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Abstract

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Since 1903, the movie industry has produced nearly one thousand films offering cinematic contributions to the contentious discourse about the evolving meaning of race in US society. Despite the pervasiveness of such images, neither academia nor the general public fully recognize the integral place of interracial sexuality in US cinema, past or present. These filmic images have both incited discussion and contributed to the discourse about the ever-evolving meaning of race in US society—sometimes reflecting, frequently shaping, but always fully participating in this contentious national discussion. The representation of interracial sexuality in film charts the history of how various interlocutors discuss, disagree, and argue over the meaning(s) of race in any given era. This dissertation provides a narrative account of interracial sexuality in US films from 1956 through 2001, a period roughly covering the burgeoning years of the Civil Rights Movement through an era marked by the ascendency of a powerful colorblind discourse insisting that race no longer mattered in US society. I periodize the era under review into four eras that roughly correspond to the four decades—the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and

1990s—and present a chapter for each in which I outline the major representational frames for depicting interracial sexuality. Each decade was characterized by multiple coexisting frames offering conflicting images of interracial sexuality, and these frames corresponded to contemporaneous ideas and discourses about the meanings of race in US society, history, and political culture. I draw upon a wealth of primary sources (including promotional movie posters, film reviews, opinion polls, and the films themselves) to historically analyze key films to argue that these cinematic texts offered valuable contributions to the ever-shifting yet historically bound discussion about the meaning(s) of race in the United States. This dissertation closes by arguing that cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality released over the past fifteen years have largely been shaped and structured by the prior four decades, while demonstrating how this history sheds light on a host of contemporary racial events from Barack Obama's historic election and presidency to the Black Lives Matter movement.

MIXED MESSAGES
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY NARRATIVE OF INTERRACIAL SEXUALITY IN US FILMS, 1956-2001

By

Andrew David DeVos

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Introduction

Interracial Entanglements in *Black or White*

Elliot Anderson never intended to raise his 7-year-old biracial granddaughter Eloise alone. Elliot lost his beloved daughter (Eloise's mother) due to complications during his granddaughter's birth, and he and his wife adopted the baby girl, raising her as their own and providing her with the best education money could buy. Eloise's father Reggie, a crack addict from a Black neighborhood in South Los Angeles, never showed interest in her, while her paternal grandmother Rowena adored her and made every effort to enfold Eloise into her side of the family. Rowena and Elliot enjoyed amicable relations until the sudden death of his wife to a fatal car accident, a tragedy that moved "Grandma Wee-Wee" to propose joint custody in order to fill the maternal void in her granddaughter's life. Elliot balked at Rowena's proposal, extending an open invitation for her family to visit his palatial mansion and swim in his enormous pool at any time, while insisting that Eloise be shielded from her unstable father and the dangerous environs of the ghetto. Angry and hurt, Rowena consulted a family lawyer who proposed that she compel Reggie to reenter Eloise's life and help the family sue for custody, bolstering their case by framing Elliot as a racist attempting to keep his granddaughter away from her Black family. As tensions between the two sides mounted, the courtroom proceedings grew increasingly rancorous and racially-charged. The defense painted Reggie as a worthless ghetto junkie so unfit to parent that he cannot even spell Eloise's name, also revealing that Reggie impregnated Elliot's daughter when she was underage and he a young adult (essentially making him a statutory rapist). Conversely, the prosecution portrayed Elliot as a hopeless alcoholic prone to fits of rage, insisting that he hates Black

people and wanted to cloister Eloise in a bubble of White privilege. The latter accusation emerged when the prosecution lawyer pushes Elliot to admit he once called Reggie a "street nigger," arguably demonstrating a pattern of racial prejudice. Elliot became defensive, angrily insisting with unintentional irony: "I'm not racially prejudiced, I just don't happen to want . . . [Reggie's] broken-down Black ass anywhere near my granddaughter!"

