

INTRODUCTION

Reading Race, Reading Pornography

Over the years, a ritual has evolved around my work. Every time I tell curious strangers that I am writing a book about pornographic representations of black women, I am met with great interest. There are often follow-up questions, some titillated and some inspired by a kind of racialized curiosity, a desire to know what is distinctive about racialized pornography, and, at times, a desire to know what is distinctive about black women's bodies and pleasures. The most consistent response, though, is praise for my courage, for my brave willingness to expose pornography's racist exploitation of black women's bodies. My interest in how black women are depicted in pornography is often heard—or misheard—as an interest in how black women are violated by pornography. These experiences of being misheard prompted me to wonder if a black feminist project on pornography could articulate a theoretical and political stance that *avoided* a condemnation of the racism imagined to underpin racialized pornography.¹ What would it mean to read racialized pornography not for evidence of the wounds it inflicts on 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 project of race?²

The Black Body in Ecstasy's engagement with these questions requires a critical interrogation of black feminism's approach to representation,

which treats visual culture, unless produced by black women, as presumptively problematic. My critique of black feminism's theory of representation is rooted in a particular visual archive that has long troubled black feminists: racialized pornography. In this book, I use the term *racialized pornography* to describe hard-core moving-image pornography featuring black women. It is certainly true, as the film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu notes, that "porn shelves are organized by race" and that a host of female bodies—black, Asian, and Latina, to name just a few—generate racial (and sexual) meanings on the pornographic screen, but I am particularly interested in the relationship between black women and pornography's representational economy.³ Black women's projection on the hard-core pornographic screen has concerned black feminists precisely because it has been imagined to make explicit the exploitation that representation already inflicts on black women. Indeed, if dominant visual culture objectifies black female bodies, racialized pornography is imagined to be particularly demanding in its incessant exposure of black female flesh and its insistence on black female sexual excess and alterity.

In place of reading racialized pornography for evidence of the wound, as is the tradition within black feminist visual culture studies, I develop a new method of analyzing racialized pornography: *racial iconography*. Racial iconography is a critical hermeneutic, a reading practice that shifts from a preoccupation with the injuries that racialized pornography engenders to an investigation of the ecstasy that racialized pornography can unleash. By reading for ecstasy rather than injury, racial iconography performs what Judith Butler terms an "aggressive counter-reading," one which suspends normative readings of racialized pornography and instead advances readings which emphasize black performances and pleasures represented on the racialized pornographic screen.⁴ By *ecstasy*, I refer both to the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy. I am drawn to the term *ecstasy* in much the same way some feminists have been drawn to the term *jouissance*, to describe pleasures that exceed or transcend the self and to capture a bliss that exceeds language.⁵ If *jouissance* describes an unnamable sexual pleasure, my use of *ecstasy* aspires to capture forms of racial-sexual pleasure that have heretofore been unnamed (and some that have been too taboo to name), including blissful performances of hyperbolic racialization and uncomfortable

enjoyment in embodied racialization. The ecstatic pleasures that this book locates are varied and multiple—pleasures in looking, pleasures in being looked at, pleasures in performing racial fictions, pleasures in upending racial fictions. I am particularly interested in the ecstatic possibilities of racialization, pleasures which are both deeply personal (aesthetic, erotic, sexual) and deeply social, and that form the basis of political communities and identities. To that end, I use ecstasy to consider how race aids pornographic protagonists in staging, enacting, and naming pleasures, even as it always already constrains protagonists' lexicons of desire.

My investment in the term ecstasy also contains a utopian wish for black feminist theory. Drawing on José Muñoz's conception of ecstasy as "an invitation, a call, to a then-and-there, a not-yet-here . . . a collective potentiality," I use ecstasy as a corrective to injury and as a critical response to a black feminist tradition that, as Judith Wilson notes, treats "the Hottentot Venus and Josephine Baker [as] . . . twin poles of visual theory about the black female body."⁶ For Muñoz, ecstasy is an "invitation" to "step out of the here and now of straight time" and to embrace the possibility of futurity.⁷ For me, ecstasy offers an opportunity to "step out of the here and now" of the logic of injury emphasized by black feminist visual culture studies, and to embrace the potential of *doing* black feminist visual culture studies (and, implicitly, black feminist politics) differently, of organizing around the paradoxes of pleasure rather than woundedness or the elisions of shared injury, around possibilities rather than pain. To be clear, the book does not exculpate racialized pornography or suggest that racialized pornography is the pathway to black women's political freedom. Instead, I use racialized pornography as a tool for shifting the black feminist theoretical archive away from the production and enforcement of a "protectionist" reading of representation, and toward an interpretative framework centered on complex and sometimes unnerving pleasures.⁸

By treating race as both a technology of domination and a technology of pleasure, racial iconography offers a critical departure from scholarly work on race. My conception of race is indebted to the interdisciplinary work of Loïc Wacquant, Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and Edward Telles, which reveals that race is a historically and socially contingent structure of domination, and to the work of Judith Butler, Nicole Fleetwood, Patricia Hill Collins, and Elizabeth Abel, which underscores the centrality of visu-

ality to racial domination.⁹ Drawing on their insights, I emphasize two under-theorized aspects of race: pleasure and performance.

When scholars theorize pleasures in race, they tend to focus on pleasures in whiteness, as is the case with George Lipsitz's interrogation of white subjects' "possessive investment in whiteness," Cheryl Harris's conception of whiteness as a valuable "property right," or Anthony Paul Farley's description of the "sadistic" pleasures white subjects take in inflicting race on nonwhite bodies.¹⁰ When scholars examine black pleasures, they have focused on black cultural production, envisioning black popular culture as the primary articulation of black pleasure. Moreover, these scholars have imagined cultural appropriations of blackness as particularly pernicious because of the danger that nonblacks will co-opt a significant form of black pleasure. Ishmael Reed's work underscores this approach: "Is there something about black pleasure that attracts members of other races? Do members of other races see something unique about black pleasure, something that can't be found in their own origins? Why is it that 70 percent of the hip-hop market is dominated by white suburban teenagers? Why did whites take such pleasure from minstrel shows, and why did they enjoy getting up in blackface?"¹¹ Reed's queries suggest that black pleasures and black cultural production are inextricably linked, and that appropriation presents particular challenges for black subjects because it threatens one of the few pleasurable sites that blacks can "own."

