Introduction

Speaking the Unspeakable

In many cases, desire lies like a bodily boundary between the everyday and the unspeakable.
—Samuel R. Delany

Homecoming

Black female visual artist crystal am nelson’s Building Me a Home (2009), an eight-minute, three channel video, engages the unspeakable pleasures of black female sexuality that anchor this book, an exploration of black women, BDSM, and pornography that presents BDSM as a stage for analyzing black women’s sexuality and its representation in order to unveil the complex desires and self-making practices of black women subjects. Moreover, it signals queerness, interraciality, and technology as vibrant motifs that galvanize my discussion of racialized BDSM as a critical site for reinvigorating debates about pleasure, domination, and perversion in the context of black female sexuality. In the video, we look at various parts of nelson’s body bound in intricate knots by Mistress Heart, a celebrated San Francisco Bay Area dom, model, and community activist. Both nelson and Heart were instrumental members of the Bay Area Women of Color Photo Project, a photography collective formed by Heart and fetish photographer Andrew Morgan in 2003 to document local women of color BDSM practitioners. Its mission was “to expand the aesthetic and cultural perception of the BDSM community by promoting artistically tasteful photographic images of Women of Color in BDSM.” According to queer feminist photographer Shilo McCabe, one of several photographers on the project, it was an intervention to increase the visibility and belonging of women of color in the BDSM community. McCabe explains the project’s mission: “The goal
of the project was to increase the visibility of women of color in erotic/fetish images in order to make women of color feel like they belonged in those communities." Although nelson’s Building Me a Home presents this politics of visibility, it also explores the complexities of black women’s navigation of BDSM space.

While nelson recognizes BDSM as a “hot-button” issue, she acknowledges that its inflammatory power is compounded by race—specifically the black female body’s legacy of sexual trauma. She refers to “a compacted body doing things that are very loaded with history and historical trauma that haven’t been resolved.” nelson says that her goal “is to try to cultivate a vocabulary but also to try to help people shift their perspective." Building Me a Home functions as a visual vocabulary to critically intervene in our reading of black female sexuality—one that recognizes the pleasure and power some
black female subjects experience in sexual performances scripted by the memory of slavery.

Because it deftly engages the multiple contradictions that cohere in the performance of BDSM, *Building Me a Home* is the entry point I have chosen for this book. Like nelson, I am interested in what BDSM and black female sexuality “means for someone in [her] body.” I interrogate our contested libidinal investments in “the residuals of trauma” as evinced by black women’s representations and performances within BDSM and in contemporary American pornography from the 1930s to the present. I read performances of black female sexual aggression, domination, humiliation, and submission in pornography and BDSM as critical modes of black women’s pleasure, power, and agency. *The Color of Kink* also explores the multiple and contradictory fantasies that animate black women’s practice of BDSM, placing them in the context of long-standing debates and controversies about the representation of race, gender, and sexuality. How do we rethink the formative links between black female sexuality and violence? Like nelson, I explore how domination and submission are not just mechanisms of power but also modes of pleasure. I argue that BDSM is a productive space from which to consider the complexity and diverseness of black women’s sexual practice and the mutability of black female sexuality. I also illustrate how BDSM illuminates the queerness of blackness and how blackness brings into focus the queerness of BDSM.

As a BDSM apparatus and tool of bondage, the rope functions not just as a technology of pleasure and pain, but also race. In *Building Me a Home*, a rope bit gag is slipped in between nelson’s parted lips and fastened around the back of her head. Another knot forms beneath her breasts at the base of her breastbone. Her wrists are thickly shackled with coils of rope. The white rope contrasts with the color of her skin and the black frame of the triptych video. The scene is a BDSM fantasy of black female sexuality shaped by the memory of chattel slavery. In one image, the indentations of the rope form a visible pattern of small ripples on nelson’s stomach. While these flesh imprints manifest the black female’s bodily memory of slavery, they are also impressions of pain and pleasure. While the rope elicits whiteness in order to fetishize whites’ violent domination in the primal scene of slavery, it also marks the pleasure in this queer encounter of black female intimacy. In her art, nelson recog-
nizes the salience of what she terms the “black/white dichotomy” and the magnetism of its pull while at the same time, she works to place black subjectivity beyond this binary. She states, “The work I was doing is really about asserting black subjectivity and subjectivity that’s not necessarily wrapped up in how my body or my experience is related to the white body or the white experience.” Though whiteness is corporeally absent from the powerful piece, its symbolic presence is strong. Whiteness becomes personified in ways that perhaps contradict its absence from this bodily encounter to assert itself in this particular staging of black female subjectivity and within the scene of black female BDSM performance more broadly. While the artist did not include a white performer, whiteness haunts the scene nonetheless.

The metaphorical residue of whiteness resonates with this book’s assertion that interraciality is a necessary optic when considering kink. As a symbol of whiteness, the white ropes encasing nelson’s brown flesh visualize the intimate relationship of whiteness and blackness that I argue is salient in black women’s enactment of BDSM erotic fantasy. Building Me a Home instantiates the presence of whiteness in the sexual scene of black women’s domination and submission, a grip nelson is aware of, as evidenced by her desire to disentangle black female subjectivity from whiteness in this provocative piece. The work is one of physically and metaphorically wrapping and unwrapping. In drawing on the symbolic yoking of black female BDSM sexuality to the memory of transatlantic slavery, the work invokes whiteness. If BDSM becomes a map for sketching out black female sexuality, whiteness stands as a signpost, a point of reference that often intrudes on the erotic scene to highlight its enactment of pleasure, power, and pain. In racialized BDSM performance and its dynamic representation in pornography, interraciality signals the political stakes for black women.

