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# Erotic Labor and the Black Ecstatic “Beyond”

*Mecca Jamilah Sullivan*

***The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography.* By Jennifer Christine Nash. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 219 pages. \$84.95 (cloth). \$23.95 (paper).**

***Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures.* By L. H. Stallings. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 270 pages. \$95.00 (cloth). \$26.00 (paper).**

***A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography.* By Mireille Miller-Young. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 368 pages. \$99.95 (cloth). \$27.95 (paper).**

When American pop culture uberstar Beyoncé released her visual album, *Lemonade*, in April 2016, the black feminist digisphere lit up with response. Critics discussed the album’s historical, diasporic, and transcultural resonances, its interventions into black cultural discourse, and its cross-genre scope. Some of the most astute think pieces examined the album’s use of erotic experience as political metaphor and its riffing on black diasporic spiritual cosmologies to center black women’s love and sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Even bell hooks weighed in.<sup>2</sup> Yet one of the most important—if surprising—responses came from Karrine Steffans-Short, the video-dancer-turned-author whose 2005 erotic memoir, *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, chronicled her sexual encounters with various rappers and pop celebrities in explicit, detailed prose.

“Over 15 years ago, I had Beyoncé’s husband,” Steffans-Short declares in her essay “I Am Becky with the Good Hair (and I Am Also Beyoncé),” published on the popular feminist blog *xoJane*. The essay’s title plays on a line from *Lemonade* in which Beyoncé’s speaker laments her husband’s sexual affair with another woman, whom she calls “Becky with the good hair.” The essay’s title, coupled with a byline nearly synonymous with hypervisible black female sexual irreverence and eroticism, suggests the piece will be another titillating

exposé, inviting readers to take pleasure in the sexual excesses of the lascivious mistress's exploits while honoring the pain of the respectable wife, reinforcing the comfortable binary opposition of the two. Quickly, however, Steffans-Short upsets this narrative: "I am Becky. I am Beyoncé . . . We are all Becky." In the essay, which has been shared over fourteen thousand times on social media, Steffans-Short describes in evocative detail a sexual encounter with Beyoncé's soon-to-be husband, the rapper Jay-Z, before the couple was married: "Jay and I feasted on our attraction to one another—ravidly and quickly. After just a few minutes, I lifted my head from his lap, wiped my lips, and knew we'd made a mistake." She then turns immediately to describe her experiences as the wife of a cheating husband and the shame she has felt in both roles: "There is a stigma attached to the other woman, the side piece . . . but, honestly, I don't see the difference. . . . A woman is all things."

In mobilizing simultaneously the identities of the wronged wife, the libidinous mistress, the "video vixen" (a euphemism for "video ho"), and the popular memoirist and author, Steffans-Short highlights the need for reading strategies that move beyond the stubborn hold that classist respectability politics tend to have on discussions of black women's bodies and sexualities. In her refusal to accept unsanctioned eroticism as a site of sexual shame, and her casual insistence on narrating her sexual transgression in detail while claiming the position of the faithful wife, she insists on a complex black female sexuality in which respectability and ratchetness, sexual pleasure and sexual shame, can coexist in both public and private spaces. She exposes the porous skin between black sexual cultures, black popular cultures, and black literary cultures, and demands that black sexuality studies expand its archive of viable texts to include those produced by the "video hoes," porn stars, nonmonogamists, "side pieces," and freaks who often shape the contours of both public performance and sexual life.

Together, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, L. H. Stalling's *Funk the Erotic*, and Mireille Miller-Young's *Taste for Brown Sugar* demonstrate the urgency and the political possibility of this emergent archive, marking a welcome turn toward the development of what Jennifer Christine Nash calls "a black feminist theoretical archive oriented toward ecstasy" in recent black feminist and black sexuality studies discourses (150). In gathering a black feminist archive of the erotic, these texts make needed interventions into incomplete feminist and black studies intellectual projects, and call for a fundamental rethinking of the terms on which blackness, womanhood, and the erotic can be read. This archive becomes both cultural site and political process—it is a decisively

liberatory, antihegemonic enterprise on the part of strippers, porn actresses, video vixens, sex workers, and sexuality scholars alike, a political access point through which, as Stallings (borrowing from Sylvia Wynter) suggests, "perhaps freedom or whatever exists beyond the colonial projects of solidifying the genres of humanity . . . will be possible" (26).

The question of the "beyond" of black female sexuality—the textures of its limits, the histories that shape and trouble its borders, the question of where it ceases to be legible in contemporary parlance and what happens when we read past that point—these are the questions that interlace through these three texts, revealing undertheorized nuances of black female erotic experience across genres, periods, mediums, and methods of critique. Where Miller-Young grounds her exploration of black women's pornographic representation in historiographic, ethnographic, and film and media studies approaches, presenting an unprecedented history of black female eroticism in media, Nash offers close readings of an overlapping archive to interrogate black feminist theories of sexuality. Stallings, in turn, deploys these methodologies and others, using ethnography, historiography, literary analysis, ethnomusicology, and personal narrative techniques to explore the multiple valences of black eroticism in various cultural sites.