The above scenario was neither drawn from contemporary biography nor "ripped from the headlines" of a recent media spectacle. Rather, it describes the plot of *Black or White* (2014), a wide-release dramatic film starring Kevin Costner as Elliot and Octavia Spencer as Rowena.[*] According to director and writer Mike Binder, the studios he approached with the project initially balked at the racially-charged subject matter, and the film only began production after Costner put up $9 million of his own money. Binder expressed no surprise about the challenges he faced realizing his film: "People always talk about race; they just don't want to talk about it honestly."[1] Of all the ways in which Binder could have explored contemporary racial issues, he chose to package his "honest" analysis of race via the trope of interracial sexuality.[†] The story of *Black or White* begins with an interracial sexual encounter that results in the birth of a biracial child. A parental death leaves two racially-divided families to do battle over the child's future, and the film invites audiences to ask whether Eloise's Black or White family should have primary influence over her education and enculturation. Binder drew inspiration for the story from his own life, having helped raise his biracial nephew following his sister's untimely

[*] Throughout this dissertation, the first time a film appears in a chapter, it will include a parenthetical note citing its domestic US release year. Additionally, from this point forward, the first and last names of actors playing key characters in films will be noted parenthetically.

[†] I will more explicitly detail my understanding of the concepts "race" and "interracial sexuality" in the "Key Terms of Concepts" section of this chapter on page 15.

Figure 1. **Online advertisement for *Black or White*.** The film's title starkly divides Eloise's Black and White families. Although both families are depicted as loving and nurturing, the White side of the family (represented by Elliot) sits on top of the Black side (represented by Rowena), perhaps an unconscious performance of the film's privileging of Elliot's power and perspective. (Apple iTunes Store)

death, leading to many interactions with his nephew's Black family.[2] Binder fictionalized this personal story but dramatized the tensions that frequently emerge from such interactions through several awkward and explosive encounters between Elliot and Rowena. Throughout the film, Elliot exudes a palpable discomfort around Rowena's family, and Rowena reasonably reads his refusal to allow Eloise to visit her grandmother without his watchful presence as racism. During one such visit, Rowena explodes, shouting, "You just want her away from us, the *Black* people!"

Black or White offers a rare Hollywood acknowledgement of the enduring "problem" of race. When Rowena's (Black) lawyer asks Elliott to tell the courtroom if he

exhibits racial prejudice, he flatly states: "We have different skin colors. Is that the first thing I notice when I see a black man—the color of his skin? Yes . . . It's the first thing you see when you see a white guy." However, it ends as an endorsement of colorblindness, the belief that race does not or should not matter, and that individuals should be judged on their character and actions alone. After Elliot's courtroom acknowledgement of the significance of racial difference, he insists that while noticing race, he ultimately judges all people by "the action and interaction I'm having with the person that I'm interacting with." Binder confirms this as the film's core message, stating that he conceived the movie as a colorblind parable: "Our kids [need to know] how to deal with people whose skin is a different color than theirs—and realize that they're no different except for that little piece of skin."[3] As if to drive the point home, the film's marketers latched onto the Twitter hashtag #LoveHasNoColor, posting images of promotional posters and links to film trailers while encouraging interracial couples around the nation to share their stories of love conquering race.[4] Not all appreciated *Black or White*'s colorblind evangelism, and some (particularly Black) reviewers levelled sharp criticisms. Ghanaian-American film blogger Zeba Blay chided the film for furthering a naïve, deracinated view of biracial parenting: "The sentiment 'Love Has No Color' is a beautiful one, but . . . frankly, love has very little to do with the realities of growing up a mixed Black girl in an all-White environment."[5] Online media critic Rebecca Theodore-Vachon (a Black woman) agreed, castigating *Black or White* for promoting a "White people know best" ideology: "It operates under the guise of being progressive and furthering the 'conversation' about race, but only serves to exalt Whiteness by marginalizing Blackness."[6] This critique particularly characterizes the

Figure 2. Screenshot of *Twitter*—tweets about # LoveHasNoColor. Marketers heavily promoted *Black or White* on Twitter using the preexisting hashtag #LoveHasNoColor. In this screenshot taken shortly after the film's theatrical release, we see a collage of stills from the film, positive viewer responses to its "profound" colorblind message, as well as user-submitted photos of various mixed race families. (Twitter)

film's resolution, when, after a drugged-addled Reggie breaks into Elliot's home and nearly kills him, a chastened Rowena grants Elliot full custody and publicly announces to the judge that he knows what is best for her.

