

Strange Bedfellows

Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism

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Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, has emerged as one of the most significant figures in contemporary black feminist thought.¹ The recent explosion of interest in Baartman can be traced, at least in part, to Sander Gilman's seminal article "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." Gilman documents the nineteenth-century European fascination with Baartman, a Khoikhoi² woman who became an object of caged display at exhibitions in London and Paris. Baartman's body functioned as a "master text,"³ allowing European audiences to cast their collective gaze on the racially and sexually marked Other in an era where locating the Other's imagined differences justified the project of exporting "civilization."

The "Black Venus narrative," which linked black women's bodies with sexual deviance and moral pathology, provided the European audience an analytic framework for interpreting Baartman's display.⁴ Foundational to this narrative was Baartman's imagined "steatopygia"—the term used to describe (and denigrate) her "deviant" buttocks—which was taken as evidence of her aberrant sexuality.⁵ The racialized fictions surrounding both Baartman's buttocks and her allegedly abnormal genitalia transformed Baartman from a cultural curiosity into an object for "scientific" exploration.⁶ "Scientific" interest in Baartman continued even after her death in 1815, as French scientist Georges Cuvier produced a plaster mold of her body and dissected her genitalia, allowing the European audience to continue their search for "proof" of racial-sexual difference.

Gilman's canonical work offers the important insight that Baart-

man's body became the quintessential Hottentot body, and the Hottentot body became the quintessential African body, such that "in the course of the nineteenth century, the female Hottentot comes to represent the black female *in nuce*."⁷ In other words, Baartman became a symbol of a symbol, the primary metaphor for imagined racial and sexual difference.

Ironically, Gilman's critique of European uses of Baartman's body as the prototypical representation of difference has produced a "veritable theoretical industry," where feminists use Baartman's story as a metaphor for theorizing black women's perceived otherness.⁸ In fact, Baartman's story has become a kind of black feminist "biomythography," a ritualized retelling of a political parable that demonstrates the dangers of the dominant visual field for black female subjects.⁹

Recent scholarship calls attention to Baartman's privileged analytic status within feminist work, inviting scholars to critically examine the continued deployment of Baartman's story as the primary framework for theorizing black female sexuality. Zine Magubane writes: "The question must be asked why this woman has been made to function in contemporary academic debates as the preeminent example of racial and sexual alterity. This question becomes even more compelling when we consider that Sarah Baartman was one of thousands of people exhibited and transformed into medical spectacles during the course of the nineteenth century."¹⁰ Magubane's work foregrounds the politics of *selection*, suggesting the importance of scholarly attention to the rationale underpinning the retelling of Baartman's story and the politicized use(s) that the retelling of Baartman's story serves.

This article takes up Magubane's challenge by examining the rhetorical and political work that the retelling of Baartman's story performs for both antipornography and black feminist scholarship.¹¹ In particular, I argue that the constant invocation of the Hottentot Venus has enabled an antipornography theoretical formation to flourish within the parameters of black feminism. Pulling back the curtain on the intimate relationship between these scholarly projects spotlights how antipornography feminism's fingerprints smudge the lens through which black feminism examines sexuality, pornography, and pleasure.

This article focuses on two significant theoretical and political consequences of the traffic between black and antipornography feminisms. First, in mobilizing the Hottentot Venus to critique dominant representations of black women's bodies, black feminism has permitted a pernicious sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism, to seep into its analytic framework. By sexual conservatism, I refer to black feminism's tendency to foreground examinations of black women's sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury at the expense of analyses attentive to black women's sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity.¹² In emphasizing black

women's continual sexual degradation, rather than the complex interplay between "pleasure and danger"¹³ that constitutes black women's sexual subjectivity, black feminism has become steeped in an "epistemological respectability,"¹⁴ producing an intellectual formation that tends to avoid questions about black women's sexual desires, black queer subjectivities, and the various forms of black women's pleasures.

While my critique of black feminism's sexual conservatism emphasizes the importance of theorizing pleasure, I do not imagine sexual pleasure as a site of liberation wholly outside of domination. In fact, my emphasis on pleasure is informed by antipornography feminism's important insight that pleasure can obscure inequality, eroticize subordination, and entrench hierarchy, functioning as a "velvet glove on the iron fist of domination."¹⁵ While mindful of the ways that dominance can disguise itself as pleasure (and to the ways in which dominance and pleasure are often coconstitutive), I turn my attention to pleasure in the hopes of creating a rupture in the dominant subordination narrative, a gap that can produce space for imagining the critical linkages between black female sexuality and black female subjectivity.

The second effect of the traffic between antipornography and black feminism has been the production of *normative*, rather than iconographic or analytical, engagements with racialized imagery in pornography. To that end, both scholarly traditions pose the perennial question "is pornography racist," and answer that question in the affirmative by drawing connections between Baartman's exhibition and the contemporary display of black women in pornography. However, merely affirming pornography's alleged racism neglects an examination of the ways that pornography mobilizes race in particular social moments, under particular technological conditions, to produce a historically contingent set of racialized meanings *and* profits.

This article begins by tracing antipornography's and black feminism's respective engagement with racialized pornography. It then examines the theoretical traffic between these scholarly conceptions of racialized pornography, revealing the centrality of the Hottentot Venus to both projects' critique of racialized pornography. In particular, I argue that the Hottentot Venus acts as an antipornography and black feminist reading practice, the primary analytic tool used for exposing the racism that continues to haunt the pornographic visual field.

Finally, I suggest an alternative reading practice—racial iconography—to supplant the dominance of the Hottentot Venus reading strategy. As a reading practice, racial iconography grapples with the multitude of meaning-making purposes that black bodies perform in the visual field in a panoply of social, historical, and technological moments, and the complex and multiple interpretative frameworks that spectators deploy to

interpret these racialized meanings. In examining pornography's strategic use of black women's bodies in particular historical and technological moments, racial iconography asks new questions about the pleasures racialized pornography can produce for minoritarian viewers, carving out representational space for black spectators to view themselves and each other as sexual subjects.

Antipornography Feminism

Antipornography feminists have strategically mobilized claims about race to bolster their arguments about the *gendered* harms of pornography.¹⁶ These scholars imagine racialized pornographic representations as produced through gendered pornographic representations, asserting that "pornography contains a racial hierarchy in which women are rated as prized objects or despised objects according to their color."¹⁷ For antipornography feminists, pornography oppresses all women, yet it subordinates women differently based on "racial hierarchy." Ultimately, this body of scholarship treats race as "an intensifier" that demonstrates the severity of pornography's gender-based injury and as an analytic tool that helps antipornography feminists secure their claims to pornography's harms.¹⁸

Despite its interest in using race to bolster claims about pornography's sexism, antipornography feminism has been inattentive to pornography's mobilization of *particular* racial and ethnic differences. Antipornography feminists conflate the variety of racial and ethnic representations within pornography under a theory that the deployment of any racial or ethnic trope necessarily renders pornography pernicious sexist representation. MacKinnon's description of racialized pornographic tropes is emblematic of this approach: "Asian women are bound so they are not recognizably human, so inert they could be dead. Black women play plantation, struggling against their bonds. Jewish women orgasm in reenactments of Auschwitz."¹⁹ For MacKinnon, there is a basic fungibility to racialized tropes in pornography: all racially or ethnically marked women are exploited "as women" and are the most exploited of *women*.