Yet black pleasures beyond cultural production remain relatively under-theorized, leading the cultural critic Arthur Jafa to call for an investigation of black pleasure: "What are its parameters, what are its primal sites, how does Black popular culture or Black culture in general address Black pleasure? How does it generate Black pleasure? . . . This whole question of addressing Black pleasure is a critical thing."¹² My work attempts to unsettle the primacy of the appropriation debate to questions of black pleasure. Rather than presuming that black pleasures center on cultural "ownership," I instead ask how black pleasures can include sexual and erotic pleasures in racialization, *even when* (and perhaps *precisely because*) racialization is painful, and I assert that the racialized pornographic screen is a site that makes particularly visible the complex relationship between race and embodied pleasures. In so doing, I underscore the importance of sexual subjectivity to embodied racialization, and trace the intimate connections between sexual subjectivity and racialized subjectivity.

While pleasure is central to my conception of race, performance is as well. Joining scholars like E. Patrick Johnson, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Robin Bernstein, and Harvey Young, I am interested in how racial formations are both crafted and disrupted through performance.¹³ In particular, my close readings of pornographic films ask how black protagonists' performances of race—some spectacular, some hyperbolic, and some stereotypical—toy with racial fictions, and underscore that race is constituted, at least in part, by a “stylized repetition of acts” that can produce pleasure both for performers and for spectators.¹⁴ These performances demonstrate that race can be entrenched, undone, and rendered hypervisible through repetition, and that racialized performances can be pleasurable for subjects on all sides of the proverbial color line.

While racial iconography foregrounds how pornography renders visible race's pleasurable and performative aspects, it also attends to the historical and technological contingency of how racialized tropes are deployed in pornography. Racial iconography is particularly interested in how pornography engages with black women's bodies, drawing on—and, at times, departing from—prevailing racial-sexual mythologies to generate spectators' viewing pleasures. Racial iconography is also sensitive to the time and place in which pornography is produced and consumed, analyzing how modes of consumption alter both visual pleasures and pornographic viewing experiences. Pornography has proven to be an endlessly malleable genre, routinely taking advantage of new viewing technologies—whether the VCR or the Internet—to reach new consumers, and race has been central to the story of pornography's incessant attempts to reach new consumers, and to generate new (and more substantial) profits.

Because racial iconography is invested in historically and technologically rooted readings of pornography, it implicitly contests a dominant black feminist “overexposure” narrative—an account which asserts that black women have been consistently and violently “exposed” on the pornographic screen.¹⁵ Instead, racial iconography shows that the history of racialized pornography contains moments where black female bodies have been “overexposed,” and other moments when black women have been wholly absent from hard-core pornography. In challenging the hegemonic overexposure account, racial iconography asks new and historically specific questions, including how do we interpret black women's absences from the pornographic visual field in particular historical moments? How

can we read those absences against pornography's strategic mobilization of black women's bodies in other social, historical, cultural, and technological moments?

While my interest in black women's participation in pornography is, in part, a challenge to ahistorical accounts of racialized pornography, my project is also invested in studying how black women's bodies make race a pornographic subject, placing racial fictions and fantasies on pornography's visual agenda. The films I analyze in *The Black Body in Ecstasy* show black female protagonists rendering explicit racial mythologies, at times toying with them, at times finding pleasure in them, and at times problematizing them. In so doing, they center racial fictions' inextricable connection to sexual fictions, and emphasize that race is necessarily a pornographic fantasy.

Finally, racial iconography advances a theory of representation, one which draws on Shimizu's concept of the "bind of representation." Shimizu's work contests the long-standing presumption that images can be "positive" or "negative," instead considering how minoritarian subjects are both constrained by and potentially liberated through representation.¹⁶ Shimizu uses the term "bind of representation" to argue that Asian-American women (the subjects at the center of her analysis) cannot be "imaged outside of perverse sexuality or non-normative sexuality. . . . Therefore, they must use that sexuality in order to create new morphologies in representation and in history."¹⁷ Like Shimizu, I am interested in how black female pornographic protagonists navigate the "tightrope" of representation, putting to work the sexual stereotypes that often constrain them.¹⁸ Rather than celebrating self-representation, or calling for "positive images in identification and redress in protest," racial iconography asks how black female protagonists negotiate the minefield of representation, and studies how representation can be a site where spectators and protagonists exercise freedom, even within the confines of a visual field structured by race and gender.¹⁹

If racial iconography is a critical reading practice that troubles black feminism's preoccupation with injury, why use racialized pornography as the visual site for unsettling black feminism's logic of woundedness? Why is racialized pornography a critical site in revealing the limitations of black feminism's engagement with visual culture?

Pornography has implicitly come to structure black feminism's con-

ception of representation. Indeed, black feminism has often read visual culture's treatment of black women even in nonpornographic texts as a kind of pornography; pornography has become both a rhetorical device and an analytical framework, a strategy for describing and critiquing a particular re-presentation of black women's bodies. Alice Walker, for example, notes that "for centuries the black woman has served as the primary pornographic 'outlet' for White men in Europe and America."²⁰ Here, the "pornographic" comes to signal not the genre conventions of the hard-core, but a mode of sexualizing and objectifying black women. If the "pornographic" describes a way that black women are violated, dominant visual culture is imagined to offer a particularly explicit, uninterrupted gaze at black women's bodies, securing ideas of black women's hyperlibidinousness, ranging from black feminist critiques of blaxploitation to hip-hop feminist critiques of "video hoes" and "video vixens."²¹ Engaging with racialized pornography as an actual visual enterprise structured by historical moment and technological shifts rather than as a rhetorical trope is thus necessary for unraveling the assumptions underpinning black feminism's conception of representation.

