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INTRODUCTION: THE SEXUAL BODY

SHELLY EVERSLEY & JENNIFER L. MORGAN

Recalling Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863), one contemporary art critic writes, "She wasn't a goddess or an angel or a shy bather caught off guard. She was a contemporary woman—unabashedly unclad, unmistakably unallegorical. Her name was Victorine Meurent, but Edouard Manet called her Olympia. And she changed everything" (Schambelan 2002). Of course the author of this account of *Olympia* refers to the way in which Manet's work has purportedly changed the reception of the female nude in the history of art. During its first exhibition in 1865, the portrait of a reclining nude with a black maid standing behind her caused such a scandal over questions of art and decency that the painting required two police officers to protect it. The nude's enigmatic smile and unaccommodating, direct gaze suggested a subject whose sexuality and naked body needed no apologies. Its contemporary viewers wondered if Manet had confused a concubine for a queen.

The sexual body functions as a challenge to bourgeois normativity, but to end with *Olympia* and her maid as emblems of sexual deviance is to foreclose critical engagement. *Olympia* and her maid exist at a moment when the terms of race, sexuality, and racial violence were contested and particular—political economic arguments about the slave trade and abolition situate the passive gesture of *Olympia*'s maid in a material context that we ignore at our peril. Simultaneously, *Olympia*'s glib refusal of the black woman's offerings raises questions about race, sexuality, and hierarchy in nineteenth-century Europe. It is in this broader context that we must situate *Olympia* as an image around which myriad issues about the nature of the body, of sexuality, of racial hierarchy, and of licentiousness convene.

We chose Cox's photograph for the cover of this special issue on the sexual body precisely because Cox forces us to grapple with the notion that a sexual body might signal an expansive change. Has "everything changed"? Both Manet and Cox's images portray confi-

dent nudes whose looks turn the objectifying gaze back onto the viewer and articulate their knowledges of sex. But the bourgeois black female subject featured in *Olympia's Boyz* reminds the viewer that the sexual body is a cipher for interrogating the theoretical and practical discomforts of pleasure and power. When they were exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001, Cox's images, like Manet's canvas, required police protection. But by 2001 viewers and critics had found new ways to express their discomfort. This time, the black woman in the frame became an example of "political and sexual audacity" (Moylan 2001). Standing behind the Olympia figure in Cox's giant Cibachrome print are two boys—they replace the black maid in the original painting—who, rather than proffering a suitor's flowers, wait with spears ready to defend their mother. The scandal of this work is that Cox places the black female body—herself—at the center of history and the traditions of Western art. One reviewer writes that the photograph's realism forces the viewer to confront everyday assumptions concerning what matters about the body (Schambelan 2002). Another reviewer casually comments, "And, one can't help but notice, amidst the many references to Cox's African heritage, that her husband is white, the children posed elsewhere in African garb are of mixed race" (Moylan 2001). More than one hundred years after *Olympia*, the scandal of Cox's unaccommodating nude continues to mobilize responses laden with the issues of race, miscegenation, reproduction, and the specific terms of sexual pleasure. Viewers understood Manet's Victorine Meurent as an unapologetic prostitute; Cox's Olympia is somebody's wife. The children are legitimate in a patriarchal logic, yet the naked body and its confident sexuality defy easy categories. How is it that an evaluation of a work of art becomes a question of the race of the subject's husband? What is salient about the mixed-race children in African garb? Unspoken in the reviewer's comments is that with these personal details, the reviewer, and now the viewer, cannot call Cox's subject a whore. Indeed everything has changed.

Since the 1970s, feminists have turned to the body as a site of academic and political inquiry. It was through the body that activists and scholars were able to problematize the material conditions of patriarchy and to engage with the argument that sexual inequality was explicated by biological, natural, and thus unchangeable, difference. From "the personal is the political" grew "gender as social construct" as

the effort to clarify the profound and complicated implications of sexual difference, and the social meanings attached to them became a central focus of feminist work. But, like Cox's inversion of *Olympia*, the attempt to dislodge the naturalized body has always been a gesture fraught with the central tenets of Western political philosophy: The body is a deceptively complex site.

