

Racialized Sexuality: From Colonial Product to Creative Practice

Jillian Hernández

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Summary and Keywords

Racialized sexuality is a term that describes the linking of racial attributes to sexual comportment. Racialized sexualities have been produced through colonial conquest in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. European discourses framed colonized subjects as racial and thus sexual others—as different kinds of human beings with deviant erotic practices. The colonial and racist underpinnings of religion, law, and science have produced pervasive tropes of, for example, the sexual excess of Native and African peoples and the sexual submissiveness of Asian peoples. These stereotypes have had an enduring impact on the representations of racialized people's sexual subjectivities in art and media, in addition to academic knowledge production. Representations of the insatiable lust and spitfire of Black and Latina women, the sexual submissiveness of Asian women, the lack of Asian men and the predatory sexualities of Black men, stem from centuries of discursive circulation in fields ranging from biology to anthropology, which in turn shaped how such tropes have been taken up and reproduced in cultural production.

With the understanding that racialized sexuality is a colonial product, scholars invested in anti-racism and queer politics have problematized the scientific racisms that have upheld dominant discourses of racialized sexualities by exposing their deficient methodologies, ethical violations, and often eugenicist agendas. Racialized sexualities have been lived by colonized subjects through a wide range of violences via chattel slavery, and in the early 21st century, through eroticized violence such as that inflicted on the Arab detainees of Abu Gharib prison by the United States military following 9/11. While acknowledging how racialized sexuality is intimately wedded to experiences of violation and injury, contemporary artists and scholars of sexuality have also worked to show how the very tropes that dehumanize people of color are also marked by ambivalence. These representations often present the possibilities of both pleasure and pain for racialized subjects and thus are in turns claimed, disavowed, and altered through art and scholarship in order to highlight the complexities of how racialized sexualities are experienced. Queer and trans artists of color are at the forefront of demonstrating the potential of transforming racialized sexualities from a colonial product to a creative practice.

Keywords: race, sexuality, colonialism, gender, representation, cultural production, creativity, erotics

Beyond normative ideas about the sexualities of colonized peoples, racialized sexualities can also be understood more expansively as complex processes in flux. Racialized sexualities encompass ideas and experiences, stereotypes and social constructions as well as fantasies, sensations, embodiments, and creative practices that are constantly undergoing transformation and negotiation. Scholars and cultural practitioners have engaged racialized sexualities through transnational histories, memoirs and *testimonios*, art, literature, music, film, and video. These varied productions of knowledge demonstrate how science, law, immigration, exile, religion, and broader processes of

racialization and gendering shape the sexual representations, identities and practices of people of color. Creative practice has been a significant method for complicating the master narratives of racialized sexualities that stem from Euro-American colonialism and scientific racism.

Racial Difference as Sexual Deviance

Racialized sexuality, the social and cultural production of discourses and images that bind racial attributes to sexual comportment and subjectivity, is a product of European colonialism and modernity. Notions of racial difference emerged in the 18th century as colonial encounters with the peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas spurred an interest in investigating variations in phenotypical attributes through emerging scientific classification methods and Darwinian discourses of evolution.¹ In the 18th century, the notion of a “Great Chain of Being” was drawn upon in Europe to support the notion that natural differences among human beings justified their differential treatment and access to rights. The Great Chain of Being posited that “species were immutable entities arrayed along a fixed and vertical hierarchy stretching from God down to the lowliest sentient being.”² For example, African peoples were situated as bridging orangutans and humans on the Great Chain of Being.³ Beyond generating tropes of sexual personhood, Anne McClintock argues that notions of racialized sexuality emerged along with the sexualization of the colonial landscape itself. In referencing a map of southern Africa found in Henry Rider Haggard’s novel *King Solomon’s Mines* of 1885, she notes that the diamond mine map illustrated therein, which refers to a mountain range as “Sheba’s breasts,” appears like a diagram of a women’s body “spread-eagled and truncated—the only parts drawn are those that denote female sexuality.”⁴ The colonialists in the novel describe entering these new territories in the eroticized language of sexual conquest, intrigue, and mystery. Such discourses are examples of what Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers describes as the colonial *pornotroping* of African peoples, namely the framing of them as outside the realm of the human, as flesh that is subject to physical and sexual violence.⁵

While such colonial projects were underway, discourses were circulating in Europe that framed sexuality as the truth of the subject. Through challenging the notion of the repressive hypothesis, the widespread notion that sexuality during the Victorian era in Europe was repressed and silenced, Michel Foucault has famously and persuasively argued that in fact, there was a social and cultural imperative to speak about sex in the Victorian era.⁶ Assessments of sexuality became utilized in institutions such as churches, schools, doctors’ offices, and psychiatric clinics to determine a subject’s state of wellness or disease, morality or deviance. Viewed as an innate biological drive intrinsic to the subject, sexuality was framed as the individual’s constitutive truth.⁷ Thus, the appraisal of one’s sexuality in the clinic examination room, psychiatrist’s couch, or church confessional provided mechanisms for classifying subjects as normal or abnormal. This is the regime of knowledge and power that Foucault describes as *scientia sexualis*, the science of sex. Foucault notes that people were encouraged to tell the truth of their sex as a way to implicate them into the networks of power of these various institutions as a form of biopolitics. Biopolitics is the interest that modern states took in the biological health of the population by gathering demographic data and engaging in public health projects to protect the social body from degeneracies which were imagined in racial, gender, and class terms. Although Foucault noted that the modern discourse of sexuality oppressed women, who were often framed as hysterics if their sexuality was deemed abnormal, and those who would be labeled “homosexual,” he did not attend to the ways that the modern regime of sexuality and its attendant biopolitics affected racialized peoples under European colonialism.⁸

