NIKKI LANE

Bringing Flesh to Theory: Ethnography, Black Queer Theory, and Studying Black Sexualities

AS DOROTHY HODGSON TELLS US, the most common features of an ethnographic project involve "talking to, participating with, and observing the people who produce . . . texts, exploring the contexts of their ideas and actions, and often studying how their situations, ideas, and actions change over time."[1] Practically, this often involves spending months, and more often years, in a particular field site, where one develops relationships with members of the group, community, or institution being studied. Ethnographers are positioned in a place to observe, but also place their bodies on the line — participating, when possible, in the quotidian practices of the group. This observation and participation is captured in the form of "field notes" that may relay in the form of "thick description," what the ethnographer sees as she observes and participates in various cultural and social practices.[2] As such, ethnography requires reflexivity because the ethnographer must constantly consider how her body is *affecting* and is *effected by* the communities and institutions in which she is embedded. The benefit of this reflexive ethnographic approach is that, as Faye Ginsburg notes, it "has the capacity to reveal the fault lines in

1. Dorothy Louise Hodgson, "Of Modernity/Modernities, Gender, and Ethnography," in *Gendered Modernities: Ethnographic Perspectives*, ed. Dorothy Louise Hodgson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 17.
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

 Feminist Studies 42, no. 3. © 2016 by Feminist Studies, Inc.

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba.
By Jafari S. Allen. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.
By Marlon M. Bailey. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women.
By Mignon Moore. Oakland: University of California Press, 2011.

A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography.
By Mireille Miller-Young. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

communities, social movements, and institutions, which frequently run along class, race, and generational lines, and that might easily be missed by more deductive and quantitative methodologies."[3]

Marlon M. Bailey's *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, Jafari S. Allen's *¡Venceremos?*, Mignon Moore's *Invisible Families*, and Mireille Miller-Young's *A Taste for Brown Sugar* represent an exciting trend within an interdisciplinary body of research that I am referring to as Black sexuality studies. What links these projects is their use of ethnographic methodologies to understand how Blackness informs racialized gender and sexuality in the everyday experiences of their interlocutors. In relying on ethnography, to varying degrees, they are in conversation with and expand upon methodological trends within Black feminist studies and Black queer studies. Further, the Black sexuality studies projects reviewed here question the (hetero)normative bent within the field of African American studies, the normatively white subject position that exists within queer theory, and the lack of attention to issues of sexual pleasure within Black feminist theory. They also challenge theorists of race and sexuality to move

3. Faye Ginsburg, "Ethnography and American Studies," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2006), 492.

in the direction of interrogating the *flesh*, because they go to the site—the place where the body acts, feels, and engages the world—asking the simple question articulated best by E. Patrick Johnson: "What is the utility of queer [or feminist] theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, where the body is the site of trauma?"[4]

In my discussion of these texts, I will focus on how each utilizes ethnographic methodologies in distinct ways. I will argue that regardless of *how* they employ ethnography's methods, they make two very important contributions to fields of Black feminist theory and Black queer theory. First, they add information about the lived experiences of Black sexual subjectivity to the ethnographic record. By adding these experiences to the record, they become part of the limited but growing body of available knowledge about the everyday experiences of Black people within the African diaspora. Second, they put Black feminist theory and Black queer theory to use "in the field." In doing so, they test the interventions, concepts, and approaches that have been developed using these critical lenses, allowing us to see what happens when theoretical bodies meet actual ones. As I hope this review will suggest, ethnography, no matter how engaged its use, provides an opportunity for those whose work falls within Black sexuality studies to theorize *with* Black sexual subjects, giving credence to their experiences of life at the intersections of racialized gender and sexuality. This knowledge can lead to even richer insights into how Black sexual subjects are represented in text, how those representations are read, and how processes of racialization, gendering, and sexualization come to structure their quotidian experiences in the world.[5]

EROTIC SUBJECTIVITY AND CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Jafari S. Allen's *¡Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba* revolves around the styles of self-making among sexually marginalized Black Cuban women and men. Allen is primarily interested in looking at

---

4. E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 5.
5. See Tom Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology," *Annual Review Anthropologist* 36 (2007).