These texts span centuries of black women's sexual labor, examining the political, aesthetic, and theoretical relevance of erotic models, porn actresses, strippers, self-portraitists, video vixens, erotica authors, sex-club patrons, and "hoes." Reading for the "beyond" of black ecstasy, they show what black women's erotic practices and desires reveal about race, sexuality, labor, and the histories and geographies of the black erotic.

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, Miller-Young offers an unprecedented history of black women's sexual labor, undergirded by expansive archival research, pathbreaking ethnographic work, and incisive explorations of both recent and foundational work on race, culture, and the erotic. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of labor, class, and cultural production, Miller-Young establishes a trans-historical and multimedia archive of black women's erotic labor, and introduces a bold, interdisciplinary methodology for recentering pleasure in black feminist politics and thought.

*A Taste for Brown Sugar* situates itself both across and beyond a broad range of disciplines, bringing academic discourse into close contact with ongoing conversations on sexuality among black women's communities. Miller-Young draws on black studies, feminist studies, queer studies history, sexuality studies, and performance studies discourses, bringing them to bear on critiques

of pornography, race, sexuality, and erotic spectatorship among black sexual laborers themselves. She engages “with porn actresses directly, listening to their voices and taking seriously their descriptions of their experiences” in order to develop a framework for understanding power and labor within black erotic performance (20). These voices inform Miller-Young’s close readings of specific porn performances, allowing her to invite readers to “learn about porn’s meanings by looking at the self-presentations and self-understandings of black women working inside the industry,” as well as at the social, political, and economic contexts that frame their work (21).

This partly ethnographic approach to black feminist erotic performance is perhaps the most striking of *A Taste for Brown Sugar*’s many important contributions. Miller-Young develops a black feminist methodology that is keenly attentive to issues of labor, even as it emphasizes the artistic, aesthetic, and performative possibilities racialized sex work offers for structural subversion and resistance. Exploring black women’s “pornography from within” allows Miller-Young to link sexual labor to narrative and cultural production. In this move, she positions black women’s sex work as a site of both representational tension and political possibility, and locates porn performers as “cultural workers” who “use the seductive power of brown sugar to intervene in representation, to assert their varied sexual subjectivities, and to make a living” (6). She questions familiar feminist and other antipornography stances predicated on the imperatives of “positive” representation, illuminating how these perspectives devalue not only black eroticism but also black labor. For her, “characterizing porn only as bad representation dismisses an arena in which black women and men are actually working hard to create their own images, express their own desires and shape their own labor choices and conditions. There do exist black feminists who are also pornographers, who challenge the representational, physical and psychic violence done to black women’s bodies in pornography from within. This book is about them” (xi).

The important intellectual yield of this approach is particularly evident in chapter 4, “Ho Theory: Black Female Sexuality at the Convergence of Hip Hop and Pornography.” Here, Miller-Young explores the impact of commercial 1990s hip-hop and “video vixen” iconography on black female in pornography and other areas of black women’s sexual labor, including hip-hop musical and visual cultures, and the “video ho” phenomenon of which Steffans is a primary icon. While the “ho” can function as an emblem of working-class black female hypersexuality and sexual availability in these texts, Miller-Young uses her mixed methodology to read the “ho” as a position of both circumstance and strategy.

Drawing on her interviews with pornographic performers Candice Nicole, Sasha Barbuster, and Sierra, she examines how black women erotic performers and models use strategies such as role selection, in-scene "representational tactics," and "psychic tactics" of belief and imagination to "mobilize the figure of the ho for their own needs" and thus to "shape the terms of representation in black pornographies" (165).

Miller-Young's innovative methodological choices are linked to her commitments to expanding black feminist modes of analysis, a move that goes far in highlighting the full theoretical potential of black feminism's interdisciplinarity. She develops what she terms a "black feminist pornographic lens," acknowledging and extending the works of Cathy Cohen, Evelyn Hammonds, Deborah King, Stallings, Ariane Cruz, and other black feminist voices who have centered black women's pleasure and sexual subjectivity as "important political work," thus naming a lineage of black feminist theorists invested in a politics of specifically erotic pleasure as part of the field's intellectual project. Her focus on sexual labor as a site of cultural production also allows her to incorporate into her analysis crucial black feminist literary and literary critical voices omitted from some explorations of the black pornographic, including foundational black queer and lesbian voices such as those of Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Jewelle Gomez, who, as Miller-Young points out, see pornography as holding important potential for the expression of women's subversive desire and erotic imagination (x).

