

The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography

Abstract

Feminist scholarship on racialized pornography assumes that pornographic images of black women's bodies titillate the white male spectator with "proof" of black women's imagined sexual differences. This dominant reading envisions racialized pornography as a fundamentally racist endeavor which degrades and objectifies the black female body.

*The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* challenges this dominant interpretation by examining pornography's racialized, but not necessarily racist, uses of black women's bodies. In place of a *normative* assessment of racialized pornography, my dissertation offers a new *analytical* practice for reading pornography: a method I call racial iconography. Racial iconography is a critical hermeneutic attentive to the socio-historical specificity of race as a pornographic trope, and to the multiplicity of ways that race produces meaning in pornography.

My dissertation uses racial iconography to read significant Golden and Silver Age pornographic films with an attention to the variety of meanings black women's bodies produce on the pornographic screen. Racial iconography allows me to ask new questions about the viewing positions and pleasures of black spectators, pornography's use of race-humor, and pornography's inability to provide "evidence" of difference.

Racial iconography makes an important contribution to feminist scholarship on pornography, and racial progressive scholarship on visual culture. By pushing beyond

normative evaluations of racialized pornography, racial iconography foregrounds new questions about the intersections of race, gender, collective fantasy, and pleasure.