While pornography has maintained rhetorical and symbolic value for black feminists, some black feminists have been specifically concerned with racialized pornography's pernicious effects. Following Catharine MacKinnon's insight that pleasure can be the "velvet glove on the iron fist of domination," black feminists have often treated racialized pornography as particularly problematic because of its capacity to make racial inequality look sexy.²² Walker's famous refrain that "where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects,' black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted at least as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit" has become emblematic of a prevailing black feminist approach to pornography where critiquing racialized pornography is treated as analogous to critiquing racism.²³ Examining the meaning-making work that black women's bodies have performed in pornography is central for undermining the transtheoretical, transtechnological claim that racialized pornography's representational labor is always to represent black women "as shit."

While my work is born from a critique of black feminism's approach to visual culture, it is also indebted to the field and politically committed to crafting space within the black feminist theoretical archive for plea-

sure. My intellectual coming-of-age was facilitated by an array of black feminists whose work populated my bookshelves. Those scholars—June Jordan, Patricia J. Williams, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Deborah King, and many others—shared a fundamentally important point of departure: “That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance.”²⁴ My project is particularly indebted to Mireille Miller-Young’s “A Taste for Brown Sugar,” a history of black women’s participation in pornography, which exposes the “complicated” relationship between black women’s bodies and hard-core pornography. Though Miller-Young’s work has a different focus than mine—it examines the complex experiences of black women laboring in the sex industry—her archival work laid the foundation for my project. Ultimately, my project does not argue for abandoning black feminism; instead, it is a “loving critique” of the field, one that parts company with many of the questions that have driven black feminist scholarship on representation, and one that hopes to bring renewed theoretical energy to its debates.²⁵

Though my work positions itself in conversation with black feminism, it also critically engages other feminist traditions that have taken up, or failed to take up, the significant connections between race and pornography. To underscore the urgency of my intervention—racial iconography—I offer a brief history of feminist theoretical and political engagement with pornography to highlight both the variety of sophisticated analytical tools feminists have used to study pornography and the surprising paucity of analyses of the interplay of race and pornography. While I am critical of the relative inattention to racial meaning-making that permeates the four feminist traditions that I outline—antiporn, pro-porn, sex-radical, and feminist porn studies—this history is not meant to offer a progress narrative, to criticize earlier interventions, or to celebrate newer scholarly innovations. Instead, I endeavor to show that all four traditions have made significant theoretical contributions in tracing pornography’s relationship to law, patriarchy, violence, pleasure, and privacy. Moreover, my account is purposefully attentive both to theoretical debates surrounding pornography and to political debates within feminism on how to respond to pornography’s ubiquity. In so doing, I underscore that feminist theory and feminist politics are mutually constitutive.

Four Feminist Traditions

ANTIPORNOGRAPHY FEMINISM

The term “sex wars” has often been used to describe a debate that captivated feminist scholars and activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and was at its most visible, and most contentious, at the Barnard College Scholar and Feminist Conference in 1982. The Barnard conference’s theme of “pleasure and danger” (from which Carole Vance’s now seminal edited collection emerged) attempted to theorize complex experiences of female pleasure under patriarchy, though the effort to capture complexity was threatened by the polarized debates surrounding the conference. Some antipornography feminists, who claimed that they had been excluded from conversations about the conference’s planning, protested outside the conference wearing shirts embossed with “For Feminist Sexuality, Against S/M.” As a result of the negative publicity, Barnard College halted printing of the conference’s publication, *Diary of a Conference*, which contained writing and artwork focused on the politics of sexuality from a number of activist-scholars, including Gayle Rubin, Amber Hollibaugh, and Carole Vance. (Barnard eventually reprinted the volume, but redacted its name from the publication. As Janet Jacobsen notes, “The College effectively paid thousands of dollars to have Barnard’s name taken off of the document, thus removing the College’s connection to this important body of work.”)²⁶

While the Barnard conference became the “flash point for a revolution in how feminists could approach questions of sexuality,” an anti-pornography movement (which was part of a larger feminist antiviolence movement) had been gaining momentum for a few years.²⁷ The legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon and the activist Andrea Dworkin became the centerpieces of a movement that envisioned pornography as a visual celebration of patriarchal power and women’s subordination. For anti-pornography feminists, pornography is not simply an explicit depiction of women’s subjugation; it constitutes violence and disguises it as mere representation.

Because pornography functions as an act which secures male power, antipornography feminists argue that pornography both mirrors and cements the actual position of women under conditions of patriarchy.²⁸ MacKinnon asserts, “In pornography, there it is, in one place, all of the abuses

that women had to struggle so long even to begin to articulate, all the unspeakable abuse: the rape, the battery, the sexual harassment, the prostitution, and the sexual abuse of children. Only in pornography it is called something else: sex, sex, sex, sex, and sex, respectively.”²⁹ Pornography, then, celebrates male dominance, it eroticizes sexual assault, it glamorizes female subordination, and it “sexualizes women’s inequality” — quite simply, it is the linchpin of male control over female bodies.³⁰

Antipornography feminists, then, actively rebut the idea that pornography is merely benign fantasy. Dorchen Leidholdt argues, “The environment in which we learn about and experience our bodies and sexuality is a world not of sexual freedom but of sexual force. Is it any surprise that it is often force that we eroticize? Sadistic and masochistic fantasies may be part of our sexuality, but they are no more our freedom than the culture of misogyny and sexual violence that endangered them.”³¹ Leidholdt shows that the very content of fantasy is shaped by male dominance, suggesting that our affective lives are shaped by “the culture of misogyny.” If “sexual force” constitutes the milieu in which our sexual subjectivities develop, antipornography feminists assert, then our sexual practices and pleasures are suffused with the practices of patriarchy.