This inclusion of black feminist literary theory leads her to rich close readings that reveal black erotic performers' critical strategies in several historical contexts. Her first chapter, "Sepia Sex Scenes: Spectacles of Difference in Race Porn," offers an extensive history of visual depictions of black female sexuality from the early nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, linking representations of Saartjie Baartman to privately circulated nineteenth-century French boudoir photos featuring black women and nudes by Édouard Manet and others. Reading closely the facial expressions and body language of the black women featured, Miller-Young argues that the models "convey an erotic subjectivity that marks a turning point in the evolution of pornographic images of black women," and serves as a point of departure for viewing black women sex workers as "erotic agents" aware of the circumstances of their sexual labor (41). Turning to explore pornographic "stag" films of the 1920s through 1960s, Miller-Young describes the strategies of "facial stunting," in which black women actors' eye rolling and pointed facial expressivities parody and critique the scenes they dramatize—an especially resonant tactic in silent film

genres (63). Reading films such as *KKK Night Riders* (1939), which eroticizes racialized sexual violence, Miller-Young argues that black women porn actors use these expressive modalities to negotiate racialized sexual labor and assert sexual subjectivity, even when tasked with playing out “particularly egregious violent” racial-sexual fantasies such as rape (59).

Miller-Young’s focus on pornographic performance as both art and labor allows her to examine nuanced intersections of class, sexual, and gender difference in the pornographic texts she explores, and to explore those intersections against various backdrops of American political and cultural history. In chapter 2, “Sexy Soul Sisters: Black Women in the Golden Era,” she considers the development of “soul porn,” a term she uses to describe “how black people interacted with and performed in porn through the uses of soul, as well as how whites’ fascination with black sexuality is represented in porn through the iconography of soul” in the 1960s and 1970s (67). Here her intently intersectional perspective brings her to nuanced readings of sexual difference not only in the films but in soul aesthetics as well. In her reading of *Lialeh* (1973), for example, Miller-Young explores the film’s racial iconographies as they connect with blaxpotation film motifs of black masculine phallic power, a project dependent on homophobia, and on a “view of black sexuality [that] is firmly set on privileging the desires of heterosexual black men over black women or black gay men” (77). This intersectional perspective continues in her reading of Anthony Spinelli’s *Sexworld* (1978), in which Jill, a black woman patron of a sex resort, is tasked with pleasuring a racist white male patron. Here Miller-Young’s attention to porn as sexual labor leads her to emphasize the main character, Jill and her deployment in the service of male pleasure, particularly given that, within the scene, as Miller-Young points out, Jill is mistaken for a maid. Where Nash’s reading of this same scene, for example, centers on Jill’s erotic performance of blackness, which she reads as pleasurable both for Jill and for the white male patron, for Miller-Young, the scene emblemizes the labor conditions that circumscribe black women’s erotic performance, rendering Jill imaginable only as a service commodity in both erotic and nonerotic contexts. Tasked with the labor of fulfilling white male fantasy, Miller-Young argues, “her true desires and motivations are left unaddressed” (96).

Reading for the multiple iterations of black women’s desire leads Miller-Young to another of *A Taste for Brown Sugar*’s key interventions: its attention to queer, nonnormative, subcultural, and fetish presences in black women’s erotic performance. Here, too, her emphasis on labor introduces an important exploration of the specific social and economic contours of racialized sexual

difference and nonnormativity in pornographic labor markets. The book's final chapters focus on the experiences of black women porn actresses as they navigate the economic, social, and political structures of the porn industry and negotiate their own understandings of sexual labor within pornographic markets defined and divided by racialized forms of difference. Miller-Young identifies her respondents' three primary incentives for pursuing work in porn: money, fame, and sex (186). She also notes that many of her respondents described their own same-sex sexual activity and "long-held pleasures in non-normative sexuality as a way to establish a claim for hyperconsent in their sex work," opening space for a provocative queer reading of black sexual labor (197). Miller-Young also uses her ethnographic-aesthetic approach to explore black porn performers' explicit verbal critiques of racialized power structures within the industry, and to situate both their professional choices as laborers and their creative choices as performers as strategies for navigating these power structures. Her final chapter's discussions of colorism and body stigma in the industry are particularly illuminating, as are her discussions of BDSM porn, and the BBW (Big Beautiful Women) subindustry and other niche markets, which, as she argues, are shaped by particular forms of stigma and labor exploitation, even as they offer economic opportunities and broader representations of black female eroticism and power (244).