Despite the interchangeability of racial and ethnic tropes in antipornography theory, black women have held a special rhetorical status for this project. To secure their claims that pornography is a particularly undesirable form of sexist representation, antipornography scholars compare the pornographic treatment of black and white women, advancing the claim that the presence of black bodies in the pornographic visual field makes pornography *more* sexist. Luisah Teish's work epitomizes this trend, arguing that "the pornography industry's exploitation of the Black woman's body is qualitatively different from that of the white woman. While white women are pictured as pillow-soft pussy willows, the stereo-

type of the Black ‘dominatrix’ portrays the Black woman as ugly, sadistic, and animalistic, undeserving of human attention.”²⁰

This interest in the “qualitative differences” in representations of black and white women has two significant implications. First, antipornography scholars argue that black women are represented “worse” than white women. To that end, Alice Walker’s notion that “where white women are depicted as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit” has become the standard antipornography method of investigating the meaning-making work that race performs in pornography.²¹ This comparison ultimately yields the insights that pornography is doubly dangerous as it is racist and sexist, and that black women are exploited *worse* than white women in pornography, with little examination of the processes or mechanisms through which black women are represented differently.²² Second, womanhood functions as a unifying common denominator across racial difference. That is, while black women are treated worse than white women, both black and white women are oppressed *as women*. The difference in their treatment is a difference in degree, not in kind.

When antipornography scholars focus their attention on pornography’s “differential” treatment of black women, they draw analytical linkages between contemporary pornography and Baartman’s display. In particular, antipornography feminists have anthologized Patricia Hill Collins’s essay “Pornography and Black Women’s Bodies,” an excerpt from *Black Feminist Thought*, in a number of antipornography edited collections, including *Making Violence Sexy* and *Violence against Women: The Bloody Footprints*, rendering Collins’s essay the decisive text on pornography and black women.²³

Collins’s essay traces contemporary pornography’s roots to nineteenth-century Europe, precisely the moment when European audiences were fascinated by the ethnopornographic display of Baartman’s body. Locating pornography’s genesis in Baartman’s historical moment suggests that “the treatment of Black women’s bodies in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States may be the foundation upon which contemporary pornography as the representation of women’s objectification, domination, and control is based. Icons about the sexuality of Black women’s bodies emerged in these contexts.”²⁴ Contemporary pornography has cultivated a “full-scale industry” that reenacts Baartman’s display, featuring black women in positions that glamorize subordination and reify racial mythologies of black women’s hyperlibidinousness. To that end, contemporary pornography continues to shore up conceptions of black women’s sexual alterity, and black women’s bodies act as the “key pillar on which contemporary pornography itself rests.”²⁵

While Collins’s essay insists on the importance of race to pornography’s history, her essay neglects to investigate how viewing technologies

and historical moment²⁶ shape the relationship between the viewer and the viewed, fundamentally altering the psychic labor of interpretation.²⁷ Considering the *differences* between the live display of Baartman's body in nineteenth-century Europe and the computer-mediated pornographic displays of black women's bodies in our current moment would allow an analysis of how technology shapes both racial fantasies and spectators' viewing pleasures. Ultimately, if interpretation is a process of "shuffling and collating and transcription of images or words so that they have effectivity within one's own fantasy universe," it becomes critical to engage with how the form of pornographic viewing alters spectators' pleasures and fantasies.²⁸

Collins's essay has been strategically taken up by antipornography feminists precisely because it performs antipornography work under the guise of racial progressivism. If pornography has historical roots in Baartman's display, any sexualized representation of the black female body contains that same impulse to locate, display, and verify black women's imagined racial-sexual differences. To that end, eliminating pornography serves an antiracist purpose: it eradicates texts that shore up conceptions of black women's alterity.

Black Feminism

Black feminism has committed itself to drawing attention to "mainstream" feminism's neglect of questions of racial difference and its exclusion of the experiences of women of color—which are always already multiple and heterogeneous—from the dominant feminist project. With a particular interest in exploding the various incarnations of race-versus-gender logic, black feminism has recently mobilized "intersectionality" to describe the coconstitutive nature of experiences of oppression and identity.²⁹ That is, identity is understood to be comprised of the intersections of multiple constructed categories including, but not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

While black feminism's practical goals—explicating the relationship between race and gender, recovering black women's stories, and challenging both feminism and antiracist projects to meaningfully include black women—have been clear, it has struggled since its inception to define the contours of its theoretical project. This has been a particular challenge because of black feminism's interest in crafting a grounded theory, producing linkages between "the real" and "theory."³⁰

This fundamental interest in translation, in rendering black feminism "real" to the imagined black female subject (whether the romanticized black "Folk"³¹ or the equally romanticized figure of "Shequanna on 142nd"³²), has often placed black feminist thought in an oppositional relationship

to conventional conceptions of theory. Black feminists have argued that dominant notions of theory privilege institutionalized forms of knowledge, ignoring the panoply of ways in which black women have produced theory. Barbara Christian's work epitomizes this position, asserting that institutionalized forms of knowledge overlook the ways that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seemed more to our liking."³³ Christian's work persuasively argues that prevailing conceptions of theory deemphasize, if not devalue, the theoretical richness of experience. Yet her formulation of "narrative forms" and "riddles and proverbs" as theory suggests that *every* cultural product black women create is a kind of theory. This incredibly expansive conception of the theoretical tends to overpoliticize black women's cultural production, suggesting that we can distill theoretical meanings out of black women's seemingly quotidian social practice.

Where black feminism has functioned as a kind of "critical social theory"³⁴ is in its critical engagement with visual culture, with the (re) production of what Patricia Hill Collins terms "controlling images."³⁵ Collins describes "controlling images" as dominant representations that produce and entrench racial-sexual mythologies. These images depict black women as licentious, animalistic, libidinous Jezebels; as asexual, comical, masculinized Mammies; or as tough, detached, "strongblack-women."³⁶ Collins envisions these "controlling images" as serving a social purpose: they provide a justification for the state's continued disciplining of the black female body. That this discipline has most often focused on black women's sexuality, linking black women's reproduction to the moral and fiscal "deterioration of the state," demonstrates the ideological power these images have in securing conceptions of black women's sexual deviance.³⁷ Ultimately, the regulation of the black female body has rendered it a public site, a space onto which social debates and collective anxieties about morality, religion, policy, and the state are inscribed.

