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A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography, by
Mireille Miller-Young; *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race,
Reading Pornography* by Jennifer Nash

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Recommended Citation

Shah, Svati P., "A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography, by Mireille Miller-Young; The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography by Jennifer Nash" (2015). *Women's Review of Books*. 24.

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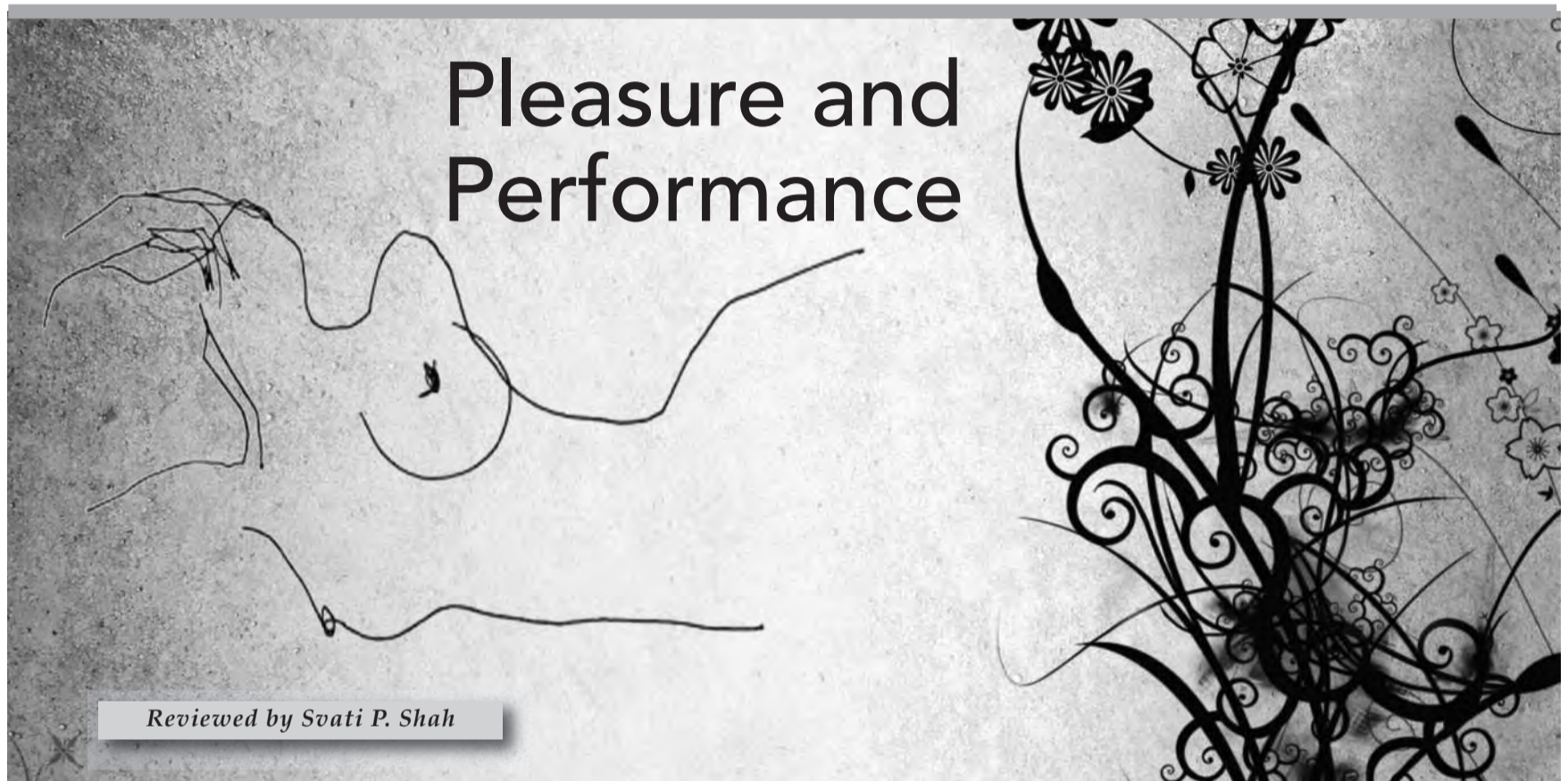
period contends with the post-Revolutionary legacy. Representations of women friends mourning one another or even entombed, as in Elisabeth Post's 1788 German novel *The Land* or Anna Seward's elegies for her dead beloved Honora Sneyd, published in the 1790s, set a Romantic tone of loss and melancholy. Lanser sees these elegies as marking the death of the sapphic as an idea rather than a reality. In other words, as writers such as Seward began chronicling their actual, rather than fictional, same-sex loves, the role of the sapphic waned as a putatively innocent laboratory for exploring ideas about desire and identity more generally.