In its impressive scope and methodological approach, *A Taste for Brown Sugar* offers an extremely valuable resource for scholars in black sexuality studies, feminist studies, and performance studies. Miller-Young pushes us toward "a radical and inclusive sexual politics that encompasses the labor struggles of sexual minorities including black sex workers in porn" and beyond (229). The book's impressive interdisciplinarity and precise, engaging prose position it as a highly teachable and readable text that can effectively bridge academic and nonacademic discourses on black sexuality, and open several avenues for further exploration of the place of performance, pleasure, and erotic labor for black women.

Miller-Young's readings of black gender and embodiment reveal pornography as a crucial terrain on which to examine several key questions in contemporary black feminist studies. What is the place of bodily difference in discussions of black women's pleasure and performance? How might further interrogation of the category of black woman broaden these definitions? For example, how does a more sustained engagement with the experiences of black transwomen sex workers and performers affect our readings of pornographic performance and sexual labor? Miller-Young leaves some of these questions unanswered,



reflecting the shifting and indeterminate place of categories such as woman and even intersectionality in contemporary black feminist discourse. Yet her insistence on using both aesthetic and structural approaches to understand black gender sexuality and difference—and her assertion that pornographic performance and sex work are crucial sites for understanding black womanhood—offers a hint of the kinds of methodologies that might be most useful in this regard. To fully explore black gender, womanhood, sexuality, and pleasure, Miller-Young suggests, we will need to push past both cultural and disciplinary norms, disrupting our own senses of intellectual locatedness as researchers in the academy and seeking out knowledge from previously ignored sources: the narratives, pleasures, and bodily experiences of black women themselves.

If Miller-Young's project is to offer an archive and hermeneutic for reading black women's erotic performance, Nash's *Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* develops a strategy specifically for centering pleasure in such readings. Through extensive close readings of pornographic representations of black women from the nineteenth century through the present, Nash explores the theoretical, political, and discursive potentials of black female eroticism and embodiment in the visual field. Arguing that scholarship on race and representation has yielded limited understandings of black female embodiment in visual media, she engages feminist studies, critical race studies, performance studies, and media studies to call for a new interpretive strategy that reframes black female embodiment around an optic of "visual pleasure," in which black women's eroticized bodies can signal multiple potential relationships to pleasure, desire, and erotic agency (21).

Central to this rereading is a critique of canonical black feminist conceptions of representation, sex, and the erotic. Where Miller-Young explores pornography from within the archive of black feminism, Nash directs her critique toward black feminist theory itself, interrogating what she sees as "black feminism's preoccupation with injury," which, for her, dominates black feminist readings of visual culture in general, and of pornography in particular (6). Shifting black feminist's lens on the visual, Nash examines various pleasures available not only to the spectator of pornographic renderings of black women, but also to black women porn protagonists and actors themselves. This pleasure, for Nash, occurs not in spite of but specifically *because* of the genre's invocations of racialized power schemas and "racial inequality" (7). Nash calls for a move away from what she terms a "black women have it bad" logic, focused on legacies of racialized exploitation and sexual violence, pointing instead to the "sexual and erotic pleasures in racialization, *even when* (and perhaps *precisely*

*because*) racialization is painful" (11, 4, emphasis in original). For Nash, this shift also makes space for alternative interpretive strategies for consumers of racialized pornography, moving away from what she sees as "the black feminist theoretical archive's consistent celebration of black women's 'oppositional' reading strategies" focused on antiracist critique, and instead incorporating modes of analysis that proceed "with the grain" of pornography's racialized narratives and thus allow both spectators and protagonists to experience pleasure in the pains, violences, and performative labors of black racialization (62).

By shifting critical analysis of black women's eroticism to consider the violence of racialization as a potential source of pleasure, Nash makes a daring intervention into black feminist discourse. Black feminist scholars have long been concerned with exploring the interrelationships between pleasure and violence (particularly epistemic and representational violence) in black women's experience; in these readings, pleasure often occurs explicitly as a resource against (rather than a product of) violences of racialization. An emblematic example is Audre Lorde's famous articulation of the erotic as a site of both joy and political potential useful in antiracist and antisexist action, which has been revisited in recent popular black feminist conversations in the #Black-GirlJoy and #BlackGirlMagic discourses, each of which aims to emphasize the existence and importance of black women's affective pleasures sites of power. These recent conversations have yet to center the specific importance of erotic pleasure in black women's political living. Nash's study brings black feminist conversations on pleasure and power to bear directly on black women's erotic life, placing sexual pleasure at the center of a decades-long dialogue about race, gender, and violence.

Yet *The Black Body in Ecstasy* also challenges a core conceit of each of these discourses: that the violence of racialization is primarily a site of injury for black women. Her suggestion that racism and violence can and should be read instead as potential sites of pleasure for black women is provocative and compelling, particularly as it offers a model of black women's eroticism that can lead us to complex notions of black women's eroticism that can include interests in non-normative sexual practices such as kink, BDSM, nonmonogamy, and queer sex acts and desires, though these possibilities are subordinated here in favor of a broader critique of what Nash sees as black feminism's overemphasis on injury.