For black feminists, Baartman is the quintessential symbol of both the public nature of black women's bodies and the power that "controlling images" have over the collective imagination in both producing fears of difference and legitimizing racist-difference narratives. Mobilizing Baartman's story as an analytic point of departure has enabled black feminism to offer a "real" theory of the public nature of black women's bodies, a theory rooted in the practice of Baartman's exhibition. This "real" theory emphasizes the ways that black women's bodies have been unshielded by the privilege of privacy afforded to majoritarian subjects, rendering the contemporary black female body exposed and displayed.³⁸

Theoretical Traffic

While antipornography and black feminisms are often imagined as discrete intellectual projects, there are three significant theoretical strands of continuity between these theoretical regimes. First, both antipornography and black feminist projects imagine black women's bodies as inherently "overexposed."³⁹ According to this logic, racialized pornography secures black women's status only as objects to be gazed upon in the ostensibly white spectator's unrelenting search for proof of racialized mythologies. Second, both regimes implicitly pathologize interracial voyeurism, suggesting that the ostensibly white male viewer's gaze at the black female body is motivated by "racial fetishism," and thus constitutes a reductive, objectifying form of looking.⁴⁰ Finally, scholars working out of both traditions imagine sexualized representations as the linchpin in the perpetuation of white supremacy and racial inequality. To that end, the theoretical and political work of both projects is to dismantle dominant sexualized representations of black bodies and to encourage black women to launch a "visual defense" rooted in self-representation.⁴¹

The Logic of "Overexposure"

Both black and antipornography feminism take black women's visual "overexposure" as an analytic point of departure. Rooting "overexposure" in slavery, scholars argue that white slave owners' unmitigated sexual access to black women's bodies rendered exploitation, violation, and literal bodily *exposure* central to black women's experiences of their sexuality.⁴²

Both camps extend this "overexposure" framework into our contemporary moment, arguing that black women's bodies continue to function as cultural spectacles that are called upon to provide evidence of black subjects' deviance. For antipornography feminists, black women's inherent "overexposure" renders them the prototypical antipornography subject. It is precisely because black women are already hypervisible that they are an ideal case study for antipornography feminism: if all women are "exposed" and objectified, black women's hyperexposure makes them the ideal metaphorical vehicles for exposing pornography's harms.

For black feminists, terms like the "culture of dissemblance,"⁴³ the "beached whale" of black female sexuality,⁴⁴ and the "politics of silence"⁴⁵ have provided frameworks for considering how black women strategically avoid describing their own sexuality as a way of guarding against "overexposure." That is, black women are imagined to have adopted a deliberate "politics of silence" as a way of shielding themselves from further scrutiny and exploitation.

However, the predominance of these terms often obscures the histori-

cal specificity with which they were originally used. For example, Darlene Clark Hine's notion of the "culture of dissemblance" seeks to describe the noneconomic rationales for black women's migration in the decades following the Civil War, yet has been expanded to function as a transhistorical description of black women's sexuality. As Michele Mitchell warns, "it remains crucial to consider how analytical frameworks can obscure as well as reveal."⁴⁶ Considering the constitutive power of concepts like the "culture of dissemblance" reveals that the strategic "silence" that black women are imagined to have taken on as a result of "overexposure" requires analyses of the mechanisms of "dissemblance" and "silence" and the variety of ways that black women both took on and resisted "silence."

Because both projects are concerned with black women's hyper-visibility, their incessant cultural and representational exposure, they suggest that the work of radical political projects is to shield the black female body from the exploitation inherent to dominant representation by encouraging black women to represent themselves, on their own terms.

However, this strategy has two significant shortcomings: first, considering the case of pornography suggests that black women are not always "overexposed" in the visual field. In fact, there are historical moments when black women are wholly absent from the pornographic visual field. Comparing black women's relative absence from pornography's early stag films to black women's presence as pornographic protagonists in Golden Age films—the era spanning the 1970s when pornographers self-consciously challenged the boundary between the pornographic and the mainstream, producing films that resembled conventional Hollywood films—compels us to ask how we might understand the black female body as *both* under- and overexposed. An attention to historical and technological variability would allow black feminists to interpret black women's absences from the pornographic visual field in particular historical moments, and to read those against pornography's strategic (and profitable) mobilization of black women's bodies in other social, historical, cultural, and technological moments.

Debates about the over- *and* underexposure of the black female body extend far beyond the pornographic visual field.⁴⁷ Art historians have a long-standing interest in the *desexualization* of the black female body in the history of Western art and the invisibility of black women's bodies from visual representation outside of roles as servants, mammies, or handmaids.⁴⁸ In particular, the paucity of representations of the black nude has been a source of tremendous interest to art historians, with Judith Wilson noting that "apparently, the black nude only becomes a permissible subject for black artists in the twentieth century."⁴⁹ This absence is of particular significance because of the centrality of the nude to the history of Western art and to Western conceptions of beauty, suggesting

that black female bodies might be “underexposed” in sites conventionally associated with desirability, femininity, and sexuality. The striking lack of sexual representations of black bodies, and of representations of the “black body beautiful” more generally from visual culture, suggests the need for conceptualizing both visibility and *invisibility* in more historically contingent and specific terms.⁵⁰

Second, both projects’ advocacy of a “black liberation discourse on the black body beautiful” ignores the problems inherent to visibility itself, neglecting questions about the violence that representation can inflict, particularly on minoritarian subjects.⁵¹ Because the visual is underpinned by an incessant plea for legibility and intelligibility, it often requires bodies to confess, to provide “proof” of the difference that race, gender, and sexuality produce. This appeal to making bodies’ workings visible can compel minoritarian subjects to provide evidence of precisely the “truths” that can inflict injury: race, gender, and sexuality.

Moreover, appeals to self-representation often neglect that *what can be seen* is colored in a visual economy that is structured by race.⁵² Judith Butler argues that we inhabit a “racially saturated field of visibility,” where race fundamentally alters the conditions under which viewing takes place.⁵³ Given that visual lenses are so thoroughly smudged by race, even images that black women have produced are subject to (mis)readings informed by the dominant conception of black women’s sexual deviance.

Ultimately, feminist appeals to perpetuating “positive images” of the black female body through self-representation assume that the task of black cultural production is to contest racism⁵⁴ and ignore the homogenizing effects that “positive images” can have.⁵⁵ In encouraging black women to create images of “the black body beautiful” that disrupt racial fictions and mythologies, appeals to “positive” self-representation discount the significance of images of black female heterogeneity and diversity to the “inauguration of a public black female subjectivity.”⁵⁶

Racial Fetishism

Both antipornography and black feminist traditions argue that racialized pornography is produced for a white spectator, whose desire to gaze at the black female body’s imagined difference is motivated by a reductive “racial fetishism.” Looking across the racial border is thought to be undergirded by a pernicious inequality, one where part of the pleasure-in-looking that the white male viewer achieves is the reification of his position of social dominance.

For antipornography feminists, interracial inequality bolsters gendered inequality; the interracial gaze and the male gaze coalesce during consumption of racialized pornography, entrenching white male power.

Because pornography is imagined to be produced for a white male viewer, antipornography feminists draw connections between the fact that “we [women] are pussy, beaver, bitch, chick, cunt” and the fact that “pornography is a major medium for the sexualization of racial hatred. Every racial stereotype is used.”⁵⁷ MacKinnon makes explicit the imagined connections between sexism, racism, and representation:

Perhaps sexuality is a dynamic in racism and ethnic prejudice as well as in gender bias. Upon examination, much racist behavior is sexual. Consider the pure enjoyment of dominance that makes power its own reward, reports of the look of pleasure on the face of racist torturers, accounts of the adrenalin high of hatred and excitement that survivors of lynchings describe having seen, the sexual atrocities always involved. Recall the elaborate use of race, ethnicity, and religion for sexual excitement in pornography and in much racist harassment.⁵⁸

To that end, sexism and racism are theoretically run together, with pornography bolstering both male privilege and white privilege simultaneously.

