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## **a taste for brown sugar: black women in pornography**

Mireille Miller-Young, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, 392pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5828-2, \$28.95 (Pbk)

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, feminist studies scholar Mireille Miller-Young creates a sweeping but detailed history of black women's participation in pornography from the early twentieth century to the present. She pays particular attention to the conditions of production, the experiences and goals of the performers, and the cultural contexts that inform black women's sexual labour. She is most concerned with the interplay between white fetishisation of black bodies and the ways black women have capitulated to, profited from, troubled and/or challenged racist tropes of black virility.

Speaking against earlier black feminists such as bell hooks (1992), who write off black women's participation in pornography as a 'menace to the hard-fought image of respectable womanhood they have sought to create', Miller-Young argues for a more complex interpretation of black women's sexual performances (p. 5). Given the racist and sexist tropes that have constrained black women's identities and economic opportunities, participation in sexual labour has offered tools for survival and resistance against demeaning narratives of black femininity.

Miller-Young uses a mixed methodology to explore these strategies of agency, delving into archives of pornographic photographs, films and promotional materials; interviewing porn stars; and performing her own on-set observations of porn productions. She effectively shows that, even as the stereotype of the hypersexual black woman has morphed over the years and technologies of representation have changed, black women have found ways to benefit from their own participation in pornography.

Miller-Young traces the roots of American racial voyeurism to the slave auction and early racial science, showing how practices of looking allowed white men to both indulge and disavow their desire for black women. After slavery, black women used sexual labour (e.g. prostitution, nude photo modeling and acting in stag films) as an avenue towards greater agency when their only other option was menial domestic labour, which also carried a high risk of sexual assault. Although participating in sexual labour often meant perpetuating stereotypes about the hypersexuality of black women, Miller-Young points out that black women used gestures and eye-rolls to create a 'competing gaze' back at the white male viewer. Her reading of these small motions occasionally feels strained, but it does offer a compelling portrait of small resistances under conditions of great constraint.

Miller-Young spends much of the book describing the historical conditions against which black women have continued to turn this competing gaze. During the Golden Age of pornography in the 1960s and 1970s, a newly radical black subjectivity arose with the Civil Rights Movement. Representations of black sexuality in 'soul porn' reflected both black people's interest in seeing

themselves as erotic subjects and white people's anxiety about racial mixing and empowerment. By contrast, adult films in the 1980s and early 1990s were purely economic ventures due to the rise of video and the growth of interracial porn as a niche market. Feeding into the rhetoric of the welfare queen, black women in these videos were written as 'social failures, an urban underclass pathologically dependent on welfare and drugs' (p. 111). In films mostly produced by and targeted to white men, black and especially interracial porn invoked a combination of desire and disgust towards black racialised Others.

In the 1990s and especially the early 2000s, rap artists and pornographers began working together. Rap primed the market for pornographic depictions of black women, leading to the cultural dominance of the image of the 'ho' and the popularity of 'ghetto porn'. In contemporary pornography, black women who enter the porn industry seeking money, sex and fame encounter hiring and wage discrimination due to the perceived lack of demand for black women having sex with white men. These economic justifications further racist depictions of black women as undesirable. In short, 'symbolic violence pervades the ways in which black female bodies are read as oversexed, expendable, unfeminine, and unworthy' (p. 230).

Even in these various racist contexts, black performers like Jeannie Pepper and Angel Kelly have found ways to exercise agency or what Miller-Young describes as 'illicit eroticism'. They might, for instance, play a slightly more empowered version of a stereotype or use costuming, posture, gestures and the performance of pleasure to challenge the debased image of black women. Using what Miller-Young terms 'ho theory', she shows how black video vixens, strippers and porn performers manage to 'trick off', using the hypersexual trope to make money and even take pleasure in both the expressions of sexuality themselves and the power in taking advantage of men's desires. In recent years, black women have begun directing and producing their own pornography that offers alternate representations of black sexuality.

Ultimately, Miller-Young paints a complex portrait of agency in the context of racism and sexism, showing how black women have worked with the tools available to them at any given time to make their own best choices. The book draws on and adds meaningfully to queer of colour critique; although porn performers are not queer in a traditional sense, their sexual subjectivities and performances challenge hegemonic discourses of sexuality in the black community and otherwise. Because of its diverse methodology and careful critique, this book will appeal to scholars in fields as wide-ranging as critical race and ethnic studies; gender, women's and sexuality studies; cultural studies; film and media studies; and even art history.

Alyssa Bossenger  
Indiana University Bloomington

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