Nash grounds her study in close readings of black female erotics on the visual field, a choice that makes space for an important interrogation of long-standing paradigms for reading representation in black feminist studies. For example, in tracing black feminist readings of visual culture, she offers an important

critique of black feminism's tendency to use Baartman as "representative of all black women's alterity" (30)—a tendency that, as she points out, elides the historical specificities of Baartman's racial and ethnic and cultural contexts as a Khoikhoi woman, imposing a contemporary US-centric narrative of black female racialization, performance, and embodiment on Baartman's story (30, 48).

By highlighting close reading as a way to examine "the racialized meaning-making performed by various pornographic texts," Nash also draws much-needed attention to the importance of humanities methodologies for critical race and sexuality studies discourses, and reveals the potentials of literary critical approaches for uncovering the workings of race in as-yet-underexplored media like pornography (22). Nash's emphasis on close reading distinguishes her analysis from Miller-Young's treatment of their overlapping archive. Where Miller-Young situates her treatment of porn actors' creative aesthetic choices alongside her own ethnographic research with the performers themselves, Nash maintains focus on the films' narrativizations and performances of race, and the effect of those aesthetic and representational qualities have in shaping pornographic spectatorship. This leads her to rich and unexpected readings of the affective modalities of porn spectatorship and performance. In her reading of the director Drea's incest-themed film *Black Taboo* (1984), for example, Nash argues that the film's "absurdly comical narrative," animated by fantasies of black sexual deviance, leaves space for black women protagonists to critique the soundness of logics of race (107, 122). By invoking a "double-edged" humor that both invokes and eroticizes racial stereotypes, Nash suggests, the black women protagonists turn the film's "racialized humor on its head, making the film's imagined spectator . . . the subject of the joke" (122).

In her assessment of black feminist erotic visuality, Nash chooses to de-emphasize black feminist literature and literary theory, a choice that is particularly striking in light of her emphasis on literary-critical methodologies. This is explained by Nash's urging against what she sees as an overemphasis on the literary in black feminist engagements with pleasure and embodiment, particularly in the works of writers like Patricia Hill Collins and Hortense Spillers, for whom, she suggests "black women's freedom . . . comes through subverting the visual register entirely" (34, 42). Focusing on black women's embodiment in the visual realm allows Nash to contest what she sees as black feminism's common "belief that the visual field is both a problem and a site of remedy," completely dislocated from and offering no potential for black women's erotic pleasure (31). Yet shifting away from the literary in her assessment of "the dominant black feminist project" risks minimizing the relevance

of black feminist literary works that might complicate Nash's critique of black feminist discourse, particularly by omitting the works of black queer feminist writers and literary scholars, who have been deeply engaged with the specifically subjective, interior, and nonrepresentational capacities of erotic pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

This quieting of black queer possibility and analysis signals one of *The Black Body in Ecstasy's* few theoretical gaps. To sustain her critique of black feminism as inordinately preoccupied with pain, Nash must at times elide important contributions by black feminist scholars and writers directly engaged in discourses of nonnormativity, queerness, and pleasure, including such as Lorde, Stallings, Hammonds, Cohen, Cheryl Clarke, and even Miller-Young. Because Nash's focus on racialized performance is at times dislodged from readings of sexual difference and other forms of nonnormativity, some of her close readings seem to understate the potentials of black sexual alterity in the meaning-making processes of black porn performance. In her reading of *Lialeh* (1973), for example, Nash notes a scene in which Arlo, the film's black male protagonist, prompts two female phone operators to have sex with each other simply by talking to the titular Lialeh, a black woman, on the phone. For Nash, this is a moment in which "black male sexuality is so alluring, so exciting, that it encourages white women to transgress entrenched racial and sexual boundaries," bringing into the pornographic representation one of the guiding tropes of classic blaxploitation films: "an unrelenting celebration of black male phallic power" (68, 65). Yet attention to queer and sexually non-normative possibility reveals the potential this scene holds for understanding black women's eroticism beyond phallic power. What would it mean to take as a point of departure for this close reading not Arlo's sexual power but the women's homoerotic interest Lialeh's pleasure itself? (68). In this case, destabilizing heteronormativity to center same-sex desire across racial lines may be a matter of both "oppositional reading" and pleasure, highlighting how the critical work of unreading the presumption of (racialized) heterosexuality can give way to a heightened erotic experience, catalyzed by racialized imagination but also deferred by sexual difference, and set to motion not (only) by the power of a black phallus but by a black woman's voice expressing her own pleasure as other women listen.