For example, under the system of chattel slavery in the United States and elsewhere, black women could not claim to have been raped as they were viewed as lower on the chain of being than white men and women, with an excessive sexuality compared to that of animals. As a result of this dehumanizing discourse, black women were framed as depraved by nature, and thus incapable of being violated, making them subject not only to sexual violence but also to scientific experimentation without consent. Black slave women were the primary test subjects of American gynecology, and they underwent unanesthetized surgeries by doctors such as J. Marion Sims.⁹ These dehumanizing ideas and practices were buttressed by the scientific racism of European doctors such as Henri de Blainville and Georges Cuvier, known as one of the founders of modern biology, who conducted studies of the bodies of African women and crafted arguments about how so-called anatomical “abnormalities,” such as purportedly enlarged labia or buttocks, provided physical evidence of their sexual aberrance.¹⁰

Men of color were also framed as hypersexual under chattel slavery and colonialism and the modern European regime of sexuality described by Foucault, which linked the “fate of the race and the nation” to individual sexual practices were also mapping colonial relations in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Stoler notes how “Maryland legislators had already made such connections in 1664 when they focused on the sexual inclinations of white women who bedded with ‘non-white’ men as targets of concern, accusing them, as in the Indies, of causing ‘disgrace not only to the English but also of many other Christian nations.’”¹¹ Notions of men of color’s uncontainable sexuality fed the white slave panic in the early 20th-century United States, which framed white women and girls as imperiled due to the then burgeoning youth night life culture that coincided with increased immigrant and African American presence in cities like Chicago.¹²

Recent work by scholars such as L. H. Stallings and Greg Thomas have shifted the scholarly discourse beyond the regulatory foci of Foucault and the binaries of the pleasures of sex (*ars erotica*) versus the truth of sex (*scientia sexualis*), to the alternative formations and philosophies of sexuality among racialized peoples that manifest in creative practice.¹³ In *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Stallings argues that funk, understood expansively in its creative and physical manifestations as musical genre and bodily smell, draws on the imagination as resource, producing

fictions of sex to counter the truth of sex. Instead of downbeats and bass lines, writers and performers use sexually explicit expressions and unique ideas about sex and work to undo the coloniality of being/truth/ freedom. I am calling this literary tradition *funky erotixxx* rather than *black erotica* because its texts form a black-Atlantic communal narrative on the fluid practice of what I theorize as “sacredly profane sexuality,” as opposed to sexuality or sacred sexuality in other cultures. Sacredly profane sexuality ritualizes and makes sacred what is libidinous and blasphemous in Western humanism so as to unset and criticize the inherent imperialistic aims within its social mores and sexual morality.¹⁴

Being attentive to the histories and organic sexual formations of Black diaspora peoples allows for an understanding of how contemporary black cultural producers embrace their hypersexualization through the raunch aesthetics of hip hop music.¹⁵ The sexually explicit music of performers like Yo! Majesty, Blowfly, and 2 Live Crew inhabit stereotypes of the sexually insatiable Black subject to create carnivalesque spaces for communal Black pleasures.¹⁶

Yet, when Black men and women reframe and reclaim the sexual scripts inscribed upon them by colonial white supremacist discourse, they are censored and posed as dangerous to youth.¹⁷ For example, the music of 2 Live Crew was censored in 1990, when they were arrested following a live show under charges of obscenity, and the labeling of their album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989) as obscene by a federal judge. In 2014 rap artist Nicki Minaj was widely decried over the cover art for her hit single “Anaconda,” while a similarly revealing cover of a *Sports*

Illustrated magazine cover at the time was unremarked upon in cultural discourse.¹⁸ The “Anaconda” image featured the artist photographed from behind in a spread-eagled squat position in a pink thong, pink bra and sneakers, with her head turned around to face the camera with a steady and commanding gaze. The image drew negative backlash in the media as vulgar and hypersexual, which the artist responded to via Instagram posts that juxtaposed her image with the then-current issue of *Sports Illustrated*, which featured three thin topless young white women in thongs photographed from the rear at a beach. By placing the accompanying caption “Angelic, acceptable, lol” on her post of the young women on the *Sports Illustrated* cover and “UNACCEPTABLE” with the post of her *Anaconda* photo, the artist directly critiqued the double-standard that sanctions white women’s sexual display in mainstream spaces while vilifying that of a Black woman as inappropriate, dangerous to youth, and excessive.