Scholars working out of the black feminist traditions have imagined the white viewer’s visual pleasure as rooted in a pathological “racial fetishism,” one that renders particular body parts—the buttocks, in particular—a metonymy for the entirety of the black female body. For these scholars, the black body is an object for white viewing pleasures, enabling white spectators to entertain a kind of “imperialist nostalgia” for a moment like the one when Baartman was displayed, and black female bodies were literally objects to be consumed.⁵⁹

In ignoring both the possibilities of black spectatorship and non-“fetishistic” white spectatorship, the “racial fetishism” logic suggests both that black bodies inhabit the visual field *for* white viewing pleasures, and that interracial viewing is inherently problematic as it is steeped in inequality. This theoretical framework leaves little room for white visual pleasures that are not degrading, objectifying, or fetishizing, foreclosing the possibility of white spectators gazing at, and taking pleasure in, black women’s bodies without reducing the black female body to its constitutive parts.

The Danger of Images

Finally, scholars working out of both traditions conceive of sexualized representations as the linchpin in the perpetuation of white supremacy and racial inequality. In advocating the eradication of these images, either through legal abolishment (antipornography feminism) or the creation of counterimages produced by minoritarian subjects (black feminism),

these projects envision sexualized representation as integral to structures of domination and hegemonic control.

For antipornography feminists, sexuality is the primary locus of patriarchal power, and pornography functions as the most vivid representation of phallic power. Underpinning this conceptualization of sexuality is a critique of the heterosexual sex act as an enactment of male power and dominance, whereby women are rendered “occupied.”⁶⁰ For antipornography feminists, heterosexual sex epitomizes and reenacts the social conditions of male dominance because man functions as the active penetrator and woman as the passively penetrated. This rhetorical critique of the heterosexual sex act has been broadened to envision normative heterosexuality, rather than simply heterosexual intercourse, as the locus of patriarchal power. Sexuality is a “dynamic of control” whereby male dominance produces, eroticizes, and maintains gendered inequality and constitutes a political system that entrenches male dominance.⁶¹

This “dynamic of control” is made particularly visible in pornography where “man fucks woman; subject verb object.”⁶² Pornography reinforces a “dynamic of control” because it is not simply a cultural product; instead, it is a cultural practice and a patriarchal tool where power and inequality innocently masquerade as sex. Because pornography is a kind of “doing,” a visual advocacy of violence, the work of the antipornography project is to eliminate pornographic representations entirely.

While antipornography feminism imagines pornography as the linchpin in female subordination, it gestures to the “erotic” as a benign site where women can cultivate their sexual subjectivity.⁶³ For example, MacKinnon’s condemnation of pornography is coupled with a celebration of erotica, “sexually explicit materials premised on equality,” as erotica is imagined to permit women to explore their sexual subjectivities unencumbered by the violence of phallogentric patriarchy.⁶⁴

Yet, absent from MacKinnon’s formulation of the egalitarian possibilities of erotica are an engagement with what equality means in sexual representation, and an analysis of the plethora of pornographic products designed for the pleasurable consumption of women, couples, and sexual minorities. MacKinnon’s conception of “equal” sexual representation is too vague to be conceptualized, neglectful of the potential importance of domination and subordination to the cultivation of sexual subjectivity, and inattentive to the sheer variety of pornographic products that “speak sex” to a host of consumers.⁶⁵

Finally, MacKinnon’s powerful critique of pornography as an advocacy of “man fucks woman, subject verb object” neglects the material realities and visual diversity of pornography: a representational site that increasingly features images of women pleasuring each other (which often predict a male viewer, but nonetheless center female pleasure) and “speaks sex” in

particular vernaculars to *particular* imagined communities including, but not limited to, queer communities,⁶⁶ women,⁶⁷ and couples.⁶⁸ Considering pornography as a diverse market, which alters its vocabulary for “speaking sex” to appeal to a variety of consumers, challenges the seemingly universal claims that MacKinnon marshals against pornography.

Similarly, black feminism’s emphasis on the perils of representation suggests that “controlling images” are the linchpin of black women’s subordination. Collins argues that an examination of the resilience of “controlling images” is particularly important, as “even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only subjugate U.S. Black women but are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions.”⁶⁹ In legitimizing black women’s social marginalization, “controlling images” are integral to the production of a “highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place.”⁷⁰

Both antipornography and black feminism conceptualize representation as a critical site in the reproduction of racist and sexist inequality. In particular, sexualized representations are imagined to function as sites that exclusively entrench dominant regimes, securing white patriarchal power. While the two scholarly traditions conceive of the work that sexualized representation performs in securing the dominant regime’s power differently, both ultimately embrace a normative goal of eradicating sexualized representations, at least those that are produced for the voyeuristic consumption of the dominant white male subject.

Racial Iconography as a Reading Practice

Locating the racist and/or sexist practices of heteropatriarchal, white-dominated society is a project that has been of tremendous interest to a number of progressive intellectual traditions. While usefully demonstrating the multiplicity of sites in which processes of domination exert their control, this task contributes to “the logic of the trial,” to the production of a normatively driven intellectual project that condemns unequal practices in lieu of locating the *mechanisms* through which structures of domination are articulated in varying social moments.⁷¹ In the context of pornography, scholarship inspired by the “logic of the trial” permits asking certain questions (“is pornography racist?”) and systematically avoids questions about the social, historical, and technological specificity of pornography’s racialized meanings, the possibilities of black pornographic spectatorship, and the pleasures black bodies might take *in* pornographic representations that include them.

In place of the normatively driven Hottentot Venus reading practice, a framework undergirded by the “logic of the trial,” I advocate a reading

practice of racial iconography. Racial iconography is a critical hermeneutic, attentive to the nonracist meaning-making work that black women's bodies perform in pornography and to the historical contingency of racialized pornographic texts. Ultimately, in posing unasked, indeed unthinkable, questions about the multiplicity of pornography's racialized meanings, racial iconography shifts black feminist thought toward what Rinaldo Walcott calls "the unthought of what might be thinkable."⁷²

The remainder of this essay will deploy racial iconography as a reading practice, engaging in close analyses of two Golden Age films. I have specifically chosen to focus on Golden Age pornography as it marked a significant shift in both the quantity and type of pornographic representations of black women's bodies. During the Golden Age, a period spanning the 1970s, moving-image pornography was transformed from an underground genre to a mainstream genre whose feature-length, narrative-driven films like *Deep Throat* (directed by Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (directed by Artie Mitchell and Jim Mitchell, 1972) resembled Hollywood films.