If the rope is an ambivalent signifier of race, it is also an equivocal marker of pleasure and pain, empowerment and captivity, and past and present. The tightly pulled diagonal line of rope guides our eyes to the central image of nelson’s bound figure. But it also serves as a (color/time) line, marking black female sexuality in relation to the moorings of queerness (figured here as a mode of complicit blackness), the remembrance of slavery, and the somatically absent but symbolically present whiteness, creating an erotic threshold that is vital to the performances I interpret.
in this book. At the same time that the rope leads our gaze to nelson and Heart’s hands, it also directs our eyes to the unsettled space outside the frame—a willing canvas for our own imaginary. The tension of the rope emanates from its physical tautness and from what it metaphorically represents of what lies between black women’s historic captivity under chattel slavery and the “erotic macramé” of contemporary BDSM bondage.13 nelson conveys the imbrication of pleasure and power that BDSM performance may engender for black women: “The work is about empowerment through pleasure. I do think that pleasure is a source of empowerment and I think also that when you are able to empower yourself that’s also a feeling of bliss. I think that’s a reciprocal relationship.”14 nelson asks us to critically rethink power—not only what it feels like but also what it looks like and what it can look like as enacted by the black female body specifically. She states, “I am really interested in BDSM and particularly what it means for someone in my body.”15 Her work represents an attempt “to reconfigure both the understanding of how individuals in certain situations empower themselves and how they assert their will.”16

The subjects in Building Me a Home do not speak. Sound becomes a further challenge to this digital fantasy of pleasure, power, and will. In the absence of dialogue, a looped soundtrack heightens the complexity of racialized pleasure in the landscape of domination/submission. The audio accompaniment is an electronic tinny static—a soft metallic rattling sound overlaid by wind or perhaps by distant crashing waves—interspersed with a soft humming. Though we are unable to conclude if the humming is a diegetic or extradiegetic sound, the impression is that it comes from Mistress Heart (nelson’s mouth is bound) as a kind of soundtrack to her labor. The humming amplifies the slow methodical care with which she binds and unbinds nelson’s body. The effect of this chorus of sounds is almost soothing, amplified by the hazy repetitive white noise. This calm contrasts with the inescapable violence of this scene of black female captivity. Yet the humming also becomes an audible instantiation of queer black female pleasure. The sonic thus collaborates with the visual in elucidating how producing blackness is bound to domination, submission, and queerness and their intricate pleasures. In its artful play with the dynamics of speechlessness and sound, Building Me a Home presents BDSM as a mode of speaking the unspeakable of and for black female sexuality.
In rendering tangible the tethering of black female sexuality to the history of chattel slavery, the rope connects the past to the present, but it also reveals the past as the present (and future). Does the visual image of the bound flesh of the captive black female body necessitate such a psychic return? Is this homing to the mythologized site of transatlantic slavery ineluctable? Nelson articulates the work’s querying and queering of linear time: “At what point do historical readings of the black figure end and black female desire and subjectivity begin, if at all?”

Yet a couple of minutes into the piece, this fettering, like many aspects of Building Me a Home, is complicated as it becomes clear that the work is a process of doing and undoing, building and deconstructing. Heart’s hands enwrap Nelson’s body and free her from the rope’s constraints. At times it is difficult to ascertain which is happening—tying or untying. This linear ambiguity compounds the complexity of the piece while disrupting the idea of slavery as in the past. The work narrates a process, a movement forward and backward, that belies linear time.

Mirroring this lapse between past and present, doing and undoing, the three simultaneous viewing frames of Building Me a Home facilitate
multiple temporal and spatial vantage points. This pastiche of temporal frames mirrors the slippage of present and past, of modern BDSM and chattel slavery, pleasure and pain, subject and object. Nelson is interested in precisely these slippages and how we, as spectators of her work, read them; she and her work ask: “What is that fine line between a representation of a contemporary space that is consensual and a representation of historical spaces or historical traumas that were non-consensual and is it possible to kind of make that leap from a historical reading to a more contemporary reading?”\(^\text{18}\) The negative space between the frames reinforces the tension of the spatiotemporal leaps Nelson describes. The fragmentation of frames reflects that of the black female body itself. We never see Nelson’s full body in one frame, only isolated pieces of it as the camera pans up from her rope-shackled bare feet to her thighs, to a cluster of white knots nestled in her dark pubic hair like a floral arrangement adorning her pubis, to the flesh of the belly gently nudg-

Figure 1.3. Crystal Am Nelson, Portrait of Crystal, suburban born daughter of Valerie and James, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations—semi-profile [from Untitled (Bound) series], 2007, ~4x5” giclée print. Image courtesy of the artist.
ing through spaces between the rings of tight rope that form a bustier around her stomach region and encircle her breasts, to a group of knots at the base of her sternum, to her face. At times her eyes are closed, at others she gazes directly at the camera, confronting our own gaze and challenging an understanding of her as passive, undesirous, and submissive.

Occupying both the central frame and the periphery in this video triptych, the black female body plays an essential role in Building Me a Home and in nelson’s work more generally. As in much of nelson’s art where she doubles as both artist and model, the line between subject and object is blurred here. The black female body is doing the building and the unbuilding and is itself the site of this complex architectural project. Art historian Huey Copeland has explored contemporary black artists’ critical aesthetic engagement with transatlantic slavery. By disrupting the privileging of the body as a medium for this artistic engagement, Copeland discusses the limitations of the figure as a vehicle for the visual rendering of slavery. Hitching an artistic engagement of slavery to the body, Copeland argues, individualizes the memory of transatlantic slavery, foreclosing our recognition of the vast material instantiations of its aftermath. He writes: “These artists took the meaning of slavery out of the figure and made it a function of the viewer’s relationship to the world.” By not relying on the figure, these artists depersonalize the legacy of slavery, imploring us to see slavery everywhere, etched in both the flesh of the black body and in our material landscape. I would argue that while nelson anchors slavery’s meaning in the figure, her use of the rope effects a more comprehensive viewing of the material embodiment of slavery—one that conveys both its structural and psychic logic and the collision of the two. nelson’s work, like much of the BDSM and pornography performance I discuss here, is fundamentally a distinctly embodied encounter with the history of slavery.

