



The color of kink: black women, BDSM, and pornography

Rachael A. Liberman

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BOOK REVIEW

The color of kink: black women, BDSM, and pornography, by Ariane Cruz, New York, New York University Press, 2016, 320 pp. (paperback), ISBN 9781479827466

Ariane Cruz's *The Color of Kink* is a critical intervention that skillfully unpacks complicated dynamics at the intersection of pleasure, "perversion," and black female sexual performance. In her examination of racialized practices within BDSM and pornography, Cruz confronts "the traditional androcentric, heteronormative, and narrow framing of the questioning of violence in pornography discourse" (9) and pushes "toward a more nuanced critical crossing of perversion with black female sexuality" (14). Building on Mireille Miller-Young's (2014) framework of "illicit eroticism" and Jennifer C. Nash's (2014) practice of "racial iconography," Cruz articulates a methodological "politics of perversion" to generate visibility around the transformative power of racialized sexual performance. Her investigation is supported by personal interviews, visual analysis, textual analysis, and archival research in order to interrogate "the dynamics of racialized shame, humiliation, and pleasure that undergird the genre of commercial contemporary interracial pornography in the United States" (21). And as the pornography industry continues to shape the mainstream sexual imaginary, *The Color of Kink* offers a timely contribution to porn studies scholarship in its articulation of the tension between (commercial) sexual practice and its relationship to racial formation.

Throughout *The Color of Kink*, Cruz deploys the term "racial-sexual alterity" as a way to signify "the ways black womanhood is constituted, but not produced solely, through a dynamic intervention of racial and sexual otherness" (33). This foundational language works as a contextual reminder of the ways in which black female sexuality has been systematically situated as non-normative, and helps the reader consider the ways in which the agency in BDSM/pornography might work as an "effective tool" (49) for the reclaiming, or recovery, of black womanhood. Keeping in mind that most readers may not be familiar with the consensual practice of race play within BDSM, Cruz spends the first chapter carefully articulating the nuances of pleasure and "racialized exchanges of power" (72). She argues that race play acknowledges, rather than disavows, the history and complexity of racism and privilege; and by including performances inspired by chattel slavery and interracial sexuality, racialized BDSM serves as a renegotiation, a "way of working not through the past, but perhaps in and through the present" (73). In her interviews with black women BDSMers, Cruz learned that practitioners found a "therapeutic, restorative quality" (65) in race play, and Cruz therefore concludes that although there are contradictions and historical narratives of domination inherent in the performance, their "play" (60) with race dismantles those boundaries and opens up a powerful space for agency and pleasure.

The remainder of *The Color of Kink* delves into the landscape of race-play BDSM in both the mainstream and amateur pornography industries; specifically, Cruz reveals the tensions around political economy and fantasy/reality that allow for a renegotiation of, but also reinforcement of, the politics of difference and historical trauma. In an effort to correct the lack of scholarship on black women's performances in race-play pornography, she offers readers case studies of directors, performers, and texts and argues that, "Race-play pornography facilitates an ambivalent play of racial difference ..." (82). She is able to illustrate this "ambivalence" through textual

analysis; for example, one of the case studies that she analyzes in the second chapter features the performer Skin Diamond and her work in the Blaxploitation-inspired, “plantation porn” film, *Get My Belt*, directed by Kelly Madison. Cruz explains that the racial dimensions of this “racialized revenge” (102) film exist beyond the backdrop of its historicized, sexual narrative to include the ways that skin/flesh additionally represent “the materiality of a difference that is neither fixed nor essential, but is rather at play” (93). Here, race becomes “an eroticized technology of domination” (99) that has the capacity to challenge the linear narrative of socio-historical power between racial and gendered subjects. Throughout Chapters Three and Four, Cruz continues to track the ways in which race, as an eroticized technology of domination, is harnessed as both a commercial device as well as a space for the renegotiation of power relations. She highlights the exclusion of black female sexuality from the commodification of interracial pornography as a reminder that socio-historical applications of race continue to drive the fantasies of consumers interested in white/black encounters. And yet, Cruz also offers a profile of Shine Louise Houston and her *Crash Pad* series in order to draw attention to black, queer, female directors who are working to broaden the “expansion of racialized sexualities in the landscape of contemporary American commercialized porn, opening and unlocking a queered, destabilized deconstruction of sexual categories” (166).

The Color of Kink concludes with an examination of Kink.com’s “fucking machines” as examples of technologies of race. As sexual “extensions of man,” fucking machines are both mechanically- and human-operated units that are able to penetrate and arouse performers beyond human physical abilities. According to Cruz, while the website does not use blatant, racialized language to market black female sexuality to viewers, subtle gestures, such as language that refers to a black female performer’s athleticism, or that she was able to “take” more of the machine due to her hypersexuality, demonstrate the ways in which fucking machines operate as tools for shaping racial-sexual alterity. Cruz’s exploration of fucking machines transitions into her conclusion, where she compares the repetitive function of fucking machines to the ways in which race operates as a repetitive structure in sexual performance.

For Cruz, the concept of repetition is a “salient black cultural motif” (213) that she identifies as a critical theme in her analysis of pornographic performances of racialized sexuality. While her analysis resurrects sexual subjectivity to spaces that are otherwise diagnosed as imposing bodily and psychic harm, images that produce memory, historical trauma, and racial formation simultaneously work to “stabilize difference” (217) through repetition. Cruz’s dedication to identifying this stabilization offers readers a pathway for understanding the power of *disrupting* repetition through “playing” with racial codes and practices. In the end, *The Color of Kink* presents readers with an interdisciplinary, disruptive method to decode black female performance in a way that honors the agency in interpretation yet recognizes the structural constraints that limit such an interpretation. Additionally, her genealogy of discursive construction(s) around black female sexuality within kink—or “critical kink” (14)—offers theories, terminology, and perspectives that have the capacity to strengthen the work of scholarship beyond porn studies, including (but not limited to) practitioners of feminist media studies, critical race theory, and queer theory. In this way, Cruz offers us a critical lens with which to confidently consider the pleasure in taboo sexual performance, to contemplate the ways that BDSM performers “play” with race, to recognize the ways that commercial pornography “stabilizes” difference, and to honor the ways that the repetitive visibility of historical trauma has emancipatory potential.

References

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Rachael A. Liberman

University of Denver

 Rachael.Liberman@du.edu

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