

Book Review

Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast

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Pornography, however defined, has become a legitimate, established field of academic study since the seminal (pardon the pun!) collection of essays *Porn Studies*, from 2004 and edited by Berkeley scholar Linda Williams. A journal with the same title was launched in 2014 by Routledge and its diverse content is continuing testament to how varied the field of study is; including intriguing research byways such as “‘The First Rip Off’: Anti-Circumcision Activism in Men’s Magazines’ (Allan, 2018). Further, Williams’s volume contained a mere dozen pages of ‘Suggested Reading’ and many of the essays and books listed were only laterally connected to hardcore pornography. These days it wouldn’t be difficult to imagine a bookshop or library with a large, dedicated section and, again, the interests are methodologically and politically diverse: contemporary titles include, for example, Carolyn Bronstein’s *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* and Katherine Harrison and Cassandra A. Ogden’s *Pornographies: Critical Positions*.

But a set of critical questions arguably hang over current porn studies: to what extent is the field focused on heterosexual productions and other heterosexist concerns; what is the health of studies of race and ethnicity, and pornographies from around the world; and how central are questions of ‘power’ to the field? The latter was a defining issue of feminist critiques of porn in the US and UK in the 1970s, and as these critiques brought the topic of porn to national attentions, set the ground for the studies (and activism) that were to grow. Julie Bindel (2014) and Gail Dines (2011), amongst others, advocate an abolitionist politics based on the idea that porn is a manifestation of structural misogyny; while organisations such as Feminists Against Censorship (FAC) and Backlash have organised with counter-concerns, typically claiming a right to freedom of expression. But this polarity exists amidst, for example, Laurence O’Toole’s (1999) liberal study of how public access to porn has increased due to new technologies-thus porn has become pervasive; and, very recently, Rita Therese’s (2020) literary memoir of working across the range of the sex industry.

This reviewer couldn’t begin to substantially answer the questions sketched above, but they spring to mind by the sheer fact of Desmond Francis Goss’s weighty *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men’s Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast* arriving at this point in history. Or, the book has a lot to answer to: between the diversity of interests and methods that attend contemporary studies of porn, the continuing history of feminist critiques and what fresh perspectives (if any?) can be brought to bear by studies of race. In regard to critical questions of race for gay male

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communities, there are active, heated, online and journalistic debates about racism prompted by declarations such as 'No Asians' on dating apps such as Grindr (Conner 2021). But, otherwise, it has been acknowledged that 'Very few studies have focused on the role pornography plays in influencing and modelling sexual desire on the basis of race and ethnicity' (Corneau *et. al.*, 2020: 579). However, Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014) does offer sophisticated textual analyses of the sexual representation of Asian men in mainstream-Euro-American-porn and film, arguing for a re-interpretation of the typical abjection of racialised bodies to suggest performative sexual pleasure.

Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography reads as both a symptom and a casualty of current porn studies: the field's amorphousness yet the persistence of a polarising, determined, understanding of power. This tension underlines the book's aim of marrying a new empiricism, for studies of porn and race, with theoretical debates. How can either allow us to think the other?

The book mixes methodologies through a case-study approach to user-submitted, online, gay porn and also theoretical frameworks largely derived from post-modernist thinkers including Jean Baudrillard and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Though, in Chapter 1, Goss describes his methodology as combining interpretivism, positionality, Black feminist epistemology and intersectionality, these can be considered subsets of the broad approach. Goss insists on the necessity and innovation of case studies, of actually *looking at* porn rather than abstract theorising or politics but doesn't mention precedents that would reinforce the need for this claim. (A lot of critical writing on porn does employ case studies though much of the politicking against it doesn't.) However, rather, his focus on user-submitted porn, specifically the now defunct Xtube.com, which he studied for six months in 2017, does propose the methodological interest of studying a consumer-led shaping of sexual desires against the mainstream, corporatised, industry of commercial pornography. It is argued that the latter more readily responds to white, or strictly racialised, tastes about 'ebony' bodies that the former might, in theory, refute given its 'amateur,' community-based, status. (User-led, for the uninitiated, are online platforms for the free-exchange of content.) The scope of Goss's research includes a survey and analysis of online user comments.

