

# PREFACE

Why the black female *body*? Why not simply a photographic history of black women that does not focus on their bodies? On one level it was the desire to see our likenesses in photographic history that compelled us to seek them out and eventually gather what we found into one volume. When we began looking at the photographic history of black women, we soon discovered that the history of our image is deeply rooted in representations of our mostly unclothed bodies. It was inescapable. In Western art the representation of the black female has been largely determined by prevailing attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality and can be grouped into three categories: the naked black female (alternatively the “National Geographic” or “Jezebel” aesthetic); the neutered black female, or “mammy” aesthetic; and the noble black female, a descendant of the “noble savage.” Even imagery that resists these stereotypes alludes to these figures.

The history of the image of the black female body, like photographic history generally, accounts for what has been included and what excluded, what has been reproduced and what repressed, what has been anointed as “art” and what relegated to obscurity in historical archives. Because of the nature of the subject matter, many examples of nudes in photography, especially of the nineteenth century, still remain in the hands of private collectors or in the back rooms of public archives, rarely seen except in glossy picture books intended to shock and titillate. Likewise early images of blacks are so rare as to be widely dispersed in institutional collections or inaccessible private collections.

Photography books have been one of the primary sources for the images in this book. Histories, monographs, catalogs of private collections—almost without fail these sources include at least one image of a black woman; rarely are there more than two. Publication, however, is a problematic measure of cultural validation since black photographers and subjects have not been consistently published; therefore the preponderance of nude or semi-clothed black women seems significant.

We were therefore conscious of doubly objectifying black women by re-presenting exploitive and derogatory images created in another time and historical context. But the matter of exploitation is not so simple, and negative images are not without complexity and contradiction. One of our primary considerations was the issue of agency, of the subjects’ participation and responsibility in making the image. We define agency as the act of confronting identity and taking control of the image; agency equals power. To put it more simply, sometimes the women posed willingly, either for pay or not. While we do not suggest that these women should be castigated for posing, we, as historians, must resist the impulse to see only what we want to see. That is, we are aware that in protecting a collective body from misrepresentation we might overlook, or even discount, individual desires and choices, especially when they do not fit a “positive” ideal. One of our personal challenges has been to present the images without proselytizing and to distinguish between images commissioned by the citter or her family and those that serve the photographer’s agenda. Likewise

we discuss the images in relation to the prevailing code of ethical conduct in the contemporary culture that produced them and note that the moral code of the subjects might be quite different.

Many black female artists working today address these historical images either directly or indirectly, subverting and rewriting history through their photographic work. A growing number are turning the camera on their own bodies, creating work about how they see themselves and how they are seen in society. Photography is the perfect medium for revisiting and reinterrogating the black female body, for tracing a history coded in images bound by fear and desire, the contradictory emotions that Frantz Fanon argues “lie at the heart of the psychic reality of racism.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this book, we define black women as all women of African descent. Because many of the images reproduced here were made in Europe, where designations of “colored” differ from those in the United States, we also address some images of Asian and Middle Eastern women. The term “African American” does not apply in every case, so we have chosen to use the term “black” in general. Rather than follow a strict chronology, we have arranged the images thematically, drawing parallels and making comparisons across the decades through categories of representation. It is our intention that this book serve as a comprehensive introduction to the subject, although we acknowledge that some important photographers could not be included—for example, Reverend William Ellis (English, 1794-1872), Hannah Hoch (German, 1889-1978), Destiny Deacon (Aboriginal-Torres Strait Islander, b. 1957), Marc Ferrez (Brazilian, 1843-1923), Jean Weisinger (American, b. 1954), Ingrid Pollard (British, b. 1953), and others. We hope that other scholars will build on our work and examine the image of the black female in all media and in all of her aspects.