these interrelated forms of self-making through the lens of Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic. Borrowing from Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic," Allen posits that the erotic, as a force that refers to both the sexual and to a "deep longing within," (2) can serve as an entry point into a "site of knowledge production and energy, which is alternative to regimes of state and received culture" (96). Allen introduces the notion of "erotic subjectivity" to address the way those engaged in self-making practices on the margins of Cuban society construct both an alternative sense of personhood and new kinds of publics based on "deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul" (97). For Allen, erotic subjectivity attends to the presumed "impasse" between studies of sexuality, race, and gender, where it is sometimes believed that to study one is to neglect the others. Allen situates his theoretical intervention within Black feminist, Black queer, and queer of color literature which have attended to the ways that sexuality, race, and gender are intricately linked. By defining sexuality as "deeply personal and culturally constructed desire" (12), Allen considers the individual and collective sense of marginalized subjects' desire and the lengths to which they go to negotiate with hegemonic forces in order to experience those desires. Each chapter treats a different aspect of erotic subjectivity as it manifests within the lives of several key informants. In particular, Allen is concerned with how each of his key informants enacts their erotic subjectivity within the interconnected contexts of Cuba's "Special Period,"[6] black resistance, queer subject formation, and Afro-Latin American and Caribbean culture and politics (3).

For Allen, ethnography is the key that unlocks the door to studying queer subject formation, gender dissidence, and informal sexual economies of Black Cubans. It provides glimpses into momentary acts of negotiation with a conservative cultural hegemony that, on the surface, have removed racist and sexist policies and laws, but where racist, sexist, and heteronormative practices remain intact. For example, Allen describes the attempt to formally organize around the needs and desires of lesbian and bisexual women under the banner of the state-sponsored women's

---

6. Cuba's "Special Period in Time and Peace" is described by Allen (119) as a period of severe economic crisis resulting from the combined effects of the end of Cuba's relationship with the defunct Soviet Union in the late 1980s, long-term government inefficiency, and the blockade by the United States.

organization CENESEX (149). Initially invited by CENESEX to discuss the specific interests of lesbian and bisexual women, the group of primarily Black and mulatta women, later named Oremi, the Yoruba word for "close friend," became a site of anxiety for CENESEX (149). When the size of the group swelled at the second meeting, CENESEX was unprepared. Members of CENESEX became uncomfortable and unwilling to provide a space for Oremi, which seemed poised to call for formal recognition independent of CENESEX (150). Delores, a key informant for Allen, was a central figure in the group and later lamented about the fear that many women expressed at being "out" while formally organizing around issues of both race and sexuality, opening them up to state surveillance because collective action outside of the auspices of the state are forbidden (150). The small gatherings that these same women would have in their homes, gatherings that Allen had attended, felt safer, but they were also subject to state surveillance. So while women had a limited right to collectively organize, only the needs and desires of heterosexual women were state sanctioned.

Allen relates various — sometimes connected, often times not — ethnographic encounters he experiences over the course of several years and within various scenes in Cuba. In each chapter he shows that, as marginalized subjects in Cuba work out their position within the shadow of an incomplete revolution and changing political economy, they construct their racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities according to deep longings that are conditioned by Cuba's unique economic, social, and geopolitical position as well as their complex, individual relationships to the Cuban Revolution.

Allen describes *¡Venceremos?* as a "critical ethnography" (2). Critical ethnography uses empirical methodologies to critique cultural formations and social practices that restrain the freedom or prevent the full participation in social and political life of those who occupy marginalized identities.[7] According to Jim Thomas, "Critical ethnographers describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain."[8] Naming *¡Venceremos?* a critical ethnography then, permits the reader

7. D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (London: Sage, 2012), 5.
8. Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography* (London: Sage, 1993), 2–3.