This brief analysis of *Black or White* and its critical reception highlights several crucial dynamics of American film culture that lie at the center of this dissertation.[‡] First,

[‡] I recognize the problematics of the word "American." In contemporary usage, the word stands in for the modern nation-state of the United States of America, a linguistic move that essentially erases the rest of the nations of the North and South American continents as well as the diverse peoples, past and present, who have occupied this hemisphere for millennia. Janice Radway has argued that widespread use of the term "powerfully evokes . . . [a] unitary 'American' culture" that does not exist, perpetuating false concepts of singularity while reproducing this nation's imperialistic claims to cultural and military hegemony. However, modern parlance has yet to offer a more sufficient adjective for the United States—e.g., the "American dream" could not be written the "United States dream" or the "US dream," as such constructions essentially do not exist in contemporary English. In light of these issues, I will employ the word "American" only when necessary, either as an adjective to describe something belonging to the US ("American film") or as a commonly-used demographic descriptor ("American Indian" or "Asian

Black or White represents the pervasiveness of the image of interracial sexuality in US film. It stands as one recent entry in a voluminous yet little-discussed history of films depicting interracial sexuality as central to race and relations in US history and society. Second, it demonstrates that the cinematic presentation of interracial sexuality remains a contested issue in US society. Far from being an ordinary, unremarkable fixture of a "post-racial" society, the representation of interracial sex, romance, and child-bearing on film invites comment and debate, particularly when the issue rests at the center of a movie's narrative. Third, the film's critical reception demonstrates that the image of interracial sexuality in the media has no fixed, universally agreed-upon meaning. Rather, the interracial couple remains an open-ended signifier—an ambiguous symbol with no final, settled meaning, yet one inextricably linked to a large set of historical debates and racial discourses. The pervasiveness of cross-racial relations in society has invited a host of cultural producers across the decades to cinematically frame interracial sexuality as proof or disproof a variety of ideological positions, inciting interlocutors to praise, critique, and/or denounce such images, depending on the degree to which they confirm or contradict their own racial worldviews.

"Race is a minefield in this country," Binder stated in a recent interview, positing his initial difficulties securing funding for his project as indicative of the movie industry's hesitancy to release racially-charged subject matter into the film marketplace.[7] While I largely agree with Binder's statement, he fails to acknowledge the pervasiveness of the image of interracial sexuality in US film, perhaps unaware of the degree to which filmmakers have historically employed cross-racial sex and romance to explore the ever-

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American"). Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 1–32.

shifting terrain of race in the US. In fact, the cinematic depiction of interracial sexuality has a long history: the American movie industry has to date produced nearly one thousand films representing interracial sexuality in a variety of complex and contradictory ways. The earliest depictions of cross-racial desire appeared in the earliest years of silent cinema and continue through *Black or White*, covering almost the entire history of film itself. Although representations of interracial sexuality enjoy a central place in the history of US cinema, Binder is not alone in failing to recognize or realize this. Film historian Susan Courtney argues that neither academia nor the general public fully recognize the "integral place [of interracial sexuality] in the history of American cinema."[8] Although the more general subject of race in US film has received widespread attention, spawning academic books and countless articles dedicated to the subject, academic analyses of interracial sexuality in American movies remain relatively scant. The hundreds of films spanning over a century of time have provided shared reference points that have facilitated and furthered the discourse about the meaning(s) of interracial sexuality. These texts collectively offer a stock of images, titles, characters, motifs, and stories from which to draw as we discuss racial issues, while serving as flashpoints for clashing readings and divergent opinions. Some have become widely known films and still often surface in contemporary discourse, most notably *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Jungle Fever* (1991), while D. W. Griffith's interracial panic film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) remains mandatory viewing for students and scholars of film for its formal contributions to the evolution of narrative filmmaking.

