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BOOK REVIEWS

BLACK WOMEN MISBEHAVIN': A NEW POLITICS OF SEXUALITY

by Sherri L. Barnes

Jennifer C. Nash, *THE BLACK BODY IN ECSTASY: READING RACE, READING PORNOGRAPHY*. Duke University Press, 2014. (Series: Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies.) 240p. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$23.95, ISBN 978-0822356202.

Trimiko Melancon, *UNBOUGHT AND UNBOSSSED: TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK WOMEN, SEXUALITY, AND REPRESENTATION*. Temple University Press, 2014. 256p. notes, bibl. index. pap., \$26.95, ISBN 978-1439911464.

Mireille Miller-Young, *A TASTE FOR BROWN SUGAR: BLACK WOMEN IN PORNOGRAPHY*. Duke University Press, 2014. 392p. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$27.95, ISBN 978-0822358282.

The nexus of race and sexuality in Black women's lives is fraught with controversial knowledge that includes complex historical legacies, taboos, stereotypes, racism, sexism, and violence. Pornography, even without racializing it, is equally as controversial. These recent books by Black feminist scholars bravely address these issues with the purpose of disrupting the discourse of representation, respectability, and dissemblance within feminist thought, African American studies, and porn studies. They offer complex historical, ethnographic, literary, and postmodern visions for a more liberating Black female sexuality. All three texts respect, honor, and build on the rich legacy of Black feminist scholarship, which values and centers lived experiences in pursuit of self-determination — a core principle of Black feminist thought. They also draw on the evolving and increasingly influential body of queer-of-color research, which sees sexual pleasure as a subversive force and teaches us about the multi-dimensional possibilities of embodied pleasure in expressing our desires.

I approached these texts having never participated in the sex wars within feminist studies or invested much thought into the pros and cons

of pornography.¹ However, as a Black woman, I am fully aware of and impacted by the culture of dissemblance (silence, shame, masking, secrecy, disavowal of sexuality, protection from exploitation) and the politics of representation and respectability (don't be the stereotype; if you act like a stereotype you are deserving of abuse) around Black women's sexuality. The search for alternatives to these lived and widely theorized experiences is what fuels all three of these book projects. Two of the books deal directly with the rarely studied or discussed subject of Black women in pornography, while the other concerns sexual transgressions by Black women in post-Civil Rights era novels, written during the Golden Age of porn (1960s–1970s) and in the immediate aftermath of the sexual revolution.

The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography is the least complex of the texts. Jennifer Nash's goal is to expand the Black feminist discourse on Black female sexuality and representation beyond one of violence, victimhood, pain, and injury. She writes, "What would it mean to read racialized pornography not for evidence of the wounds it inflicts on

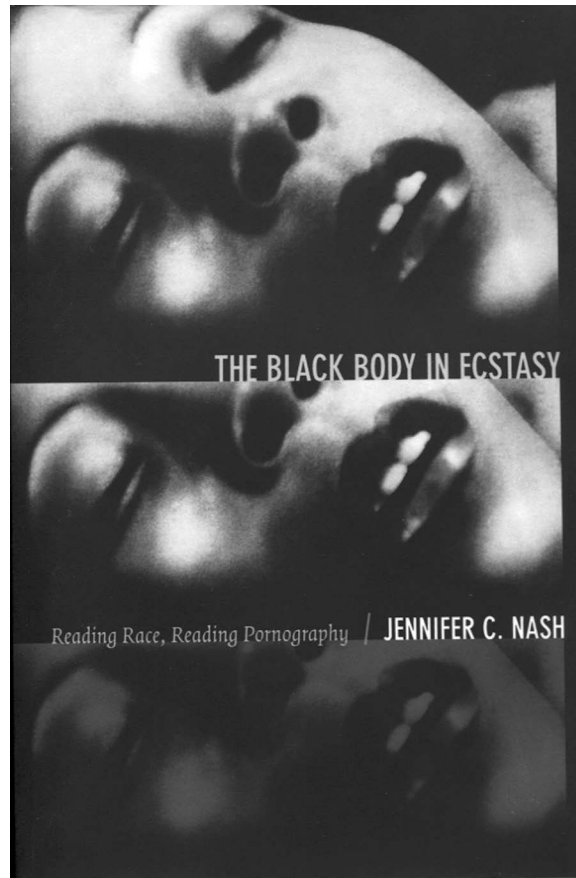
If you don't know the ideas and literature of the feminist sex wars, this is a great place to start.