to consider alongside Allen whether the Cuban state's seemingly all-encompassing cultural hegemony can actually provide a larger freedom for Black (Afro-descendent, dark-skinned) Cubans, including those who are lesbian, gay, feminist, or gender nonconforming. Throughout Allen's ethnographic accounts, we see flashes of their resistance to notions that they are counterrevolutionary, improper Cuban subjects, just as we see moments where they game the system and buck the demands or hails of the state. However, we learn by the end of the book that many of Allen's key informants left the country in attempt to locate their own "larger freedom" elsewhere. As Black, nonheteronormative gender dissidents, they were positioned as "Other," left out of the collective "We" within the pervasive cultural trope in Cuban parlance of *venceremos*, (we will overcome). Thus, "*Si, venceremos*, but with no guarantees" — Allen's answer to the question posed by the book's title — is, on the one hand, somewhat noncommittal and, on the other, simply confirms the fact that self-making and state-crafting projects are messy (2).

Reflexivity is a core component of contemporary ethnographies. Researchers are expected to talk about their own bodies and how their subjective experiences shape the form of knowledge that they produce. In Allen's work it is clear that we are viewing his subjects through his Black middle-class US-American lens of race, gender, and sexual politics. Ethnography is in many ways about what our informants teach us — it is about how they teach us to *see* and analyze their worlds according to how they interpret the conditions of their experiences. One of the tensions in the text arises, however, when we see Allen's interest in relating what he sees and notices occurring *en la calle*— on the streets — in Cuba back to what he has experienced in the United States. One vivid example is when he asks the comrades sitting on the stoop in front of Octavio's apartment how they felt about Octavio leaving his home dressed as a woman, or more specifically, what they thought "of the scene." Allen then describes telling them "about the violence often visited on transsexuals and other transgender people in the United States and other places" (75). Allen frequently describes asking his informants questions about things that he witnesses or hears, which asks them to talk about their experiences in relation to what he is familiar with in the United States.

One of the limitations of placing one's body on the line, some might argue, is that for the ethnographer, her body, shaped by previous encounters in the world, can severely color the field — shaping what she

notices and what she doesn't. This is to be expected; however, best practices in ethnography might suggest that such overt leading of informants should be avoided. While appropriate touchstones for the ethnographer, questions posed as such are thought to disallow informants to consider the unique positions from which their beliefs emerge. The ethnographer is thought to hold it as her principal duty to position informants as experts and herself the novice, careful not to presuppose a particular set of shared understandings about the way things are or, potentially, how she believes things should be. And yet, Allen consistently reports speaking back to informants, being in conversation with them. He discusses what is familiar to him and what is familiar in other parts of the African Diaspora. From these moments we are able to witness Allen's individual subjective experience rubbing up against the various scenes of erotic self-making in Cuba: these moments themselves taking place within the larger context of African Diasporic experience. What some would argue is a limitation in his application of ethnography — his reliance on his own subjective experience — lends the application of the method greater strength for the study of Black sexuality. In not only giving voice to those moments of recognition, moments where his Black American middle-class male body recognized something familiar, he foregrounds the ways that his own flesh experienced the erotic subjectivities of others.

LABOR, GENDER, AND PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

Marlon M. Bailey's *Butch Queens Up in Pumps* explores contemporary ballroom culture among Black LGBT communities in Detroit, Michigan. Using what he refers to as performance ethnography, Bailey explores ballroom culture from the perspective of an active member of a "house" or membership group (20). Bailey defines performance ethnography as a form of practice whereby the researcher involves their body and labor directly in the process by which the cultural formation being studied gets produced. What seems clear from the ethnographic engagement that Bailey describes throughout the text is that this particular depth of engagement with his informants allows him greater access to the epistemological framework of those within ballroom culture than what a mere observer might have garnered. In particular, Bailey is committed to the notion that performance functions as a means by which the division between "researcher" and "researched" dissolves.

Bailey begins with a depiction of the gender system in the ballroom scene. Then he moves into a detailed discussion of the contours of the houses, tightknit membership groups bound through a fictive kinship network, which compete against one another in ballroom events. Next, he renders an ethnographically rich account of a ball in which he participates as a member of a house. Finally, he discusses the crucial intersection of ballroom culture and the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis, offering an analysis of the ways that the politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit has impacted and is impacted by the politics in ballroom culture. Bailey concludes with a discussion of what he sees as the future of ballroom culture along with a discussion of the more recent changes taking place in ballroom culture that the book did not address.