Significantly, black women were ushered on-screen as pornographic protagonists after their relative absence from the short, anonymously produced stag films that constituted the moving-image pornography market prior to the advent of the Golden Age. In films like *Lialeh* (directed by Barron Bercovich, 1973) and *Sexworld* (directed by Anthony Spinelli, 1978), the pornographic presence of black female protagonists became significant for the formation of Golden Age narratives.⁷³

Using racial iconography as an interpretative device permits asking previously unasked questions about Golden Age films. First, racial iconography examines how Golden Age films coupled pornographic genre conventions with the genre conventions of mainstream cinema to produce visual pleasures for new audiences, including black spectators. An examination of Golden Age's interest in producing pornographic films for black spectators challenges the prevailing conception that black bodies inhabit the pornographic visual field for the exclusive pleasure of the white spectator and asks how pornography produced an aesthetic for "speaking sex" to a black audience. Second, racial iconography analyzes Golden Age representations of black protagonists taking visual, aesthetic, and sexual pleasure in blackness, troubling the deeply held notion that race is a site of pleasure for whites and an embodied wound for blacks.

Generic Marriages and the "Discovery" of New Audiences: Reading *Lialeh*

The era that produced hits that traversed the boundary between the mainstream and the pornographic also ushered on-screen the first all-black pornographic film. *Lialeh*, the so-called black *Deep Throat*,⁷⁴ merges the

genre conventions of the pornographic and the blaxploitation to “speak sex” directly to the black spectator. In so doing, *Lialeh* both recognizes a new market—the black spectator—and codifies a pornographic vernacular for “speaking sex” to that audience.

Lialeh's classic blaxploitation narrative tells the story of Arlo, who produces a black sexual revue, and his perennial conflict with Roger, the white club owner, who insists on receiving payment before the show can continue. Because the ostensibly black spectator is invited—indeed, encouraged—to imagine Roger as an exploitative, racist white man who profits from extracting money from black subjects, Arlo's proclamation that he plans to take “black tits, cunts, dicks, pricks, and mak[e] them into a big-time money-making show” acts as a racially progressive, emancipatory claim.

Of course, the sexual revue hinges on the presence of women's bodies, and Lialeh, the film's black female protagonist, acts as the conduit for connecting the blaxploitation project of representing the triumph of black business with the pornographic project of displaying the workings of female bodies. Yet, unlike conventional pornographic films, the display of Lialeh's body is explicitly in the service of a race loyalty narrative, with Lialeh using her sexuality to secure black humanity in the face of white dominance.

For example, in the film's climactic scene, Lialeh concludes her on-stage performance at the revue and then enters the audience to perform a striptease. First dancing suggestively in front of a black male audience member who puts money into her G-string, Lialeh then dances for a white man. When the white audience member attempts to slide money into her G-string, she reprimands him, exclaiming, “that's a fiver, not a c-note,” and stuffs the money into his open mouth. Lialeh's acceptance of money from a black audience member compared to her reproach of a white audience member gestures to the race loyalty that underpins the blaxploitation: Lialeh is willing to sacrifice financial gain for establishing her allegiance to the imagined black collectivity. In coupling the blaxploitation and the pornographic, *Lialeh* produces a blax-porn-tation aesthetic designed to celebrate the black phallus, race loyalty, and racial authenticity, and to showcase the black female body as an erotic site for the black spectator.

While racial iconography attends to the viewing pleasures created by generic collusions, it also examines generic collisions and the potential visual pleasures produced by the discontinuities between aesthetic projects. In the case of *Lialeh*, black women's sexual pleasures are clearly articulated in the fissures produced by the marriage of the blaxploitation and the pornographic. In the scene preceding the film's climax, Lialeh talks with her minister about her anxiety regarding her upcoming performance. When the reverend interrupts their conversation to use the bathroom, he

returns a few moments later in embarrassed agony, explaining that his penis has become stuck in the zipper of his pants. Though the reverend begs Lialeh not to touch his penis, Lialeh and two of her friends dislodge his jammed penis through fellatio, and then Lialeh mounts him and has sex with him.

In this scene, the blaxploitation and the pornographic humorously collide, troubling the aesthetic and meaning-making projects of both genres and producing visual space for representing black women's pleasures and desires. First, while blaxploitation uses the elevation of the black phallus as a metaphor for black male dominance more generally, this scene foregrounds black male masculinity's vulnerability. In this scene, the black male phallus is *literally* in trouble, and it is black women who are able to loosen (again, literally) trouble's grip. Mireille Miller-Young describes this scene as a "subversion of the sexual conservatism within the black Church," yet the scene is also a "subversion" of the blaxploitation foundational myth of black phallic power.⁷⁵

Moreover, once Lialeh mounts the minister and begins to have sex with him, the scene concludes without a resurrection of phallic power, usually indicated by the pornographic money shot, the visual evidence of both phallic presence and phallic pleasure. As a generic convention, the money shot provides quantifiable and legible proof of male pleasure, lending a visual stamp of authenticity to the pornographic scene. While aural clues suggest that the minister enjoys a sexual climax, the scene concludes without visual "proof" of the primacy of the phallus and with no "evidence" that the troubled black phallus has been restored to its customary position of authority.

Lialeh exploits the interstices of the coupling of the blaxploitation and the pornographic to carve out space for the black feminine sexual imagination and for black women's pleasures. Miller-Young's analysis of *Lialeh* suggests that the film "moves beyond any film in the black, Hollywood, or pornographic 'exploitation' film traditions in advancing a space for the articulation of the explicit, hardcore sexuality of black women actors."⁷⁶ This analysis underscores *Lialeh*'s production of visual space for the articulation of black women's desire and pleasure. Yet, racial iconography advances this reading by suggesting that *Lialeh* produces black pleasures on multiple interpretative levels. Read as a blax-porn-tation film, *Lialeh* celebrates the black phallus and black women's racial loyalty to black men; yet, read with an attention to aesthetic "failures," to the difficulty of completely coupling the blaxploitation and the pornographic, it becomes clear that black women's pleasures flourish in the in-between spaces, in the gaps between two aesthetic projects.⁷⁷

Reading Race-Pleasure in *Sexworld*

While racial iconography recognizes the pleasures of black spectatorship, it also examines the possibilities of pornographic representations of black race-pleasure, contesting the dominant conception that blackness is merely an embodied wound repeatedly inflicted on black bodies by white hegemony. Rather than reading the black body's presence in the visual field as evidence of white spectators' desires to screen imagined difference, racial iconography asks how the on-screen black body can represent blackness as a locus of pleasure and sexual arousal *in addition to* a classificatory formation that inscribes itself on the flesh of all subjects, conferring benefits and burdens on whites and blacks respectively.

Racial iconography enables reading the Golden Age film *Sexworld*, described by critic Robert Rimmer as "an excellent montage of interracial sexmaking," as a representation of the black female protagonist's taking sexual, aesthetic, and visual pleasure *in her own blackness*.⁷⁸ Rather than depicting blackness as a site for white protagonists' and white spectators' pleasure, blackness becomes a locus of sexual enjoyment for the on-screen black protagonist, a "fact" that becomes essential to her arousal and pleasure.