Ultimately, *The Black Body in Ecstasy* is one of contemporary black feminist theory's most provocative explorations of sexuality and representation. In her readings of the pornographic, Nash offers an analysis that "center[s] fantasy in the political life of black feminism," pushing existing work on black women's erotic pleasure boldly forward and opening new paths for inquiry into the

aesthetics and politics of black women's sexual subjectivity (150). She echoes and recasts the questions on black women's erotics that Miller-Young and others introduce: What do black women's bodies tell us about power and pleasure? What are the landscapes and epistemologies of ecstasy? What does black desire teach and how do we read it?

This tapping of unexplored sexual knowledges is one of Stallings's major concerns in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Stallings takes up a pleasure-centered theory of black embodiment similar to Nash's, bringing it into conversation with the questions of black sexual labor as cultural production that Miller-Young explores, to develop a theory of black erotics that centers the intersections of erotic practice as simultaneously pleasure, labor, and art. Stallings explores black sexual cultures from a rich and innovative multidisciplinary humanities focus, melding literary studies, sexuality studies, performance studies, pop cultural studies, and media studies to explore multiple social, political, aesthetic, and sensory valences of black sexual experience in contemporary US culture (iii).

For Stallings, this exploration requires not only ethnographic and aesthetic approaches but also careful attention to the erotic dimensions of narrativity and to "affective and personal genealogies of imagination that are themselves movements," in black cultural expression (xii). Central to this analysis, for Stallings, are two key terms: *funk* and *transaesthetics*. Drawing on mobilizations of funk in popular culture and the visual arts, as well as critical theory, she reads *funk* as "a multisensory and multidimensional philosophy [that] has been used in conjunction with the erotic, eroticism, and black erotica" and as "a philosophy about kinesthetics and being that critiques capitalism and the pathology of Western morality, [providing] innovative strategies about work and sexuality" (3). She uses funk to reframe both Jean Baudrillard's notion of "transaesthetics," which works as a frame for destabilizing the hierarchies and evaluative systems by which visual art was interpreted, and Susan Stryker's notion of "transing," a way of reading gender that critiques and opens space beyond compulsory dominant configurations of gender (10). Through her funk analytic, Stallings imagines transaesthetics as a mode of analysis that destabilizes reductive causalities and hegemonic hierarchies in "all artistic forms, including sex as representative of art as experience and provides a fresh line of inquiry for concerns about representation, agency, and sexuality," while articulating "a commitment to interrogating the human" (11, 26).

For Stallings, questioning the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman is crucial for analyzing black sexuality and art. Her reading of the

nonhuman departs from science studies definitions focused on the animal and other elements of the natural. For her, the nonhuman signals a realm of psychic, spiritual, and erotic presence and knowledge constantly engaged with both black sex and black art. Reading for these presences, she suggests, is key for understanding black sexual cultures: "If we accept the African diasporic concept of ancestral presences," she argues, "and that these ancestors walk with us, guide us, and visit us, then the current geographies of sex and work that were established based on where human/human or human/otherly human interactions take place can no longer dominate" discourses on race and sexuality (153). Riffing on Sylvia Wynter's notion of the "genres of humanity," which Wynter uses to describe social classifications of human difference and critique the hegemony of white Western phallogocentric notions of humanness, Stallings suggests that attention to the transcendent, spiritual, and erotic dimensions of black art—and the artistic praxis inherent in black sexuality—offers pathways for reading beyond both social categories and the limitations of the human realm. "When black people develop artistic strategies and aesthetics to dismiss or deconstruct the pathology that is sexual morality," she argues, "then perhaps freedom or whatever exists beyond the colonial projects of solidifying the genres of humanity . . . will be possible" (26). *Funk the Erotic* takes as its premise that black people *are* creating such strategies and sets out toward the undefined space "beyond" social configurations of the human as reflected in artistic expressions of the erotic.

Stallings effectively executes this ambitious aim on an impressively broad generic and temporal scope. She explores this black erotic "beyond" across several sites and media, including theater, pornography, fiction, and strip club culture, and in contexts spanning from late nineteenth-century occult and stage personae to contemporary erotica writers and sex club attendees. Uniting these figures, for Stallings, is the concept of the black *freak*, a term she introduces in her exploration of Paschal Beverly Randolph, a nineteenth-century occultist and self-ascribed "sexual magician," and Christine and Millie McKoy, black women conjoined twins and stage performers born into slavery. Each of these figures, she argues, use erotic and embodied forms of "freakhood" to turn erotic interrogations of the human into capital (42).