Nowhere are the dangers of fantasy more apparent than in racialized pornography, a representational site that antipornography feminists have been particularly invested in critiquing. Indeed, antipornography feminists have strategically mobilized claims about race to bolster their arguments about the gendered harms of pornography.³² These scholars imagine racialized pornography 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.”³³ For antipornography feminists, pornography oppresses all women, yet it subordinates women differently based on race. Ultimately, this body of scholarship treats race as “an intensifier” which 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.³⁴

Despite their interest in using race to bolster claims about pornography’s sexism, antipornography feminists have been inattentive to pornography’s mobilization of particular racial and ethnic differences. They conflate the variety of racial and ethnic representations within pornography

under a theory that the deployment of any racial or ethnic trope always 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. . . . Amputees and other disabled or ill women's injuries or wounds or stumps are proffered as sexual fetishes. Retarded girls are gratifyingly compliant. Adult women are infantilized as children, children are adult women, interchangeably fusing vulnerability with sluttish eagerness said to be natural to women of all ages, beginning at age one.³⁵

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 and theoretical 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 women's bodies in pornography makes pornography *more* sexist. Luisah Teish notes, "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 stereotype of the Black 'dominatrix' portrays the Black woman as ugly, sadistic, and animalistic, undeserving of human attention."³⁶ The study of "qualitative differences" in representation has two significant implications. First, antipornography scholars argue that black women are represented "worse" than white women, and that the gendered exploitation of women inherent to pornography is multiplied for black women. This comparison ultimately yields the insights that racialized pornography is doubly dangerous, as it is both racist and sexist, and that black women are exploited more than white women in pornography, entrenching a "black women have it bad" logic with little examination of the historically specific ways that black women are represented.³⁷ Second, womanhood functions as a unifying common denominator across racial difference. 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.

If antipornography feminism is a robust theory of patriarchal power, it is also a theory of legal action. The movement endorses the abolition of pornography under a theory that pornography has both production and consumption harms: women are injured through their participation in the production of pornography, and all women are injured through the circulation of pornography. The Minneapolis pornography civil rights hearings that took place in 1983—chronicled in MacKinnon’s and Dworkin’s collection *In Harm’s Way*—document the involuntary nature of women’s labor in “sex factories,” where pornography is produced, and refute the assumption promoted by the pornography industry that women are in pornography because they want to be there.³⁸ As one woman who testified at the hearing noted, “Every single thing you see in pornography is happening to a real woman right now.”³⁹ Yet antipornography feminists’ concerns extend beyond the women victimized by pornography production. MacKinnon writes, “Sex forced on real women so that it can be sold at profit and forced on other real women; women’s bodies trussed and maimed and raped and made into things to be hurt and obtained and accessed, and this presented as the nature of women in a way that is acted on and acted out, over and over; the coercion that has become invisible—this and more bothers feminists about pornography.”⁴⁰ Eliminating pornography entirely, then, is the only way to ensure that women are not subjected to the violent production of pornography—conditions which MacKinnon sees as analogous to prostitution and rape—and that women are not subjected to the continued circulation of images which normalize male violence against women.

These dual concerns animated MacKinnon and Dworkin’s attempts to abolish pornography through an ordinance that defined pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words . . . [including representations where] . . . women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or . . . women are presented as sexual objects for domination, conquest, violation, exploitation, possession, or use, or through postures or positions of servility or submission of display.”⁴¹ The proposed ordinance, which *American Booksellers v. Hudnut* struck down in 1985 because of its unconstitutional breadth, centered on the elimination of pornography in the service of pro-

tecting all women from pornography's harms, and demonstrated anti-pornography feminists' commitment to marshal law to protect women's bodily integrity and sexual autonomy.⁴²

Though their engagement with the state to abolish pornography lost traction after *American Booksellers v. Hudnut*, antipornography feminism has maintained its cohesiveness as a political moment. Contemporary anti-pornography feminists extend the work of MacKinnon and Dworkin by centering the importance of analyses of capitalism on pornography's omnipresence and by tracing the impact of pornography's omnipresence on intimate life. Gail Dines, for example, argues that "pornographers are capitalists and they control much of the speech on sexuality. Anti-porn feminists are repeatedly censored from mainstream media and silenced by the capitalist juggernaut that is the porn industry."⁴³ For Dines, pornography's ubiquity is intimately related to the fact that it is big business; pornographers' tremendous profits afford them to control dominant media and to effectively silence antipornography critique. Contemporary anti-pornography feminists also argue that pornography's omnipresence has come to fundamentally alter the fabric of intimate life. As Dines argues, "To think that men and women can walk away from the images they consume makes no sense in light of what we know about how images shape our sense of reality."⁴⁴ To that end, the labor of some contemporary anti-pornography work is to trace how pornography's cultural presence destroys intimacy, commodifies relationships, and glamorizes violence.

While I am deeply critical of antipornography feminism's reliance on law as an attempt to safeguard women's bodily integrity, its wholesale neglect of pleasure, and its symbolic use of black women's bodies, my analysis remains fundamentally interested in two foundational premises of antipornography thought. First, antipornography feminism convincingly argues that female subjects' experiences of pleasure are mediated by patriarchy and its intersection with other structures of domination. This is not to say that one's experience of pleasure is inauthentic; rather, antipornography feminism uncovers that pleasures are enjoyed against the backdrop of patriarchy and heteronormativity, and that this context casts a profound shadow on the pleasures we experience. Second, this scholarly tradition shows that pleasure can mask the pernicious workings of patriarchy. By critically interrogating pleasure, rather than simply celebrating it as necessarily positive, antipornography feminism shows that

hierarchy often wears the guise of pleasure. Both of these critical interventions underpin my own readings of racialized pornography, spectatorship, and visual pleasures.