Regulating Erotics, Sexuality and Governmentality

Colonial rule resulted in decades of church and state efforts to regulate the sexualities and reproduction of racialized populations, which were viewed as savage and in need of intervention. For example, the Catholic church in colonial Mexico would subject people to Inquisition proceedings if they were suspected of illicit or blasphemous desires or sexual practices, sometimes based on information garnered from church confessions.¹⁹ In *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*, Laura Briggs describes the transnational traffic in tropical medicine and prostitution law in the 19th century, specifically how the British Contagious Diseases acts subjected sex workers to vaginal inspection for disease and hospital confinement to protect colonial soldiers.²⁰ These medical practices, informed by scientific racism, spread from British India to other colonial spaces around the world, including Puerto Rico. The attendant discourses of these practices framed venereal diseases as stemming from racialized peoples, and women of color in particular.

In addition to attempting to control the sexuality of racialized subjects in colonial territories, sexuality is often used to manage and police the borders of First World nations such as the United States. Eithne Luibhéid has discussed how rape is often not viewed as a justification for women migrants from the global South seeking asylum in the United States, and that when they are placed in detention during processing they are then made vulnerable to sexual assault by guards. As border crossers are imagined as already breaking the law, migrant women are viewed as criminal and undeserving of due process rights. Migrant women also experience rape at the border by agents who abuse their power in determining whether or not they are allowed entry. Luibhéid argues that “Since rape is a technology for (re)producing hierarchical social relationships, it reconstructs borders. These borders are not reducible to the nation’s territorial borders, however. Instead, they involve social, economic, political, and symbolic orders within the United States that connect to sexuality, gender, race, and class inequalities . . . rape at the border by the Border Patrol is a site for reinscription by the state of the social body as stratified by gender, sexuality, race, class, and legal status.”²¹

Luibhéid’s argument holds for the treatment of queer male Cuban migrants of the Mariel boatlift of 1980, who, while held in Immigration and Detention facilities in the United States, were barred from engaging in gender non-conformity (though it has been documented that many openly broke these rules). For example, signs were placed prominently in refugee housing barracks prohibiting residents from wearing women’s clothing or makeup. At the time, the McCarran-Walter act prohibited queer people from entering the United States because homosexuality was viewed as a mental illness. The United States made a tacit exemption of the Marielitos from this policy by not ask-

ing entrants about their sexual orientation, which was a way of sidestepping the law while continuing to engage in the Cold War politics of receiving the exiles of Communist regimes.²²

In the post-9/11 period the United States has engaged in a homonationalist discourse that frames the nation as exceptional in its acceptance of queer sexualities in order to frame Arab nations as hyper-misogynist and homophobic, thus justifying military intervention in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.²³ The revelation of the abuses of the U.S. military at the Abu-Gharib prison, many of which were sexual in nature, demonstrated how colonial violence is often meted out in erotic terms.²⁴ Mayanthi Fernando has noted how the embrace of European gender and sexual mores and secularism by some Muslim immigrant women in France who denounce headscarves and Islam has framed the Islamophobic state as the protector of women of color. Fernando argues that this phenomenon has had the effect of bolstering the neoliberal sovereignty of France while simultaneously framing Arab men as violent misogynists and sexual predators who threaten the nation, with Muslim women wearing headscarves viewed as oppressed. Fatima El-Tayeb has noted how such Islamophobic discourses in the West, which frame Islam as a culture rather than a religion, make the notion of queer Muslims virtually unintelligible in the Western imaginary. Mainstream LGBT discourses, which imagine coming out as the ultimate marker of liberated queer subjectivity, fail to take into account the complex ways queers of color, particularly those who are working-class migrants, negotiate their performances of gender and sexuality, and information regarding their relationships, in their ethnic communities.²⁵

Working-class communities of color in the United States have been imagined as gender-deviant and sexually deviant in canonical sociological scholarship and government policy. This has been expressed in influential social studies such as the Moynihan Report of 1965, which portrayed women-headed Black families as the primary cause for the economic, social, and educational marginalization of African Americans. Oscar Lewis's influential ethnography *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty-San Juan and Puerto Rico* (1966), depicted the Puerto Rican family as possessing a "culture of poverty," that, in a similar framing to that of the Moynihan report on African Americans, is marked by a "mostly female, disordered sexuality whose 'pathological' results (free unions, unstable marriages, high rates of illegitimacy, and matrifocal households) were perpetuated culturally through deficient child rearing or bad mothering."²⁶

These discourses continue to circulate culturally through films such as *Precious* (2009, Lee Daniels), which tells the story of a poor young Black woman who is an incest survivor subject to the abuse of her pathological mother, who is single, cheats the welfare system, fails out of school, and does not work. In the mass market film, which provides a much less nuanced depiction of poor Black girlhood than the novel *Push* (1996) upon which it was based, *Precious* finds redemption by dedicating herself to education and performing selfless motherhood to her two young children. Such cultural texts demonstrate Roderick A. Ferguson's contention that the framing of Black gender and sexual deviance has been attended by and functions through discourses that link the overcoming of social marginalization and inequality as facilitated by the performance of normative and respectable gender, sexual, and family formations.²⁷

Framed, But Uncontained

Considering how knowledge production has been utilized to bolster the dehumanizing tropes of racialized sexuality and their attendant modes of social and state regulation, scholars of color have undertaken their own research to complicate and push back against dominant narratives. Many of these projects entail looking back at historical rep-

representations to understand how they continue to inform how people of color experience their racialized sexualities and how their meanings are being negotiated socially and culturally.²⁸ Race and sexuality studies scholarship is often marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, scholars reckon with and critique negative historical representations informed by colonial discourse such as, for example, tropes of Black women's hypersexuality and Asian men's lack of sexual virility, but they also explore the potential such constructions have for complicating racist heteronormativity and opening risky and unexamined pathways to erotic agency.

