THOTTY MOMMIES

The Erotic Potential of Black Mothers Online

Marly Pierre-Louis

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.
—Audre Lorde, A Litany for Survival

In the last decade, digital technology has, in part, democratized photography, giving lay people powerful tools to share their stories and experiences. The Instagram photostream with its scrolling, gridded view provides a canvas for the fluid, visual self-expression and articulation of complex identities. Creators can add, delete, filter and edit their timelines as they see fit, building archives of activities, moments and experiences that expand how we are looked at (and how we look back). This “humanizing power” (Caldeira et al. 2018: 31), recasts users as active subjects with agency through the act of image making. In In Our Glory: Photography in Black Life, author, professor and Black feminist icon bell hooks writes, “More than any other image-making tool, the camera offered African-Americans, disempowered in white culture, a way to empower ourselves through representation” (hooks 1998: 60). In the early 1900s for example, activists such as Fannie Lou Hammer and W.E.B Du Bois used photographs to generate support for their work (Winter 2018) and in the 1950s–1970s the use of imagery in Black power and liberation movements was a critical tool in rejecting notions of respectability in favor of a self-defined vision of Blackness (Winter 2018).
“Underpants up, dresses down and legs closed”

Growing up, I was what my mother’s generation might’ve called “fast” and what millennials might call a THOT. A THOT (That Hoe Over There) is used to describe an unapologetic and shamelessly sexual woman. Throughout my adolescence, I was a boy crazy, kissy hoe—making out with any willing cutie on the block. In high school, I was the first of my friends to buy a vibrator, using it with gusto after cruising chat rooms on Excite and Yahoo. I wore half shirts with scandalous sayings and skorts in the summer, lycra bell bottoms and tied-up button down shirts in the fall, and (once I discovered it) I became obsessed with dry humping and rubbed up against any and everything. I loved my body and was excited to explore what it could do and how it could feel. In college, I brazenly flirted with and pursued whomever appealed to me—I had an active sex life fueled by my own desires and curiosity.

College was also when I began to deepen my analysis of the world around me and where I became politicized. I read books by Assata Shakur, Angela Davis and bell hooks. I joined the Black Student Union and signed up for Black literature classes. Learning about racialized stereotypes like the Jezebel or reading about Sara Baartman being paraded as a sideshow “freak” across Europe because of how her body looked, I couldn’t help but reflect on my own love of nudity and casual sex. Baartman was treated like an animal, her body deemed evidence of the inherent hypersexuality of African women. An ugly narrative began to materialize inside of me; to be an exposed Black body was to be vulnerable, to be lustful was to be vulgar. I had never felt a way about my extracurricular activities with boys before but around this point, shame crept in.

A few years after graduation I met the man I would marry. Together we joined a Black nationalist organization in Brooklyn. As a budding feminist and activist invested in liberation, dating a Black man invested in liberation, I felt like I had to look, sound and act the part. I started to conceptualize sex and desire as something reserved for white women. To engage in that behavior was to fulfill the ugly tropes white supremacy had constructed for me, that Black women were hypersexual and amoral. To be sexually free was to prove them right. Black feminist Cheryl Clark writes:

We have expended much energy trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved. Unfortunately, many of us have overcompensated and assimilated the Puritan value that sex is for
procreation, occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage [...] Like everyone else in America who is ambivalent in these respects, Black folk have to live with the contradictions of this limited sexual system by repressing or closeting any other sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires. (Lomax 2018a: 191)

As I fell in love with my new man, shame pushed me to fashion myself after a more respectable kind of woman. She looked kind of like Erykah Badu, circa 1997. She wrapped her natural hair in African fabrics, wore long skirts and bangles and responded to every greeting with ‘Peace and Blessings’. She was a Queen and chasing men for sport was beneath her. I put away my pum-pum shorts, half shirts and juicy lip glosses, in exchange for headwraps, incense and wooden earrings. I didn’t wear makeup, didn’t pluck my brows, didn’t shave my legs.