PRO-PORNOGRAPHY FEMINISM

Pro-pornography feminism emerged as a response to antipornography's uncritical reliance on the state for redress. Pro-pornography feminists insist that there is a long American tradition of using law to promote sexual puritanism, and argue that state regulation of pornography will hurt sexual minorities and reify sexual hierarchies, continuing the tradition of valuing, indeed sacralizing, some forms of sex and denigrating, even outlawing, others.⁴⁵ These feminists point to the "strange bedfellows" pairing of radical feminists and social conservatives in their effort to pass antipornography legislation, exposing the regressive and oppressive underpinnings of the antipornography project.⁴⁶

Moreover, pro-pornography feminists interpret state regulation of pornography as a dangerous form of censorship. In response to MacKinnon's and Dworkin's model antipornography ordinance, a group of feminists formed the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), which submitted an amicus brief in anticipation of the Seventh Circuit's decision in *American Booksellers v. Hudnut*. Central to FACT's argument was that the ordinance's breadth allowed the state far too much leeway to define the scope of the pornographic, permitting the suppression of free speech. In the brief, FACT wrote, "Sexually explicit expression, including much that is covered by the ordinance, carries many more messages than simply the misogyny described by Appellants. It may convey the message that sexuality need not be tied to reproduction, men or domesticity. It may contain themes of sex for no reason other than pleasure, sex without commitment, and sexual adventure—all of which are surely ideas."⁴⁷ In arguing for pornography's multiple meanings, FACT treated pornography as speech worthy of First Amendment protection (in contrast to antipornography feminists' insistence that pornography is an act and not speech) and characterized antipornography feminists as conservative censors.

In the years following the defeat of antipornography legislation, pro-pornography feminism's political movement began to lose its cohesiveness. Yet in the early 1990s, a cohort of activists and cultural critics, including Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf, produced a new

brand of pro-pornography feminism that was preoccupied with critiquing so-called victim feminism.⁴⁸ These scholars, as Kathryn Abrams notes, “decried the ‘victim’ status assigned to women by dominance feminism” and “warned—often with marked antipathy toward feminist activists—that depictions of women as sexually subordinated encourage a wounded passivity on the part of women and a repressive regulatory urge on the part of state authorities.”⁴⁹ More than that, these feminists often celebrated pornography, and women’s involvement in it, arguing that participation in pornography constitutes the epitome of female liberation. Paglia exemplifies this position, arguing, “Far from poisoning the mind, pornography shows the deepest truth about sexuality, stripped of romantic veneer. . . . What feminists denounce as woman’s humiliating total accessibility in porn is actually her elevation to high priestess of a pagan paradise garden, where the body has become a bountiful fruit tree and where growth and harvest are simultaneous.”⁵⁰ For Paglia, pornography enables women to cultivate their sexual subjectivities by accessing the “deepest truth about sexuality.”⁵¹

If Paglia, Roiphe, and Wolf constituted a cohort of feminists invested in destabilizing the notion of female victimization, uncoupling feminism from an analysis of women’s subordination, and celebrating female liberation through commodified sex, contemporary pro-pornography feminisms have built on this tradition. With the advent of third-wave feminism and its embrace of sex-positive feminism, an iteration of feminist praxis that celebrates sexual freedom has allowed a new era of pro-pornography feminism to emerge.⁵² This new epoch, with its fetishization of choice, views the consumption and production of pornography as potentially liberatory and celebrates subjects’ “choice” to consume or produce whatever they enjoy.

Surprisingly absent from pro-pornography feminism is an engagement with how race (and other structures of domination) fundamentally alter and constrain women’s access to sexual pleasure and agency. Fortunately, a new and more complex form of sex-positivity has begun to take hold within the parameters of black feminism, with work by scholars like LaMonda Stallings, Siobhan Brooks, and Shayne Lee asking how “a pro-sex vision can supplement the feminist quest for social and sexual equality by delving into popular culture to see the production of proactive scripts for female sexuality and erotic agency.”⁵³ The development of sex-positivity

within black feminism has productively bracketed older black feminist conversations about respectability and sexual conservatism, instead attempting to place black female sexual agency at the heart of black feminist conversations.

While my work challenges pro-pornography feminism's tendency to neglect the context in which the decision to participate, or not participate, in sex work occurs and its unproblematized celebration of the language of choice, I share with this tradition a great suspicion of state regulation of pornography and the injuries it can inflict on sexual minorities. In fact, my work is underpinned by the idea that law is an imperfect device, a blunt instrument, which often forecloses the rights of far too many in an attempt to safeguard the liberties of some. Moreover, my work builds on (and aspires to contribute to) the chorus of scholars working within black feminism who draw upon sex-positive theory to advocate for a black feminist politics of pleasure.

THE SEX-RADICAL REJOINER

Sex-radicalism disrupted the contentious anti-pornography/pro-pornography debate that marked the early 1980s. Emerging from two canonical volumes—*Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984) and Ann Snitow's *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1983)—sex-radicalism destabilized the tendency to view pornography as exclusively a site of women's subordination or a locus of women's agency. Instead, sex-radicals studied how arousal, pleasure, subordination, and dominance are co-constitutive, and emphasized the contingent and complex meanings inherent to each pornographic text.

This attention to pornography's multiple meanings allowed sex-radicals—including performer Annie Sprinkle, filmmaker Candida Royalle, and scholar-activists Jill Nagle, Wendy Chapkis, and Vicky Furnari—to investigate how feminists could challenge the dominant pornographic aesthetic from inside the parameters of the genre, producing a plethora of feminist pornographies that drew on the aesthetic conventions of the hard-core, but imbue them with feminist sensibilities. Sex-radicals prioritized feminist work that claimed the female subject's affirmative rights to sexual autonomy, sexual pleasure, and sexual subjectivity, rather than staking out her negative rights to be free from sexual violence. Unlike pro-sex feminists, though, sex-radicals emphasized sexuality as

a fraught site for female subjects (rather than simply a site of agency), a space where pleasure and danger bleed into each other in messy ways, particularly for multiply marginalized subjects.

Because sex-radicals were particularly interested in creating cultural space for women's pleasures, they were committed to dismantling sexual hierarchies and promoting sexual diversity.⁵⁴ As a result, this project actively contested the installation of certain sexual practices as "feminist." Indeed, sex-radicals refused to interpret either viewing pornography or opposing pornography as necessarily feminist, and instead argued that feminism's purview did not include moral judgments. Amber Hollibaugh asserts, "Feminism cannot be the new voice of morality and virtue, leaving behind everyone whose class, race, and desires never fit comfortably into a straight, white, male (or female) world. . . . Instead of pushing our movement further to the right, we should be attempting to create a viable sexual future and a movement powerful enough to defend us simultaneously against sexual abuse."⁵⁵ Rather than condemning particular sexual practices, sex-radicals challenged feminism to develop a politics that opens up sexual possibility.