However, the hundreds of other cinematic texts stretching back to 1903 remain largely forgotten by popular memory, and there remains a general dearth of scholarship

on the history of interracial sexuality in American film. Only a handful of scholars have offered full-length monographs on the topic. Gina Marchetti penned the first major analysis of interracial sexuality in US film with *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (1994). Marchetti identifies the most repeated filmic frames used to represent Asian/White pairings in Hollywood films, arguing that Asian men have been typically presented as rapacious sexual predators while Asian women have most often been framed as sexually exoticized others and/or submissive immigrant brides.[9] Jane M. Gaines' *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (2001) examines the pervasive image of interracial sexual desire in early 20th century silent film, specifically detailing the divergent uses of the image in two separate yet intertwined film communities: the "mainstream," White movie industry represented by Griffith and the world of "race movies" populated by influential Black film entrepreneurs like Oscar Micheaux (*Within Our Gates* [1920]). Gaines combines close film analysis with rigorous research from newspapers and trade publications to demonstrate how race filmmakers like Micheaux inverted the popular image of racial/sexual savagery in White silent films to present mixed race identity as a badge of honor in a program of Black racial pride. Susan Courtney offers a broader history of filmic interracial sexuality with *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender & Race, 1903-1967* (2004), arguing that all of the key frames for interracial sexuality ultimately performed "miscegenation fantasies" birthed by the White male imagination. For example, *The Birth of a Nation* framed Black men as lust-crazed rapists, mixed race Americans as morally and sexually debased, and White women as victims needing to be saved, of course, by White men framed as noble, selfless heroes.[10]

Most recently, Erica Chito Childs' *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (2009) examines media depictions of interracial sexuality roughly from 1990 through 2007, arguing that such representations have barely moved beyond the basic frames established during the silent era: "miscegenation tales of violation, tragedy, and capture; amalgamation stories of sacrifice, salvation, loss, and redemption; and utopian fairy tales in which love conquers all."[11]

My research owes much to these scholars, and I align myself with them in reading these interracial films in light of the complex cultural, political, and racial events and discourses swirling around these fascinating cinematic texts. Yet, there remains a number of holes in their collective scholarship that I intend to fill with my own. My research contributes to this small but significant field of inquiry with an interdisciplinary narrative of interracial sexuality in US film, focusing on the years 1956 through 2001. 1956 marks the year in which Hollywood revised its Motion Picture Production Code, the film industry's official code of representational conduct which had banned the cinematic depiction of "miscegenation" since its institution in 1930. A 1956 revision permitted filmic representations of interracial coupling that had largely been suppressed since the sound era. I end my analysis in 2001, the year in which Halle Berry appeared in *Monster's Ball* (2001), an interracial romance/drama for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress, becoming the first (and to date, only) Black woman to win this prestigious award.[§] I am expanding the body of study on cinematic interracial sexuality

[§] Furthermore, 2001 marks the year of the September 11 attacks by Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda on the US, including the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in New York. The flurry of political discourses, policy changes, and tactical responses that followed those attacks drastically altered the racial discourse as thousands of individuals from Arab nations, including many natural-born citizens, found themselves the target of profiling, discrimination, hate crimes, and even detention without due process. I decided that I could not reasonably deal with these complicated events without significantly lengthening this dissertation, and have chosen to end my analysis in 2001 and encourage other scholars to examine the

by focusing on a particular historical epoch largely missing from the existing research. Although these scholars each examine different time periods, their collective work largely focuses on films of the silent era through Hollywood's "classical" era.[**] Gaines focuses exclusively on silent films, while Courtney surveys the silent era through the mid-1960s. Although Marchetti's historical analysis extends from the silent era to the films of the late 1980s, she focuses most of her monograph on pre-1960s films and essentially skips over the 1970s.[††] Collectively, these scholars have not given sustained attention to interracial images on film from the late 1960s through the late early 2000s, a period roughly spanning the beginning of the national phase of the Civil Rights Movement through the beginning of the new millennium. This era is marked by the gradual ascendance of colorblind discourse for race relations, as well as an ever-present counter-discourse insisting on the primacy of race as a basic structure in American society. The movies contributed significantly to the history of this racial discourse. This dissertation will focus on the important films released over this crucial period of time, examining the complex ways in which US cinema has simultaneously reflected and driven the roiling national discourse about the ever-shifting meaning of interracial sexuality in a nation divided over the very meaning of race itself.