In *Sexworld*, participants travel to a fantasy-sex resort where they are encouraged to abandon "social taboo" and to surrender their free will to the Sexworld "experts" who ensure the fulfillment of their fantasies and desires. The film's predominant narrative vehicle for communicating Sexworld's status as a site where fantasies are realized is an interracial scene between a white man, Roger, and a black woman, Jill. In Roger's initial session with the Sexworld experts, he shares his disgust at the sight of Jill on the Sexworld bus. The experts interpret this confession as a sign of his repressed desire for black women and arrange a sexual liaison with Jill to help Roger unleash his subconscious longings for black women. When Jill enters Roger's room, he mistakes her for the maid, ordering her to clean his room, and Jill responds that she will "clean your wet cock when *we'se* done, sir." The sexual number is then structured by Jill's persistent articulation of her body's virtues, with an emphasis on those body parts usually designated sites of black women's alterity—her "class ass," her "honey pot"—and Roger's conversion from disgust to uncontrollable excitement.

Dominant readings of this interracial scene suggest that Jill performs the role of hyperlibidinous black woman for the pleasurable consumption of both the white male protagonist and the ostensibly white male spectator. Miller-Young's analysis epitomizes this reading strategy, arguing that Jill's racialized performance "illustrates the white pornographic imagination of black women's sexuality" and represents black female sexuality as "something desired that must also be denied."⁷⁹

Racial iconography permits a reading of *Sexworld* that avoids foregrounding the pornographic “use” of black women’s bodies and instead imagines that blackness is represented as a pleasurable site for the black protagonist. This new reading requires analyzing the Roger/Jill scene alongside the film’s other interracial scene, which features black actor Johnnie Keyes (star of *Behind the Green Door*) and another white *Sexworld* guest, Lisa. The scene begins when Lisa confesses her predilection for interracial pornographic films, particularly *Behind the Green Door*, to the *Sexworld* experts. When Lisa returns to her suite, the experts send Keyes to visit her. Keyes enters Lisa’s room wearing his famous *Behind the Green Door* costume: a skin-tight full-body white leotard. While the leotard acts as a kind of racial condom, cloaking his black body in a tight seal of whiteness, it has a hole cut out for his penis to poke through the costume. This hole provides an important visual contrast: the dark black of his penis is accentuated by the stark whiteness of his leotard, visually emphasizing what Lisa deems desirable: the always-erect black penis.

Keyes’s purpose on-screen is clear: he exists for Lisa’s pleasure. Generally, pornographic genre conventions privilege both aural “proof” of pleasure (in the form of moans, whimpers, and groans) and visual “proof” of pleasure (in the form of the money shot and close-ups celebrating phallic pleasure). The Lisa/Keyes scene is performed to music, rendering aural proof of pleasure impossible. In lieu of visual “evidence” of phallic pleasure, the scene focuses on Lisa’s pleasure, featuring close shots of her face, her mouth open in delight as Keyes performs cunnilingus on her, and her teeth grinding into Keyes’s shoulder in pleasure. While Lisa’s pleasure is centered in the scene, “evidence” of Keyes’s pleasure is wholly absent, save from the convention of the money shot, where his ejaculate streams from her mouth. Even this generic convention, normally read as a sign of phallic triumph, is oriented around Lisa’s pleasure as it reenacts the climax of *Behind the Green Door*, where actress Marilyn Chambers famously allowed ejaculate to stream from her mouth.

Reading the Lisa/Keyes scene against the Jill/Roger scene makes clear that Jill’s body acts as a site of pleasure for *both* Jill and Roger, with both subjects garnering enjoyment from Jill’s racialized performance. As Jill urges Roger to “dip into the valley, dally into the valley for a while,” she is attempting to “convert” Roger from racial bigotry to interracial pleasure and revealing the pleasure she takes in her own blackness. When Jill declares “now don’t these thighs make your peter rise? . . . And ain’t this a class ass?” Jill takes up loci of imagined racial difference, claiming them as sites of pleasure, as she proudly displays the virtues of her body.

Whereas the Lisa/Keyes scene is structured by Keyes’s instrumental presence—he inhabits the visual field *for* Lisa’s pleasure—the Roger/Jill

scene is structured by Jill's insistent presence. Keyes plays the role of a present absence; he provides Lisa with the fulfillment of her fantasy to consume the black male body as Marilyn Chambers does in *Behind the Green Door*. In so doing, Keyes is virtually missing from the scene; the scene is performed to music, so his voice is unheard, and the only insistently present portion of his body is the always-erect black penis that protrudes from his white leotard. In contrast, Jill is emphatically present in the Roger/Jill scene, insisting on the potential pleasures of interracial sex *and* the pleasures she takes in her black body.

In reading *Sexworld's* two interracial scenes against each other, both the potential for pornographic representations of pleasures *in* blackness and the variety of ways that blackness is strategically mobilized for distinct meaning-making ends becomes clear. Jill's articulation of the aesthetic, sexual, and sensual pleasures she takes in her own black body certainly traffics in racialized stereotypes in its incessant invocation of black women's buttocks, "titties," and "honey pots." In so doing, *Sexworld* demonstrates that "fantasies do not merely unleash domination upon people of color. Fantasies can project desire, open the psyche, and work as technologies of imagination for authors, spectators, and critics of color."⁸⁰ Racial iconography suggests that race itself can be a "technology of imagination" and that Golden Age pornography can represent blackness as its own locus of pleasure for both black spectators and black protagonists.

Toward the "Unthought"

Racial iconography provides a productive rupture in the dominant black feminist analytical framework that links the contemporary objectification and degradation of black women in the pornographic visual field to Baartman's exhibition. In place of a normative reading of racialized pornography, racial iconography asks new questions about black spectatorship and black visual pleasures, attending to the historical and technological specificity of both. In so doing, racial iconography allows black feminists to break with a lengthy tradition of sexual conservatism and to instead embark on what Evelyn Hammonds has called a "politics of articulation."⁸¹

This "politics of articulation" insists on unmasking the silence that has cloaked black female sexuality and the sexual conservatism that has been smuggled into black feminism. In its place, racial iconography encourages black feminism to produce rhetorical, theoretical, and imaginative space for describing the heterogeneous and diverse pleasures that mark black female sexual subjectivity. That these pleasures are mediated by the continued violence of white dominance and heteronormativity is, of course, a central component of a black feminist "politics of articulation." Yet, a "politics of articulation" also recognizes the continued power of black

sexual imaginations to envision themselves and each other as sexual subjects, as agents of their own pleasure. A “politics of articulation” requires an interrogation of the metaphors, symbols, and tropes—including Baartman’s story—that have come to stand in for meaningful engagement with the messy heterogeneity of black female sexuality. Considering the rhetorical and theoretical work that metaphors perform for black feminist politics reveals that even seemingly progressive stories can become “controlling images,” limiting the black feminist imagination. It is only when we loosen the stronghold these “controlling images” have on our ability to envision the black body in ecstasy that we can begin to take seriously both the legacy of violent sexist-racist exploitation of black women’s bodies and the possibilities, politics, and pleasures of black female sexual subjectivity.

Notes

1. For a sampling of scholarly work on Baartman, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of ‘Hottentot’ Women in Europe, 1815–17,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 19–48; Ann du Cille, *Skin Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Susie Prestney, “Inscribing the Hottentot Venus: Generating Data for Difference,” in *At the Edge of International Relations: Postcolonialism, Gender, and Dependency*, ed. Phillip Darby (New York: Pinter, 1997), 86–105; T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Z. S. Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot,” in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Zine Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” *Gender and Society* 15 (2001): 816–34; Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Also of note is the emerging work on Baartman as an actual person rather than a symbol or political parable. See Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007).

