Foreword

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At the turn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois captured the soul-splitting experience of reconciling blackness with American identity by describing double consciousness as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹ While Du Bois delineated this spiritual striving of the black self to find wholeness, particularly in light of a malevolent racial gaze, he did not fully imagine the particular forms of psychological, physical, and sexual threats confronting black women and their bodies by racist, sexist, and imperialist eyes and, indeed, practices.

Black Female Sexualities addresses, in the spirit of the long history of feminist traditions, conceptualizations and consequences of the power of the racial gaze. It does so by bringing together the work of scholars who interrogate both the power of looking—the act of spectatorship—and the experiences of being looked at for African American women. Kimberly Juanita Brown prefaces her chapter for this volume, “Entering through the Body’s Frame,” by quoting bell hooks’s observation that “there is power in looking.”² This idea of the power in looking and the experience of powerlessness that so many black women experience when being looked at—especially as these relate to sexual politics, race, and the sociosexual—is central to this volume.

For many, the treatment of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, stands as a warning of the exploitive possibilities inherent in being looked upon by those who find black women’s bodies to be savage oddities or sexual commodities worthy of both visual and physical dissection. Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who became a canonized exhibit at London’s Piccadilly Circus as a result of her supposedly abnormal sexual organs. Her large buttocks and elongated labia subjected her to exhibition and public ridicule. After her death, French anthropologist Georges Cuvier dissected her and crafted body

casts of her sexual organs in an attempt to garner evidence for theories of essentialized racial (and by extension sexual) difference. As a result of Cuvier's work, Baartman's remains were on display for public view in a French museum until the mid-1970s. More than a century after her death, Baartman was still exposed to dehumanizing patriarchal and racist observation.

In the same decade that Baartman's remains were finally removed from public display and returned to South Africa for burial, American writer Toni Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which illuminates the dangers to black girls of the gaze of sinister others. Morrison shows us the destructive capacity of a white racist gaze that changes a tender, consensual first sexual encounter into a violent rape rendered open to spectatorship. Morrison describes an adolescent Cholly Breedlove and his girl Darlene exploring one another's bodies with affectionate and privately intimate gentleness when they are happened upon by two white men who demand that Cholly "get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger."³ Through their abusive looking and threats at gunpoint, the men make Cholly the instrument of rape—of their own desire for sexualized violence against young Darlene vicariously through Cholly. Their gaze turns innocence, Cholly and Darlene's organic sensual intimacy and desire, into violence.

Morrison forces readers to ride the spiral of violence all the way to Cholly Breedlove's later rape—one that begins with his look, a seemingly innocent stare at his eleven-year-old daughter Pecola as she hunches over the sink washing dishes. The rape is initiated when Cholly observes Pecola scratching the back of her calf with her toe, a gesture he saw Pecola's mother make when he first met her. Observing Pecola's physical posture simultaneously shames and seduces Cholly and culminates in his doing the unthinkable: dragging the girl to the floor, raping her, and ultimately impregnating her in a sinister act he considers love. For Pecola, it is far from safe to be seen, to be merely looked upon, even by her own father, even in her own home.

These stories represent the vulnerability and the violence, sexual and otherwise, that so frequently punctuate black women's experiences of being seen. Du Bois worried about the amused contempt and pity of the onlooking world; bell hooks acknowledged the power of both looking and the oppositional gaze; and other black women have documented the malice and brutality that accompanies the visual engagement, the ocular assaults, and the gaze of others. As Kimberly Juanita Brown writes in her chapter for this book, "People are too comfortable with black women in various states of sexual violence and unrest, too comfortable with their dismemberment and their utter corporeal destruction." The 2014 Hollywood awards season produced an example of this comfort with black women's "utter corporeal destruction." In 2014, the film adaptation of Solomon Northup's memoir, *12 Years a Slave*, was a standout of the film awards season. At the heart of this powerful cinematic achievement was the grotesque psychological, sexual, and physical abuse of an enslaved black woman played by

the extraordinary actor Lupita Nyong'o. Although Nyong'o's on-screen endurance of unfathomable cruelty earned her a well-deserved Academy Award and much critical praise, these accolades telegraphed the ongoing message that the viewing public is most interested in seeing black women's bodies when they are subjected to ferocious terror.

But the experiences of black women's bodies are not exclusively those of destructive assault or morbid fascination. To be an embodied black woman is also to know joy, subjectivity, pleasure, and the latent capacity to enjoy being seen: to, in a sense, transcend invisibility and to resist erasure. Even, then, as viewers were given opportunities to wallow in black women's suffering in 2013, and such cinematic enactments were awarded in 2014, a strikingly complex, discordant representation of black women's experiences with controlling and "disengaging the gaze" was occasioned in the surprise release of the self-titled visual album by megastar Beyoncé Knowles on December 13, 2013. Beyoncé's fifth album is notable in large part because each of the fourteen musical tracks includes an accompanying video: a gesture with which Beyoncé insists that she be not only heard but, equally important, also be seen.