Sex-radicals often crafted creative political strategies to protect women's bodily autonomy while simultaneously helping women unleash their sexual subjectivities. The legal scholar Drucilla Cornell, for example, advocates zoning pornographic displays to prevent unwanted viewing of pornography. Zoning, she argues, "keep[s] pornography safely resting in its jackets, out of the view of those who seek to inhabit or construct an imaginary domain independent of the one it offers," and yet ensures that it is accessible for those women who long to see it, who find hard-core pornography important to the development of their "imaginary domains."⁵⁶ Cornell's strategy is underpinned by the idea that pornography might constitute freedom for some subjects and oppression for others; the labor of law is thus to ensure access for those who desire it and freedom from viewing for those whose bodily autonomy and sexual integrity require it.

Sex-radical feminists were also staunchly committed to including sex workers' experiences in feminist conversations about pornography's meanings. In fact, sex-radicals refused to treat "sex worker" and "feminist" as oppositional identities, instead asking how sex workers infuse their daily labor with feminist ideologies (this is most visible in Jill Nagle's provocatively titled anthology *Whores and Other Feminists*). In viewing sex

workers as agents and sex work as a form of labor, these scholars consider the multiplicity of ways that sex workers exploit sex work's interstices, staging resistance from within paid erotic labor.⁵⁷

My work embraces sex-radicalism's interest in complexity and its fundamental commitment to treating both pornography and sexuality as contingent and fraught terrain. Though I find that sex-radicalism lacks a robust method for decoding pornography's multiple meanings, my own analyses are fundamentally connected to sex radicalism's insistence that pornographic texts have multiple—rather than singular—meanings. Moreover, I am inspired by sex radicalism's fundamental investment in treating sex work as labor and in treating sex workers as feminists without either romanticizing or condemning the practice of sex work or the labor of sex workers.

FEMINIST PORN STUDIES

Born with the release of Linda Williams's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* in 1989, feminist porn studies takes as its point of departure the fact that pornography is "on/scene," that "culture brings on to the public scene the very organs, acts, 'bodies and pleasures' that have heretofore been designated obscene, that is, as needing to be kept out of view."⁵⁸ Feminist porn studies treats pornography not as an aberration, but as a ubiquitous part of public life that insistently makes visible that which is supposed to be "out of view." In so doing, feminist porn studies scholars have ushered in an era of theorizing pornographies, with an attention to pornography's historical and technological context, pornographic genre conventions, and pornography's multiple meanings.⁵⁹

Feminist porn studies' theoretical approach to grappling with pornography's meanings has been staunchly Foucauldian. Pornography is imagined as a phallogocentric discursive project, a kind of *scientia sexualis*, which seeks to elicit the "truth" of pleasure, particularly female pleasure, by asking female bodies to make their pleasures knowable.⁶⁰ Williams captures this, noting that "the history of hard-core film could thus be summarized in part as the history of various strategies devised to overcome this problem of invisibility within a regime that is . . . an 'erotic organization of visibility.'"⁶¹ Ultimately, the pornographic aesthetic is a frustrated one because it cannot capture quantifiable, legible proof of female pleasure—the female orgasm—in the way that it so easily captures visual evi-

dence of male pleasure through the money shot, a close-up of the ejaculating penis.⁶² Though the male spectator seeks the “truth” of women’s pleasures, he sees only a reflection of his own pleasure, witnessing the male protagonist’s sexual climax. It is the will-to-know the “truth” of the female body, and the incessant frustration of that will, that most clearly displays the pornographic repetition compulsion.

Unlike the other feminist theoretical traditions, feminist-porn-studies scholars including Williams, Constance Penley, and Nguyen Tan Hoang have been particularly interested in studying how race produces meanings and engenders pleasures on the pornographic screen. Feminist-porn-studies scholarship draws on the same Foucauldian framework when it turns its attention to racialized pornography, arguing that the presence of the black body (or any racially marked body) on the pornographic screen performs a confessional role, promising to display the “truth” of its ostensibly different pleasures and practices to the spectator. Williams’s work epitomizes this deployment of a Foucauldian theoretical framework to understand racialized pornography: “If pornography is a genre that seeks to confess the discursive truths of sex, then what happens when racialized bodies are asked to reveal their particular ‘truths’? And what does it mean when the taboos enforcing the racial border are systematically violated and ‘black cock’ penetrates ‘white pussy’?”⁶³ For Williams, racialized pornography can best be understood as a racialized *scientia sexualis*, an attempt to make both racial and sexual difference knowable to its spectator.

While my project—like nearly every academic project on pornography written in the last twenty years—is indebted to Williams’s groundbreaking analyses of pornography, I part company with feminist porn studies in important ways. I aspire to problematize the reliance on a Foucauldian paradigm which presumes that difference—both gender and racial—structures the relationship between spectator and protagonist, with the spectator seeking the “truths” of something unknown. This effectively erases black pornographic spectatorship (male or female) and implicitly presumes that pleasure-in-looking hinges on difference, rather than analyzing how spectators might take pleasure in sameness, in seeing themselves—their bodies, their pleasures, their longings—projected on-screen. More than that, this insistence that the pornographic scene is fundamentally structured by difference elides all of the ways that the pornographic promise of difference gets interrupted, ruptured, and troubled,

sometimes by the very protagonists whose bodies are rhetorically and visually evoked as sites of difference.

The problem with feminist porn studies' emphasis on difference is particularly apparent in Williams's conception of the interracial scene as one that features "black cock" penetrating "white pussy." Here, Williams suggests that the pleasure that the interracial scene generates is one of visually and materially "violating" a racial border. But this articulation of racialized pornography's pleasures effectively erases black women from the analytic and visual frame. By treating "interracial" as synonymous with a black male–white female configurations of bodies, Williams ignores the plethora of pornographies that feature black women, and the erotic, aesthetic, and political charges that different gendered arrangements of interracial sex produce. I respond to black women's erasure from feminist-porn-studies scholarship by centering the meaning-making work that black female protagonists perform on the pornographic screen.