Drawing on feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, and media studies, The Color of Kink contributes to the growing scholarship on pornography and racialized sexuality. This interdisciplinary analysis makes a number of theoretical and scholarly interventions. First, it complicates the traditional androcentric, heteronormative, and narrow framing of the question of violence in pornography discourse. As a result of critical feminist interventions during the “sex wars” of
the late 1970s and early 1980s, violence is usually conceptualized as men enacting violence toward women and is usually framed as harmful and unproductive. I am interested in how violence and aggression become a source of sexual pleasure and possibility for women and how women are active agents of violence and domination rather than passive victims. This research reinvigorates important debates in feminist sexual politics in the arena of BDSM and pornography dating back to the “sex wars” in the United States, in which, as I reveal in the book, women of color, though marginalized, played a significant role. Second, linked to this question of violence is the legacy of sexual violence for black women and how this history, which is so constitutive (but not solely productive) of black female sexuality and its representations, informs these performances. Third, this book, like nelson’s Building Me a Home and the Bay Area Women of Color Photo Project, interrogates the deracialization of BDSM. Illuminating the cross-pollination of black sexuality and BDSM, The Color of Kink argues that BDSM is an apt lens through which to consider black sexuality and its performance in pornography. Finally, this project pays special attention to issues of technology. I interrogate the entwinement of various technologies—the technologies of gender, race, and sexuality with the technologies of sexual pleasure (for example, the “fucking machines” I analyze in chapter 4). My interest in technology extends beyond cyberspace as a site for the performance and laboring of black female sexuality to include the technologies of pleasure women employ in pornographic BDSM performances.

BDSM is currently a hot topic in popular culture, most notably evidenced by E. L. James’s bestselling book 50 Shades of Grey (2011) and the film adaptation. Films such as Kink (2013, dir. Christina Voros) and About Cherry (2012, dir. Stephen Elliott), which both focus on the BDSM pornography company kink.com (whose work I analyze in chapter 4), also testify to the popularity of BDSM within the public sphere. In addition to films, countless television talk shows and articles in newspapers and magazines and on websites attest to the current interest in BDSM. Scholars such as Margot Weiss have critiqued this mainstreaming, arguing that the increased representation and visibility of BDSM in contemporary popular culture fail to challenge the hegemony and privilege of “normative” sexuality, often reinforcing the
perceived binary between normal and aberrant, privileged and marginalized, and protected and policed. What scholars have not adequately analyzed is how this mainstream popularity perpetuates an understanding of BDSM that fails to consider how it is deeply informed by racialized sexual politics. Race is marginalized in both the scholarly literature and popular media about BDSM, contributing to the impression that it is not something black people do, or should do, and/or that race is not a salient factor in the power dynamics so essential to the practice. In these public, popular visual representations of BDSM, racialized bodies are typically absent or are peripheral, contributing to a long-standing imagining of BDSM as a kind of Anglo phenomenon. Nelson’s *Building Me a Home* is a response to this impression. Inspired by what I term the politics of perversion, this book seeks to disrupt the politics of visibility and respectability that police nonheteronormative black female sexualities in order to encourage a depathologization of both BDSM and black female sexuality.

Problematicizing a Politics of Perversion

The title of this book, *The Color of Kink*, references its foregrounding of black female sexuality in the landscape of BDSM and pornography and its revisiting of a politics of perversion as a springboard for thinking through the intersection of perversion with black female sexuality. Elsewhere I have advocated a politics of perversion as a disruptive shift in black feminist studies in order to critically analyze the entanglements of pleasure and power through the consumption, performance, and production of pornography. Here I revisit, refine, and reanimate this critical framework, not as a rehearsal of the queer theory truism that perversion maintains disruptive and productive politics or to reinforce the disavowal of race in these critiques of the queer currency of perversion but rather to map the critical interchange between perversion and black female sexuality. Elucidating the many ways that black female sexuality influences the dynamics of power and pleasure that undergird kink, *The Color of Kink* analyzes and explores larger questions of the relationship between perversion and the queer limits and potentials of non-“normative” sexual desires and practices for black women. For example, in what ways can perversion open up new modes of being in
the world for black women while at the same time accounting for the historical bondage (literally and symbolically) associated with black women’s bodies?

My conjuring of a politics of perversion relies on the plural and polymorphous resonance of the term “perversion.” The politics of perversion recognizes the subversive, transformative power of perversion as the alteration of something from its original course and the kink—the sexual deviance—that perversion evokes. In theorizing the politics of perversion, I explore the multivalence of the word “pervert,” which the New Oxford American Dictionary defines in its verb form as “to alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended; lead (someone) away from what is considered right, natural, or acceptable” and in its noun form as “a person whose sexual behavior is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable.” Such a politics of perversion might be understood as a kind of queering that enables us to see “sexual pleasure as a feminist choice” and the ways that pornography continues to inform the pivotal nexus of black women’s power and pleasure. Though my development of the politics of perversion is imagined in contradistinction to “the politics of respectability,” both function as critical strategies of black female sexuality and its continued negotiation of history.

The politics of perversion represents a critical kink in a reading of the entangled performances of race, gender, and sexuality that not only signals their perversions or “unusual sexual preference[s]” but also exposes the multiple kinks, the “sharp twist[s] or curve[s] in something that is otherwise straight” that are so central to these performances. Throughout this book I am invested in undertaking a critical kink—highlighting the color of kink to reveal BDSM as an overlooked site for the performance of black female sexuality while reading the multiple deviations from straightness that are integral to these performances. This kinked black feminist critique seeks to unveil the unspeakable perverse pleasures in and of pornography and BDSM to consider how pornography informs both black women’s erotic subjectivities and the resonance of BDSM for black sexuality.