But his argument, hammered repeatedly throughout the book, is that user-submitted porn typically reflects structural racism at large and such is reinforced by the comments of viewers. These comments invariably 'discuss' black men in hyper-masculine terms, where their sexuality is perceived as a condition of 'race.' On the other hand, white performers are discussed according to a range of attributes including their talents as performers and as carrying values of beauty and love. The actual porn films typically stratify white and black performers according to narrative stereotypes (e.g. 'executive' and 'thug') and the sex acts performed, with black men usually emphasised as the top partner in anal sex.

Goss, nevertheless, provides a caveat that user-submitted porn is less likely to rely on these stereotypes than its corporate, mainstream, counterpart. But this is a wishy-washy caveat as he ultimately declares, in the final chapter, that similarities are more common than differences. And this claim is made after bringing the reader through chapters with titles like 'The Insolubility of Black and Queer,' 'Dark Phalluses: Preoccupation and Dismemberment,' and 'Missing Links: Primitiveness and Primality.' The language of a familiar anti-porn argument—essentially, that porn is dehumanising and mostly to already disenfranchised classes of people, runs throughout. He makes the latter link by pointing out the exclusion of People of Colour (POC) from historic homophile movements and, more currently, homonationalism.

However, Goss doesn't explicitly avow an 'anti-porn' stance, and never cites the genealogies of literature that would support this stance (Andrea Dworkin is probably exemplary here). Again, perhaps the field of study has become so diverse that seminal precedents are lost amidst the mass of publications; and, in tandem, unlike the 1970s, there are no longer central issues or arguments? In regard to the latter, *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography* may have aimed to repurpose an old argument that a contemporary audience allegedly needs to hear, however unknowing Goss is about the lineage of the argument.

But, then again, the most critically compelling passages in the book are towards the end where the author attempts to grapple with questions of agency on behalf of producers and consumers of user-submitted, 'racialised' porn. That is, he makes a reasoned, if short, critique of an argument that stereotyped images of sexualised bodies offer viewers a type of 'disidentification' that subverts the ideologies that could be at work in those images. (Or, stereotypes function most effectively when subtle). The concept of disidentification was queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's and/but Goss also points to the problems of a certain queer political mantra that 'pleasure cannot be regulated,' as if racial fetishising was part and parcel of all the promises and pleasures of sexuality *ipso facto*. He rightly points out that is a highly individualised view and the possibility of actual political change is arguably negligible. Instead, he goes on to insist, a collective, structural, reckoning is needed to bring about the self-determination—and a more nuanced view-of black bodies in porn and this also includes cis-, white men confronting their relationships to oppressive 'ideals' of race.

Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography would have benefited from the latter argument been woven throughout the book, from the start; and the inclusion of some notes on how a collective, structural reckoning might be imagined. If so, the familiarity of the long-standing argument that much porn can seem politically

reprehensible would have been effectively updated and the nuances of its relevance to questions of race emphasised. While, also, the interests of intersections between those questions and feminist precedents in theory and activism highlighted. However, the book reads importantly for its methodological diversity, seeking to link different types of analysis for the study of gay male porn. While this reviewer can claim that the conclusions could have been more originally and complexly drawn, Goss's mixed-methods approach nevertheless provides a model for interdisciplinary research that points to potential complexity. Readers and scholars can take it as provocation to think through relations between empiricism and theory generally and also in order to 'test' long-standing debates or precedents, critically bringing together structural and interpretative concerns about the content of much hardcore gay porn. And, indeed, collective reckoning about sexual representation and self-determination is something we all unquestionably need to think about.

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