The videos invite a breathtaking, almost uncomfortable level of intimate spectatorship. In "Pretty Hurts," for instance, Beyoncé addresses the pain, at once physical and visceral, women experience when their value is connected solely and superficially to looks and aesthetics, to meeting the beauty status quo and standards about women's body image. More importantly, this track explores what is at stake in pleasing those who want to look at them and, in so doing, inflict pain.⁴ In the track "Blue," titled for her daughter, Beyoncé allows viewers to participate in the visible manifestations of her maternal adoration and her own complex embodiment of womanhood. It provides a glimpse, on the one hand, of the reproductive aspects of her sexuality (her daughter) and her role as mother, coupled with a sensuality that resists simplistic conceptualizations of black women's sexualities.⁵ More critically, she uses the video to present a micro-ethnography of Afro-Diaspora dance traditions that reframe the body: celebrating the gyrating, booty-shaking, and twerking in movements that highlight the ample backsides of black women that we see in so many popular music videos, including Beyoncé's own work. By forcing viewers to encounter these actions in the innocent, joyful, street dance of Afro-Brazilian children, "Blue" strips ass-shaking of the lewd sexual implications and skewed misreading that the American and larger Western gaze imposes. Through the almost jarring pairing, then, of the maternal ballad with swift posterior gyrations, the movements suddenly resonate as joyful, playful, and indeed sociocultural rather than as a myopic indication of untamed, illicit sexuality. The inversion is achieved only in the visual portrayal of the song, in the very power that accompanies looking, that otherwise does not occur when the music is encountered sonically. This lesson requires looking.

Nowhere does Beyoncé's album more fully demand black female autonomy in defining the terms of spectatorship—the oppositional gaze, if you will—than in “Partition.”⁶ The track opens with a dolled-up Beyoncé, an image that alludes to and transforms the notion that “pretty hurts,” sitting at the end of a long table laden with breakfast. Her love interest is hidden behind a newspaper, oblivious to her red lips, curled hair, and provocatively draped robe. The viewer is sucked into a powerful, almost pornographic and titillating series of lyrics and images as a scantily clad Beyoncé dances for and arouses her man, all the while available for public consumption. The video seems to be an open invitation to fully view her sexuality, but the lyrics, and the title “partition” itself, offer an important boundary and caveat. In the first line Beyoncé demands that her driver put the “partition” up “please,” in order to prevent “you [from] seeing” her “on her knees.” Replete with sexual innuendo, the lyric both reveals what is to happen behind the partition and demands a right to act with some measure of privacy. It is a reminder that we are allowed to look, but only on her terms and only through a lens of her design. Like the partition itself, she acts as the entity that controls and even guards: defining her sexuality while simultaneously exercising ownership of its boundaries and accessibility. “Partition” is electric, not only in its embrace of sexuality but also in its suspense: it is entirely fantasy, a performance that takes place in thought, not action. As the video ends, Beyoncé is still sitting at the end of the table. Her love interest is still reading the paper. What we have seen is her sexual reverie. She exposes the intimacy of her thoughts and desires while also elucidating the ways in which the gaze is not reliable: it is fallible and susceptible to error (as in the misreading of gyrating black bodies). Also, it does not always capture the essence or reality of its own ocular fixation. Even, then, as her performance for her man and for us has unfolded in her mind, occurring behind a partition that she controls, she invites, mediates, and encourages spectatorship of her sexuality as she deems fit. What can feel on first view like a reproduction of a troubling “Hottentot Venus” act—with black female sexuality on display in ways that seemingly reaffirm myths of black female hypersexuality—is a more nuanced representation of the body, since the locus of control remains with Beyoncé herself.

Beyoncé's fifth album is complicated, especially in its problematization of hegemonic expressions of sexuality, race, and gender. It is a pop culture intervention worth pausing to consider, as it challenges, as do the engaging chapters of this book, the almost universal cultural notion of black women's bodies as mired inevitably in violence and sexual dehumanization that compromise their sexual agency, subjectivity, and control. Beyoncé counters the narratives that black women who are seen must be broken, that they are unequivocal victims of the gaze, or that they do not possess ownership of their intimate desires and sexual pleasures. Instead, with her self-titled album, *Beyoncé*, she not only privileges an actualized and sexualized self (hence the eponymous title) but also evidences

that black women can invite watching, even ogling, and maintain a space for pleasure and autonomy across a spectrum of possibilities.

These reflections, ranging from Saartjie Baartman to a contemporary pop icon, barely break the surface of the rich terrain and intellectual coverage that constitute the remainder of this volume. These authors interrogate the multiple spaces black women occupy: from popular culture and college classrooms to the pages of novels and cultural discourses in ways that also illuminate their complex sexual identities, choices, and gender presentations. They question how black girls can grow into women under the weight, literally—see Courtney J. Patterson’s chapter on body size—of cultures that seem to despise while also challenging us to redefine freedom and sexual citizenship from the perspective of black women. For when “we prioritize, foreground, and place black women at the center of cultural discourse, popular culture, and in both public and private arenas,” to evoke Trimiko Melancon’s introduction, we honor the spirit, complexities, and totality of black women instead of diminishing them or the range of their unique experiences and desires. The scholars represented in this book demand accountability for sexual violence committed against black women while insisting on black women’s right to enjoy and explore the fullness of their sexualities. This book is not simple. It is not easy. It is not uncomplicated. But how could it be? It is about black women’s bodies.

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: McClurg, 1903), 3.
2. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.
3. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970), 148.
4. Beyoncé Knowles, *Pretty Hurts*, Columbia Records, 2013.
5. Beyoncé Knowles, *Blue*, Columbia Records, 2013.
6. Beyoncé Knowles, *Partition*, Columbia Records, 2013.