Stallings's theory of freakhood extends Nash's and Miller-Yong's readings of the pornographic as power, drawing links between the transcendent and subversive specters of the black erotic not only in performance but in various print and literary genres largely underexplored by both literary and sexuality studies. In chapter 2, "In Search of Our Mama's Porn: Genealogies of Black Women's

Sexual Guerrilla Tactics,” Stallings explores the politics of black women writers’ erotica, taking up *Players* magazine, edited by Wanda Coleman; Miriam DeCosta-Willis’s multigenre collection *Erotique Noire: Black Erotica* (1992); and the work of the popular black woman erotica writer Zane. Stallings argues that women’s erotic literature and print media meld imaginative/creative work and sexual labor to enact “a resistance to . . . the war against black women’s bodies” (69, 63). Reading these writers’ works as well as the arcs of their careers, Stallings demonstrates how “black women writers’ pursuit of erotic sovereignty through creative expression of sexuality and the fictional representation of that pursuit” create new forms of erotic labor that traverse intellectual and popular spaces (87). She expands this reading in her third chapter, “Make Ya Holler You’ve Had Enough: Neutralizing Masculine Privilege with BDSM and Sex Work,” which takes up Chester Himes’s *Pinktoes* (1961), and Hal Bennett’s *Lord of Dark Places* (1970), examining moments of BDSM, multipartner sex, and sexual commerce as central to the novels’ narratives of racial uplift and black liberation. In these chapters, Stallings extends an important thread of recent black studies scholarship that has sought to resituate black-authored “genre” and “urban” texts as objects of literary analysis.<sup>4</sup> By taking up this project through the lens of the erotic, she challenges scholarship in this area not to elide the gender, sexual, and class dynamics of these narratives but to mine them for the information they offer about black gendered and erotic life beyond the respectability politics imperatives that often shape projects of literary canon formation.

Interrogating both gender and artistic representation through transaesthetics leads Stallings to nuanced and exciting readings of gender and transness in contemporary black cultures, particularly in her discussions of the black trans\* writers Toni Newman and Red Jordan Arobateau, whose autobiographical and fictional prose on sexual labor, she argues, offer narrative alternatives to fetishistic medical conceptions of transness, engaging in erotic “antiwork politics” that critiques liberal capitalism and positions sex work “as important an element of self-definition” as surgery has been in medicalized narratives of trans\* experience (207–9).

Stallings offers some of her most provocative claims about liberatory black sexual life in chapter 4, “Marvelous Stank Matter: The End of Monogamy, the Marriage Crisis, and Ethical Slutting.” Using funk sensibility to interrogate discourses of monogamy and ethical nonmonogamy, she offers up “Funky love,” to describe “publically radical configurations of family, love and relationships where monogamy and marriage are not situated as the ideal praxis” (122).

Focusing on radical forms of nonmonogamy in Octavia Butler's speculative novel *Fledgling* (2007) and Fiona Zedde's erotic novel *Bliss* (2005), Stallings critiques prominent models of ethical nonmonogamy—most notably, Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt's *Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997). For Stallings, these recent nonmonogamy discourses' emphases on ethics, as well as their conflation of an ethics of consent with an ethics of honesty, "miscalculate . . . the infinite possibilities of multiple and poly entanglements, as well as the interior fluidity of individuals whose very being can shift and change based on contact and intimacies with others in this world and other worlds," particularly for black people (127). Stallings links this critique to the complex erotics of the black nonhuman. "Honesty," she argues, is a damaging fantasy, particularly when conflated with consent, because, "while we can always insist on consent, total or complete honesty and being honorable requires an essential and unchanging self" (127).

Stallings's tethering of "honesty and being honorable," however, may risk enacting the very sort of troubled theoretical slippage she seeks to challenge. While the imperative of "being honorable" may reaffirm patriarchal schemas of capitalist value, logics of honesty and truth telling have been a crucial concern for black queer feminist artistic, spiritual, and erotic practices for decades—a concern particularly vulnerable to contemporary misreadings via Western postmodern and poststructuralist discourses eager to point out the impossibility of stable, singular "truths." Black queer feminist cultural expression offers definitions of truth telling that are useful specifically *because of* their ability to incorporate multiplicity and change. The bisexual black poet and theorist June Jordan, for example, imagines honesty as a major "currency" of language, which she views as "a means to tell the truth in order to change the truth."<sup>5</sup> Taking up Stallings's critique of ethics from a black queer feminist cultural lens, we might ask what potential a model of *queer honesty*, for example, could offer in acknowledging both the complex, shifting, and transcendent dimensions of erotic subjectivity *and* the usefulness of sustained practices of care, sincerity, and mutuality between (queer, freakish, antimoralist) partners and communities? How might such expressive practices make space for what we might think of as an erotics of narrative consent, a fluid mode of discursive intimacy that might expand the terrain of sexual possibility, rather than limiting it?