I am informed by Freud’s use of the term “polymorphous perversion.” Freud’s understanding of polymorphous perversity is useful here because it signals BDSM’s degenitalization of erotic pleasure, the perverse
inclination as natural rather than aberrant, and the multiple shapes—both symbolic and material—that perversion manifests in performances of black female sexuality. He argues that “the disposition to perversions is itself of no great rarity but must form a part of what passes as the normal constitution.” Contradicting his sexology forefathers, Freud’s contention of the normality and fundamentality of perversion (i.e., that it is not deviant but standard) was nonetheless mediated by a kind of hierarchy or classification, however ambiguous, of perversions that reinforced a sexological tradition of defining sexual perversion as contradicting the purpose of the human sexual instinct: reproduction. Freud believed that a perversion becomes pathological if and when it supplants the normal “sexual aim” (“the act towards which the instinct tends”) and “sexual object” (“the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds”).

The subjective social, cultural, and moral foundation that anchors the purportedly scientific sexual perversion renders perversion a useful theoretical tool for illuminating the use of sexuality as a technique of power. Perversion in psychoanalytic discourse is linked with transgression and the destabilization of social hierarchies and epistemologies. Inspired by a Foucauldian tradition that revealed perversion as instrumental in the discursive production of sexuality some feminists, sex radicals, and queer theorists have embraced the “insurrectionary nature” of perversion. Though Foucault did not identify perversion as transgressive but rather as part of the biopolitical relations of power that discursively produce sexuality, the theoretical lure of perversion emanates from its perceived subversiveness in spotlighting and dismantling the “nature” of sexuality and its punitive heteronormative standards. That is, perversion as a “real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures” directs our attention to the conditionality, labor, and unnaturalness of sexual normativity. For example, Adrienne Rich’s celebrated feminist theory of “compulsory heterosexuality” spotlights heteronormative coercion in order to refute the oppressive binaries of sexuality and contest the nature of (hetero)sexuality. Also illuminating the relationship between perversion and norms, Gayle Rubin’s theory of radical sexuality is one that accounts for the ways that perversion forms the basis of hierarchies of erotic pleasure that are oppressively policed by law.
Within queer theory, perversion performs as a kind of theoretical metonymic mascot for queerness—gesturing toward a prolific and unstable range of sexualities that the assumed norm of heterosexuality marginalizes. Perversion demands a rethinking of pleasure beyond the domain of heteronormative sex to facilitate a queer critique of what Michael Warner terms “the regime of normal.” Warner illuminates how a politics of perversion becomes not merely a question of pleasure but also a matter of queer sexual autonomy and self-elaboration. More specifically, Lauren Berlant and Warner consider the queer cultivation of perversions, or “criminal intimacies,” as practices of belonging. Illuminating perversion as a kind of queer “counter intimacy,” they exemplify a line of queer thought that (re)aligns perversion in a way that queers—lays bare and denaturalizes—the discursive mechanisms of sexuality as a technology of power to contest the terms of intimacy. Yet what is less fleshed out in these engagements with the politics of perversion is how race directs notions of perversion within queer theory. Race is not merely a lacuna in this theoretical body. The lack of critical analysis of race, specifically black female sexuality, unsettles the disruption that perversion potentially has to change the rules of the “game of powers and pleasures” that both BDSM and race play. As I discuss at length in the following chapter, black female sexuality complicates the narratives of subversion, pleasure, and power that underline BDSM.

I want to call our attention to the ways that what might seem like the absence of black female sexuality in these important discussions of perversion functions not so much as an empty void but instead an influencing, gravitational presence in what I see as the still-dynamic energetic field of the politics of perversion. How does black female sexuality effect and affect the “region of space” in which it is so often (dis)located? Using the allegory of a black hole to theorize black female sexuality and the reading practices that have consistently failed it, Evelynn Hammonds calls for an alternate conceptual framework that challenges the paradigms of (in)visibility that characterize the discourse of black female sexuality. Yet, as Hammonds suggests, the metaphoric currency of the black hole lies not within its power to reveal the repletion of what appears to be vacant space but in its prompting of an alternate concep-
tual geometry with which to rethink perversion. Black female sexuality offers an important critique of what Hammond calls the dichotomous “axis of normal and perverse.” Hence, problematizing the politics of perversion uncovers new vistas for considering the intersection of race and “perverse” sexuality to intervene in a “genealogy of black female sexuality,” that as Hammonds argues, recognizes black women’s silence and excision but not the multiplicity of their desires and the polyvalence of their pleasures.

Black feminist scholar Cathy Cohen, a critical voice of intervention in this genealogy, has suggested that we, as scholars, shift our critical gaze away from the conventionally respectable to read deviance as kind of black political strategy. Indeed, deviance is where Cohen locates the “radical potential of queer politics.” She argues that “intentional deviance” can function as an important stratagem of resistance and agency, albeit restricted, for marginalized subjects who reside outside the disciplined limits that are policed by normative white heteropatriarchy. Cohen is in conversation with Warner, who unveils respectability politics as a kind of “false ethics” of queer sexuality, asking: “What kind of politics could be based in such a refusal to behave properly?”

The politics of perversion is inspired by Warner’s query and Cohen’s push to read deviance not as pathology but as a mode of “oppositional politics” that might enable us to see power, agency, and resistance as well as pleasure differently. Hence my return to the vexed site of perversion is not intended to platitudinize the fruitfulness of queer theory’s exploration of perversion and unsettlement of the coherence of heterosexuality; instead, I want to push toward a more nuanced critical crossing of perversion with black female sexuality. Black female sexuality informs and further queers the dynamics of subversion, reproduction, power, and pleasure that undergird kink.

In scholarly theory, BDSM enjoys a complicated and ambiguous relationship with the term “perversion.” I use the term “enjoy” quite deliberately to capture the eroticization of aberrancy that the “perversion” of BDSM evinces. Though BDSM, in practice and theory, is anchored in the literary foundation of Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, in the nineteenth century, people began to see sadism and masochism as psychosexual perversions. In Psychopathia Sexualis (1886), Richard von Krafft-Ebing not only coins the terms but also in-
augurates them within the moralizing pathologizing impulse of psychoanalysis as sexual perversions. Krafft-Ebing’s description of “cerebral neuroses” was divided into four types of paraesthesia, or “perversions of the sexual instinct”: sadism, masochism, fetishism, and “antipathetic sexuality” (essentially homosexuality, or sexual inversion). While classical theories of BDSM are grounded in perversion, they remain divided over the relationship between sadism and masochism; they are theorized as radically opposed, interrelated, or more “complementary,” as sexologist Havelock Ellis deems them. While Krafft-Ebing considered sadism and masochism to be distinct entities, Freud viewed them as linked—two simultaneous perversions in the same individual. Adopting a psychoanalytic literary methodology, Gilles Deleuze radically challenges Freud’s reading of masochism on multiple fronts, arguing that masochism and sadism are independent of each other and are fundamentally different.

