

Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)

Review by Rachel Corbman

In May 2014, as part of her second stint as a scholar in residence at the New School, the legendary black feminist critic bell hooks sat down with a hand-selected cohort of young black female cultural workers for a public dialogue before a hearty crowd in the university's auditorium as well as a virtual audience tuned in via live stream. This dialogue with bell hooks—who writes her name in lower-case to emphasize the importance of her ideas over her identity—covered an expansive range of topics. Yet one dangling clause in this two-hour program caused the most buzz and unrest. The subsequent reaction centered on hooks's searing criticism of the superstar Beyoncé, whose celebrity is already the locus of considerable conversation around race, gender, sexuality, and feminism in popular culture. "I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact anti-feminist," said hooks, "that is a terrorist especially in terms of her impact on young girls."

This purposeful overstatement—we all know Beyoncé is not a terrorist—rehearses an argument quite familiar by now to hooks's dutiful readers, which was most forcefully articulated by hooks twenty years ago in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). Famously, *Black Looks* argues that images produced within the mass media maintain the white supremacist patriarchy's "oppression, exploitation, and overall domination" of all black people and all women, and especially black women.¹ For hooks, the ways in which Beyoncé's body is represented—emblazoned on the recent cover of *Time Magazine*'s "100 Most Influential" issue and elsewhere—is not just problematic but also complicit in the anti-black racism and sexism of the culture at large. "[Beyoncé] is colluding in the construction of herself as a slave," hooks concluded.

The outpouring of responses to hooks's provocative comments ranged from wholesale rejections, to dismissals tempered with respect for the writer, to statements of support. However, according to the public intellectual and writer Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, this coverage strongly trended toward negative responses that deemed hooks and her patented critique of the representation of black women outdated. "What is at stake in the younger generation's critique is not simply a question of age," Sekou writes, "but rather is fundamentally a question of ideology."² Sekou stages this intergenerational clash as a battle that pits a generation of unruly upstarts, who lack a sufficient critique of neoliberal capitalism, against their older and wiser elders. In "On bell, Beyonce, and Bullshit," Brittney Cooper's brilliant and nuanced commentary of the fallout following hooks's comments, the writer takes Sekou to task—yet ultimately concludes that her generation "could benefit from a more radical edge to our critique."³

While Cooper's blogged article is well worth reading, her argument is largely outside the purview of my review of Jennifer C. Nash's important new contribution to black feminist thought. Rather, what I want to emphasize here before turning my attention to *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (2014) is that hooks's assault on Beyoncé was lodged in the context of a panel that was already intentionally framed as a dialogue between hooks and a younger generation of thinkers—specifically the author Marci Blackman, the filmmaker Shola Lynch, and the memoirist and activist Janet Mock. Mounted as more of an opportunity for mutual appreciation than as a sparring match, the conversation in fact took a surprise turn with Mock's (and later Lynch's) disagreements with hooks. However, if a critical mass has followed Mock's lead in taking to the internet to question hooks's once tried-and-true analysis, how can we move beyond this critique to a new mode of black feminist analysis?

A few weeks after I fumed silently in my seat at the New School, I had the opportunity to read Jennifer Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, which was published a couple of months earlier, in March 2014. Partially through this confluence of events, a book has never instantly struck me as so timely and necessary. *The Black Body in Ecstasy* is a "loving critique" of the established canon of black feminist thought, including bell hooks's oeuvre, that both "parts company with many of the questions

that have driven black feminist scholarship on representation ... [and] hopes to bring renewed theoretical energies to these debates.”⁴

Nash takes two routes to this destination. First, in the opening chapter of *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Nash charts a critical genealogy of contemporary black feminist thought. Specifically, the writer convincingly argues that it was Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, which was published two years before *Black Looks* in 1990, that moved representation from the periphery to the center of black feminism. While attention to the representation of black women has become so pervasive that it is rarely remarked upon, this focus actually marks a distinct rupture in the field. Earlier work, Nash argues, had “relatively little interest in representation,” instead emphasizing a myriad of causes of black women’s marginalization—including “capitalism (Frances Beale), sexual violence (Darlene Hine Clark), sexual hierarchy (Audre Lorde), simultaneous oppressions (Combahee River Collective), and the law’s inattention to black women’s experiences of discrimination (Kimberlé Crenshaw).”⁵

Nash’s black feminist genealogy has a similar guiding impulse to the genealogy in Clare Hemmings’s *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, which was published in 2011 as part of the series *Next Wave: New Directions in Women’s Studies*, the same Duke series of which Nash’s contribution is also a part. In both monographs, the writers question and creatively reconfigure commonly narrativized truths about feminism—in the end opening up a space where we can begin to think differently about feminism. “I hope to create analytic breathing room for scholarship,” Nash writes. “My profound faith in the promise and possibility of black feminist theory leads me to advocate not an abandonment if it, but instead a concerted effort to craft an alternative black feminist theoretical archive.”⁶

To do so, the ensuing chapters of *The Black Body in Ecstasy* offer close readings of four hardcore pornographic films from the 1970s and 1980s that feature black women. Nash’s decision to hone in on racialized pornography is crucial. “Pornography has implicitly come to structure black feminism’s conception of representation,” she argues. “Indeed, black feminism has often read visual culture’s treatment of black women even in non-pornographic 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."⁷

The Black Body in Ecstasy intervenes within black feminism by challenging the critical "preoccupation with the injuries that racial pornography engenders" by instead reading for what the writer characterizes as *ecstasy*, "possibilities for female pleasure within a phallic economy and possibilities of female pleasure within a white-dominated representational economy."⁸ This is a strategically selective reading practice or what queer theorist Judith Butler has termed an "aggressive counter-reading."⁹ And although I am in complete sympathy with both this hermeneutic and its deployment in *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, this leads me to my primary critique of Nash's book. At times, the precision of her close readings and the seductiveness of her larger argument have the potential to jump step disruptive cleavages in her readings of films.

