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the black body in ecstasy: reading race, reading pornography

Jennifer C. Nash, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2014, 240pp.,

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For understandable reasons, black feminists traditionally treat pornography as a damaging form of visual representation for black women. In agreement with Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's powerful criticisms of pornography, many black feminists, including Patricia Hill Collins and Hortense Spillers, imagine pornography as a painful site that violently denigrates, objectifies and exploits black female bodies for the sake of male pleasure. Pornography, according to this perspective, can only generate wounds; this cinematic genre is a persistent reminder of legacies that have reduced black women to passive objects of pleasure, fantasy and violence. In her provocative and beautifully written book, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Jennifer Nash challenges this tendency within black feminist discourses to privilege pain and trauma and ignore the ways in which visual culture enables women to name, articulate and experience desires, pleasures and fantasies.

In order to provide a kind of corrective to black feminist approaches to pornography and the representation of black women more broadly, Nash introduces a new way of interpreting and viewing racialised pornography that she calls racial iconography. As a counter-reading practice, racial iconography 'shifts from a preoccupation with the injuries that racialized pornography engenders to an investigation of the ecstasy that racialized pornography can unleash' (p. 2). By broaching the language of ecstasy, Nash 'refers 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' (p. 2). In other words, Nash reminds the reader that power (white supremacist and patriarchal) does not simply repress and constrain desire. As Foucault and others inform us, power also generates and enables pleasures even as these pleasures proliferate against the backdrop of inequality and exploitation. By underscoring and tracing the generative dimensions of pornography and visual culture, especially for black women, Nash endeavours 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' (p. 3). Through the use of racial iconography, the author draws our attention to pleasure, laughter, parody, comedy and agency in pornographic cinema and defuses the over-emphasis placed on trauma, exploitation and agony.

Nash practises and performs this racial iconography in each chapter of the book as she engages black feminist scholarship and offers counter-readings of classic pornographic films made in the 1970s and 1980s. In Chapter 1, 'Archives of pain', Nash challenges the assumptions and claims of authors like Collins and Spillers, authors who have imagined the Hottentot Venus or the captive female slave as enduring templates for the visual representation of black women. This legacy of

representation, according to previous black feminist thinkers, marks the black body as sexually excessive, as sexually available flesh to be used, manipulated and enjoyed by men. As Nash argues, Collins and Spillers assume that the visual field is *only* a site of pain and injury for black women (both spectators and protagonists). Therefore, liberation from racial and gender exploitation, from controlling images, can only occur by abandoning the field of visual representation altogether. In other cases, as in the artwork of Carla Williams, liberation from injury and pain can only come from self-representation and ownership. For Nash, both of these approaches assume that a space of liberated wholeness exists; they also deny the complexities and possibilities within cultural domains like pornography, domains that allow us to cite, trace and re-imagine black women's sexual ecstasy (p. 58).

The next four chapters provide provocative readings and images of racialised porn films—*Lialeh*, *Sexworld*, *Black Taboo* and *Black Throat*—arguing that these films are unacknowledged sites of pleasure, parody and agency. In the 1974 film *Lialeh*, for instance, female pleasure is visualised (masturbation scenes, lesbian scene) while the so-called power of the black male phallus is undermined, troubled and parodied. In films like *Black Taboo* (1984) and *Black Throat* (1985), racial/sexual stereotypes and conventions are made fun of and rendered absurd—all black people look alike, black women 'do it' differently than white women, authentic black masculinity as hetero and hyper-sexual. For Nash, these films are just as comic as they are erotic; they evoke laughter, pleasure and fantasy as much as pain and suffering. They also demonstrate how pornography both reinforces and undermines troubling racial and gender fantasies.

The Black Body in Ecstasy is a fascinating, well-argued text. Nash acknowledges her debts to previous black feminist scholarship while parting ways with certain tendencies and commitments. As Nash examines the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and visual culture, she offers a corrective to approaches that emphasise the pain and wounds of dominant modes of representation and disregard pleasure, fantasy and agency. More positively, by introducing the language of ecstasy, she opens up space within black feminist discourses to talk about black female pleasure (and pleasure more generally) with all of its complexities and ambivalences. One concern with the book is that while the language of ecstasy supposedly registers the tension-filled relationship between pleasure and pain, or intimacy and violence (pp. 149–150), Nash does not always maintain this tension when reading the selected films. She often describes the pleasure experienced by female protagonists in a manner that alludes to pain and suffering without fleshing out the relationship between the horrific and the enjoyable. But this concern does not take away from Nash's major achievement. For those interested in race and gender studies, queer theory, porn studies, and recent attempts to trouble the proverbial politics of respectability within black feminist discourses, Nash's book is a must-read.

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