Moreover, while feminist-porn-studies scholarship has provided important insights into the historical and technological specificity of pornography imagery, and identified the panoply of meaning-making work that bodies perform on the pornographic screen, when this body of work turns to racialized pornography, it tends to foreground the racism ostensibly inherent to racialized pornography. For example, Williams's analysis of the Kinsey Institute's collection of stag films endeavors to stake out a "historically nuanced way of reading female agency in stag films, something that can be located *between* white slavery and the ethnography of sex workers."⁶⁴ Yet when Williams turns to considering a racialized stag film, questions of agency are wholly bracketed, and her analysis instead centers on the racism inherent in one of stag's most terrifying films. Williams offers a close reading of *KKK Night Riders* (ca. 1930s), a film which represents a Klansman (who remains hooded for the duration of the film) breaking into a black woman's house and raping her. The sex, which initially appears forced, is quickly transformed into something pleasurable for both the black female protagonist and, of course, for the hooded Klansman.⁶⁵ For Williams, the film is significant because it makes clear the shortcomings of feminist engagements with agency in the context of the stag film, a term which she argues "says too little about the historically determined, coercive context of black female and white male sexual interactions depicted here under the very sign of a white

supremacy designed to reassert the race- and gender-based prerogatives of white men.”⁶⁶ While *KKK Night Riders* deserves critical attention to its terrifying representation of racial-sexual violence, my interest is in how Williams’s insistence on “historically nuanced” readings of agency gets bracketed in a conversation about race. Clearly, *KKK Night Riders* is a film where (black) female agency is absent and a film that brutally eroticizes racial violence. Though I suspect Williams’s deployment of the film is to demonstrate the importance of race in conversations about agency on the pornographic screen, I am interested in how black female protagonists are analytically used as the outer limits of conversations about agency. The presence of black women on the pornographic screen (in the context of a stag film that sexualizes the most terrifying forms of racial violence) means agency is absent. My impulse, of course, is not to critique Williams for documenting (and criticizing) pleasurable viewings of deeply painful scenes or for underscoring the presence of racial violence in stag films. Instead, my interest is in how black women appear in Williams’s account as evidence of agency’s absence, and how their presence in other pornographic contexts is elided.

While my work is committed to many of feminist porn studies’ foundational tenets, particularly its commitment to studying pornographies, my project pushes against the Foucauldian hegemony that has marked feminist-porn-studies scholarship. By interrogating the notion that black bodies appear in pornography exclusively to confess difference or to bare their bodies’ imagined truths, my project unravels a host of assumptions about spectatorship, visual pleasure, and race that have been smuggled into feminist-porn-studies scholarship.

Notes on Method

Unlike earlier scholarly traditions which either wholly bracket an analysis of pornography’s varied use of racialized images or presume that race is a kind of “intensifier,” treating racialized pornography as particularly pernicious form of pornography, I approach racialized pornography as a visual form that tells us something about “who we are as a culture,” as a rich repository of information about collective fantasies and racial fictions.⁶⁷ If, as Laura Kipnis argues, “pornography is the royal road to the cultural psyche,” the contemporary equivalent of Clifford Geertz’s Balinese cock-

fight, then racialized pornography contains at least some of the stories we tell—or like to tell—ourselves about our bodies and pleasures, and about “other” people’s bodies and pleasures.⁶⁸ Ultimately, I use racialized pornography as a window through which I can ask new questions about the complex relationship among race, gender, and pleasure.

My method for analyzing racialized pornographic texts is close reading. Because I am invested in closely reading texts, I have largely bracketed engagement with the biographies of pornographic filmmakers or pornographic actors, and instead focused on the racialized meaning-making performed by various pornographic texts. I am also cognizant of the important critiques of close readings of film generally, and of pornographic texts more specifically, including critiques that close reading neglects pornography’s complex social functions. John Champagne’s work on queer pornographies persuasively argues that close reading “obscure[s] some of the social functions of gay pornography in particular,” eliding consideration of the ways that pornography “makes possible a social space in which dominant forms of (sexual) subjectivity might be (re)produced, challenged, countered, and violated.”⁶⁹ By ignoring the conditions under which pornography is screened and the variety of guises—or disguises—its public display takes, textual analyses often neglect the social context of its production and consumption.⁷⁰ While Champagne’s work focuses on the queer (counter) public viewing cultures that pornography produced, his intervention informs my commitment to grapple with interpretation, reception, and production, alongside close readings of scenes. My analyses move back and forth between text and context, between representation and the multitude of possible spectator responses.

My interest in the variety of spectatorial responses is particularly significant, as pornographic spectators are generally presumed to screen pornography with their penises in their hands. Indeed, as MacKinnon notes, pornography is generally imagined to be simply “masturbation material.”⁷¹ This analytical assumption ignores the host of nonmasturbatory pleasures pornography engenders and the complexity of consumption, particularly the psychic and intellectual “labor” of interpretation.⁷² Jennifer Wicke describes this 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.”⁷³ The dominant perception that pornography is used exclusively to produce (male) arousal and to aid in (male) masturbation ignores the variety of social and cultural uses to which pornography might be put, and the interpretative labor that the consumer engages in to transform the on-screen narrative into something that can produce a coherent, engaging, and exciting fantasy. In my close readings I attempt to decenter the prevailing assumption that pornography is exclusively “masturbation material,” instead asking about the hosts of pleasures—visual, comical, aesthetic, racial, political—pornography can engender.⁷⁴ In so doing, I heed Kipnis’s warning: “Pornography isn’t viewed as having complexity, because its audience isn’t viewed as having complexity, and this propensity for oversimplification gets reproduced in every discussion about pornography.”⁷⁵ Taking Kipnis’s insight as a point of departure, my close readings are infused by an attention to the personhood, the messy subjectivity, of all pornographic spectators, even as they are limited by the paucity of scholarly information available about actual spectatorship.