For example, artist and scholar Nguyen Tan Hoang's book *A View from the Bottom: Asian/American Masculinities and Sexual Representation*, is inspired by his video work *Forever Bottom!* (1999). The video features Nguyen alone in various indoor and outdoor settings in the receptive bottom sexual position in gay sex as a way of reclaiming it from its abjected status as an abdication of masculinity and power.²⁹ The bottom is a position also ascribed to Asian/American men through tropes of feminization and abject masculinities, but the images in *Forever Bottom!* highlight its pleasures. Nguyen's book explores how Asian/American masculinity is shaped through tropes of bottomhood more broadly, which he frames as a sexual position, social alliance, and aesthetic form.³⁰ Although being presented as submissive bottoms in visual culture has constrained representations of the complexities of Asian/American masculinities and sexuality, Nguyen argues that bottomhood is also powerful because it rejects the problematic tactic of attempting to reclaim Asian manhood by performing a heteronormative masculinity that is steeped in sexism.

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women and Pornography*, Mireille Miller-Young reads early 20th-century stag pornography in the U.S. featuring black women, many of which had racist storylines, and performs nuanced readings that consider how the women who performed in them subverted the plots through their gestures and facial expressions.³¹ Miller-Young argues that through engaging in such work, black women "show[ed] an unruly desire to cross boundaries and to transgress social rules. By refusing the call by black social reformers and political activists to make themselves into images of moral and respectable womanhood as a counter to black women's stigmatized, hypervisible sexuality, some black pornographic actresses might have exhibited their sexualities on different terms — terms that understood their refusal to veil their expressive sexuality or forego their sex work."³² Celine Parreñas Shimizu, author of *The Hypersexuality of Race: Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, makes similar arguments about Asian/American women in contemporary pornography.³³ She has also directed several sexually explicit films starring Asian/American women and brings that production experience to bear on her analysis. These scholars of racialized sexuality understand that cultural production and creative practice are critical objects of analysis to engage, as they carry dominant meanings and also have the potential to transform them.

Visual culture has played a significant role in the discursive production of racialized sexualities. Diagrams and illustrations of so-called Hottentot women circulated widely in the 19th century, and figures such as Saartje Bartmann, a woman from the KoiKoi tribe of the Eastern Cape of South Africa, called the "Hottentot Venus," were presented semi-nude in public settings to offer Europeans an opportunity to view her body, which was framed as evidence of human difference as racial-sexual deviance.³⁴ Cartoons depicting audiences' reactions to Bartmann's body portray European men and women gazing at her buttocks and genitalia with alternating expressions of disgust, intrigue, and titillation. As photography emerged as a popular form of image making in the late 19th century, African women became the subjects of both ethnographic and pornographic visual production (often both at once), with their dark skin, the signifier of their racial difference, framed as a titillating trait.³⁵ Sander Gilman has described how the racialized sexuality attributed to black women also shaped discourses concerning white women's sexuality. In his study of 19th century art, literature and medical illustration, Gilman has shown how images of white women considered sexually amoral, such as prostitutes, were often accompanied by figures of black women

and men, one famous example being Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), in which a reclining nude white woman looks defiantly out to the viewer while her matronly black maid presents her with a bouquet of flowers from a suitor.³⁶ Gilman argues that the presences of these black figures thus marked the white women in the images as prone to sexual aberrance by visual proximity.

Black women artists and playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks and Renee Cox have engaged with the history of Bartmaan as a way of complicating notions of Black women's sexual agency and subjection and underscoring the relevance of this history in contemporary culture.³⁷ In *The Anarcha Project*, an initiative organized by a collective of artists and scholars that included Petra Kupperts, Anita Gonzalez, Carrie Sandahl, Tiye Giraud, and Aimee Meredith Cox, performance informed by extensive archival research was used to engage the histories of Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsy, the Alabama slave women who were subjected to gynecologist J. Marion Sims's tortuous gynecological experiments. The collective describes the project as using dance, spoken-word poetry, theater, music, and other media to celebrate "folkloric healing practices, explore ethical relationships to history, and interrogate the ongoing abuse of marginalized people in health care practices today."³⁸

Images of racialized women captured by doctors, anthropologists, and amateur photographers circulated widely as a form of pornography. Malek Alloula has studied the representation of Algerian women in colonial postcards produced in the early 20th century.³⁹ The images not only aimed to provide male Europeans a rare peek behind harem walls and under Arab women's veils by focusing on exposed breasts and sometimes nudity, but markedly, the prominent framing of objects such as tea sets and ornate interiors eroticized the markers of Arab cultural difference themselves. Similar approaches are found in Orientalist early film representations of Arab and Asian women that frame them as mysterious seductresses marked by their ornamentalism.⁴⁰ Arab dress continues to have a hold on the Western sexual imaginary as 21st-century Arab women porn performers such as Nadia Ali and Mia Khalifa attract millions of viewers online when they don Islamic dress in their scenes.