Although many classic scholars identify BDSM as a perverse pathology, they also argue for its gendered existence in “normal” sexuality, contending that sadism and masochism are evidence of the atavism and primitivity of sexuality itself. Like Krafft-Ebing, Freud believed that BDSM tendencies were manifest in “the normal individual.” Krafft-Ebing writes, “Modern civilized man, insofar as he is untainted, may exhibit a weak and rudimentary association between lust and cruelty.” Similarly, Freud states that “the history of civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct.” Despite more recent work in the field of BDSM that approaches the practice from a standpoint that it is not pathological, BDSM remains tainted by its psychopathological roots. Though the most recent edition American Psychological Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) has taken steps toward depathologizing sexual sadism and masochism and distinguishes between aberrant sexual interest and sexual practices that threaten disorder, it still locates the “paraphilias” of sadism and masochism within the bedrock of psychiatric disorders. As Gayle Rubin acutely acknowledged some twenty years ago: “Sexualities keep marching out of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual and on to the pages of sexual history.” BDSM delimits the shaky boundaries of perversion and how it relates to so-called normal sexuality.
Perversion maintains an intimate relationship with the concept of “normal” as its point of deviation. As Kaja Silverman argues in her sharp analysis of masochism and male sexuality, perversion “always represents some kind of response to what it repudiates, and is always organized to some degree by what it subverts.” Silverman identifies the profound tension in perversion, its “double nature” as a simultaneous movement of surrender and rebellion, “capitulation and revolt.” She is, however, largely focused on the latter—how perversion, specifically masochism, fundamentally contests sexual difference, to radically disrupt ideologies and performances of gender and gendered social binaries. As I argue throughout this book, BDSM, as both an invention and a rejection of the social symbolic system, maintains an ambivalent relationship to the many binaries (including reproduction/subversion) it labors so dynamically to erect and erotically transgress. Like Silverman, I am interested in unveiling the “politics,” not merely gendered, but also racialized, that inform BDSM’s “libidinal deviations.” That is, how might “the theoretical interest of perversion extend[d] beyond the disruptive force it brings to bear upon gender” to kink race?

Heeding the politics of perversion highlights perversion as a technology of power deployed in the discursive production of sexuality. In his analysis of “consensual sadomasochistic perversions,” psychoanalyst Robert Stoller critically problematizes the term “perversion” as determined by the “moral order” of psychoanalysis to argue psychosexual perversions such as BDSM are heterogeneous and should be depathologized. Stoller identifies three central components of perversion. First, hostility is central to the meaning of perversion; it is an “essential interplay between hostility and desire.” Second, perversion is a discipline: its threatening moralizing force is used to separate the abnormal from the normal (the “unperversion”). Third, perversion “reflects the need of individuals in society to keep from recognizing their own perverse tendencies by providing scapegoats who liberate the rest of us in that they serve as the objects of our own acceptable and projected perverse tendencies.” Encouraging us to see the perversion of all erotic fantasy, Stoller contends: “When (the psychoanalyst’s great advantage) one gets into people’s heads and they allow one access to their fantasies, all erotic desires are aberrant. We should legislate (diagnose) not on the basis of the engaged anatomy or the positions taken during an act, but on what
behaviors mean to actors." Contextualizing sexual fantasies, desires, and performances from the viewpoint of the “actors” is critical in gaining both a more cohesive, holistic understanding of sexuality and one that has the potential to temper the moralizing psychoanalytic force behind perversions. Therefore, when possible, throughout this book I have relied on interviews to supplement my readings of the performances. I remain inspired by Stoller’s push to unveil erotic fantasy as perverse and by his move to expunge the word “normal” from our lexicon of sexuality.

In shifting our reading of perversions, the politics of perversion queers our conceptualization of normalcy. Deconstructing the perverse “social construction of sadomasochism” requires a deconstruction of normal. We might be more inclined to pathologize “normal,” to give it the meaning it lacks in the context of fantasy, according to Stoller. Pathologizing normal is different from recognizing the existence of perversions such as sadism and masochism in our “normal,” quotidian sexuality, as sexologists from Krafft-Ebing to Freud to Gebhard have done in various ways, arguing that sadomasochistic tendencies, such as aggression, passivity, humiliation, dominance and/or submission, are both natural and sociocultural facets of masculinity and/or femininity. The politics of perversion works to queer “normal,” to unveil its kinks, disclose its ethical foundation, and destabilize its privileged zenith on a hierarchy of sexuality. In a Freudian tradition wherein sexual perversions represent that which contests the authority of heterosexual genital penetration as the purportedly “true” and “correct” form of sex, to pervert is to queer. The politics of perversion reflects this queering power of perversion. This book discusses queer sexual performances and works to queer black female sexuality, using a queer theoretical framework to read marginal sexual desires and practices while illuminating the many binaries that these sexual performances engage and deconstruct.

