists*.

23. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.
24. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 277.
25. Slade, "Violence in the Hardcore Pornographic Film."
26. Slade, "Violence in the Hardcore Pornographic Film," 160.
27. Ford, *A History of X*, 49.
28. Camille Paglia interviewed in Bailey and Barbato, dir., *Inside Deep Throat*.
29. Bailey and Barbato, dir., *Inside Deep Throat*.
30. Blumenthal, "Hardcore Grows Fashionable—and Very Profitable."
31. Although the \$600 million figure is cited in the documentary film *Inside Deep Throat*, others believe the lower figure, estimated by the FBI, is more accurate. The confusion relates to the fact that the film was distributed by Mafia networks attached to the Peraino family, who were believed to inflate revenue reports in order to launder money from illegal activities.
32. Slade, *Pornography and Sexual Representation*.
33. Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border."
34. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
35. Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*.
36. Slade, *Pornography in America*.
37. Thanks to Albert Steg for making me aware of these performers and for screening these rare 16 mm and 8 mm films for me.
38. See Heller, "Inter-Racial Porno Movies," 91; Boone, "Black Girl in a White World," 52–56.
39. A "white coater" is a term for sexploitation films of the 1960s and early '70s that were prefaced or narrated by an actor portraying a doctor or psychiatrist. Often dressed in a white coat, the doctor provided the educational pretext necessary to circumvent U.S. obscenity laws. See Cook, *Lost Illusions*.
40. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 265–85.
41. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 281, 280. See also Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 275–82.
42. Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 66. Cress Welsing quoted in Hemphill, *Ceremonies*. Both are discussed in Stallings, "'Mutha' Is Half a Word!," 153.
43. Stallings, "'Mutha' Is Half a Word!," 153.
44. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 85–86.
45. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 86. Not all films deemed part of Blaxploitation were exploitation films. Classic exploitation films sought to exploit a particular racy topic or to shamelessly pander to a particular audience, and were usually cheaply made films produced and marketed outside of Hollywood and its distribution networks. Yet films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Cleopatra Jones* were made on big budgets by big Hollywood studios, while *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* took on important political questions that hardly pandered to its audience. Hence, because many black-cast, black-oriented and black-produced films were considered part of the genre, the designation Blaxploitation film does not represent the tremendous diversity of so many films created during this period. However, scholars continue to debate the

- conventions of the genre. See Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s*; and Simon, "The Stigmatization of 'Blaxploitation.'"
46. Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*
  47. Hall, *Representation*, 270.
  48. Hall, *Representation*, 270.
  49. Hall, *Representation*, 271.
  50. Hall, *Representation*, 271.
  51. Dyer, *White*.
  52. Jaggi, "Twentieth-century fox."
  53. Jaggi, "Twentieth-century fox."
  54. Jaggi, "Twentieth-century fox."
  55. Jaggi, "Twentieth-century fox."
  56. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 6.
  57. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 5.
  58. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 6.
  59. Robinson, "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation," 11.
  60. Hall, *Representation*, 263.
  61. America Distribution Corporation was owned by the same person (Bentley Morris) as Holloway House publishing, which was known for many of the "black experience novels" of the time, such as the work of Donald Goines as well as *Pimp* and *Trick Baby* by Robert Beck (under the pen name Iceberg Slim).
  62. Neal, *Soul Babies*.
  63. Lewis, "Letter to the Editor."
  64. On the casting-couch trope and the classic stag film *The Casting Couch*, known for its portrayal of ambitious aspiring actresses pressed for sex by unseemly directors, see Williams, *Hard Core*; and Di Lauro and Rabkin, *Dirty Movies*.
  65. Martial arts themes were very popular among African American audiences of Blaxploitation and represent an important commingling of black and Asian American culture at the time. See Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.
  66. Arthur Bell, cited in Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television*, 133.
  67. Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television*, 133.
  68. Penley, "Crackers and Whackers."
  69. Linda Williams argues that the racial difference between the actors in pornographic film creates a specific and powerful erotic charge. She writes specifically about the contrast between black men and white women but I think this racialized tension creates interest and heightened eroticism in scenes between black women and white men as well, though of course because of the different history between these couplings, the erotic charge works differently. See Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border."
  70. "Colonial fantasy" is a term used by Homi Bhabha in "The Other Question."
  71. Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, 269.
  72. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.
  73. Slade, *Pornography in America*.

74. JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border."
75. I am drawing again on Linda Williams's argument that racial differences charge interracial pornography with a special form of intensity due to the powerful investments and desires rooted in race. Williams draws upon Abdul JanMohamed for her argument about these erotics on the racial border. See Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border"; JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border."
76. Brown cited in Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*, 3-4.
77. Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*, 4-5.
78. Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border," 286; JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border."
79. Moynihan, *The Negro Family*.
80. Although E. Franklin Frazier discussed "black matriarchy" as problematic, his thesis did not see it as being the primary cause of African American political and social powerlessness and economic marginalization, as the Moynihan Report later argued. See Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*.
81. The image of the "black matriarch" had a profound influence on social discourse around gender roles in the black community and inspired a lasting debate among scholars. In response to Moynihan, Herbert Gutman asserted that the black family and gender roles were essentially adaptive to histories of slavery and marginalization, with black women as assets rather than detriments to the black family's stability. Black feminist scholar Linda La Rue critiqued Moynihan's view as well: "He does not recognize the liberation struggle and the demands that it has placed on the black family" (168). See Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; La Rue, "The Black Women's Movement and Liberation." See also Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*; Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," 8-16; and Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*.
82. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 207. See also Mink, "Welfare Reform in Historical Perspective," 879, 891; Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood*; Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled*.
83. Jill Quadagno argues that the abolishment of War on Poverty programs, through the design of a strategic, conservative white backlash, was linked to the black civil rights movement's increasing and threatening demands for political and economic justice. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare*.
84. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.
85. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896); D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 106.
86. *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967); Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law," 50.
87. Cleaver, *Target Zero*, 47.
88. Pseudonyms were common: virtually every performer used them because it was still illegal to perform in sex films in California and New York during the 1970s and early 1980s.
89. Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism," 169.
90. Brown, *A Taste of Power*.
91. La Rue, "The Black Women's Movement and Liberation."
92. hooks, "Eating the Other."

### Chapter 3. Black Chicks

1. O'Toole, *Pornocopia*, 104. In fact, many argue that the adult industry's use of the Sony VHS format secured the dominance of VHS, while JVC's resistance to the porn industry using their Beta video format forced Beta to become obsolete. See Slade, "Erotic Motion Pictures and Videotapes," 107; Van Scoy, "Sex Sells, so Learn a Thing or Two from It," 64.
2. Videocassette recorders were invented in the 1950s, but VHS entered the market in 1971, remaining a specialty technology until the early 1980s.
3. Holliday, "The Changing Face of Adult Video," 15.
4. "Who Rents Adult Tape?," 27. According to this graph, which includes rentals from general video stores as well as all-adult video stores, women account for 47 percent of renters. Of these renters 29 percent are listed as "Women and Men Renters," 15 percent are "Women Alone," and 3 percent are "Women with Women Renters."
5. Bailey, dir., *Pornography*.
6. Higgins, cited in Bailey, dir., *Pornography*.
7. Holliday, "The Changing Face of Adult Video," 88.
8. *Adult Video News 1986-87 Buyer's Guide*. See also "Charting the Adult Industry," 26.
9. Bailey, dir., *Pornography*.
10. Thomas, "The Marketing of Three Major Titles," 1.
11. Paone, "Combating the Adult Video Glut," 8.
12. Paone, "Combating the Adult Video Glut," 8.
13. "Consumer Feedback: Problems with Shot-On-Video Features," 4.
14. Fishbein, "Where Are We Spiralling to Now?," 63.
15. Fishbein, "Where Are We Spiralling to Now?," 63.
16. Fishbein, "Where Are We Spiralling to Now?," 63.
17. "Retail Feedback," 6; "Consumer Feedback: Favorite Sub-Genres," 6.
18. "Retail Feedback," 6; "Consumer Feedback: Favorite Sub-Genres," 6.
19. In this way, black and interracial video—which function differently in terms of representation, but because they are lumped together in the adult-business discourse during this period in time I will refer to generally as "black pornography"—was both a valued and devalued product.
20. Goldsby, "Queen for 307 Days," 117-18.
21. Goldsby, "Queen for 307 Days," 121.
22. Margold's comment is cited in the post "Racism" on LukeFord.com, which is no longer accessible. Margold reiterated it in an interview with me at his residence in 2002. Bill Margold, personal interview with author, November 26, 2002; "Racism," LukeFord.com.
23. Black pornography in the video era also included Latino and Asian actors. However, despite the occasional inclusion of people of other races and ethnicities, black-cast films were still categorized as black. The category interracial films indicated black-white sex acts. The separate Latino market was not developed until the late 1990s, but during the 1980s films featuring Vanessa Del Rio were advertised to both black and Latino men in urban markets. Some advertisements for Vanessa Del Rio's films used