The association of women with the corporeal and in opposition to that which is rational and refined serves as the backdrop for sometimes contradictory impulses on the part of feminist scholars and activists to both dismantle the nature/culture divide and to nurture it. While centering the body as the site of critical inquiry might originate as an act of claiming a terrain outside of theory, scholars of the body soon came to understand the ways in which the body demands a highly nuanced and sophisticated theoretical underpinning—without it, the presumption remains that the body exists as an unchanging entity outside history, society, or culture. For some, the female body, in its messy corporeality, was an obstacle to equality. Following the trajectory of Simone de Beauvoir, to be female was to be always already tethered and limited by your body's sexual accessibility and reproductivity. The gulf between being a mother and a citizen was insurmountable. In this context, the struggle was to overcome or remove the limits of the female body. For others, the difference between male and female bodies was a problem that primarily required reinterpretation. By accepting the patriarchal notion of the female body as being more "natural" than the male, the problem becomes either surpassing the body or reinterpreting female "nature" as superior. In either case, this fixity of an unmediated female body remains.

The sexual body is messy: it bleeds, it cums, it sweats (among other things). In addition to these real-life actualities, it also struggles through ambivalence and ambiguity within binaristic and patriarchal logics of power. Less than queer theory, feminist criticism has had some trouble with this reality. This challenge always returns to the question of the body. Sex requires full engagement with the body, and the body has historically been the very impediment to women's power if it is always interpolated through patriarchal logics. The question of female pleasure and sex, the female body and sex, thus depends on full engagement with ambiguity, or better, new articulations of pleasure and of what power might mean. These articulations depend on a version of

gender that is not built on biological difference; it also requires that prevailing ideologies of socially constructed identities either change or disappear. Thus any academic engagement with the sexual body must not only reject the nature/culture binary, it must also offer new insights on how questions of the body can be practical and theoretical at the same time. This simultaneity has the potential to, actually, change everything.

For feminists who engage questions of race and class, biological difference has never been so easily reductive. For instance, African American women's status as enslaved labor meant that biological capacities were always linked to their status as laborers; and, as race emerged as a heritable category that signaled a physiologically defined social reality, their reproductive lives were always signified by their public location in the space of capital accumulation rather than in the private space of home. While that bodily logic shifts once slavery is abolished, but instead, at the moment of emancipation, black women's reproductive identities also shifted from being foundational to white men's wealth to being obstacles to that wealth—a binaristic racial logic meant that free black women have never produced children for the state but, rather, produce children as a challenge to the state. As such, there is no static essentialist biological body that is socially conditioned by patriarchy as feminine and reproductive. Rather, there is a biological body socially conditioned as machinated for labor (a condition held not only by black bodies but by brown and immigrant and poor bodies as well). Biological essentialism is thus interrupted for women of color as the particularities of race and class mediate the gendered messiness of their corporeality.

Olympia's Boyz is part of a larger body of Cox's work called *American Family*. By locating this new Olympia within the context of family, Cox and her art call attention to everyday incarnations of what family might actually mean. If, as Hortense Spillers argues in her landmark essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (reconsidered here in a roundtable discussion by Spillers, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Saidiya Hartman, and ourselves), family becomes the "mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community," the claim made by *Olympia's Boyz* is more than simply to replace the whore with the mother. Rather, Cox's appropriation of Family for herself and her sons is a challenge to centuries-old assumptions that the black

female body can only produce children that are commodities and will only nurture children who will be slave owners. There is, of course, a subversive pleasure here for Cox as she meets the viewers' gaze with a satisfaction borne in the depiction of her sexual pleasure.

The body as it appears in this special issue of *WSQ* is not a Cartesian body in opposition to the mind, but is, rather, a social body, or bodies, deeply imbricated in and ultimately shaped by the mediating forces of economies, cultural practices, and social forms. These bodies are not rooted in the private sphere—traditional bourgeois, normative, heterosexual. Rather, they are insistently public, and reflect a twenty-first-century–feminist engagement that perceives the body as crafted by the economic, the cultural, and the social. There is, as these authors show, no space for a body positioned oppositionally to the mind, or outside the parameters of ideological and social formations. Rather, the body reflects the complexity of those formations, and indeed, our lived experiences in and with these bodies may be our best means of framing a response to and an engagement with all manner of human hierarchies.