While colonizers took advantage of their power to have sexual access to the bodies of racialized subjects, these encounters also caused panic as the resulting offspring defied the racial logics undergirding the colonial project by blurring the boundaries of racial difference established by scientific racism.⁴¹ For example, 18th-century Mexican *casta* paintings featured images of interracial couples and their offspring in ordered, grid formations, along with terms for new racial taxonomies. The *casta* paintings evidence a desire to place a hierarchical order upon the new racial formations resulting from interracial couplings.

Notions of interracial sexual violence have also shaped notions of race and nation. For example, in his 1950 book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, writer Octavio Paz famously frames Mexico as a mestizo, mixed-race state by referencing the sexual relationship between the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes and Malitzin, known as La Malinche, a Nahuatl woman who served as his interpreter and whom bore several of his children.⁴² Paz fames the native woman as a figure of racial betrayal, wanton sexuality, and victimization (as La Chingada, the "fucked one"), who is responsible for the continual subjection of Mexico to colonialist violation by Spain and later, the United States. Chicana feminist scholars have reclaimed the figure of La Malinche as one that signifies the vicissitudes of agency and victimization that mark Chicana racial and national identification and desire.⁴³

Through decades of sexual relations between European men and black women slaves on Caribbean islands where there were few European women, Omi'seke Natasha Tinsley has noted that these relations "at once institutionalized and domesticated slavery's social imbalances, embedding them in the realm of the intimate in ways that partnerships between slaves could not."⁴⁴ Tinsley observes that free women of color eventually outnumbered white men, white women, and free men of color.⁴⁵ This unsettling formation to the planter colonial state resulted in the

creation of sumptuary laws aimed to curb the new freedoms of women of color. Such laws aimed to keep them “from being classed too closely to white ladies but also legally restricted their ability to be gendered like them, ensuring that the latter’s femininity never looked or sounded like the former’s (even if they attracted the same sexual partners) . . . They carefully mythologized a split between the luminous attraction of white ladyhood’s receptive femininity and the glittering seduction of brown womanhood’s aggressive voluptuousness.”⁴⁶ One example of the regulations Tinsley describes is the Tignón law established by the Spanish Governor of Louisiana in 1786 that forced women of color to cover their hair, as it was believed to attract the attention of white men, diverting their gazes from the bodies of white women. Artist Firelei Baez, a Dominican Republic-born artist of Haitian and Dominican parentage, explores these politics in her practice. In works such as *Sans-Souci* (2015), she references the Tignón law, and in describing the ideas that shape the work, states that women of color “started making the most beautiful headdresses imaginable, to the point where they became the fashion in Europe.”⁴⁷ So the law had the unintended effect of attracting even more attention to the bodies of women of color, who were a spectacular sight in their elegant head wraps. In Baez’s work, the elaborate ornamentation of the tignón takes on a life of its own, expressing the subjectivity of the figure, whose facial features are obscured save for her arresting gaze. For racialized and sexualized women and girls, colonial prohibitions become the grounds for aesthetic innovation and corporeal expressions of subjectivity, which then become appropriated Euro-American trends.

In colonial Cuba, notions voluptuousness, or sexual aggressiveness of mulata (mixed race) women of color were also rooted in panics over racial purity on the island. Popular images of mulatas that circulated in the 19th century, such as those created by the Spanish artist Victor Patricio Landaluze, frame them as sexually assertive women whose irrepressible lust leads them to ruin and despair.⁴⁸ This is the cautionary narrative depicted in a well-known series of cigar labels (*marquillas*), that tell the story of a mulata who ensnares a white man into a sexual relationship for financial gain, only to later be abandoned by him after she bears his child. She eventually becomes destitute, ill from venereal disease, and dies alone, with her mulata daughter framed as promising to follow in her path of sexual depravity.⁴⁹

These 19th-century images inform the history of Afro-Cubana representations in Latin American cultural production such as Golden Age Mexican cabareta films like *Victimas del Pecado* (*Victims of Sin*) (1951), that featured famous Cuban rumberas like Ninón Sevilla to signify Afrolatinidad as a uniquely Caribbean (and thus not Mexican) phenomenon. In these representations shapely light-skinned Cubanas, often paired with more dark-skinned, maternally Afrolatina co-stars like the legendary Cuban actress Rita Montaner, suture Latinx femininity to Black sexuality through tropes of the tragic mulata whose gendered downfall is caused by her toxic and uncontainable eroticism, signaled by her curves and the aesthetic excess of the ruffles and sequins on her costumes. Such images of Afrolatinas shape the market for sex tourism in Latin American countries, much like Orientalist notions of Asian women’s sexual difference shape tourism in countries like Thailand.⁵⁰

Racialized Sexuality as Creative Practice

Although the sexuality of Black, Latina, and Asian American women has been framed through tropes of racialized sexual deviance, contemporary women of color cultural producers, porn performers, and sex workers have tarried with these representational histories by critiquing the colonial racism inherent in the representations while also embracing the hypersexuality that has been ascribed to them. This is an approach that scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu describes as race-positive sexuality, an approach that Asian American women and other women of color

employ in their cultural production to “present pleasure, pain, and trauma simultaneously in ways that embrace the liberating possibilities of sexuality while also acknowledging the risks of reifying perversity and pathology traditionally ascribed to women of color in popular culture.”⁵¹ The work of women of color cultural producers who embrace race-positive sexualities reveals how their sexual subjectivities are uncontained by colonial tropes, even though they are nevertheless shaped by them. By transforming sexual inscription into art, women of color cultural workers transform racialized sexuality from a colonial product to a creative practice.