black women's flesh, but for moments of racialized excitement, for instances of surprising pleasures in racialization, and for hyperbolic performances of race that poke fun at the very projects of race?" (p. 1). Nash's methodology is the close reading of four films — *Lialah*, *Sex World*, *Black Taboo* (1985), and *Black Throat* (1985) — with a chapter dedicated to each one. In a phenomenal and extremely valuable opening chapter, "Archives of Pain: Reading the Black Feminist Theoretical Archive," she deconstructs the traditional discourse and politics of representation and objectification that have dominated feminist and popular rhetoric, and presents an introduction to and an overview of the various feminist viewpoints on pornography: anti-pornography feminism, pro-pornography feminism, sex-radicalism, and feminist porn studies. If you don't know the ideas and literature of the feminist sex wars, this is a great place to start. Equally as important, the chapter

lays out her alternative reading of Black women in pornography — one centered on ecstasy, pleasure, and performance.

Nash pays cursory attention to the sociocultural historical moments in which the films are made. Her discussions simply concern how the Golden Age (1960s–1970s) of pornography borrowed from the Blaxploitation/“blax-porn-tation” genre; and how the Silver Age (1980–1990s) of porn was related to President Reagan’s establishment of the Meese Commission (headed by Attorney General Edwin Meese) to study pornography’s effects, and the Commission’s findings, which relied, in part, on the work of anti-pornography feminists. Everyday Black politics and culture, outside of the pornographic and Blaxploitation film industries, are not factored into her analysis. Her counter-readings of pornographic representations of Black women are insightful and legitimate, but her close readings don’t have as much impact.

The basis of Nash’s counter-readings is that the films do not rely on the conventions of pornographic films — conventions that include the dominance of the Black male phallus, race loyalty narratives, inclusion of the money shot (a man ejaculating), the imperative to make bodies visible, reliance on unnamed racial fictions, and the hyper-visibility of stereotypes. Nash’s arguments would be weightier if more context was provided to illustrate the complexity and multidisciplinary nature of the subject. However, her alternative readings do give readers insight into the tropes within pornography, and into how certain films upset racist and sexist industry practices, as