# INTRODUCTION

On February 14, 1839, scientist Sir John Herschel (British, 1792-1891) wrote about his experiments with the newly announced invention of photography. “Figures have a strange effect—fair women are transformed into negresses &c.”<sup>1</sup> He referred, of course, to the “negative” image in which the tones are reversed, so that what appears white in the “positive” print is seen as black and impenetrable by light in the negative. The negative portrait image appears not simply as a reversal of tones but as hollow and haunting. Just as skin color appears as its tonal opposite, so do the outlines of eyes, nose, and mouth; the person appears inhuman, almost spectral. Herschel’s statement suggests something more than the reversal of skin tone. It reveals an awareness of the black female but also posits the notion of the black woman, or “negress,” as the opposite of the white woman, a visual transformation from presence to absence. It is from just such an opposition that the black female’s photographic image developed. Artist Lorraine O’Grady (American, b. 1940) writes:

*The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West’s metaphoric construction of “woman.” White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be.*<sup>2</sup>

Nineteenth-century photographic images of black women are scarce. Western visual art offers precious few portrait studies of black women, no black heroines celebrated on canvas or in stone for an act of bravery, few gentle glimpses of a spiritual or intellectual being within the black female body. Until the late nineteenth century, the black female was seldom the primary subject of a work of Western art.<sup>3</sup> Exotic but rarely exalted, the black female image frequently functioned as an iconographic device to illustrate some subject believed to be worthier of depiction, often a white female. When she appeared at all, she was a servant in the seraglio, a savage in the landscape, “Sarah” on the display stage,<sup>4</sup> but always merely an adjunct.

Among the tremendous social, technological, and cultural developments that occurred in the nineteenth century, the invention of photography, the birth of “popular culture,” wide interest in the natural sciences and the related disciplines of ethnology and anthropology, and the abolition of slavery, both in the colonies and in Europe, contributed to the ways in which black women were regarded and visualized. Even as support for the abolition of slavery was mounting in Europe and the Americas, colonial/imperial expansion into Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America continued unabated. In the name of science, colonized peoples were compared to Western types. Major institutions were founded to finance and support such work: the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1843; the Societe d’ Anthropologie de Paris in 1859; and the National Geographic Society, founded in the United States in 1888. Studies of skin color, facial

structure, and particularly genitalia contributed to the classification of human types. Regarded as less developed than whites, blacks became associated with moral deficiency, sexual deviance, and intellectual inferiority. Phrenology and physiognomy compared the shape and size of African and European skulls; these comparisons exaggerated differences and linked blacks to animals (particularly monkeys), and were touted as “proving” African inferiority. These false sciences generated popular representations of blacks as ape-like creatures, with huge lips, bulging eyes, and sometimes even tails. These images have not been eradicated from public memory and still influence how the larger society, and even some blacks themselves, view people of African descent.

The invention of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century redefined the visual world and virtually everyone’s access to it but did not alter the visual conventions that had been used to depict racial difference. When the means of visual communication became an “impartial” machine, visual conventions gained force, as viewers assumed that they were seeing black people as they really were. For instance, the stereotype of the “grinning darkey” blissfully content with his or her station in life is rooted in antebellum notions and idealized depictions of plantation life; yet it persists into the twenty-first century and renders every image of an enthusiastic black person as potentially derogatory or problematical. The presumed objectivity of the photographic image is a key element in the historical record of black women’s images.

In Europe in the nineteenth century, the body of the black female symbolized three themes—colonialism, scientific evolution, and sexuality. Virtually always when she is depicted she is either a sexualized mythology or a neutered anomaly, defined by her sexuality or lack of it. French photographers in the decades between 1850 and 1890, working at home and abroad, were the primary producers of images of black women. In the majority of these images, black women were almost always depicted as nudes, generally of an ethnographic nature, or as (usually) clothed companions to a nude or sexually suggestive white female.