As I am interested in pornography’s “social functions,” its spectators’ complexity, and the spaces in which it is consumed and enjoyed, I am also interested in the relationship among history, technology, and representation. My close readings of Golden Age (1970s) and Silver Age (1980s) films are committed to tracing how viewing technologies shaped representational practices and viewing pleasures in both epochs. For example, the Golden Age fundamentally transformed pornographic viewing experiences. In the wake of *Miller v. California* (1973), which defined the obscene as materials that cultivate “prurient interest” and lack “redeeming” scientific, artistic, or cultural importance, pornographers labored to produce films filled with “redeeming” narratives. These new films, which resembled feature-length Hollywood films, were screened publicly (and legally) in urban theaters that attracted mixed-sex and mixed-race audiences.⁷⁶ My analysis of Golden Age films—*Lialeh* and *Sexworld*—is explicitly invested in the pleasures that collective public viewing engendered, in the similarities between the films and mainstream feature-length Hollywood films, and in pornographers’ narrative attempts to capitalize on a new and more diverse audience. In my attention to historical moment I aspire to heed Elizabeth Freeman’s insight that “close reading is a way into history,

not a way out of it, and [is] itself a form of historiography and historical analysis.”⁷⁷

If my close readings are invested in pornography’s social functions and historical context, they are decidedly a departure from earlier feminist close-reading practices, which were invested in the male gaze. The lengthy history of male-gaze scholarship, beginning with Laura Mulvey’s seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” draws on “psychoanalytic theory . . . [as] a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.”⁷⁸ Even as feminist work on film has shifted from the psychoanalytic model of Mulvey’s work to a media-studies model, the “male gaze” continues to inform much of the work on pornography. However, the male gaze has become so predominant—particularly in analyses of pornography—that there is little engagement with why the gaze is the primary unit of analysis for analyzing the relationship between the on-screen object and the spectator. In particular, the male-gaze framework’s simplistic mapping of gender onto looking positions, its inattention to the possibilities of cross-sex identification, and its implicit normative judgment—the “male gaze” is, as Edward Snow notes, “a fixed and almost entirely negative term”—suggests the importance of rethinking the very premises underpinning this scholarship.⁷⁹ My close readings tug at the seams of conventional feminist film scholarship, critiquing the hegemony of particular analytical frameworks, while remaining attentive to the messy relationship between looking and power.

Throughout the book, my close readings are supplemented with images from the films, a decision I made after considering the extensive debate among feminist-porn-studies scholars as to the role of images in scholarly writing about pornography.⁸⁰ Williams’s first edition of *Hard Core* explicitly avoided the inclusion of pornographic images because “there is no getting around the ability of such images, especially if quoted out of context, to leap off the page to more viewers and thus to prove too facily whatever ‘truths’ of sex seem most immediately apparent.”⁸¹ In “forgo[ing] the luxury of illustration,” Williams gestured both to the marginal and oftentimes stigmatized place of feminist porn studies in the academy and to the argumentative force (and shock value) of pornographic images.⁸² Writing twenty-five years after Williams’s work has legitimized, if not institutionalized, the academic study of pornography, I need not “forgo the luxury of illustration.” While I recognize the power of images to “leap off the page”

and the danger that the images included here might trouble or unsettle some readers, my hope is that viewing images alongside my interpretative work will invite readers to engage in close readings with me and will allow readers to hold me accountable for providing rigorous proof to support my interpretations. More than that, though, I hope the images—and their power to unsettle and excite, offend and titillate, humor and disgust—will make grounded my insistence that pornography generates a multiplicity of complex (and sometimes contradictory) reactions.

If close reading is my method for engaging with pornographic films, it is also my method for analyzing the black feminist theoretical archive, a collection of texts and images which, I argue, actively produces and enforces the idea of wounded black female flesh. My understanding of the importance of close reading the black feminist theoretical archive is informed by Clare Hemmings's work.⁸³ Hemmings's *Why Stories Matter* offers a compelling account of why feminists must attend to the "political grammar of our storytelling" and recognize the "amenability of our own stories, narrative constructs, and grammatical forms to discursive uses of gender and feminism we might otherwise wish to disentangle ourselves from if history is not simply to repeat itself."⁸⁴ While our scholarly preoccupations are different, I heed Hemmings's caution to closely analyze black feminist "storytelling," paying careful attention to the "political grammar" of black feminist theory, to the ways that certain analytical frameworks—*injury and recovery*—have *become* predominant. Following Hemmings's lead, I resist reducing the black feminist theoretical archive to a singular perspective or agenda; instead, I argue that a vibrant and varied archive that contains different theories of representation still manages to collectively perform the black female body as an injured site, producing an archive that is structured by a "grammar" of woundedness. Ultimately, as my commitment to close reading both pornographic texts and the black feminist theoretical archive shows, this volume is underpinned by an investment in close reading as a practice that can unsettle ossified narratives and expose analytical frameworks that are so entrenched as to seem naturalized.

I begin with a close reading of the black feminist theoretical archive's engagement with representation, arguing that it has become oriented toward twin logics of injury and recovery which make theorizing black female pleasures from within the parameters of the archive a kind of im-

possibility. In the remainder of this volume I turn the practice of close reading toward hard-core pornography with an interest in staging black feminist readings of racialized pornography *outside of dominant black feminist interpretative paradigms*. In chapters 2 and 3 I examine two Golden Age pornographic films—*Lialeh* and *Sexworld*—with an interest in the kinds of pleasures those films engender for black pornographic spectators and for black pornographic protagonists. In chapter 4 and 5 I examine two Silver Age films—*Black Taboo* and *Black Throat*—analyzing how race becomes the subject of pornographic humor in both films, and arguing that black female pornographic protagonists are the subjects who comically, hyperbolically, and productively poke fun at the very project of race. My hope is that these close readings both disrupt the prevailing logic of the black feminist theoretical archive and create space for crafting a black feminist theoretical archive oriented toward ecstasy.