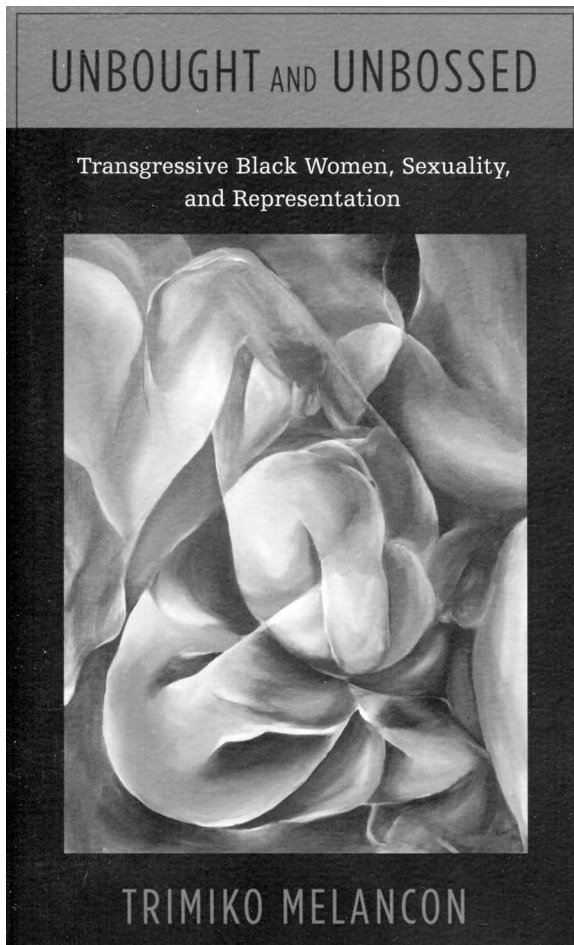


well as upsetting the Black feminist theoretical archive’s theories of representation and resistance in favor of a Black feminist theory of sexual subjectivities of pleasure and ecstasy. Nash has earned her place among a new generation of Black feminist scholars calling for what Trimiko Melancon, in the next work reviewed, describes as “postmodern modalities of black womanhood... wherein women’s roles and positionalities are not contingent upon particular racialized dictates,” many of which are socially constructed (*Unbought*, p. 51).

Melancon, in *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation*, is more successful at giving us complex close readings, in this instance of post–Civil Rights era novels about sexually transgressive Black women. By transgres-

sive,² Melancon means “those unmediated performances, enactments, or instantiations of (mis)behavior characterized by a deliberate ‘violation’ of certain racial, gender, and sexual socio-communal boundaries whereby the enactor transcends, if not destabilizes, established normative and acceptable behavior” — in other words, Black women behaving badly (p. 2). Adultery, promiscuity, interracial same-sex intimacy, circumvention of marital sex, and sexual violence are the range of violations scrutinized in the novels, which include Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), Ann Allen Shockley’s *Loving Her* (1974), Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man*, and Gloria Naylor’s *Women of Brewster Place* (1982). These classic texts were produced during what is often considered the Black women novelists’ renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s,

and in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Melancon is invested in having readers understand the historical and cultural context of that time, within and outside the Black community, and its relation to the novels and to the present, as illustrated in the concluding chapter, subtitled “Without Fear of Reprisals’: Representation in the Age of Michelle Obama.” She makes it clear why the issues she’s addressing matter, and why Black women’s lives and sexual liberation matter.³ She combines her close readings with an integral historical analysis and framework to construct a postmodern Black female identity free of what she refers to as the “classical black female script” or “black women’s expected racial loyalty and solidarity, sexual fidelity to black men, self-abnegation, and idealization



of marriage and motherhood” (p. 3). Like Nash, she begins by deconstructing theories of representation, dissemblance, and respectability upfront, in an introduction subtitled “Disrupting Dissemblance.”

Each chapter is dedicated to a different novel and theme related to the nexus of race and sexuality as that intersects with representation and transgression. The themes include the “classical black female script” and new paradigms of Black womanhood; normative racial and sexual politics; community, individuality, and belonging; sexuality and violence as they intersect with madness; and, finally, solidarity and healing for transcendence. Discovering which novels are used to represent which themes is fun and makes for great reading.

The novels of the Black women writers’ renaissance were my first Black feminist texts. Before my academic career began I devoured the fiction of these writers, who were responsible for me becoming a women’s studies major, in which I was then introduced to the scholarly writings of Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, and other Black feminist theorists, as well as to the idea that “fiction is a true way of telling.”⁴ Melancon draws on the work of these scholars as well as that of Nash and Miller-Young. As she demonstrates, her trope of transgression is well suited to understanding past and present notions of race, gender, and sex and in constituting a new era of feminist thought

concerning Black female sexuality and subjectivities.