While the contributors to this issue are primarily working within a U.S. context, they recognize the global realities of their theoretical and practical work. They also recognize the prevailing cultural ideologies that discipline the meanings and implications of their analyses. Eve Oishi's and Tim Stuetgen's essays make this point especially clear. In "Collective Orgasm: The Eco-Cyber-Pornography of Shu Lea Cheang," Oishi asks readers to consider Cheang's transnational, interactive cyber-art as one that refuses an opposition between ecofeminism and pornography. She explores Cheang's work to challenge the kind of logics that would conflate women's bodies with nature and that authorize what she calls the colonization and exploitation of both. She describes the ways in which Cheang's video collages and Web installations use technology and commercialism to expose their parallels with commodifications of women's bodies and the natural environment. Describing what she understands as Cheang's political and metaphorical border crossings, Oishi argues that Cheang's alternative pornography helps viewers and participants locate their bodies and their sexualities within a global political and economic marketplace. Like Oishi, Stuetgen views an innovative pornography as one that exceeds the pro-sex, anticensorship debates within feminism. His essay, "Disidentification in the Center of Power: The Porn Performer and Director Belladonna as a Contrasexual

Culture Producer (A Letter to Beatriz Preciado),” locates “pornography as a biopolitical field and as a machine for cultural production.” Using theory to explore performative sex acts, Stuetgen interprets pornography as a constructed performance, one that ultimately can stage new and more complex desires, bodies, and rationalities. In confronting the visual politics of pornography, he contends that the genre “might be able to produce a political philosophy in tension between criticism and arousal, analysis and desire.” Even further, the formal organization of his essay helps readers to tangibly reach the multiple practical and theoretical complexities of the female body, gender, and sex acts as well as their queer and feminist implications.

For both Oishi and Stuetgen, gender seems to have no limits within new technologies of cultural production. Kevin Frank’s “Female Agency and Oppression in Caribbean Bacchanalian Culture: Soca, Carnival, and Dancehall,” suggests that within a crucially gendered, Caribbean burlesque, sexual exhibitionism by women may only be a performance of self-control and agency. He explores the literal and metaphorical mask of carnival, dancehall, and soca to discover meanings that lie beneath the surface. He argues that despite recent feminist criticism that interprets these performances as instances of a gendered celebration and assertion of agency, readers and partygoers should reconsider the workings of patriarchal power on the erotic objectification of female performers. He complicates the opposition between agency and fetishization by suggesting that pleasure may not necessarily mean that a woman has control over her sexual power. This very notion of sexual power and the body takes on new forms in food theorist Fabio Parasecoli’s “Bootylicious: Food and the Female Body in Contemporary Black Pop Culture.” Borrowing the neologism made famous by the pop group Destiny’s Child, Parasecoli traces the ways in which black popular culture celebrates the full-figured woman. Using examples from African American soul food, music, and film, he describes an uncritical reception of equations between food and an edible black female body to suggest the ways in which these logics not only counter white patriarchal celebrations of a thin female body, but also might refuse simple stereotype. In place of the nourishing mammy, the bootylicious black body feeds new articulations of female physical and sexual empowerment.

For Kimberly Juanita Brown, whose essay, “Black Rapture: Sally

Hemings, Chica da Silva, and the Slave Body of Sexual Supremacy,” engages the echoes of slave societies in the Americas, the “slave body is the sexual body.” The reverberations of enslaved women’s lived experiences in contemporary fiction and popular culture are indications of just how tangibly the experience of slavery continues to shadow us. Indeed it is through an exposition of the entanglement of slavery and sex, the “intertwining of sexual access and labor,” that the legacies of the black female body in transnational economies become clear to us. For Brown, claims that slavery and freedom occupy clear and distinct terrain is troubled by both the lived experiences of women such as Sally Hemings and Chica da Silva and in postemancipation anxiety about their sexual connections between enslaved women and slave owners.

Like the body of enslaved women, that of the Mexican woman Josefa serves to illuminate national concerns. In Maythee Rojas’s essay, “Re-Membering Josefa: Reading the Mexican Female Body in California Gold Rush Chronicles,” the execution of Josefa, the only woman to be hanged in California in the history of the state, speaks to “early articulations of the nation and the racialized and sexualized discourses of Manifest Destiny.” As Josefa is alternately depicted as a bloodthirsty killer and a mixed-race beauty whose blood signified her civility, Rojas argues that Josefa’s act of self-defense speaks to her own consciousness about the location of her body and the conflict over it. While the lived experiences of Josefa remain elusive, she signals the complexity of the lived body for Chicanas both historically and contemporarily, speaking to the ongoing struggles over the body of color in a white supremacist patriarchal state.

Agency, race, and gender self-empowerment are critical issues Toni Irving elaborates in her essay, “Borders of the Body: Black Women, Sexual Assault, and Citizenship.” Irving brings legal and literary evidence into conversation as she works to interrogate black female sexuality, sexual violence, and the institutional and discursive practices of the U.S. national project. She argues that sexual violence is understood as normative when enacted on the bodies of black women and thus the project of situating black women’s bodies historically requires an interpretive lens that takes in both the judicial erasure of black women as victims of sexual violence and the process of accounting for that erasure—in this case through fiction—on the part of black women themselves.

