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Introduction

Black Radical Pleasure

**KIRIN WACHTER-GRENE AND
LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI**

Critical race studies and gender and sexuality studies, as broad disciplines, may be overdue for an in-depth engagement with Black radical pleasure, but more than a handful of contemporary and emerging scholars have gone all in with such explorations, marking the space of pleasure and desire as primary zones of discourse. Of course, Black scholars and writers have been framing race in relation to sexuality, desire, and power for centuries. Canonical figures, such as Frances Harper, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Gayl Jones come immediately to mind, but also non-canonical and pulp figures, such as Gary Fisher, Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim, Hal Bennett. This is not even to mention those in the space of music, such as the legendary Millie Jackson, Blowfly, Bessie Smith, Rosa Henderson (of the 1924 classic “He May Be Your Dog But He’s Wearing My Collar”) and figures in the lineage of hip hop (thankfully now feminized and queered), all who have worked with and against stereotypes and expectations of Black being and behavior generated both externally and internally.

Desire has long framed the discourses of race, but it is in the closing decades of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries that work challenging its limits has begun openly engaging alternative sexualities and sexual practices. Filmmakers and poets Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, and Melvin Dixon and scholars such as Robert Reid-Pharr, E. Patrick Johnson, Sharon Patricia Holland, Kara Keeling, Marlon M. Bailey, Cathy Cohen, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Darieck Scott—these have formed the routes of Black sexualities studies. And it is the pleasure politics arriving in the wake of this 1990s Black queer studies and early 2000s queer of color critique, such as the work of Joan Morgan, Mireille Miller-Young, Jennifer C. Nash, LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Amber Musser, and Ariane Cruz, that are now poised to forever alter how we think Black gender and sexuality, indeed race, politics, and desire.

Examples of this work, which inspire and help authorize this issue include Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy* (2014), Miller-Young’s *A Taste for Brown Sugar* (2014), and Cruz’s *The Color of Kink* (2016). They are all attentive to Black female pleasure in relation to practices and critical paradigms that remain outre in much Black scholarly and public conversation, such as kink, BDSM, and pornography. This work doesn’t reject a Black feminist scholarly tradition that arguably has long dissuaded such conversations. It extends it. For example, through this work we are increasingly

coming to know the many ways slavery and its afterlives inform the formation of, and our understanding of sex and sexuality in America—through desire and the erotics of power. We are coming to acknowledge how some Black women “deliberately [use] the shadows of slavery [to] engage antebellum sexual politics—aesthetically, rhetorically, and symbolically—in the delivery and/or receiving of sexual pleasure.”¹

Understandably, conversations about Black people’s engagement with alternative sexual practices and lifestyles have historically been publicly suppressed, discouraged, or censored by those both within and outside of Black communities in the name of protection, uplift, and/or respectability. However, to frankly explore at times difficult relationships between gender, desire, sexuality, and race is crucial if we intend to recognize and value humanity’s complexities in general and the multifaceted expressions of Black life, specifically. Black radical pleasure, however, demands a visible and critical genealogy to make sense of the relentless and inevitable eruptions of uncategorizable utterances and expressions. Jeremy O. Harris’s daring, spectacular Broadway production of *Slave Play* (2019), for example, and his off-Broadway show *Black Exhibition* (2019), explicitly take up race play and Black queerness and abjection; Kink Out’s 2020 Residency at MoMA PS1 centering queer BDSM practitioners of color squarely in the contemporary art world; and there is Tiona Nekkia McClodden’s BDSM programming for the 2019 Whitney Biennial honoring Black queer, kinky histories. None of these eruptions from multiple undergrounds or critical conversations are without a radical lineage.

This special issue, part of the journal’s Fiftieth Anniversary celebration, builds upon “Race, Pornography, and Desire: A TBS Roundtable” (2016). That roundtable brought together four leading Black feminist scholars (Nash, Cruz, Musser, and Horton-Stallings) to discuss Black sexuality studies and imagine the field anew. Our current contributors to this special issue—artists, scholars, pedagogues, kinksters, and sex workers alike both in and out of academia—continue that discussion as well as the journal’s mission to cut at edges and push at envelopes. For example, it opens with Carmel Ohman’s “Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae’s *insecure*” paying tribute to Black feminist thinkers (including the TBS roundtable participants) that paved the way for rethinking the pleasures of the Black pussy. Ohman argues Rae’s HBO television series expands the possibilities for Black women’s sexual self-expression and furthers the work of imagining alternative Black sexual worlds.