2. While Dutch colonists called colonial subjects on the Cape of Good Hope “Hottentots,” the inhabitants called themselves “Khoikhoi.”

3. Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 17.

4. Zine Magubane’s work advocates scholarly investigations of the differences between British and French interpretations of Baartman’s body, noting that Baartman’s “relatively weak interpellation into British medical and scientific discourses as compared to French” might act as a point of departure for further research (“Which Bodies,” 826).

5. Sander Gilman argues that “female sexuality is linked to the image of the buttocks, and the quintessential buttocks are those of the Hottentot.” See Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 210. Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests that the fascination with Baartman’s buttocks may have had other explanations. She argues that an emerging cultural anxiety about sodomy might suggest “possible relationships between cultural con-

structions of the sodomitical body and those of the steatopygous African woman.” Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race, and Nation,” 79.

6. Janell Hobson, “The ‘Batty’ Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” *Hypatia* 18 (2003): 92.

7. Gilman, “Black Bodies,” 206.

8. Magubane, “Which Bodies,” 817.

9. “Biomythography” is Audre Lorde’s term. See Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1982).

10. Magubane, “Which Bodies,” 830.

11. Though I am using the term *black feminist* throughout this article, I am cognizant of debates within black feminist scholarship and sensitive to black feminist diversity.

12. While this article describes the *dominant* black feminist tradition, there are a number of black feminist texts with an interest in black female sexual heterogeneity. See Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *differences* 6 (1994): 126–45; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); Tricia Rose, “Two Inches or a Yard: Censoring Black Women’s Sexual Expression,” in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Mignon R. Moore, “Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities,” *Signs* 32 (2006): 113–39; Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

13. “Pleasure and danger” is a reference to Carole Vance’s edited volume, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984). Vance’s volume asserts that feminist attention to the dangers that constrain female sexuality has overshadowed engagement with the diversity and heterogeneity of female pleasures that flourish even under conditions of patriarchy and heteronormativity. However, with the exception of Hortense Spillers’s contribution to the anthology, the *racialized* particularities of *both* pleasure and danger are not analyzed in detail.

14. William Haver quoted in Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora,” in *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 93.

15. Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8.

16. Angela Harris describes antipornography feminism’s use of black women as “black women are white women, only more so.” Angela Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” *Stanford Law Review* 42 (1989): 592.

17. Dorchen Leidholdt, “Where Pornography Meets Fascism,” *WIN Magazine* (1981): 20.

18. Harris, “Race and Essentialism,” 596.

19. Catharine MacKinnon, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 301–2.

20. Luisah Teish, “A Quiet Subversion,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 117.

21. Alice Walker, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), 52.

22. Harris critiques the practice of offering generalizations about women as a class while offering “qualifying statements, often in footnotes, [which] supplement the general account with the subtle nuances of experience that ‘different’ women

add to the mix,” arguing that this “nuance theory” reifies whiteness as a norm from which women of color deviate (Harris, “Race and Essentialism,” 595). Equally problematic is that this theoretical configuration ignores the complex simultaneity of privilege and oppression for both white and black subjects, neglecting the complexity of positions of marginality (and privilege).

23. I do not take Collins’s work to be representative of all of black feminist thought; instead, I am interested in the ways in which her article has been taken up by antipornography feminists as *the* black feminist position on racialized pornographic imagery.

24. Patricia Hill Collins, “Pornography and Black Women’s Bodies,” in *Making Violence Sexy*, ed. Diana Russell (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1993), 98.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Kobena Mercer’s reading and subsequent rereading of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black male nudes convincingly demonstrates how historical moment alters interpretation. Mercer’s first reading of Mapplethorpe’s work argues that the photographs are steeped in “racial fetishism,” permitting the white spectator to view black men’s bodies as “abstract, beautiful ‘things.’” Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 174. Even worse, Mercer argues, is that Mapplethorpe’s work bolsters the “primal fantasy of the big black penis,” reifying the racial-sexual mythology of the hyperphallic, hypermasculine, black male subject. Mercer’s rereading of Mapplethorpe’s work is written in the backdrop of a different social moment. In the wake of Mapplethorpe’s death and the extensive political debates over funding for Mapplethorpe’s exhibitions, Mercer approaches Mapplethorpe’s work from a position of “ambivalence” (Mercer, *Welcome*, 189). Mercer suggests that the always-erect black penis might be a way of calling the viewer out on her knowledge of racial mythologies, poking fun at the racial fictions that continue their hold on the collective sexual imagination. Finally, in recognizing the political stakes of reading Mapplethorpe, Mercer notes, “For my part, I want to emphasize that I have reversed my reading of racial fetishism in Mapplethorpe not for the fun of it, but because I do *not* want a black gay critique to be appropriated to the purposes of the New Right’s antidemocratic cultural offensive” (Mercer, *Welcome*, 203). Mercer’s self-conscious and reflexive reading and rereading of Mapplethorpe only underscore the ways that historical, social, technological, and *political* context shape and alter viewer’s engagements with sexualized representation.

27. Jennifer Wicke describes the labor of interpretation as “the shuffling and collating and transcription of images or words so that they have effectivity within one’s own fantasy universe—an act of accommodation, as it were. This will often entail wholesale elimination of elements of the representation, or changing salient features within it; the representation needs to blur into or become charged with historical and/or private fantasy meanings.” Jennifer Wicke, “Through a Glass Darkly: Pornography’s Academic Market,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 181.

28. *Ibid.*, 181.

29. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*.

30. I am using *the real* in reference to Rebecca Walker’s work. See Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real* (New York: Random House, 1995). See also Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

31. Alice Walker’s definition of “womanism” includes “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*” Alice Walker, *In Search of Our*

Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii (italics included in original).

32. Joan Morgan, "Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes: Notes of a Hip-Hop Feminist," *Social Text*, no. 45 (1995): 155.

33. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Making Faces, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 336.

34. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 17.

35. Collins, *Black Feminist*, 84.

36. Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 109–11.

37. Collins, *Black Feminist*, 80.

38. For more on black feminists' relationship to privacy, see Jennifer C. Nash, "From Lavender to Purple: Privacy, Black Women, and Feminist Legal Theory," *Cardozo Women's Law Journal* 11 (2005): 303.

39. Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 1.

40. *Racial fetishism* is Kobena Mercer's term. See Mercer, *Welcome*, 174.

41. Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 141.

42. See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1985).

43. See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14 (1988): 912–90.

44. Hortense Spillers argues that "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues." Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, 74.

45. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (1992): 266.

46. Michele Mitchell, "Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African-American History," *Gender and History* 11 (1999): 440.

47. An interest in the simultaneity of overexposure and underexposure, or hypervisibility and invisibility, has been of tremendous interest to a number of black feminist scholars. Patricia J. Williams contrasts the "sense of being invisible" that marked her experience as a black female law school student with the "now-heightened visibility" of her experience as a black female professor. Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 55–56. Williams notes, "I know that my feelings of exaggerated visibility and invisibility are the product of my not being part of the larger cultural picture" (*ibid.*, 56).