Despite Lanser's explicit assertions about the relationship between sapphic representations and colonialism, she has little to say about the role of racism, and contact with Africans, indigenous Americans, and Asians in shaping European representations of love between women. Lanser calls "the wide-eyed view" of love between women notable in sixteenth-century texts "ethnographic," arguing that it borrows conventions from travel narratives, but she does not examine those narratives themselves for images of female sexuality. Since a generation of scholars from Sander Gilman to Anne McClintock has demonstrated the shaping force of colonial violence

on European ideas about gender and sexuality, this seems like a missed opportunity.

The Sexuality of History is a wide-ranging work of scholarship that will open new doors in LGBT and gender studies. It does much to remind us that homosexuality has never successfully been confined to the closet for long.

Lisa L. Moore is professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes* (2011) and *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (1997).



Reviewed by Svati P. Shah

*A Taste for Brown Sugar:
Black Women in Pornography*

By Mireille Miller-Young

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 368 pp., \$27.95, paperback

*The Black Body in Ecstasy:
Reading Race, Reading Pornography*

By Jennifer C. Nash

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 219 pp., \$23.95, paperback

A *Taste for Brown Sugar* and *The Black Body in Ecstasy* provide rich, nuanced, and careful critiques of how black women are represented, and re-present themselves, in American pornographic films. Both Mireille Miller-Young and Jennifer C. Nash invoke this discussion in order to expand the discursive terrains of race and sexuality, and to engage with feminist debates on pornography, power, and racialization in relation to sexuality. The books overlap in some significant ways, including their shared interest in a filmic archive drawn from the Golden (1970s) and Silver (1980s) Ages of pornography, when changes in the law made it possible to create, distribute, and screen hardcore pornographic films to a mass audience. These books also differ. *A Taste for Brown Sugar* provides a discussion of black women's representation in pornographic film that spans the twentieth century and includes the contemporary era. *The Black Body in Ecstasy* links pornographic films featuring black actors to a discussion of race

within other contemporaneous film genres. Both books examine the treatment of pornography within black feminist theory and may be understood as part of a new turn in feminist scholarship on race, sexual commerce, and sexuality.

A Taste for Brown Sugar takes in the sweep of the pornographic film archive, from late nineteenth-century French photographs, to American stag films, Golden and Silver Age pornographic films, and contemporary debates on the intersections of hip-hop and pornography. The book ends with a discussion of working conditions for black women in the pornographic film industry. In addition to the industry's history, Miller-Young examines its aesthetics, racial and economic politics, and the debates it has generated among black feminists regarding representation.

Miller-Young tracks when and where black women appear in pornographic films, but first contextualizes this history with a discussion of slavery in the US—in particular, of slave markets as

the sites where women of African descent became eroticized objects for white men. Moving from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Miller-Young identifies shifts in the aesthetics of black female eroticism, such as the increased cachet of lighter-skinned models. She notes the ways in which models in early photographs and stag films interacted within the image and with the camera, often breaking the fourth wall with a rolled eye, a smirk, or a smile; women, then and now, constantly negotiate the conditions of the production of these images, says Miller-Young. The book concludes with a discussion of African American women's negotiations of working conditions in the contemporary porn industry, and offers several examples of African American women who make their own pornographic films or run their own production companies.

A Taste for Brown Sugar is written for a relatively broad audience, and is able to reach both academics engaged in scholarly debates and general readers.

The broad remit of the project is evident in Miller-Young's use of a range of methodologies, drawing from archival research in the earlier chapters and ethnographic methods in later ones, in which she discusses, for example, the everyday life of an actor of color who performs in a pornographic film. Deploying a conversational style, she shares her excitement in discovering obscure sources, as well as candid opinions of particular films. From the outset, Miller-Young makes her analytic and methodological aims clear, explaining that she seeks to "represent and analyze the complex iconography of race found in pornography, both on behalf of those in the image, and in order to understand the enduring power of these images in our lives." The questions of voice and perspective resound throughout the book, particularly in the later chapters, which include interviews with actors and filmmakers, including those who have worked in the industry since its Silver Age.