I married that man and a year later became a mother. I had achieved a normative, Black family unit, something “quintessentially representative of Black racial progress and Black freedom” (Lomax 2018b: 191). But I wasn’t happy. Around that time, if I met someone new and my son wasn’t with me, I wouldn’t disclose that I was a mother. I felt more and more that motherhood was a rejection of my true self, but at the same time I felt that expressing my thotty parts made me a bad mother. I struggled to reconcile who I was with who I had become.

Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins coined the termed “controlling images” (Collins 2015) to describe stereotypes birthed from slavery that reflected the ways in which the dominant society sought to subordinate Black women. If you’ve ever watched TV or been to a grocery store, you’re familiar with them. The mammy is asexual, jolly and content in her role as caregiver to white families. She neglects her own children in favor of caring for white ones. Sapphire, the matriarch is aggressive and evil. Her children fear her and so does her man. The welfare queen had babies in order to scam taxpayers and often chose addiction over parenting. The thread that unites these images in our imagination is the enduring idea that Black mothers are inherently “bad” and incapable of having loving bonds with their children. Through these images, the sexual possibilities for Black women are policed, contained and managed. In an effort to distance myself from mammy, sapphire and them, I had unwittingly compartmentalized my chopped and screwed up identity into someone palatable but unrecognizable.
The first time I read Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic*, it felt like a dirty secret had been whispered from Lorde’s mouth to my ears. Even the word *erotic* from the mouth of a Black woman (a Black feminist no less) seemed scandalous and yet, Lorde incisively confronts this, boldly claiming the power available to all of us in the erotic. For Lorde, the denial of access to the erotic as a result of the shame inculcated through culture is an act of dominance, a way to “corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy” (Lorde 1984a: 87). The erotic offers deep knowledge, power and information to those who dare to claim it (Lorde 1984b: 88).

In a speech delivered at Harvard University in 1982, Lorde reflected on the movement space of the 1960s and her personal journey:

> As a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody’s comfortable prej-udices of who I should be. That is how I learned that if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive. My poetry, my life, my work, my energies for struggle were not acceptable unless I pretended to match somebody else’s norm.

Like Lorde, in trying to build an identity that felt “suitable” to my life and my politics, I had buried the freest parts of myself. I read the world in search of a vision of womanhood that integrated all of who I was and aspired to be.

**Look back at it**

Truth be told, I was never really a Beyonce fan. Give me Destiny’s Child over pre-2013 Bey all day. So when her self-titled album dropped secretly in 2013 I wasn’t pressed. My homegirl was like, “have you seen Beyonce’s visual album? Girl. Bey’s telling bitches to bow down and talking about giving head in the backseat of a taxi.” I promptly paid iTunes and took a seat.

Here was a Black mother openly reveling in the beauty of her own image, shamelessly turned on by herself, absolutely dripping in eroticism. I was floored. Beyonce’s visual album weaved together a body of work that illustrated the fullness of who she was as a woman; a wife, a mother, an artist, a businesswoman, a bad bitch and so much more. It was a revelation, an intervention.

In a video documenting the production of this album, Beyonce Giselle Knowles echoes Audre Lorde in reflecting on the explicit nature of her album’s visuals:
I was very aware of the fact that I was showing my body. I know finding my sensuality, getting back into my body [...] I know that there’s so many women that feel the same thing after they give birth. You can have your child and you can still have fun and still be sexy and still have dreams and still live for yourself. I don’t at all have any shame about being sexual and I’m not embarrassed about it and I don’t feel like I have to protect that side of me. Because I do believe that sexuality is a power that we all have. (YouTube.com)