I initially used the politics of perversion to critically interrogate the historically contentious relationship between black feminism and pornography. It served as a valuable analytical tool in my personal attempt to reconcile black feminism and pornography as a black feminist scholar of pornography who does not view it as wholly oppressive, inimical, and definitively at odds with a kind of black feminist political agenda. Such a perspective has distanced me from a number of seminal black
feminist scholars, whose work I deeply respect, who have argued against pornography. For example, in an honest, incisive story of an intimate encounter with pornography, Alice Walker condemns pornography as “Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy: Depressing,” deeming it an impossible tool of sexual intimacy. She objects to pornography’s animalistic and scatological treatment of the black female body. Walker’s analysis identifies black women as “the roots of modern pornography.” Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women are a “key pillar on which contemporary pornography rests,” as a medium that treats black women as sex objects, relies on violence as an implicit or explicit theme, and champions motifs of female passivity. Jewel D. Amoah argues that pornography is particularly detrimental for black women in its double-jeopardy effect of combining racism and sexism. According to both Collins and Amoah, black women are especially vulnerable to the dangers of pornography because they must contend with both its sexual and racial politics—sexism and racism. Tracey A. Gardner reaffirms the sociohistorical salience of racism to contemporary American pornography. First presented at a conference on feminist perspectives on pornography in 1978, Gardner’s attack against pornography is deeply personal. She states: “I want you to understand that when a person of color is used in pornography it’s not the physical appearance of that person which makes it racist. Rather it’s how pornography capitalizes on the underlying history and myths surrounding and oppressing people of color in this country.” Similarly, Luisah Teish posits the unique harm that pornography wreaks on black women because of their historical legacies of violence (sexual violence in particular): “The pornography industry’s exploitation of the black woman’s body is qualitatively different from that of the white woman.” Last but not least, Audre Lorde, in her groundbreaking conceptualization of the erotic as a “life force of women,” considers pornography as antithetical to the erotic.

Though these scholars have done important work to bring pornography into the discourse of black feminism and to consider its unique sociohistorical, cultural, and political relationship with black women, the substratum of racism, sexism, exploitation, and victimization that buttresses this body of work prevents a more nuanced, radical analysis of the polyvalence of pornography, of its vital narration of the complexities of black female sexuality, and of its productive opportunities for
black female sexual pleasure and power. The separation of pornography and black feminism is an ideological wedge that distances elements that profoundly inform one another, ultimately preventing a radical analysis of black female sexuality. Pornography and black feminism maintain a critical, if volatile, relationship with one another.

Rather than viewing this relationship as inherently incompatible, we need to understand porn and black feminism as pushing, not policing, each other in productive directions that elucidate black female sexuality as “simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency.”Jennifer Nash has done indispensable work to explicate this clash between black feminism and pornography. She explores the peculiar alliance between antipornography feminism and black feminism, arguing that the relationship hinges upon the figure of the so-called Hottentot Venus—a problematic analytic tool of both scholarly political projects. According to Nash, her work highlights the sexual conservatism of black feminism and the narrow analysis of racial imagery in pornography that does not account for changes in historical and technological specificity and the complex dynamics of black pleasure.

Although my understanding of this productive and pleasurable potential of pornography for black women has distanced me from these seminal black feminist scholars, it has aligned me with a burgeoning generation of black feminist scholars who study pornography. Mireille Miller-Young is a pioneer in this field. Her groundbreaking archival and ethnographic research has both solidified the academic field of racial pornographics and illuminated the political, symbolic, and, ideological labor of black women’s sexual performances in pornography and the materialities of this labor. Dynamically contesting a black feminist tradition that views black women as oppressed and victimized within pornography, Miller-Young considers how black women performers and producers autonomously negotiate the landscape of pornography, analyzing porn as a critical arena for black women’s labor, pleasure, and self-representation. Illuminating the intricacies of black female sexual politics, Miller-Young reveals how black women, as sexual subjects, engage in “illicit erotic economies” in ways that demonstrate their professional autonomy, financial independence, and self-determination. While she exposes pornography as a unique site of resistance in the
arena of black female sexuality, she does not imagine a utopian promise of pornography. On the contrary, Miller-Young shows how black women’s history of racial-sexual violence and “exploitation” nuances their labor in pornography, a visual domain in which they are “ambivalently mythologized as sources of both fascination and disgust in a system organized around the marking and marketing of their absolute difference.”

Conveying this ambivalence “illicit eroticism” encompasses how black women capitalize on their “mythic racialized hypersexuality in the sexual economy.”

Asking difficult questions about the entanglement between sexual pleasure and exploitation, labor and agency, self-authorship and self-representation, and desire and anxiety, Miller-Young has undertaken trailblazing work to deepen our understanding of the entanglement of power and pleasure for black women. She paved the way for other black feminist scholars, such as myself and Jennifer Nash, to articulate a modern black feminist reading of pornography that departs from its anti-pornography roots. This book approaches pornography and BDSM from a black feminist standpoint to demonstrate the power, agency, and pleasure, albeit highly conflicted, that they engender for black women. Focusing on black women’s performances in hard-core pornographic films from the 1970s and 1980s, Nash’s recent work reconciles pornography and black feminism around the concepts of black women’s pleasure and agency. In doing so, she relies on a method of black feminist analysis she calls “racial iconography,” an innovative critical practice of reading performances of black female sexuality in moving-image pornography in ways that foreground black women’s pleasure rather than their exploitation, oppression, and trauma. Nash uses “racial iconography” to problematize a tradition of black feminist criticism anchored in a foundation of damage—the black female body’s purported harm by both pornography and visual culture at large. BDSM always already performs a kind of practice and theory of racial iconography—“moments of racialized excitement, . . . instances of surprising pleasures in racialization, and . . . hyperbolic performances of race that poke fun at the very project of race.”

BDSM both creates and necessitates a reading that considers the complex interplay of black women’s pleasure and pain in the collaborative performance—the dynamic play—of race and sex. Like Nash, my work puts the question of black women’s pleasure at the center of
my analysis; however, my work focuses on the unspeakable pleasures in and of black female abjection as a mode of racialization. Such pleasures coalesce in *race play*—a BDSM practice that explicitly plays with race—which, as I argue, is not a peripheral sexual practice relegated to the perverse margins of BDSM and pornography but is rather a powerful metaphor of black female sexuality that evinces its constitutive interplay of race, pleasure, trauma, and abjection.