For example, in responding to the fetishization, dehumanization, and cultural erasure of Afrolatinas in representation, the sociocultural critic and artist Zahira Kelly generates images of nude Black women admiring and pleasuring themselves.⁵² The Korean American comedian Margaret Cho often engages in raunch aesthetics by performing hypersexuality as a way of exposing the absurdly flattening tropes of Asian women’s racialized sexuality.⁵³ Artist Xandra Ibarra, who also uses the alias La Chica Boom playfully engages tropes of racialized sexuality in her work. In *Tapatio Cock and Strap-On* Ibarra affixes the iconic bottle of Tapatio brand hot sauce with a leather strap-on harness to evoke tropes of Latinx sexual spitfire and poke fun at heteropatriarchal mythologies of Latinx male virility.⁵⁴ Juana Maria Rodríguez has analyzed performance works by Ibarra such as *I’m Your Puppet* (2007), in which Ibarra enacts a scene where a Mexican migrant woman embodied as a marionette crosses the border and becomes both violated and seduced by a butch woman border patrol officer. Rodríguez describes how the performance elicited varied responses among the audience of primarily people of color, it was upsetting to some audience members who felt triggered by the scene of racialized violation by the state, while other audience members were aroused by the piece, so much so that they were inspired to reenact the narratives with their sexual partners. In analyzing these varied responses Rodríguez notes that this “is the type of sexual fantasy that we not confess, the type of sexual fantasy that marks us as improper sexual subjects of feminist politics. As racialized queers, we are not supposed to be aroused by scenes of state subjection, let alone reenact them. When we find perverse pleasure in these moments of submission or domination, we expose our own erotic attachments to power, to other scenes and stages that jumble together desire and disgust.”⁵⁵ In her novel *Flaming Iguanas*, Erika Lopez crafts a lush narrative of a biracial and bisexual Latina who traverses the United States in a motorcycle in an appropriation of tropes of white men’s self-discovery through travel.⁵⁶ Throughout the novel, the sexual misadventures of Tomato, the protagonist, provide complex insights on queer Latina sexual subjectivity as she navigates sexual encounters that often blur the boundaries of coercion and consent, racial fetishization and self-determination.

Women of color sex workers and pornographic models and performers also reclaim their racialized sexualities through a process that Mireille Miller-Young calls, “putting hypersexuality to work,” in fulfilling their desires for pleasure, exhibitionism, and social mobility.⁵⁷ For example, inspired by the uninhibited sexuality and exhibitionism of early Latina film stars such as Isabel Sarli, the legendary Latina porn performer Vanessa Del Rio made the decision to become a self-described “whore” by engaging in sex work and performing in pornographic films as an alternative to the gendered restrictions of Latina heteronormativity and respectability.⁵⁸ Yessica Garcia Hernandez has argued that the Chicana banda performer Jenni Rivera opened spaces for working-class Latina sex and body positivity by celebrating intoxication in both her live performances where she would ingest liquor, but also through the sounds of her music, leading many fans to remove their bras in concerts and threw them to her.⁵⁹ Some Black women BDSM and porn performers engage in forms of race play where they assume stereotypical tropes of Black femininity, or engage in porn narratives that eroticize the master/ slave relations of chattel slavery, such as the film *Get My Belt* (2013). In describing how the Black actress who plays the role of the female slave named Skin in *Get My Belt*, experiences pleasure in scenes that eroticize racialized sexual violence through rough sex, Ariane Cruz contends that her performance “communicates an understanding of race play that is not necessarily therapeutic, but one that encompasses a kind of redemptive suffering that engenders feelings of agency and power.”⁶⁰

As the above examples demonstrate, the vicissitudes of racialized sexuality often get worked out creatively. Artists of color have put their craft to work in gesturing towards new sexual formations that reframe, yet do not attempt to break free of, the “bondage” of sexual othering, recognizing that doing so is an impossible project due to the weight of historical representations.⁶¹ For example, in the 1990s, films such as *The Attendant* (1993) by Isaac Julien and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) by Cheryl Dunye, centered the narratives of Black queers in interracial relationships, bringing taboo desires into visual representation. In Julien’s film a Black museum guard engages in sadomasochistic sex with a white male museum visitor, and in *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye, playing herself, enters into a relationship with a white woman while researching the life of Fae Richards, a fictional queer Black actress of the 1930s who was also in a relationship with a white woman. Both films highlight how violent racial histories can become fertile ground for the forging of unexpected desires. Art depicting grim scenes of chattel slavery hang in the museum where the erotic encounters in Julien’s film are staged, and Dunye finds interracial attraction while searching for a Black queer predecessor in Fae Richards. As Matt Richardson notes, “Cheryl’s desires for representation and sexual desire drive the plot and her search for history.”⁶²