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impact of 9/11 on cinematic interracial sexuality. See the Epilogue for this and other suggestions for future research.

[**] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson date Hollywood's classical era between 1927 and1960, during which time the film industry established its basic cinematic norms for film production, storytelling, editing, and aesthetic style. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[††] To qualify this statement, Childs does examine recent depictions of interracial sexuality, roughly covering 1990-2007. However, Childs proves to be the one scholar out of the group least interested in cultural history. She offers deep readings of a number of texts, particularly analyzing the ways in which contemporary racial discourses like colorblindness and racialized sexual desirability circulate throughout media texts. Her research is valuable, but it stands more as a work of social science than cultural history.

Research Origins and Questions

The origins of this dissertation lie in a personal odyssey of race and relational intimacy from my own life. Before outlining the specifics of my research, including the tools for analysis and the texts to be analyzed, I will briefly explore the genesis of this project and how it has emerged from and intertwined with my personal biography. My interest in these films dates back to the fall of 2004 when I became romantically involved with a Black woman who would later become my wife. My White, evangelical Christian family initially disapproved of our pairing, warning biblical judgment on our relationship for flouting racial/sexual boundaries instituted by God. Despite the opposition, we continued dating, during which time we would often end up watching movies together on home video. Two films screened early in our relationship were chosen specifically because they contained interracial couples, and both would speak to me as someone considering a long-term interracial relationship. The first was the British film *28 Days Later* (2002), a post-apocalyptic thriller in which a White man and a Black woman find love and comfort in each other's arms in the midst of a disease outbreak that wipes out most of England. I had previously seen *28 Days Later*, but on that particular viewing, I found the film's treatment of the interracial couple fascinating, specifically because the film made no explicit comment on their status as a mixed couple. Shortly thereafter, we watched *Jungle Fever*, the aforementioned movie which centers on an interracial affair between a White woman and a Black man who suffer a torrent of anger and abuse from onlookers and loved ones alike. I had never seen *Jungle Fever*, and I reacted with dismay to the film's portrayal of Black/White romance as an incitement to abuse. These two films provided a stark contrast for someone wrestling with the personal politics of

Figure 3. Film still from *28 Days Later*. In the British post-apocalyptic horror film *28 Days Later*, a deadly plague wipes out most of England leaving a tiny handful of survivors, including Selena (Naomie Harris) and Jim (Cillian Murphy). In this film still, they share a frenzied kiss after Jim violently murders a group of marauding soldiers who had attempted to sexually assault Selena.

interracial sexuality. *28 Days Later* essentially ignores the couple's interracial status, presenting them as two people who meet and became romantically involved due to mutual attraction and shared experiences.[‡‡] *Jungle Fever* obsesses over interracial sex, framing the practice as a fetishistic fool's errand into an explosive racial minefield. Although a British import film, *28 Days Later* spoke to me as someone dealing with that very American problem of interracial sexual relations, perhaps unconsciously indulging a desire for a race conscious society to see our relationship as legitimate. *Jungle Fever* deeply troubled me, amplifying the discouragement I already felt in light of my family's resistance, and it seriously led me to reconsider the wisdom of alienating my loved ones by continuing to see a woman I had only known for a few months.

[‡‡] One could read the film's incidental interracial couple in the opposite way—as an argument that Black women and White men only get together when the world ends, a point more explicitly made in two earlier American post-apocalyptic films on which *28 Days Later* was arguably based, *The Omega Man* (1971) and *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959).However one reads the film's interracial romance, it remains a significant text in the formation of this research this topic.