The central argument in Bailey's book surrounds the performance of racialized gender, sex, and sexuality. Ballroom culture, we learn, has six gender categories, and circulating around each category is a set of discourses and practices concerning issues of sexuality and social power. As the title of the book suggests, Bailey deeply interrogates one of the categories in the ballroom gender system, the butch queen. It is in this early discussion of the gender system where Bailey introduces the key concepts that undergird much of the ethnographic engagement in the rest of the text, including performance and the concept of "realness." Bailey argues that the individual and communal performances of sex, gender, and sexuality are a form of "work" that ballroom members do in an "attempt to refract the violence to which Black and sexual minorities are subjected to in Detroit" (32). Interestingly enough, the form that this refraction takes is in the collective and individual attempt to achieve "realness."

Realness refers to one's successful "minimiz[ation] or elimina[tion] of any sign of deviation from gender and sexuality norms in dominant heteronormative society" in the performances of sex, gender, and sexuality (58). Realness animates many of the performances in the event through which ballroom is best known to outsiders — the ball. Balls are the spaces where performances are read — where one's realness is determined, judged, and proven in a competition that pits house against house. So when one performs in the Femme Queen category, for example, dancers must work to achieve the best embodiment of femininity, one that most closely matches the ways that femininity has been defined by heteronormative society. Dancers must demonstrate their ability to blend

in within normative spaces. According to Bailey, realness is not simply a way of miming heteronormative society, but a "creative response" to the dangers associated with not blending in, and realness functions as both an "analytic and a guide for understanding the strategic gender performances that members deploy in the urban spaces in which they live and move daily" (65). If these Black non-gender-conforming sexual minorities must move through life performing normative gender and sexualities in order to garner for themselves what should be the right of everyone — a basic level of freedom from violence and discrimination — then balls offer the space for being recognized and rewarded for those performances, something that is not guaranteed in normative society. Ball events offer an opportunity to exercise "greater agency in shaping how they are viewed by altering and performing their bodies in ways that disguise their gender and sexual nonconformity" (65). However, since ballroom community members rely on normative ideas of femininity and masculinity, they demarcate the boundaries of normative categories and thus reinscribe the very boundaries that mark their bodies as "out of place" and inauthentic in normative society. Yet, it is in these distinctive Black queer spaces that one can demonstrate their ability to question, revise, and expertly perform various categories of racialized gender, sex, and sexuality — and, thus, demonstrate their *realness* (32, 58). Realness is how participants can prove that they do indeed have what it takes to "fit" into the "real world," even as the real world castigates and ostracizes Black sexual and gender dissidents.

In the first two chapters, Bailey describes the organization of houses. He focuses on the gendered nature of care-work done by members of houses. Even though most of the members of houses are gay men, those whose gender performances are read as more feminine are often expected to perform labor associated with "women's work." Bailey offers detailed ethnographic renderings of the everyday practices of houses, which include a great deal of what Bailey terms "work" and "labor" that go into the production of the balls. Bailey's position as performance ethnographer means that we are able to see what he refers to as work and labor, including care-work and emotional and physical labor that goes into the daily subsistence of house members, many of whom are poor, young, and in some cases without the support of their families of origin. Additionally, we learn a great deal about the sheer amount of work that is put into the production of the balls.

Ethnography allows us to see these activities through the perspective of one who has become embedded and invested within the cultural formation. This allows us access to the production and the worldview from which a particular epistemological, or knowledge-producing framework emerges. Where ethnography of any sort becomes difficult to do is in making the theoretical leaps beyond what our informants know to be true. Indeed, their work might be connected to a kind of labor done absent remuneration, however, what remains is a question about the theoretical implications of the "unproductive" or "unreproductive" Black and Latino/a LGBT bodies in ballroom culture. What do their class positions reveal about the normative projects of homonormativity and heteronormativity that are tied to particular investments in the urban political economy? Performance may indeed be a kind of work, but some will question whether the kind of work that goes into producing ballroom culture can be construed as labor since it does not appear to serve capitalist accumulation. Bailey offers us a rich and detailed view of Detroit's ballroom scene; however, there remains need for further critique of the political economy of ballroom culture and the socioeconomic conditions under which black gay and trans bodies do their work.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