The album stayed on repeat. I could not take my eyes off it. At the same time, resentment was running wild through me and my relationships. The effort of compartmentalizing had left me unfulfilled and straight up exhausted. Standards and expectations of beauty, womanhood, motherhood and Blackness created a soup of political consciousness I felt beholden to. My pursuit of pleasure, spontaneity and joy weren’t motherly, they were a cause for guilt and shame. I had been worshipping at an altar of womanhood that wasn’t my own. Beyonce gave me the mirror image I was longing for. I didn’t want to be domestic and homely, I wanted booty shorts, crop tops and late nights out. I wanted to center the erotic and teach my son to spell. I wanted to enjoy my body, the gaze of others on it, and change diapers, make meals and patch up scraped knees. I wanted to be sexual and a good mother. I wanted a motherhood an erotic, “yes and” kind of motherhood; a thotty motherhood where all my parts could coexist. Beyonce opened a window to the possibility of a Black motherhood that was whole, nuanced and affirming and I crawled in in search of more. I found it on Instagram.
“While I share this body with my kids through breastfeeding, it’s mine”

My son was born about a year after Instagram was launched and two years before the word “selfie” was added to the Oxford Dictionary. As a new mother, I happily posted pictures of his sweet face on Instagram for friends and families to coo over. But as I began to shed the layers of respectability I had been cloaked in, I stopped posting. Being a wife and mother didn’t feel particularly sexy, it felt like these roles were stripping away all that was beguiling, alluring and sensuous about me.

Singer, songwriter, dancer, choreographer, director, model, mother and wife Teyana Taylor’s photostream (@teyanataylor) turns any externally placed boundaries on her identity into dust: she poses seductively with her husband, she’s grinding in Black leather and fishnets atop an audience participant, she’s hand-in-hand with her daughter in gray sweats on the first day of school, she’s face down, ass up in sheer panty hose on stage, she’s in a sweatsuit and baseball cap behind the camera on set. In a post from May, we get to see Taylor with her two daughters singing the praises of her breast pump and how it’s enabled her to be an “active mom, but also a dancer, singer, actress, director...”, and in June she shares photos from her ‘Sexiest Woman Alive’ photoshoot with Maxim.

In her dissertation on identity and meaning making, Jessica de Aguiar Pereira quotes research by Yvonne Jewkes and Kay Sharp: “Within postmodern analysis, identity is neither inherent nor fixed, but is rather an ephemeral, fluid entity which is open to constant negotiation, change and manipulation” (Pereira 2016b: 17). In the triads of squared images and videos on her feed, Taylor is serving multitudes, and eroticism is the steady beat pulsing through. Being a mother only negates our sexuality in the gaze of those who wish to further subjugate us. By centering her own gaze and obliging what resonates from within, Taylor is fully herself no matter which photo she’s posing for.

“A woman’s place is wherever she desires”

Eryn Khristine (@erynamelism) is an entrepreneur and mother. Her timeline can be read as a celebration of her body and a resistance to the disassembling of sexuality, motherhood and home. In one photo shot from above she’s lying on her back on a beach towel in a red bikini, her full breasts loll to one side, one hand touches her stomach, the other arm stretches above her head, her eyes closed, her skin aglow. In another she’s at home holding a bright, yellow
mug in a simple bra and underwear set, beaming down into her son’s face. In another, she’s perched on her kitchen counter, smoldering in a lace catsuit, her phone expertly angled to capture all her goodies.

Juicy with rolls and stretch marks, Khristine’s provocative and sensual photos tell a story about self love and beauty standards. Posting almost only selfies, she centers her own gaze and what feels sexy and attractive to her, thus claiming her body (and the lens) as her own. By “appropriating the lens” (Pereira 2016a: 21), Khristine makes public the private erotics of her life and creates an “oppositional gaze” (hooks 1992) that looks back at the violence of dominant narratives.