My parents' views softened quickly, much more so than I initially predicted, and they eventually welcomed her into our family, even blessing our marriage a few years later. My interest in cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality persisted as our relationship grew, and what began as a desire to understand my own experiences through film developed into a formal research project. At that time, my knowledge of Hollywood's representation of interracial sexuality was limited to a handful of well-known texts. I remembered (although had never seen) *The Bodyguard* (1992), a wildly popular interracial romance/thriller released when I was a middle school student at a conservative Christian school that encouraged me to disdain such depictions of interracial romance as sinful. My undergraduate studies had exposed me to *The Birth of a Nation*, the silent epic that presented interracial sex as the vile obsession of rapacious Black men, and my general interest in film led me to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the influential melodrama about a White woman who must convince her "liberal" parents to accept her Black fiancé. Wanting to know more, I reviewed academic research on the topic and combed the internet, compiling a list of films that depict any form of interracial sexuality.[§§] As the list of titles climbed past the 500 mark, I became convinced of Courtney's assertion that interracial sexual relations have been a *central* concern in the history of US film, and I formulated a series of questions that now comprise the research

[§§] I utilized a variety of methods to discover these films and compile my list. The most basic method was through popular media exposure; for example, films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Jungle Fever* are familiar titles to most individuals with a general interest in film and popular culture. I also found many films through the scholarly works on cinematic interracial sexuality discussed above. Finally, I made extensive use of the popular website Internet Movie Database (IMDb) which catalogs films with searchable cross-linked metatags. For example, if one searches *Jungle Fever* on IMDb and expands the section titled "Plot Keywords," one finds a lengthy list of user-generated keywords related to the film's narrative and/or generic elements. Clicking on *Jungle Fever*'s plot keyword "Interracial Relationship" opens another page that lists all of the other films in the database with the metatag "Interracial Relationship," a list that can be conveniently sorted by release date. To date, I have identified over 1,000 US narrative films with some representation of interracial sexuality.

questions of this dissertation. What have been the dominant patterns and frames for representing interracial sexuality in US films? How have these representations changed, and remained static, over time? What are the relationships between these representations of interracial sexuality and the shifting historical discourses about the meaning of interracial sexuality in US society between 1956 and 2001?

When I began my research, I hypothesized that this narrative would be a straightforwardly triumphant story of liberal cinematic progress over regressively racist depictions of interracial coupling. I posited *The Birth of a Nation* as the beginning point (and nadir) in this story and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as "the moment" that Hollywood broke with its representational past, followed by a host of subsequent films which increasingly downplayed or deemphasized the "race" in "interracial," culminating in *The Bodyguard*, the definitive statement on cinematic colorblind romance. After viewing hundreds of these films and pouring over the academic books and articles on the subject, I have developed a much more complex understanding of this story. This dissertation represents the results of what I have discovered and uncovered. These filmic images have both incited discussion and contributed to the discourse about the ever-evolving meaning of race in US society—sometimes reflecting, frequently shaping, but always fully participating in this contentious national discussion. Sexuality remains one of the most intimate human interactions but also one of the most historically fraught realms in the US, and images of interracial sexuality prove particularly explosive, but also uniquely central, to cinematic messages about race. The representation of interracial sexuality in film charts the history of how various interlocutors discuss, disagree, and argue over the meaning(s) of race in any given era. I will tell the story of the cinematic

image of interracial sexuality in US films 1957-2001, examining the complex and contradictory ways in which cinematic texts have framed interracial sexuality.