A good example is found in her extended analysis of the film *Black Taboo* (1984) that constitutes the third chapter of the book, "Laughing Matters: Race-Humor on the Pornographic Screen." *Black Taboo* depicts a family's excitement at the return of their son, Sonny Boy, after a decade of service in the military. In hopes of helping the melancholic and withdrawn Sonny Boy acclimate back to civilian life, his sister Verdana, his sister Theodora, and his mother Valdesta each in turn have sex with him. The film, then, concludes with a punch line that ostensibly undoes the film's promise of breaking the incest taboo. Valdesta discovers that Sonny Boy is missing a birthmark and is, therefore, not actually her son. But "you know what they say: We all look alike," she laughs.¹⁰

Nash argues that Valdesta's joke not only deflates the taboo promised by the title of the film but also the "racial mythology that lent the film its erotic charge" in the first place.¹¹ This joke, then, effectively releases the protagonists of the film from "being the subjects of ethnographic race-humor and instead [turns] an uncomfortable comic gaze on the spectator."¹² Nash makes a quite compelling case here. And in the context of her powerful argument, it is easy to miss the writer's mere parenthetical mention of incestuous lesbian sex between the sisters, Valdesta and Theodora,¹³ as well as Nash's avoidance of this scene vis-à-vis the chapter's larger thesis. However, if we take lesbian sex seriously as sex, her argument loses some of its traction,

as we would certainly have to see the sisters' sexual encounter as an example of incest that is not negated by the narrative. Complicating an argument, however, does not have to weaken it. Significantly, *Black Taboo* (unlike the writer or reader) does not require a negation of incestuous sex acts between sisters because lesbian sex is imagined as something that can be sexy but is less than sex in a phallic economy. This is missing from Nash's argument. But it is worthy of our attention, precisely because it creates an opportunity to consider the intersection of heterosexism and male dominance that both renders lesbianism largely invisible and conversely pornographic lesbian sex highly visible.

Clearly, the representation of lesbianism is more central to my intellectual agenda than it is to Nash's project. Yet my desire for her to engage this question comes from my respect for her work and its many successes rather than a place of dismissal. Indeed, I think *The Black Body in Ecstasy* is the most significant black feminist text in recent memory. It is as rigorous as it is creative; and, in the tradition of thinkers like hooks, it is elegantly written and thoroughly readable. Most importantly, it charts an inspired critical path that sees pleasure as a site of possibility or, invoking the late queer theorist Jose Muñoz, "an invitation, a call, to the then-and-there, a not-yet-here... a collective potentiality."¹⁴ This fashions a clearing that is serviceable both inside and outside of black feminism, particularly in the broader bodies of feminist and queer thought that Nash engages throughout *The Black Body in Ecstasy*.

In closing, I would like to return now to a second moment in the "Are You Still a Slave?" dialogue. For me, this moment remains far more troubling than the question of whether Beyoncé is or is not a terrorist. "I used to believe," bell hooks noted, "that by the time I reached the age of forty, fifty that there would be so many people, young black females and males, who would have surpassed bell hooks." Shifting seamlessly from the first to third person, she continued: "Wow, you know, bell used to be useful but we've got so much more visionary theory'— and yet that hasn't happened." Or has it? It would be depressing to think black feminism stalled after bell hooks. Equally depressing is the thought that newer visionary theory must inevitably supplant older visionary theory with time. Thankfully, though, I do not subscribe to either of bell hooks's presuppositions. And after reading *the Black Body in Ecstasy*, I count Jennifer Nash as

one of the young visionary theorists whose work, like the work of proceeding generations, continues to engage, excite, and inspire me.

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Endnotes

- ¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 2.
- ² Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, "The Master's House is Burning: bell hooks, Cornel West and the Tyranny of Neoliberalism," *Trouthout*, May 19, 2014 <<http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/23792-the-masters-house-is-burning-bell-hooks-cornel-west-and-the-tyranny-of-neoliberalism>>
- ³ Brittney Cooper, "On bell, Beyonce', and Bull Shit," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, May 20, 2014 <<http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/05/20/on-bell-beyonce-and-bullshit/>>
- ⁴ Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.
- ⁵ Nash, *The Black Body*, 33.
- ⁶ Nash, *The Black Body*, 32.
- ⁷ Nash, *The Black Body*, 6-7.
- ⁸ Nash, *The Black Body*, 2.
- ⁹ Nash, *The Black Body*, 2, 87.
- ¹⁰ Nash, *The Black Body*, 119.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Nash, *The Black Body*, 127.
- ¹³ Nash, *The Black Body*, 133.
- ¹⁴ Nash, *The Black Body*, 3.