In the essay, “The Black Romance,” Belinda Edmondson argues that

in the late twentieth century, the notion of a black female sexual body is deeply imbricated in the eroticism of consumption. In popular-culture representations of romantic love, consumer goods—homes, vacations, fashion, higher education—mediate the distance between sexuality and social uplift, or eros and agape. Black female characters must navigate their desire for sexual connection and romance through the expectations and needs of the larger black community; the most intimate and individuated choices become referenda on their connection and commitment to socially responsible community uplift. Here Edmondson emphasizes the emergence of a popular cultural representation of black love that demands both the erotic and the socially responsible, a reflection of black women as erotic on their own terms. By offering a reading of Spike Lee’s film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), Thelma Wills Foote explores this tension between collective social responsibility and self-determination among black women as sexual subjects. Her “Happy Birthday, Nola Darling! An Essay Commemorating the Twentieth Anniversary of Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*” reads Lee’s protagonist within the context of the twentieth-century modern girl to explore the material conditions of Nola’s life as they inform her expressions of sexual freedom. Foote shows how the film’s apparent focus on Nola’s story becomes a source of rivalry between men rather than evidence of emancipated black desire and its potential for consolidating a community.

In “From Our Body to Yourselves: The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective and Changing Notions of Subjectivity, 1969–1973,” Amber Jamilla Musser charts the Boston Women’s Health Collective’s production of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Through this history, Musser offers us a clear example of the ways in which a feminist subjectivity around the body emerges in the early 1970s. As Musser illustrates, the collective’s critique of patriarchy in general and patriarchal medicine in particular mobilized a feminist response to the Cartesian fetish of the “rational” over the “corporeal.” Musser’s close reading of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* demonstrates that at the heart of their intervention lay an “essential notion of Woman” whose very corporeal “reality” cannot be dislodged by either class or race. Musser concludes that the emergence of a biological woman in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* echoes a larger move in the feminist movement, one in which biology and reproduction were “sutured” to the female body and thus became central to the unwieldy construction of a universal Woman.

In his discussion of the gay white man as he is figured in postwar African American literature, Tyler Schmidt delineates an integrationist cultural context to explore the ways in which the recognition of the gay white male presence has the potential to redefine and perhaps even undermine racial boundaries and sexual identities in addition to definitions of family and nation. “White Pervert: Tracing Integration’s Queer Desires in African American Novels of the 1950s,” recovers hitherto ignored African American responses to changing social and sexual identities in postwar American culture. By offering close readings of white gay sexuality—a sexuality Schmidt argues is often interracialist—he presents a powerful archetype that transforms the seemingly fixed meanings of race, gender, and sexuality. The white gay male body, whose perversion undermines the heterosexual family, also signals the possibilities of integration. Thus the potential located in an unnatural body holds out the possibility of social transformation.

The premise of a naturalized biological body continues to resonate both on the largest political stage and in the most intimate of sexual practices. For lesbian activists, as Jennifer Brier shows in “Locating Lesbian and Feminist Responses to AIDS, 1982–1984,” dislodging the presumption of a feminine passivity in sexual practices was a crucial component for lesbians and gays intent on politicizing the body in response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Reclaiming the feminist watchword that “the personal is political” became part of the arsenal aimed at shifting the discursive field in which AIDS was not an individualized medical event, but rather a politicized assault on the gay and lesbian community. However, the activists that Brier engages did not, as the Boston Women’s Health Collective did, make the mistake of reinscribing the mind/body split by leaving misogynist hierarchies of sexual pleasure and practice unexamined. Rather, sexual health was dependent on a feminist activism that understood the body and its pleasures as a social body, one that is produced by, and thus can be changed by, political, cultural, and social phenomena.

For the authors in this special issue of the *WSQ*, the body must be, as Elizabeth Grosz has argued, “regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture . . . it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product” (Grosz 1994). It is not insignificant that the essays collected

here stake a claim about centering the body at a historical juncture in which in the face of virtual reality it is tempting to reduce the body simply to the seductive powers of the global market—the body as passive consumer of images and commodities. But in fact the body is the effect of political economies. And while this is the moment of virtual realities, it is also the world of Abu Ghraib, a moment in which a critical appreciation of how the body is harnessed by political contingencies is crucial to our identities as feminists.

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