In *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women*, Mignon Moore interrogates notions of identity among Black gay women in New York City. She is particularly interested in how notions of motherhood intersect with racial, gendered, and sexual identities. Much of the text uses what Leslie McCall would term an intracategorical approach to intersectionality and looks at the differences among Black lesbians.[9] For McCall, the intracategorical approach is typified by an interest in the processes of boundary-making that go into the production of categories alongside an acknowledgement of the relative stability of the relationships between various categories such as race and gender. However, this approach also retains a critical viewpoint of categories. In particular, researchers using the intracategorical approach

---

9. Leslie McCall, discussed in Mignon R. Moore, *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 4.

tend to be interested in "neglected points of intersection."[10] Moore, in her interest in Black lesbian mothers, considers the way that Blackness inflects the previously studied intersections of lesbian gender performance and lesbian motherhood.

In her introduction, Moore describes having collected four kinds of data, including participant-observation; interviews with focus groups; a fourteen-page mail-in survey completed by one hundred women; and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifty-eight women who had filled out the survey. In the appendix titled "A Roadmap for the Study of Marginalized and Invisible Populations," Moore describes her decision to use mixed methods for her project and, in particular, to be "as conservative as possible" (226) in her data collection methods because her initial findings suggested serious departures from arguments that had been made before about lesbians and lesbian-headed households. She does not classify her work *as* an ethnography, but describes a weekly event she helped to organize for black lesbians and bisexual women as being "critical to her fieldwork" (232) because it allowed her to make crucial connections with the women who would later take the survey and to observe those same women's gender performances over time.

In the first half of the book, Moore reports her research findings — the survey taking center stage as its findings allow her to parse out patterns, including those related to issues of class and gender performance. While she uses her engagement in the lived experience of her informants, it is positioned as supplemental to the data collected from the survey and formal interview protocols. For example, when Moore considers how Black gay women came "into the life," or began to express their gay sexual identities publicly, she uses survey data to first categorize her informants into four different groups based on their gender presentation, class, and the approximate age at which they entered "the life." She then uses interviews to determine some of the characteristics most common among those within each of the four groups. Finally, her ethnographic engagement within their homes and in weekly event space further enhanced her discussion of her data.

---

10. Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771–1800.

The questions that guide Chapter 3, for example, are "Which identity would you say is most important to you: your identity as a Black person, as a lesbian, or as a woman? Or are you unable to rank them in any particular way?" and "Who do you think you would have the most in common with: a Black straight woman, a White lesbian, or a Black man?" (93). Phrased in this way, Moore's question asks her informants to rank identity categories as if they exist as single, independent variables as opposed to interconnected axes of experience. The responses are divided based on the previously established categories of gender performance and class. For example, we learn that lower-middle-class and working-class women with feminine gender presentations were more likely to find it impossible to discuss their gender and race separately. In some ways, we might see this question as presupposing that the informants will be able to make neat what much of Black queer theory has suggested is perpetually messy. Zoe, who Moore presents as the first example, struggled with ranking her race, gender, or sexuality, but in the end said, "If I *had to* number them one, two, three? Probably Black and lesbian — real close, to be honest with you. I don't know which would come up as one. Probably Black. Woman last" (95, emphasis mine). Moore categorizes this response as "Race as Primary Social Identity"; however, this does not account for what a linguistic anthropologist might flag as Zoe's ambivalent modality. She does not commit to this statement as absolute fact, but is suggesting that there is a high degree of probability that it is true that she ranks her Blackness as "first." When people use such markers of modality in English, it is typically because they may not be fully committed to an answer, or want to avoid appearing "wrong" later.[11] Zoe is not comfortable with the question, and her answer betrays her discomfort. Her explanation might be understood more as a discussion of the order in which her multiple identities formed, than of *which* identity is more "important" to her. For example, she may strongly identify with her experience of racialization in childhood, but this may not mean that her race is *always* more important.