Human display for entertainment, once a pastime exclusive to royalty and the aristocracy enticed an emerging middle-class audience in the mid-nineteenth century. The spectacle reached its zenith in the international expositions or world’s fairs that began in 1851 in London, flourished at the end of the century, and continued until 1965. “World’s fairs,” “expositions,” and “exhibitions”—interchangeable terms—were celebrations of cultural, industrial, scientific, and imperial achievements, and they were clearly organized to promote national pride and economic growth. Most expositions were nationalistic and political in nature, promoted by the host countries as educational events, though they also provided a variety of amusements for their audiences.

The Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867 was the first of these hugely popular fairs to feature living and/or photographic displays of non-European peoples. These displays introduced colonized people as a spectacle alongside technological and industrial advances. The first “native villages,” attempts to re-create the customs and naturalistic settings of particular ethnic groups, were

a feature of the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889. Organized around the racial and evolutionary theories of the time, exhibits examined the notion of human difference, presenting a living or documentary lesson in evolution through the display of the “Other.” Expositions supported European and European-American beliefs about African, Asian, and Indian peoples as inferior, using the new social sciences to prop up an already well-established ideology. Widely accepted in scientific and academic institutions by the 1870s, the new field of anthropology and its sub-category of ethnography justified the domination and classification of peoples and paved the way for the introduction of anthropology departments to the fairs. In the interest of science and education, no moral concern restricted the display of the naked colored body. Soon white scientists and fair visitors encountered photographic and living exhibits featuring unclothed Africans. The expositions gave ordinary Europeans their only firsthand experience of black Africans and thus profoundly influenced the popular image of “primitive” man. Certainly some of the people on display were willing and paid participants, which raises complex questions of their agency in shaping their image.

It was also during the mid-nineteenth century that visual pornography, literally “writing about prostitutes,” entered the lexicon.<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century the prostitute was a lower-class woman who often supplemented an insufficient income from another low-wage job with the proceeds of her sexual labor. Prostitutes sometimes modeled for artists and photographers; for these women the stigma associated with the sale or display of one’s body was much the same. For “all the moralizing about character, the primary reason for a woman to become a prostitute was economic.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, a woman posed nude for a photographer or other artist for money. Black women, many still enslaved in France and the United States when photography came into existence, lived on the margins of society. As property themselves, they had no class status; even after the abolition of slavery, the black female was the perpetual “working girl,” in that she could never possess a status in European culture that was unrelated to her labor, whether forced or paid. Her supposed availability as a sexual being coincided with her actual availability as a worker. Ultimately the image of the black woman was associated with prostitution, pornography, and deviant sexuality. Above all else, her image, and particularly her body, was understood to represent that which could be dominated and that which could be possessed, especially sexually.

The end of the nineteenth century saw an explosion of ethnographic photography as anthropological expeditions and tourism increased, opening Africa and Africans to broad exposure. The introduction of the Eastman Kodak box camera in 1888 and the consequent proliferation of photographic “snapshot” images and postcards at the end of the century helped to widely disseminate ideas about ethnographic difference.

In the United States a quite different image of the black woman developed. Antebellum America elevated the image of the nurturing, asexual mammy as the standard even as white males continued

to systematically rape black women and breed new generations of slaves. This contradiction between the black woman's image and her actual experience shaped the way in which black women were visualized.

*The larger society, observing the [black] women's outrageous persistence in holding on, staying alive, thought it had no choice save to dissolve the perversity of the Black woman's life into a fabulous fiction of multiple personalities. They were seen as acquiescent, submissive Aunt Jemimas who showed grinning faces, plump laps, fat embracing arms, and brown jaws pouched in laughter. They were described as leering buxom wenches with round heels, open thighs, and insatiable sexual appetites. They were accused of being marauding matriarchs of stern demeanor, battering hands, unforgiving gazes, and castrating behavior.<sup>7</sup>*

These "national, racial, and historical hallucinations"<sup>8</sup> that Maya Angelou describes have been ingrained in the collective consciousness of the United States since slavery. Many of these representations deprive the subject of a voice, preventing her from participating in the process of representation. The sexualized black female body took the form of the "Jezebel," or "bad-black-girl" character, "a mulatto or fair-complexioned African American female, who possesses features that are considered European. Thin lips, long straight hair, slender nose, thin figure and fair complexion are the physical characteristics that make up this image, which conforms more to the American standard of beauty than any of the other images."<sup>9</sup> Skin color and hair texture played distinct roles in this visualization, bringing the Jezebel closer to a white ideal. The traditional stereotype of the sexually aggressive, dark-skinned black was forsaken for a Jezebel whose near-white appearance was generally the result of coercive sexual relations between white men and black slave women.