In *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Jennifer Nash focuses on an iconic set of films from the Golden and Silver Ages of pornography to demonstrate, as she writes, that "race is necessarily a pornographic fantasy." We may understand this assertion to denote the ways in which race is closely enmeshed with sexuality, rather than being wholly distinct from it, or having developed independently of it. Instead, race may be understood as a discourse of sexuality, and vice versa; the concepts are so imbricated that they must be theorized together. Using close readings of both the filmic archive and black feminist theory, she presents her argument in five main chapters, each of which is devoted either to an archive as a whole—such as the black feminist theoretical archive, which she discusses in Chapter 1—or to a particular film or theme. Like Miller-Young, Nash is interested in complicating the one-dimensional view of race in pornography, in part derived from antipornography feminism, which argues that pornography and its aesthetics reduce black women to the hypersexualized objects of a racist representational discourse. Nash characterizes antipornography feminism's perspective on black women as stemming from its more general criticism of women in pornography. She summarizes the analysis of race in antipornography position in this way: "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."

In seeking to complicate this position, Nash methodologically follows on the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in presenting what she calls an "aggressive counter-reading" of pornography, which "suspends normative readings of racialized pornography and instead advances readings which emphasize black performances and pleasures represented on the racialized pornographic screen." Miller-Young, for her part, positions her argument as being in accordance with the aspect of antipornography criticism that asserts that actors in pornographic films experience violence and powerlessness, but she also asserts that there are other ways to read and complicate black


women's engagement with pornography: for example, through the lenses of pleasure, play, and a wry engagement with the audience via the camera.

Nash returns to the trope of ecstasy throughout her argument. "By *ecstasy*," she explains, "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." The operative term here is "possibilities." While Nash's project includes mapping pleasure and ecstasy within these films as a rejoinder to the feminist antipornography paradigm, her theoretical intervention is also manifest in activating the *possibility* of reading ecstasy and other forms of pleasure into the racialized pornographic archive.

Nash presents her primary criticisms of the imbrications between the black feminist theoretical archive and antipornography feminism in her first chapter, "Archives of Pain." The title refers to black feminist thought that finds common ground with antipornography feminism in its assertion that pornography is only legible through the lens of harm. This variety of black feminism reads black female-ness in the terms of injury. Pursuing her ideas of possibilities and foreclosures, Nash structures the chapter around a discussion of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, a South African Khoi Khoi woman who was put on display for audiences in late nineteenth-century Europe. Nash writes that feminist portrayals of Baartman as an iconic figure of violence and violation exemplify a "critique of dominant visual culture" within black feminist theory "that emphasizes representation as a practice that references and reenacts historical traumas." It is not the fact of racism and dehumanization in this case that Nash aims to problematize but, rather, the ways in which the history of Baartman's treatment as an object of display has risen to the level of iconicity within black feminist thought. What, in other words, does it mean to trace contemporary critiques of racism and gender through Baartman? What kind of genealogy of the present does this iconicity produce?

Later chapters offer similarly detailed readings of "blaxporntation"—a genre of pornographic films made in conversation with 1970s "blaxploitation" movies and Golden Age pornography—including *Lialeh* (1973) and *Sexworld* (1978), as well as Silver Age works, such as *Black Taboo* (1984). Miller-Young discusses these films as well, focusing on the conditions of their production, and including interviews with some of the actors who participated in them. She shows that with these films, the pornographic film industry was attempting to capitalize on the then-relatively untapped African American market, as well as to expand the racial demographics of its performers. (Discussions of the political economy of race and the production of pornographic genres are linked with this history.) Nash situates these films within the aesthetic and discursive conventions of exploitation films, blaxploitation films, and pornographic films, while problematizing feminist analytic

tropes such as the "controlling image" and the "male gaze." The focus of her reading of these films, however, remains ecstasy: where it is signaled, how it is mapped, and what it reveals about the racialized discursive milieu in which it is produced. In building on, while perhaps moving away from, the notion of "controlling images," Nash makes an argument for seeing what pornography makes, what tropes it produces, and what it might reveal of the imbrications between race and sexuality.

If there is a mainstream or dominant understanding of pornography, it is one that views pornography as harmful: an egregious example of a universal, gender-based hierarchy. When this discourse takes up the question of race, it does so primarily by maintaining that black women are particularly objectified and hypersexualized in the representational conventions of film and other media, and that these conventions are laid bare in pornography. Both books address this view of pornography, while also aiming to move beyond it. Each demonstrates that there are a host of questions yet to be asked of the images that constitute the archives of pornography. These include how, and to what effect, pornography produces, uses, maintains, experiments with, plays with, and critiques tropes of black female sexuality. How may the dialogue, plot lines, and aesthetics of pornographic films be read as commentaries on race, as well as gender and sexuality? How and in what context can this archive operate as a space that produces, reflects, and "remembers" race in the United States? The questions these books raise show that both are essential reading for anyone seeking to understand new work on feminism, critical race studies, pornography, and film history. 

Svati P. Shah is an associate professor of Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her book *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (2014) offers an ethnographic critique of sexual commerce, migration, and informal sector labor in India.

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