48. See Lisa Collins, "Economies of the Flesh: Representing the Black Female Body in Art," in Wallace-Sanders, *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, 99–127. Kobena Mercer's reading of Mapplethorpe, mentioned above, also describes the absence of the black nude from Western art. In his rereading of Mapplethorpe, Mercer suggests that the elevation of the black male body to the subject of art might act as an "elementary starting point of an implicit critique of racism and ethnocentrism in Western aesthetics" (Mercer, *Welcome*, 196).

49. Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of

Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art,” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 114.

50. Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, 13.

51. *Ibid.*, 13.

52. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’s work also reads race and the visible as inextricably bound up, suggesting that race is both a “regime of looking” and a “practice of visibility.” Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

53. Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

54. Michele Wallace critiques this perspective, writing, “Since ‘racism,’ or the widespread conviction that blacks are morally and/or intellectually inferior, defines the ‘commonsense’ perception of blacks, a positive/negative image cultural formula means that the goal of cultural production becomes simply to reverse these already existing assumptions. Not only does reversal, or the notion that blacks are more likeable, more compassionate, smarter, or even ‘superior,’ not substantially alter racist preconceptions, it also ties Afro-American cultural production to racist ideology in a way that makes the failure to alter it inevitable.” Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990), 1.

55. Ann Pellegrini captures the “normalizing” effect of “positive images,” arguing, “We can no more predict what actions or identifications ‘positive’ representations will give rise to than we can be certain to capture the all of us in ‘our’ would-be positive images. Can any campaign for ‘positive’ images reckon with the unconscious and its unpredictable uptake of ‘the’ image? Will ‘our’ images be any less normalizing than ‘theirs’?” Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 81.

56. Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*, 4.

57. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 199.

58. Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 63.

59. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 29.

60. See Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

61. Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 137.

62. *Ibid.*, 124.

63. Audre Lorde’s canonical “Uses of the Erotic” essay is also strategically taken up by both black and antipornography feminists as an example of the possibilities for feminine sexual subjectivity untainted by the pornographic. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).

64. MacKinnon, *Feminist Theory*, 176. Gloria Steinem makes a similar distinction: “Look at or imagine images of people making love; really making love. Those images may be very diverse, but there is likely to be a mutual pleasure and touch and warmth, an empathy for each other’s bodies and nerve endings, a shared sensuality and a spontaneous sense of two people who are there because they *want* to be.” Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), 219.

65. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 2.

66. Pornography’s importance to queer male subjects has been theorized by a

number of scholars (there is considerably less scholarship on lesbian pornographies and their importance for queer women subjects). Richard Dyer captures pornography's analytic and representational importance, arguing that pornography is "the predominant form of how we [gay men] represent our sexuality to ourselves." Richard Dyer, "Gay Male Porn: Coming to Terms," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 30 (1985): 27. For more on gay male pornographies, see Tom Waugh, "Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight," *Jump Cut* 30 (1985): 30–36; John R. Burger, *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (New York: Harrington Park, 1995); Jeffrey Escoffier, "Gay-for-Pay: Straight Men and the Making of Gay Pornography," *Qualitative Sociology* 26 (2003): 531–55; Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145–68; Daniel Tsang, "Beyond 'Looking for My Penis': Reflections on Asian Gay Male Video Porn," in *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment*, ed. James Elias et al. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999), 473–77.

67. Candida Royalle notes that she started Femme Productions, her adult video company, because "I wanted to show that it was possible to produce explicit porn that had integrity, I wanted to show that porn could be nonsexist, and I wanted to show that porn could be life-enriching." Candida Royalle, "Porn in the USA," *Social Text*, no. 37 (1993): 23. There has been considerable feminist attention to Candida Royalle's films, produced specifically for women and couples, precisely because Royalle critiques the hard-core from within its parameters. See Williams, *Hard Core*; Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jane Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); James K. Beggan and Scott T. Allison, "Reflexivity in the Pornographic Films of Candida Royalle," *Sexualities* 6 (2003): 301–24; Roberta Sterman Sabbath, "Romancing Visual Women: From Canon to Console" (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 1994). Some scholars have been quite critical of feminist interest in works like Candida Royalle's. Constance Penley notes that feminists have tended to focus on pornography that falls outside of the mainstream, including Royalle's couple-centered films. She notes, "within mass-commercial videos, the great majority of the titles are seen to merit little critical, much less feminist, interest." Constance Penley, "Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 312. For a sampling of Royalle's films, see *Femme* (1984); *Urban Heat* (1985); *Christine's Secret* (1986); *Sensual Escape* (1988); *Revelations* (1993); *Stud Hunting* (2002).

68. Linda Williams describes couples' pornography as a "softer, cleaner, nicer version of the stock numbers and narratives of feature-length hard core." Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 232. Yet the emergence of instructional sex-videos for couples, like *Bend over Boyfriend* (dir. Carol Queen, 1998) and *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women* (dir. Tristan Taormino, 1999), "demonstrating and demystifying anal sex—a sex act with a stigmatized past and (as evidenced by these films) a changing future"—suggests that the couples market has changed significantly since Williams's initial analysis. See Michelle Carnes, "Bend over Boyfriend: Anal Sex Instructional Videos for Women," in *Pornification*, ed. Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 151.

69. Collins, *Black Feminist*, 69.

70. *Ibid.*, 5.

71. Loïc Wacquant, "For an Analytic of Racial Domination," *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (1997): 222.

72. Walcott, "Outside in Black Studies," 91.

73. Mireille Miller-Young's dissertation, "A Taste for Brown Sugar: The History of Black Women in American Pornography" (PhD diss., New York University, 2004), provides tremendously useful details of *Lialeh's* and *Sexworld's* plots and production histories.

74. Light in the Attic Records and Productions, distributor of *Lialeh's* soundtrack, refers to the film as the "black *Deep Throat*."

75. Miller-Young, "Brown Sugar," 139.

76. *Ibid.*, 142–43.

77. While hardcore pornography's celebration of phallic authority and blaxploitation's celebration of black phallic power seem to bolster each other, *Lialeh* gestures to the tensions between these two seemingly related genres. For example, in an early scene, Arlo arrives at Roger's office to find Roger's (white) secretary eating her lunch, insisting that Roger is unavailable. When Arlo tries to side-step her desk, she performs a martial arts move, and the two engage in highly stylized mock-fighting, which eventually yields to kissing and fondling. When the secretary turns to Arlo and queries, "Wait a minute, you mean you're not going to rape me?" Arlo fondles her, and then penetrates her with the remainder of her lunch, a hot dog. Mistaking the hot dog for Arlo's penis, she continues to moan with pleasure until Arlo jumps up and says, "so long bitch, enjoy your lunch!" Arlo's strategic withholding of sex, while true to blaxploitation's commitments to race loyalty and contesting white dominance, frustrates the pornographic promise of making bodies and their pleasures visible. Arlo's body remains completely covered during this scene, frustrating the spectator's desire to *see* his "cock"—its hardness, its emphatic visual presence—and black phallic triumph is garnered not through sex, but through the *refusal* of interracial sex.

78. Robert Rimmer, *The X-Rated Videotape Guide 1* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 135.

79. Miller-Young, "Brown Sugar," 146–47.

80. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 146.

81. Evelyn Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 180.