The concept of “undisciplining”—that is, releasing an object from its epistemological tethers—forms a root ripe for emergence. Omari Weekes’ “Something in the Holy Water Ain’t Clean: Time and Religious Inversion in Hal Bennett’s *Lord of Dark Places*” is the first of two essays in this special issue that look closely at the edges of desire in African American literature. Weekes reads Bennett’s notorious underground 1970 novel *Lord of Dark Places*, arguing for its satirical inversion of Christianity which makes space for new articulations of Black masculinity. Likewise, K. Thomas explores the impact her religious upbringing in the Haitian Baptist

church (HBC) had on her sexual development as a young woman and later, initiate into the San Francisco and New York queer, Black BDSM scenes. The first of two personal essays in this issue, Thomas's "A Black Church, Black Woman, and the Lure of Black BDSM" meditates on the many ways Black bodies are "coded," and thereby policed within the strict confines of the church (and, by extension, the family).

Amber Musser returns to *TBS* with "The Limits of Desire: Jacolby Satterwhite and the Maternal Elsewhere." Taking as her focus Satterwhite's 2017 installation *En Plein Air: Music of Objective Romance*, Satterwhite's use of BDSM imagery oscillates between transparency and opacity—what we think we know and what we have yet to begin to imagine. Specifically, *En Plein Air's* imagery and soundtrack produced by Satterwhite's deceased mother invites a relation to the maternal through pleasure and creativity.

Pleasure and creativity are two words that might describe Mistress Velvet's practice of making her white, male clients read Black feminist theory, a commitment that has garnered the Chicago-based Pro Domme national attention. In Kirin Wachter-Grene's interview, "Caretaking in So Many Ways," Mistress Velvet discusses this practice with an emphasis on caretaking, pedagogy, and the Black feminist ancestral and critical lineage she emerges from and contributes to. A teacher, both as a social worker and in her sex work, there is an emphasis on legitimizing alternative sites of knowledge production and transforming perspectives through pleasure.

In "Finding Family," multi-media artist, curator, and educator Heather Raquel Phillips

shares how laborers in adult industries have been mentors and kinfolk. Tracing a personal journey that limns family pain and the construction of alternative, chosen family structures, Phillips' essay reiterates the relationships among emergent sexuality, race, history, and ancestry.

Returning to literature, Anna Ziering takes up one of the most infamous novels about the complicated nexus of sexuality, pleasure, power, and history in her article "They Are Busy with This Woman: The Abject Erotics of Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*." Ziering explores one woman's methods of survival that, at times, intersect with and depend upon what is often understood as abjection. Specifically, Ziering is interested in analyzing protagonist Eva's finding of pleasure in extragenital sites, such as orality and anality, that serve as erotic practices to process her own relationship to violence. Following on the theme of finding and expressing pleasure through unexpected methods is Amaris Diana Brown's "Closing the Distance: The (Im)possible Politics of the Yield in Carrie Mae Weems' *Not Manet's Type*." Weems' 1997 photographic series is here read through the concept of "the yield," defined as a specifically Black feminist optic. Brown argues it expands available theories of subjection that foreground power, rather than dispossession.

We would be remiss if we did not mention here the indispensable work of Samuel R. Delany who could easily be the sole focus of a special issue (or series) and will likely be. Delany is our guiding spirit here because his critical and fictional work from the 1960s to the present broke the necessary ground in exploring the erotic potential in

asymmetrical power dynamics such as practices of racialized kink and BDSM, abjection, and queer forms of kinship, caretaking, and communal living. Delany lived and wrote of and continues to bear witness to such practices. Likewise, a deep debt is owed to Black leatherwomen, submissives, and lifestyle slaves, such as Vi Johnson, Jill Carter, Mistress Mir, Michele Buchanan, and Mollena Williams-Haas who have, for the past 50 years, uncompromisingly paved the way to show us different ways to think, feel, and live.

That all these folks have contextualized the work they do and lives they lead via a radical tradition of race, gender, and resistance is why we argue that these practices and subcultures do indeed provide relevant and necessary critical paradigms. A shout out must go to Chicago's Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M), the home of most of these women's archives. It is a necessary public resource dedicated to preserving the histories

of leather, fetish, and kink and the hidden histories of race in that cultural complex. The LA&M has provided generous funding for two contributors to this special issue, Kirin Wachter-Grene and Heather Raquel Phillips, to pursue their research and teaching of Black sexuality, and offers its resources to countless others to educate, sustain, and inspire. With the increase in public acknowledgement of practices of Black radical pleasure, perhaps independent institutions such as the LA&M and artists such as our cover photographer, Efrain Gonzalez, a legend who has truly seen it all and tirelessly provided visual testimony, will be increasingly acknowledged.

Note

1. Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 32.

Kirin Wachter-Grene is Assistant Professor of Liberal Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a PhD in English and a focus on African American literature and gender and sexuality studies. Dr. Wachter-Grene was the 2017–18 Visiting Scholar at the Leather Archives and Museum where she researched Black women's historical involvement with leather, kink, and fetish. Her work is published in *African American Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Callaloo*, and *Sixty Inches from Center* and is forthcoming in *Feminist Formations* and *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*.

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