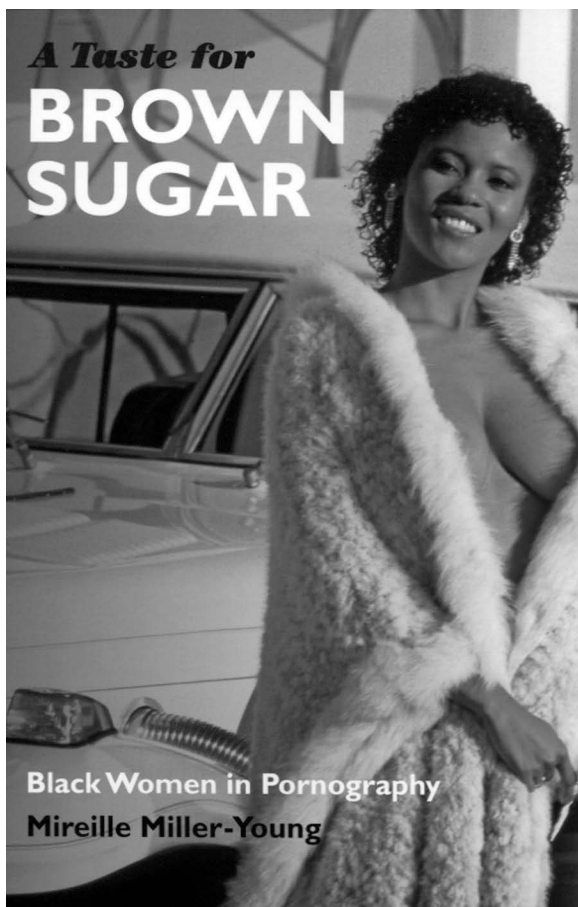
Mireille Miller-Young’s *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* is the most complex of the three texts under review. By the time I finished this book my knowledge about the industry in general, and particularly about Black women in porn, had expanded significantly. Everyone interested in understanding the industry and the people, especially the Black women involved, in front of and behind the cameras, should read this book cover to cover — not necessarily to change their opinions, but to know what they’re talking about. The first sentence in the book — the epigraph on page 1 — is from porn star Jean-

nie Pepper: “You are not supposed to talk about sex because you are already assumed to be a whore.” Despite such a deep understanding of the ugly and complex intersection of race, gender, and sex, Jeannie embraces and works hard at her career, seeking to be viewed as a complex person. Her agency, as well as the agency of other Black women in the industry, is what Miller-Young uncovers and asks readers to recognize as she calls for a rethinking of agency, a central concept in feminist thought:

I propose to open up the concept of agency by moving away from readings of its equivalence with resistive (sexual) freedom. We might instead read agency as a facet of complex personhood within larger embedded relations of subordination... Agency then might be seen as a dialectical capacity for pleasure and pain, exploration and denial, or progressive change as well as everyday survival. (p. 17)

My preconceived notions about the book had more to do with the author than with the topic. Miller-Young and I both have academic appointments at the University of California Santa Barbara. She is in the Department of Feminist Studies, and I am the feminist studies librarian. I have conducted research orientations for and consultations with her students. I have added porn industry publications to the library collection to support her research. At cocktail parties and campus events we have lamented the state of scholarly publishing, and she has shared the very harsh and critical responses she has experienced in presenting her work on Black women in pornography. And frankly, an early presentation of hers left me quite dis-

appointed. In contrast, after years of research, feedback, re-visioning, maturation, and staying true to her vision, her first book is surprisingly impressive and a significant contribution.



Miller-Young was trained as a historian, and her text is foremost a history and ethnography of Black women in pornography that deserves serious attention from historians. The historical scope is from the turn of the 20th century to the early 21st century. The ethnographic voices are from the 1980s forward. Miller-Young uncovers a vast missing archive of Black pornography and erotica in libraries and private collections, including vintage photographs, which range from the beautiful, seductive, raunchy, and humorous to the OMG — and this is just in “Sepia

Sex Scenes: Spectacles of Difference in Race Porn,” the book’s first chapter! She also covers the often-written-about Golden Age of pornography, discussing the emergence of what she refers to as “soul porn,” which describes “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” (p. 67). Black women’s role in Black-cast soul porn and Blaxploitation films is treated in Chapter 2, “Sexy Soul Sisters.”

Like its Golden Age, porn’s “video revolution,” or Silver Age, has also been much written about for its expansion of and economic impact on the industry. Miller-Young demonstrates that the soul porn era was mostly about Black male sexuality, and shows in her coverage of porn’s video revolution that Black actresses were critical to the substantial growth of the industry.