My work differs from these two paramount scholars’ analysis of the black female body in contemporary American pornography in multiple ways—most significantly in its focus on BDSM and its reading of a recent pornographic archive. Because of this attention to BDSM and its discussion of heretofore untheorized work, *The Color of Kink* offers new breadth to the burgeoning field of racial pornographics. If historical black feminist criticism evidences a privileging of pornography’s “injury” over its pleasure, it has similarly approached the topic of BDSM from a foundation of harm. Pornography and BDSM have both been objects of vehement feminist critique since the sex wars as cultural products that both purportedly reflected and perpetuated heteropatriarchy and, perhaps more dangerously, signaled women’s complicity in their own gendered, racialized, and sexualized oppression. As I demonstrate in chapter 1, these black feminist discussions of BDSM are fiercely political and polar, most arguing, unsurprisingly, against BDSM and black women’s nuanced practice of it. In antipornography feminism, as in anti-BDSM feminist discourse, we see analogous arguments about women’s pleasure as problematically circumscribed by patriarchal domination. However, BDSM is an apt site for a contemporary analysis of black female sexuality that is grounded in “racial iconography” to foreground questions of black female pleasure, demand a recognition of the complexities of this pleasure, and highlight the stakes of black female sexual politics. I use BDSM as a critical aperture for elucidating the dynamics of racialized shame, humiliation, and pleasure that undergird the genre of commercial contemporary interracial pornography in the United States.

**Toward a Methodology of Perversion**

The politics of perversion informs the standpoint from which I have researched and written this book. It describes the critical practice with
which I read the many performances of black female sexuality that constitute this text to foreground questions of black women’s power, pleasure, and agency. The politics of perversion also inspires this book’s unique, mixed methodology. Using a variety of innovative source materials including personal interviews, visual and textual analysis, and archival research, I reveal BDSM and pornography as critical sites from which to rethink the enmeshment of black female sexuality and violence. This work contextualizes particular historic and contemporary debates and analyzes pornographic film, videos, and websites. I draw upon the interviews I conducted for additional context. In each of these tasks, I aim to pervert, but ultimately enrich, our reading practices. Analyses of pornography must not be confined to the space of representation or the ethnographic: the perverse overlaps and interstices illuminate new perspectives for considering the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Though I am inspired by a tradition of feminist studies of pornography, inaugurated by Linda Williams’s formative analysis of pornography in the late 1980s, I engage the intersections of race and violence. While many feminist scholars of pornography, including Williams, have analyzed the question of race, its constitutive imbrication with eroticized violence and abjection remains undertheorized. Similarly, as I discuss in chapter 1, recent scholarship on BDSM has not offered a thorough discussion of how race and the gradations of racialized sexuality beget the practice. Unlike these texts, The Color of Kink contextualizes black women’s BDSM performance in important historical and contemporary debates and reads its representation in modern pornography. I argue that the unique historical legacies of black female sexual violence necessitate a more nuanced reading of black women’s BDSM performance, particularly race play.

Throughout the book I draw from open-ended interviews I conducted with black femdoms, pornography performers, and producers. I also use published interviews in trade publications in the adult entertainment industry, mainstream magazines and websites, personal websites, and blogs. These interviews irradiate the marginalized voices of black women in pornography and BDSM. In line with the depathologizing impetus of the politics of perversion, my inclusion of personal testimonies from these sites reflects my interest in illuminating black women’s agency and diverse pleasures in pornography and BDSM. At-
tending the voices of black women who narrate their own sexual experiences of domination, submission, and erotic power exchange in BDSM and pornography—their pleasures, limits, pains, fantasies, histories, conflicts, and boundaries—brings us closer to a more comprehensive understanding of these performances. Indeed, part of the feminist intervention of this book is a destigmatization of varied and transgressive black women’s sexual pleasures such as BDSM. Marshaling the diverse voices of black women self-narrating their sexuality, *The Color of Kink* disrupts monolithic views of black female sexuality as anchored in a bedrock of normativity and silence. Yet these voices do more than simply function as intervening utterances in a politics of speechlessness; they form the basis for my central claims regarding the theoretical entanglement of BDSM, race, and sexuality. Despite my reliance on interviews, unlike many recent studies of BDSM communities and sites of labor (which I discuss in the following chapter) *The Color of Kink* is neither an ethnography nor a systematic historical study of black women in the field of BDSM or the broad, nebulous kink community. While such projects are greatly needed endeavors, my interest is largely in reading performances and visual representations of racialized sexuality in the arenas of pornography and BDSM and how the categories of race, sexuality, and gender are revealed as performances via these sites. Informed by a critical genealogy of scholars who study performance as a site of the entangled identities of race, sexuality, and gender, interviews supplement and deepen my close readings of the texts and of the sexual performances as texts.

I read a series of visual and written texts across disciplines, media technologies, and historical periods. What unites these diverse texts is their engagement with the question of unspeakable pleasures—in the enactment of racialized abjection, in the history of chattel slavery, and in blackness as a site of trauma and rapture. Though I focus on more recent work of the early twenty-first century to interrogate the imbrication of black female sexual pleasure and violence, I make leaps (to recall nelson) across the convergent pornography landscape—the stag genre, the golden age, and the video age—to present a historical context in which to read this entanglement in contemporary American pornography. These leaps are both temporal and technological jumps. This book reads across disciplinary perspectives as it journeys across the
media landscape in its analysis of the black female body’s representation in different types of pornography from the late 1930s to today: film, video, and Internet. From the Kinsey Institute’s historical stag collection to kink.com’s twenty-first-century Fucking Machines video archive and from mainstream to amateur to independent to underground, I draw from a heterogeneous pornographic archive. This chronologically and technologically diverse archive facilitates my reading of the complex imbrication of black female sexual pleasure and violence: I argue that the black female body is an ambivalent site of absence and presence in the genre.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1, “The Dark Side of Desire: Racial-Sexual Alterity and the Play of Race,” examines black women’s participation in BDSM and how these performances illustrate a complex and contradictory brokering of pain, pleasure, and power for the black female performer. I reveal BDSM as a critical site for reconsidering the entanglement of black female sexuality and violence. Within BDSM, violence becomes both a mode of pleasure and a vehicle for accessing and contesting power. This book reinvigorates important debates in feminist sexual politics in the arena of BDSM and pornography dating back to the sex wars in which women of color played a significant role. The chapter begins with a brief section that frames black women practitioners of BDSM in the context of still very vigorous feminist dialogues surrounding sexuality, violence, and BDSM. Here, I am interested in staging the unique theoretical and practical challenges of the unspeakable pleasures aroused in racial submission and domination that BDSM presents to black women specifically. I examine race play as a particularly problematic yet powerful BDSM practice for black women, one that unveils the contradictory dynamics of racialized pleasure and power via the eroticization of racism and what I term racial-sexual alterity. As I explicate in chapter 2, this term synthesizes the simultaneity of racial and sexual difference in the performance of black female sexuality—a difference that pornography and BDSM reveal to be profoundly tentative. The Color of Kink intersects with historical and recent public debates regarding black women’s controversial practice of race play. I argue that race play unsettles the dichotomies
of transgression/compliance, subversion/reproduction, mind/body, and fantasy/reality that buttress BDSM. This chapter unveils performances of black female sexual domination and submission in BDSM as critical modes for and of black women’s pleasure, power, and agency.