In responding to critiques of the interracial sex in *The Attendant*, which eroticized the power relations of slavery, as problematic, Julien wrote “Could not the fetish slave-band in the film, mimicking the metal collars worn by black slaves--which, for some readers, enacts this colonial memory--be read as something else: namely, the unspeakable masochistic desire for sexual domination? Surely in this post-colonial moment, black queers should have the choice of acting out the roles of “slaves” or “masters” in the realm of desire or fantasy.”⁶³ A poster for Julien’s film appears in a scene of *The Watermelon Woman*, acknowledging that perhaps for Dunye the relationship with her white girlfriend Diana in the film enacts a similar kind of masochistic desire that, while providing pleasure, also enacts a form of working through the historical woundings of sexual racialization.⁶⁴

Queer filmmakers of color in the early 2000s continue to craft complex representations of sexuality. Dee Rees, an heir to the legacy of queer Black women’s filmmaking pioneered by Cheryl Dunye, centered the alternative kin formations and openly lived queerness of early blues singers such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in her 2015 film *Bessie*. In *Pariah* (2011), Rees tells the story of Alike, a black teenage girl from Newark, New Jersey who is negotiating her desires for masculine embodiment and other girls in the context of her family and community. Also focused on queer youth of color, *Mosquita y Mari* (2012), directed by Aurora Guerrero, depicts the unspoken yet fervent desires between two working-class Latina girls in a Latinx enclave of Los Angeles.

Trans of color sexual desires are explored by artists such as Juliana Huxtable and Micha Cárdenas. In the performance *Virus.Circus.Mem.*, Cárdenas envisions a dystopian future where racialized panic over pandemic diseases linked to people of color leads to the banning of physical touch, leading to inventive and queer uses of latex and digitally programmed sex toys.⁶⁵ *Mucus in my Pineal Gland*, a book by the intersex trans visual artist, writer, and DJ Juliana Huxtable, features experimental prose that, like Cárdenas’s work, portrays the dense entanglements of trans of color desire in networks of biomedical regulation, racial/ sexual fetishization, and the role of the internet in mediating trans desires.⁶⁶

The work of artist Shoshanna Weinberger exposes the perversions of dominant constructs of woman of color beauty and sexuality by engaging the image that epitomizes Black women’s essentialism—that of Saartjie Baartman. Rather than articulating a narrative of Black women’s subjection, Weinberger gives the icon of the Hottentot Venus a futuristic life as an otherworldly grotesque. The bodies in Weinberger’s work, many of which are rendered in silhouettes that evoke 19th-century images of the Baartman, are incarnations of excess. Masses of flesh are tied into shape by thick gold chains; headless bodies with proliferations of breasts and asses are clad in tight, metallic bras,

their straps binding the bulging skin into one corpus. In many of Weinberger's works, the static outlines of Black women's bodies verge on collapsing into formlessness: If a line, chain, or bra strap were to become undone, they would signify nothing but heavy, amorphous mass. This tension is achieved through her uniquely baroque and simultaneously economical approach to image making. The paintings are at once simple and ornate, direct and vague, representational and abstract, beautiful and ugly. Although bound by history, Weinberger's grotesques survive, and they evoke radical corporeal futures through their perverse hyperboles of beauty and sexuality.

Artist Kara Walker creates cut paper dioramas of black silhouettes drawing from antebellum images of plantation life in the South, for which she became internationally known in the art world. These images often depict explicit and dramatically staged scenes of sexual liaisons between masters and slaves, in addition to renderings of violence inflicted upon slaves from whites and also among the slaves themselves. Her images visualize the under-acknowledged perversity that undergirds U.S. race relations that continue to unfold via police violence, mass incarceration, stark disparities in access to health and education resources, and rampant anti-Blackness at various levels of social, educational, and political life.

Walker employed a monumental new direction in *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, a project that was commissioned and organized by the New York arts-based organization Creative Time. Situated in the abandoned Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York, which was slated for demolition, Walker created a grouping of sculptures that reference the slave labor associated with sugar production. Thus, the full title of the work is,

At the behest of Creative Time Kara Walker has confected *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, an homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our sweet tastes from the cane fields to the kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar refining plant.

The manner in which the Domino Sugar plant was still seeping molasses from its walls and had mounds of sugar sitting on the rafters prompted her to research the history of sugar production and consumption.

In thinking about the power relations that shaped the economy of sugar, the artist decided to reference an object known as a "sugar subteltie" in imperial Europe. Sugar subtelties were sculpted, decorative centerpiece confections made from sugar, nuts, and marzipan that were only to be consumed by those of high social standing. Walker's *A Subtlety* was a towering 75 feet long, 35 feet tall figure of a nude Black "mammy" figure in the form of a sphinx, seated on all fours and fashioned out of refined white sugar. She was flanked by a grouping of life-size molasses figures of Black boy field laborers, holding baskets and bunches of bananas. As the works were fashioned from sugar, they melted during the summertime run of the show and were eventually destroyed, thus highlighting the passage of time that has marked the slave trade, industrial modes of production in the United States, and cultural representations of Blackness.