“My body built my family”

Through the IG stream of model, producer, and mother Marz Lovejoy (@marzyjane) we see how mothering (i.e. breastfeeding, laboring, caretaking) and pleasure practices (i.e. fashion, beauty, dancing) can inform, facilitate and stimulate each other. In 2018, Lovejoy modeled in Rihanna’s Savage x Fenty lingerie campaign in a bra set and baby bump, quickly becoming a vocal and visible champion of pregnant and postpartum bodies. Her stream reveals the possibility of sexual prowess and beauty because of motherhood, not despite it. In one photo Lovejoy is leaning back on a sofa pregnant, topless, two sparkly dots covering her nipples. In another, she’s squatting (or perhaps caught mid-twerk) while her pregnant belly rests between her legs. Sometimes she’s natural, sometimes she’s dolled up, often she’s nearly naked staring directly into the camera.

In May of 2020, Marz Lovejoy live streamed the delivery of her second baby on Instagram as a way to raise money for childbirth services for BIPOC and LGBTQI+ people. In the video, we see Lovejoy naked in a bathtub with her freshly born baby boy on her right breast and her left breast exposed. Lovejoy uses her body, her mothering as a way to do what might’ve been called “race work” fifty years ago but what looks radically different in the age of postmodern social media. This was not at all what the revolutionaries of the 60s imagined when they linked Black motherhood with the revolution. Lovejoy is not “uplifting the race” through maternity, she is delivering power through it and she is baring it all for us to witness.
This is risky business.

All the women discussed here are privileged, conventionally attractive, CIS, able-bodied women. Trans mothers, queer mothers, poor mothers, differently-bodied mothers might all face material consequences to exposing their bodies and sexual selves on social media. In *Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification*, the authors write “the more removed from the ideal, the greater the objectification (or dehumanization) of Black women” (Anderson et al. 2018: 472). The more open and public about who we are, the more exposed we are to misogynoir.

But this has always been the case. And Black mothers are expert negotiators. Every day for us is a negotiation between safety and identity, safety and opportunity, safety and privacy, safety and power, safety and freedom. Working with Lorde’s erotic, we learn that by suppressing our identities we become complicit in our oppression and that by owning our deepest desires our resistance becomes integrated and empowered from within (Lorde 1984). Self love is only possible when we reclaim our gaze. For how can we love the self if we don’t know it? If the image of self always comes from elsewhere? (Nanda 2019)

Representation is resistance. By owning all parts of who they are, Beyonce, Taylor, Khristine and Lovejoy liberate themselves, and by projecting their truths onto the world they give us permission to do the same. Their images are a reminder of the radical nature of a Black woman fully embodying who she is despite the boxes she’s been crunched into. Thinking of Eryn Khristine makes me want to lock my bedroom door and take sexy selfies by myself, for myself and rejoice in my baby-given stretch marks, saggy titties and loose tummy skin. Loving up on and flaunting our bodies for the sake of our own enjoyment is a radical act. Their images push back in moments when I find myself editing how I show up in space, and with a wink they whisper, ‘we cannot be contained’.

In *Uses of the Erotic*, Lorde writes:

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. (Lorde 1984: 88)
This work, the work of owning who I am and how I show up; the work of looking shame and fear in the face, the work of nurturing my erotic self, is joyfully difficult work. My most fulfilling moments are when my intersections sing in harmony. When I twerk with my son to trap music while cooking dinner. When he helps me pick out my hoe outfit and makeup for a night out. When he combs out my wig while I read him a bedtime story. When we paint each other’s nails.

The pain of Sarah Baartman and all our ancestors lives in our bones. We carry them on our shoulders and into our bedrooms. With each generation, we pass on their trauma. But what would it mean to pass on something else?

I often walk around my home naked. Mostly because I enjoy it but also because my body was the first body my 9-year-old son knew that wasn’t his own. I want it to be a reference point for a Black, femme body free of trauma and shame and a Black mama safe in her skin. I like to imagine generations of children whose default understanding is that Black women are erotic, safe and whole. Children of thotty mommies everywhere finding only power, pleasure and possibility in their bodies. And that this wide open space looks like freedom.

Notes


Works Cited