Here she is able to introduce and feature one of her primary interests and contributions to the scholarship: the labor, experiences, and perspectives of Black porn actresses. At the beginning of Chapter 3, “Black Chicks: Marketing Black Women in the Video Era,” we meet porn star Angel Kelly. Before we get Angel’s full story, Miller-Young takes us back and provides an indepth analysis of the culture, major players, and industry in the 1980s, when Kelly became a star. This indepth historical and cultural contextualization enhances the richness of the text and appears throughout.

In Chapter 4, Miller-Young introduces useful concepts such as the one in the chapter title (“Ho Theory”) as well as “hip hop pornography” to interrogate Black female sexuality at the convergence of hip hop and pornography. Her Black feminism embraces such concepts as Black feminist pornographies, erotic capital, erotic sovereignty, and illicit eroticism. She also finds new applications for and critiques of the politics of representation, dissemblance, and respectability, which are all staples of feminist thought. The historiography, combined with the Black feminist analysis and the voices of the actresses and the others involved in the production and distribution of porn, helps us see and learn how actresses market their labor. Moreover, we see and learn how Black women in porn challenge industry discrimination, marginalization, pay inequality, stereotypes, and harsh representations of Black female sexuality.

The ethnographic approach, also a major strength of the text, supports Miller-Young’s case for an agentic Black subjectivity. Many of the popular representations and myths about the industry and the women who work in it are dispelled. We learn first-hand from Black women porn actresses why they “do it,” pun intended. The reasons vary: some are obvious, and others will surprise you, but really shouldn’t if you think about what motivates most of us to do the work we do. The actresses profiled at length, besides Angel and Jeannie, are Sinnamon Love, Sasha Brabuster, Carmen Hayes, and Desiree West (although we don’t get Desiree’s first-hand account). The book also introduces some of the “Black feminist pornographers” behind the camera, including Diana DeVoe, Pinky, Vanessa Blue, Damalli XXXPlosive Dares, and Abiola Abrams, whose voices are featured in two chapters, but who also, along with others, are heard throughout.

Black women have a long, embattled history of challenging and subverting systems of oppression that have contributed to their marginalization and exclusion.

Miller-Young discusses some of the same films that Nash does, and references many more, covering at length *KKK Knight Riders* (1939), *Lialeh* (1974), *Sex World* (1977), *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks* (1985), and *The Call Girl* (1986). Primary sources other than the actresses include directors, producers, distributors, agents, crew, actors, archival film and photographs of private collectors, press materials, video box covers, trade publications, and personal interactions on sets and at conventions. All of this adds up to a decade of fieldwork and a beautiful book. All images are quality, full-color reproductions on heavy glossy paper.

There is a wide audience for this well-researched and well-produced book. As I've tried to show, the scope of Miller-Young's project is large. The

general public as well as researchers from film and media studies, history, sexuality studies, African American studies, labor studies, critical race studies, sociology, and anthropology will appreciate *A Taste for Brown Sugar*.

As marginalized subjects within Black, white, and feminist communities, Black women have a long, embattled history and tradition of challenging and subverting systems of oppression and the social norms and conventions that have contributed to their marginalization and exclusion. Authors Nash, Melancon, and Miller-Young and their brave projects continue that tradition of transgression in the interest of social change, by adding a diversity of Black women's voices, experiences, desires, fantasies, ecstasies, and pleasures to the dominant sexual narratives — narratives that are often steeped in racial and sexual fictions. More importantly, they've created new knowledge: a Black feminist politics and thought that allows for a Black female sexuality — a sexuality that transcends theories of representation, respectability, and dissemblance and demonstrates the complex nature of Black women's sexual identities on Black women's own terms.

Notes

1. I do, however, hugely regret missing the "Authors Meet Critics" session for *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* at the 2014 National Women's Studies Association conference.
2. A theoretical framework of growing significance in feminist thought.
3. Thinking and writing these last few words made me realize that the Black Lives Matter movement, despite the involvement and leadership of Black women, is being defined by the Black male experience just as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were.
4. In memory of Black nationalist and feminist Chinosole, July 14, 1942–October 4, 2014.

[*Sherri L. Barnes is the librarian for feminist studies, LGBTQ studies, and U.S. history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She also co-coordinates the humanities collection group and oversees the library's scholarly communication program.*]



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