In post-Emancipation and post-Reconstruction America blacks began to develop their own identity apart from the memory of slavery, under which they lacked even human status. By the early twentieth century the desire to act rather than be acted upon, to be a subject rather than an object, took hold with regard to representation. The "New Negro" period, so defined by African American professor and philosopher Alain Locke in 1925,<sup>10</sup> marked the first time that black artists, particularly photographers, working in both rural and urban communities took control of their self-representation. For the first time many black women were commercial customers as well as artistic subjects. The "New Negro" image displaced the stereotypes of blacks as unintelligent, ignorant, and lacking a work ethic. Historian Cheryl Wall, in an essay about this period, writes, "To a degree only tacitly acknowledged in reality and in Locke's analysis, New Negro consciousness resulted from 'an attempt, fairly successful on the whole, to convert a defensive into an offensive position, a handicap into an incentive.'"<sup>11</sup> Over the next four decades, as black families moved north, swelling the black populations of New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and other cities during the Great Migration, photographers made images that reflected the aspirations and desires of these newly constructed communities.

The 1940s and 1950s saw the struggle for civil rights emerge as an organized movement. The black population was no longer concentrated in the former slave states, and with this newly migrated population once-regional concerns became national issues. Black artists in the 1960s and 1970s responded to this politicized cultural climate, pushing the envelope of self-representation to new expressions of pride and identity. These artists organized exhibitions on black art that explored both the physical beauty of blacks and their African heritage. The term “black” was itself transgressive, and it became a positive self-definition for many African Americans. Black photographers framed their photographs, especially the image of the black female nude, with a sense of pride in their ancestry informed by sexual desire and racial identity. Phrases like “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice”<sup>12</sup> presented culturally specific alternatives to terminology that debased black women. Such phrases carried complex racial and sexual significance, coding the black woman’s desirability in terms related to her skin color. “‘Black art’ became a precise term for a specific direction in African American visual arts production,” writes E. Barry Gaither, “rooted in the activism of the Civil Rights Movement; rising cultural and political nationalism; and the collapse of colonialism internationally after the emergence of Ghana.”<sup>13</sup> The Afro hairstyle, African dress, and African dance were particular popular manifestations of this cultural nationalism. Angela Davis, who as a Black Panther widely popularized the Afro hairstyle, comments, “I continue to find it ironic that the popularity of the ‘Afro’ is attributed to me, when, in actuality, I was emulating a whole host of women—both public figures and women I encountered in my daily life—when I began to wear my hair natural in the late sixties.”<sup>14</sup>

Since the mid-1970s, black women photographers have used their own likenesses and those of other black women to create an autobiography of the body and to develop themes of home, family, gender, representation, and identity in contemporary society. Their work reflects their self-awareness as social beings and critics, observers and participants, image-makers and interpreters. Acknowledging the complexity of defining black beauty in light of the history of writings about race and sexuality, these artists’ works open difficult discussions and offer highly personal yet generalizable views about black women and identity. According to theorist Kobena Mercer, “self-portraiture has been a key pre-occupation of Diaspora artists in the West . . . black artists have sought to shift the codes of the genre by working in the gaps between commonplace oppositions which govern the knowability of the depicted self.”<sup>15</sup> The interplay between the historical and the contemporary, between self-presentation and imposed representation, is fundamental to this discussion of black female photographers. They incorporate photographic legacies with contemporary realities in order to present images of real black women who are no longer acted upon but who possess, in one body, both active voice and visual self-presentation.