Referencing the trope of Black women's "exotic" hypersexuality as "brown sugar," the nude sphinx embodies an uncommon juxtaposition that pairs the "mammy" headscarf with an arched back position that conspicuously displays her hourglass shape, buttocks, and vulva.⁶⁷ Walker has noted that this sphinx is not from antiquity but rather from the New World. In describing the sculpture, the artist has said,

The mammy, although she is bent over in this gesture of supplication, I don't feel like she's there to be taken or satisfied or abused in any way. She's sort of withholding. I don't want to make her into a non-sexual caretaker of domesticity. She's powerful because she is so iconic and so monumental and so un-

expected. If I've done the job well, then she gains her power by upsetting expectations one after the other.⁶⁸

The representational innovation Walker executes in the project is the fusing of two of the most pervasive tropes of Black womanhood—unattractive, asexual mammy, and enticing, sexually excessive brown sugar—to frame Black woman's sexuality as *unexpected* and powerful, rather than the always already known, denigrated, and exploited.

In conclusion, artists of color transform the colonial product of racialized sexuality through creative practice, destabilizing normative understandings of desire and pathology. By artfully crossing the boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality, at times by rejection of racialized erotic abjection and at others, by reclaiming it is an imaginative space of pleasurable potential, these cultural producers, show that, as Julien writes, "Joy is never very far away from 'jouissance,' as mourning is never very far away from abjection."⁶⁹ Amber Jamilla Musser views creative practice as elaborating what she terms a racialized "brown jouissance" that can be seen in the work of contemporary artists of color such as Mickalene Thomas, Nao Bustamante, and Lyle Ashton Harris.⁷⁰ Through analysis of this work, Musser argues that "In contrast to an ecstasy that imagines transcending corporeality, brown jouissance is a reveling in fleshiness, its sensuous materiality that brings together pleasure and pain."⁷¹ The registers of affect, visibility, and materiality that attend creative processes make it uniquely powerful as a medium for engaging and remaking racialized sexualities.

Discussion of the Literature

Literature, testimonio, theory, and trans/disciplinary scholarship have woven complex narratives about how Latinx people live, feel, and document their racialized sexualities, which are subject to discipline and policing in social and intimate contexts—from the state to the family. Ground-breaking works that made the field of Latinx sexuality studies possible include those penned by queer Chicanas in the 1980s such as *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.⁷² These books mobilized autobiography, theory, and poetic prose to establish critical positions as desiring queer Chicanas and expose the limits of second wave white feminisms and heteropatriarchal Chicano nationalisms. The 2003 volume *Tortilleras: Hispanic and U.S. Latina Lesbian Expression*, edited by Lourdes Torres and Inmaculada Pertusa, built upon this work to explore the lives of Latina lesbians with a wide range of trans/ national identifications.⁷³ The text reclaimed the "tortillera" epithet used to disparage lesbians into an oppositional framework.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw an explosion of cutting-edge research in Latinx sexualities that not only centered queerness, but revealed the queerness of Latinidad itself as an identitarian construct. These works include Juana María Rodríguez's *Queer Latinidad*, José Estebán Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, José A. Quiroga's *Tropics of Desire*, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stoke's *Queer Ricans*.⁷⁴ This literature also exposed the ways in which queerness is raced. Sandra K. Soto's *Reading Chicana Like a Queer* made this claim forcefully by demonstrating how racialized sexuality plays a critical role in the formation, expression, and literary interpretations of Chicana desire.⁷⁵ Ramón H. Rivera-Servera's *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*, published in 2012, drew on this scholarship to show how performance practices, from dancing in nightclubs to protesting on the streets, fomented the creation of queer Latinx socialities.⁷⁶ In centering the scents and spaces that mark working-class queer socialities as deviant, Deborah R. Vargas offered a theory of *suciedad* (dirtiness) as a queer Latinx analytic.⁷⁷ Vargas describes *suciedad* as a "trope for feminine-gendered subjectivities associated with seedy working-

class Latino spaces including queer femmes, nonnormative working and underclass women of color, and travesty and transgender Latinas.”⁷⁸ The *sucia*’s gender nonconformity is read through tropes of contamination, they are subjects to be sanitized and/or expelled from the social. Yet, according to Vargas, “*sucia* genders signal possibilities of a queer sustenance within rapidly aggressive moves to destroy alternative imaginaries of joy and intimacy and care.”⁷⁹

Latinx sexualities studies have also investigated the complexities of racialized heterosexualities. In 2005, Gloria González -López published *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives*, which offered a layered account of how migration shaped the sexual practices and desires of her heterosexual participants. In *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself*, based on Lorena Garcia’s participatory research with teenage Latina girls in Chicago, tropes of Latina girl sexuality, which center on dichotomies of hypersexual excess or disempowering shame, are complicated through ethnographic accounts of how they negotiate their sexual encounters and the positions of desiring subject and “respectable” girl. Richard T. Rodriguez’s *Next of Kin* problematizes hegemonic tropes of the Chicana family as a nationalist and heteropatriarchal formation to highlight how it is also a site that makes queer relations possible.⁸⁰

An emerging group of scholars continues to explore the productive politics of Latinx performance and cultural production as elaborations of racialized sexualities. These include Roy Pérez, Christina A. León and Iván Ramos, authors whose work is included in a special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on Queer Form.⁸¹ Yessica Garcia Hernandez and Caleb Luna are making interventions in the field by examining the cultural politics of Latinx sexualities and fat embodiment; and Tanya Saunders’s work offers a hemispheric framework for understanding Black queer expressive cultures in the contexts of Cuba and Brazil.⁸²

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Jillian Hernández

Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women's Studies Research, University of Florida



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