In addition to *Funk the Erotic's* many contributions to gender and sexuality studies, performance studies, and black feminist discourse, Stallings's introduction of funk as interpretive methodology in *Funk the Erotic* offers an exciting and important intervention into literary studies, as well as to cultural studies



discourses more generally. In an environment in which numerous scholars have explored the impacts of spiritual, blues, jazz, and, more recently, soul aesthetics on African American literary cultures, Stallings's turn to funk offers a fresh and rich artistic/musical tradition from which black cultural analysis might draw—a tradition deeply linked with late twentieth-century political histories underexplored in contemporary literary and performance studies scholarship.

*Funk the Erotic* is a groundbreaking work in its scope, its methodological breadth, and the creativity and originality of the ideas it introduces into several discourses. In theorizing funk as a specifically erotic, bodily, and embodyable hermeneutic for understanding sexuality across mediums and genres, Stallings proposes exciting shifts in black feminist, performance studies, sexuality studies, and literary studies methodologies. She offers an entry point into cultural analysis that takes the black erotic as its starting, challenging long-standing classist divisions between black “vernacular” and “intellectual” traditions, divisions that have been particularly prominent in black literary studies. As pathbreaking as *Funk the Erotic* is, this particular contribution is, perhaps, underexploited. How might reading for an embodied funk aesthetic help us move beyond the musical and sonic paradigms of call-and-response (gospel) and repetition-with-difference (jazz) that have shaped scholarly understandings of black literary form for decades? What particular connections can we draw between the meters, gestures, rhythms, and rhymes of funk and eruptions of sexual embodiment in other realms of black cultural expression? What are the formal contours of funk, and what can they teach us about how to read bodily life in black art and literature?

In their archival scope, their methodological range, and their expansive interdisciplinary reach, these texts demonstrate the importance of black women's erotic lives to contemporary studies of race, gender, sexuality, and representation across several fields and disciplines. They offer the first thrilling breaths of a dialogue on the politics and pleasures of black women's sexual labor in contemporary media and culture, posing questions that should push the dialogue vibrantly into the future. What are the transnational and diasporic dimensions of black women's erotic representation and sexual labor? Both Miller-Young and Stallings draw fascinating links between US black erotics and other Afro-diasporic sites in the nineteenth century, but the question of how these images circulate in “new diaspora” economic, cultural, and technological contexts remains open for exploration.<sup>6</sup> This question is particularly important in light of Nash's critique of US black feminism's tendency to efface national and ethnic specificity in deploying Saartjie Baartman as a foundational text

in exploring contemporary US black female eroticism. What are the specific places of nonnormativity in our readings of black female embodiment? How might Stallings's attention to trans\* bodies, for example, and Miller-Young's explorations of BBW porn broaden or complicate reading strategies like the one Nash offers for understanding difference as a site of pleasure? Finally, if we take seriously Miller-Young's suggestion that we can view black women porn performers as "cultural producers," what space does this open for continued black feminist readings of erotica and pornography as art? How might such an approach expand the place of the erotic in the archive of black women's artistic production, and what new space might that carve for the inclusion of black queer, trans\*, nonbinary, nonmonogamous, kinky, and other "freak" sexualities in the canon of black feminist artistic texts?

These are only a few of the exciting questions these texts place on offer. Like the supplest works, these studies generate as many questions as they do answers, suggesting, satiating, deferring completion in the most productive ways. Together, they bring us to a precipice we have long needed to reach, to the verge of a place where black women's erotic lives tell stories about the social world, and the world learns how to feel us, and to listen.

## Notes

1. For a summary of relevant critical responses to *Lemonade*, see Janell Hobson, "#Lemonade: A Black Feminist Resource List," *African American Intellectual Historical Society*, May 12, 2016, [www.aaihs.org/lemonade-a-black-feminist-resource-list/](http://www.aaihs.org/lemonade-a-black-feminist-resource-list/).
2. See bell hooks, "Moving beyond Pain," bell hooks institute, Berea College, May 9, 2016, [www.bell-hooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain](http://www.bell-hooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain).
3. The theoretical and literary works of black queer and lesbian writers such as Audre Lorde, Akilah Oliver, Dionne Brand, June Jordan, and others stand out in this regard. Miller-Young also cites the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) amici curiae brief against the criminalization of pornography, signed by Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, and others. The brief states that pornography "can be experienced as affirming women's desires and women's equality." See "Brief Amici Curiae of Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissident and Political Culture*, by Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995), 235–36.
4. Eve Dunbar, Howard Ramsby, Stephanie Dunn, Taylor Nix, Felicia Pride, Keenan Norris, Amy Alexander, and Stallings herself have made important contributions to this line of inquiry.
5. June Jordan, "Problems of Language in a Democratic State," in *But Some of Us Did Not Die* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 229.
6. See Isidore Okpweho, *The New African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *In Search of African Diasporas: Testimonies and Encounters* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2012).