This chapter seems greatly informed by Moore's desire to situate her work *against* understandings of identity categories as "so inconsistent,

---

11. J. R. Martin and P. R. R. White, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005), 94.

transient, and unstable that they are virtually meaningless" (5). Moore suggests that such anticategorical approaches tell us very little about how individuals experience their lives as racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects. Some might argue that attempting to make neat what is otherwise messy has drawbacks. However, Moore makes it quite clear that there is a need to understand how and why individuals negotiate their identities in relation to other individuals and groups. The boundaries around collective and community identity, Moore argues, "may shift and bend and sometimes even buckle as individuals move in and out of various social environments, but they persist" (110). Ethnographic data does not serve as the primary source for her exploration of these boundaries or identificatory practices at the nexus of Black, lesbian, and woman. However, in the places where Moore renders ethnographic scenes, she shows us when, where, and how boundary work and identity practices matter. The first flash of ethnography we see in Moore's work, as is customary in many ethnographic monographs, was her entrée into Black lesbian life in New York City at a house party thrown by a Black lesbian family. Moore discusses this moment as her inspiration to study the topic, before going on to discuss her methodological and theoretical approach to data collection. Though different from Allen and Bailey's use of vivid descriptions of locations, people, and events to emphasize the messiness of identificatory practice for black queer subjects, Moore's use of ethnography is no less instructive. In fact, Moore's use of ethnographic methods to supplement survey data and semi-structured interview data is unique in its ability to make sense of categories of experience oftentimes made to appear so complicated as to be useless. This is best seen in Chapter 5, where she relies on all of her methods — including vivid ethnographic description — to paint an immensely rich portrait of Black lesbian family life — power struggles, care-work, and financial negotiations.

STUDYING SEX THROUGH REPRESENTATION AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Mireille Miller-Young's *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* examines the role of Black women in pornography not only from the vantage point of their on-screen performances, but also from behind the scenes of their erotic labor. Beginning with the assertion that the ways "black women catalyze sexual freedom in their everyday

lives and in their imaginations" has been undertheorized, Miller-Young insists on explicating this gap in our understanding of Black women's expressions of sexuality within a popular medium often subject to harsh Black feminist critique — pornography (21). She examines pornographic images from the early stag era to the video era in the United States. Stag films were pornographic films made during the early twentieth century, typically shot on 8mm or 16mm film and screened for male audiences. The video era refers to the period of the 1980s in which films were first rendered onto videotape, and later shot on video, and became readily available for consumption in private homes to individuals who owned VCR devices. Miller-Young theorizes the racialized erotic labor of Black women through close readings of their performances throughout these eras of pornographic film production and supplemented by her conversations with actresses about how they used their bodies to "speak" their own identities even as the camera fixed a particular kind of sexuality on them. She uses "brown sugar" as a metaphor through which she theorizes black women's sexual labor:

> The grinding violence and danger that attended sugar's cultivation in colonial plantations literally consumed black women's labor and bodies. . . . Like sugar that has dissolved without a trace, but has nonetheless sweetened a cup of tea, black women's labor and the mechanisms that manage and produce it are invisible but nonetheless there. . . . In this book brown sugar references a trope that black women must always broker. (3)

In weaving ethnography into her study of Black women's sexuality, Miller-Young provides a unique vantage point from which to see the performances of Black women in pornography (and other sexually explicit performance mediums such as stripping). It is not just that Miller-Young allows us to see Black female sex workers fully clothed — as caregivers, as working mothers, as fully realized human adults — but that she introduces "illicit eroticism" as a way of understanding how Black women work within the political economic conditions of US popular culture, which has a very difficult time seeing *any* Black woman as fully realized. Illicit eroticism refers to the practice of Black women utilizing, manipulating, and enacting their sexualities for the distinct purpose of profiting from their sexuality (182). As an analytic, illicit eroticism allows Miller-Young to address the various ways that performers enact particular forms of

racialized sexuality and work within the porn industry's racial fetishism, which seeks to hyperbolize and invent certain kinds of racial difference.