Chapter 2, “Pornography’s Play(ing) of Race,” reads black women’s diverse performance of race play in contemporary American pornography, focusing on three sites of analysis. First, I discuss the performance of black female/white male humiliation in the BDSM femdom website of a veteran black female performer/pornographer, Vanessa Blue, arguing that race is a critical technology of interracial BDSM pornography. Next, I read a performance of black female submission staged as a historical reenactment of chattel slavery in hard-core mainstream race-play pornography. This type of pornography evinces the hold this history maintains over our erotic imaginary. Then, I turn to amateur Internet race-play pornography to analyze queer race-play performance in porn. Personal interviews with a producer inform a more comprehensive reading of the work and shed light on the dynamics of amateur race-play pornography production. From amateur to high budget, mainstream to margins, and across the shifting racial and gender dynamics of production and positions of domination and submission, pornographic performances of race play exhibit an unfaltering racial hyperbole and eroticization of black female racial-sexual alterity and its anxiety. Though I demonstrate the salience of race play in the pornographic imaginary, I analyze race play as a comprehensive performance with a more universal sociocultural currency and relevance. Far from being a liminal sexual practice, race play delineates the performance of racialized sexuality more generally. Thus, this chapter reveals that another critical tension in race play is the tension between the quotidian and the spectacular, the pornographic and the mainstream.

Turning my analysis toward the adult entertainment industry niche of interracial pornography, chapter 3, “Interracial Iterations and Internet In(ter)ventions,” continues the discussion of (inter)racial aggression in pornography. I argue that BDSM becomes a critical lens for elucidating the dynamics of racialized shame, humiliation, and pleasure that undergird interracial pornography, a profitable genre of commercial American pornography that is deeply invested in the
miscegenation taboo. The lens of BDSM enacts a critical queering of interracial “heterosexual” pornography in order to read across the gendered and racialized subject positions of pleasure, power, and desire and to analyze homoerotic desire, pleasure, and anxiety as working in tandem with the genre’s eroticization of racial-sexual alterity. I discuss pornography as a historic site of racial-sexual revenge—a contemporary staging of racialized sexualized violence in which the retaliatory rhetoric of interracial aggression is enacted. Though I focus on contemporary Internet pornography, this chapter reads across the convergent pornography landscape—the stag genre, the golden age, and the video age—to provide a contextual frame for reading performances of black-white interracial intimacy in pornography and tracing the black female body as an ambivalent site of absence and presence in the genre. This chapter concludes with an exploration of how a contemporary black queer feminist pornographer uses new media to intervene in heteronormative, hegemonic representations of the black female body and interrupt long-standing pornographic scripts of black female sexuality in pornography.

Finally, in chapter 4, “Techno-Kink: Fucking Machines and Racialized Technologies of Desire,” I interrogate the simultaneity of the “technologies” of sexuality, race, gender, pleasure, and visuality. Focusing my analysis on one popular contemporary U.S. hard-core BDSM pornography website, kink.com, and its use of so-called fucking machines (mechanized phallic devices), I analyze performances of racialized sexuality staged through multimodal intimate points of encounter—between human and machine; black and white; “man,” “woman,” and cyborg; self and other. I argue that such places are rich sites for reading the collaborative laboring of technologies—sexuality, race, gender, pleasure, and visuality—as they delineate the material and symbolic ontological boundaries of the black female body and black women’s erotic subjectivity. While the machines most explicitly labor as technologies of pleasure, they also operate as technologies of race that reveal race as a technology. I read the fucking-machine performances as imbricated technologies of racialization, sexualization, gendering, visuality, and pleasure in the context of theories of race and/as technology and “new media” discourses of race in cyberspace. Fuckingmachines.com exhibits complex technologies of racialization performed at multiple, overlapping sites:
machines, performers, and spectators. These obscene machines effect a powerful oscillation that animates the fantastic slippage between pleasure and pain that characterizes BDSM. Illuminating the racialized and gendered corporealization of sex and sexual pleasure, these fucking machines and their sexual performances reveal the interlocking systems of race, gender, and sexuality as not only mechanized but also as mechanisms of power.

Together these chapters increase our understanding of the relationship between sex, race, and the politics of pleasure. I use BDSM as a site for exploring broader questions of the relationship between perversion and the queer margins and possibilities of black female sexual desires and practices. Just as *Building Me a Home* portrays a queer rendering of black female sexuality that engages the black female body’s contested visibility in this space, the *Color of Kink* reveals the ways that BDSM unveils the queerness of blackness and blackness unearths the queerness of BDSM. This study explores how racialized fantasies of abjection, power, and pleasure are not just essential to BDSM practices and their representation in contemporary American pornography, they are also vital in shaping the experiences of racialized sexuality, particularly black female sexuality. Racialized BDSM play is a critical site for reinvigorating debates about pleasure, domination, and perversion and a paradigmatic mode of black female erotic subjectivity.