Miller-Young spent ten years "in the field," studying the political economy, racial and gendered politics, and history of racialized performances in the pornography industry (21). At the same time, she also developed relationships with performers, conducting interviews with over sixty retired and working performers, directors, producers, agents, and studio executives. She spent time conducting participant observation at trade events, on set visits, and in the homes of performers. For Miller-Young, ethnography is a primary methodological intervention that allows her to tap into the experiences and voices of her research subjects to answer questions that center on their active participation in pornography and their active roles in cultivating images of Black female sexual subjectivity. Miller-Young begins with conversations with porn actresses and then "reads the complexity of their performances in pornographic imagery" (20–21). Including the voices of the women whose bodies are being read, whose experiences of pleasure are (mis)represented, allows for a true break in the fourth wall, the conceptual barrier between performer and audience, allowing us to hear the actors themselves speak not only as characters to an audience, but as individuals who participate in the creation of pornographic texts.

Ethnography guides Miller-Young's close readings of pornography featuring Black women performers. Even in the first chapter, Miller-Young describes her development of an archive of early stag and 16mm pornographic films featuring Black actresses as an ethnographic project requiring hours of digging through collectors' stashes, rummaging through dusty boxes, and watching previously unknown films as they disintegrated on the reel. Animating her interest in these early images of racialized scripts in early pornography is a desire to construct a history of Black women in pornography that explains how the images are rooted in "economic, social and cultural systems that circulate meanings about racial difference and blackness in the West" (27). Although she is unable to recover the voices of the actresses in this early era of pornographic film production — many of whose names are unknown — she makes an argument that, since the stories readily available in the US-American popular imagination about Black women's bodies and sexualities remain limited, whenever performers in the present era speak

about their experiences as Black women in pornography, their experiences are likely very similar to those unknown actresses of the past.

Miller-Young's use of ethnography brings flesh to Black feminist theoretical understandings of sexualized images of Black women. (Indeed, images of Black women are a poor replacement for the real thing.) What we learn most from Miller-Young is that there are not many differences between Black women who perform hypersexuality for money and those who do not. Miller-Young uses ethnography to study Black sexuality in a way that does not attempt to make its messy parts neat; in a way that respects and gives room for the experiences and voices of her research subjects; in a way that challenges assumptions about what the investments of (Black) feminist research and critique should be. And finally, she uses ethnography to theorize the erotic and emotional labor of Black women in the United States for whom sexuality, at different and sometimes overlapping periods in US history, had been a source of fear and contempt as well as a site ripe for monetary gain. Miller-Young's pairing of ethnographic material and close readings of pornographic texts deepens the insights gleaned from both.

All four authors demonstrate what ethnography has to offer Black feminist theory and Black queer theory. Allen paints vivid scenes of erotic life in Cuba and gives us an opportunity to consider questions such as, is it possible for marginalized sexual and racial subjects to overcome racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the context of hegemonic forces of global capitalism? Similarly, Bailey offers thick descriptions of performances of racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjectivities within the ballroom culture in Detroit, offering us a view from the perspective of one thoroughly enmeshed within the scene. Moore, in leaning on ethnographic methodologies to create depth in her sociological examination, provides a clear and detailed account of Black lesbian motherhood that shows us *how* categories of difference make a difference in the lives of Black lesbians. Finally, Miller-Young pairs an ethnographic methodology with the close examination of Black women's representations in pornographic texts, offering us new theoretical insights from which to examine the flesh of Black women. Each author offers incredibly important insights into the "flesh" of everyday experience at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Flesh is about living, breathing, and acting

bodies. It's about how those bodies matter, or come to take up space in the world. Flesh refers simultaneously to issues of embodiment and the way bodies are engaged in theory and practice. Simply put, to study *flesh*, you have to engage with bodies "on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street."[12] Ethnographic methods are especially well suited to exploring the *fleshiness* of contemporary experiences of Blackness and sexuality. Properly applied, ethnographic methods allow those who actively study Black sexuality to put skin in the game, placing their own bodies on the line in order to theorize from within Black feminist theory and Black queer theory. Doing so provides us a means of addressing how Blackness and sexuality matter to the body, to quotidian experience, and to cultural formations.

---

12. Johnson, "'Quare' Studies," 5.