Key Terms and Concepts

Before jumping headlong into this narrative, I must address the major definitional and theoretical issues relevant to this dissertation. I draw on a number of concepts from various academic fields of inquiry, including the social sciences, media studies, and historical studies, and in this section, I will explicitly define and outline the key terms and theoretical concepts employed in this dissertation. First and foremost, the concept of "race" obviously occupies a central place in this study, as does a second important term, "interracial sexuality." I will unpack both of these terms and explain what I mean and do not mean by their usage. Third, my reading of these films relies on the concepts of cinematic representation and framing, two intertwined approaches employed heavily in the social sciences and media studies that demand further elucidation. Fourth, there remains a host of issues related to the actual selection and reading of these films, including how I will choose representative film texts, group them into historical periods, and analyze them as historical artifacts. I will specifically address the issues of periodization, film selection, and historical analysis in the final portion of this section.

Race

Approximately halfway through Elliot's courtroom testimony in *Black or White*, the prosecution's lawyer pointedly asks Elliot, "Mr. Anderson, do you dislike Black people?" Elliot pauses, and answers candidly, "not all of them." The intended humor behind this sardonic joke totally rests on the assumption that the audience will recognize a distinction between "Black" and "White." It assumes that filmgoers will understand that the two families are separated by something known as "race," and that race, in fact, exists

in our world. The idea of race remains so fundamental to this project that it demands elucidation. I share the widely held assumption that race is a socially constructed category rather than an objective, biological one. Anthropologist Audrey Smedley calls race "a cultural invention . . . [bearing] no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations, but reflect[ing] social meanings imposed upon these variations."[12] Racial categories are invented markers ascribed to explain the geographical and biological diversity of humanity. However, to qualify race as an invention does not render it irrelevant or powerless. On the contrary, the "social meanings" imposed on racial difference exist in a world marked by deep power imbalances and inequities, and race can and does have real effects on the lives of individuals and communities. Historian Evelyn Higginbotham elaborates on this view, calling race a

> "global sign," a "metalanguage," since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race . . . Race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted. It makes hair "good" or "bad," speech patterns "correct" or "incorrect" . . . It blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops.[13]

As a "metalanguage," race remains a basic feature of American consciousness that "impregnates" a vast network of cultural practices with prescribed meanings and values. If race is a "sign" or cultural symbol, then the meaning of race remains ever open to interpretation, neither permanent nor universally agreed upon. In this way, race should be understood as a "floating signifier," an open-ended web of meanings that never stand still. Stuart Hall more explicitly described how floating signifiers work:

> [A signifier's meaning] can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection of contracting new ones . . . [It is] made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time."[14]

Seeing race as a floating signifier does not mean that racial ideas are semiotic free-for-alls in which social agents are liberated to make race mean whatever they please. Racial formation is inherently tied up with a complex interplay of social relations, and race's multifaceted, shifting meanings are bound by the historical and cultural contexts from which they emerge.

These abstractions on the nature of race have very concrete consequences, and even a cursory glance at US history demonstrates that invented concepts about racial otherness are tied to the distribution of power, status, and resources throughout US history. I align myself with an intellectual tradition that sees race as a basic structural component of US history and society, a resulting foundational ideology that continues to powerfully shape the outcomes and experiences of its diverse residents. In different periods, race has been invoked to grant or deny citizenship rights, divide residential regions into segregated districts with vastly different opportunities, drive regimes of social terror and police violence, and determine who is permitted to love who. Michael Omi and Howard Winant frame the history of the formation of racial categories and identities as "a process of historically-situated *projects*" undertaken through public discourse, law, literature, and popular media.[15] Importantly, the project of racial formation in the US has been largely dominated by those occupying the racial category "White." The primarily-English founders of what would become the US developed over time a complex ideology that viewed race as a series of fixed hierarchical categories. In this view, race was a fixed biological concept, a set of inherent dispositions and inclinations; history and time "proved" some races as superior to others, and the

differences in racial achievement via the global projects of imperialism and colonialism had irrefutably highlighted the "fact" of White supremacy over all other inferior races.[16]

In this nation's foundational years, the ideology of White supremacy shaped interactions between the racial majority and racial minorities both inside and outside of the national boundaries. White ideology generally viewed free and enslaved Africans as moral inferiors, while seeing the continents' native peoples (labeled "Indians") as savage "others" doomed to expiration and unworthy of the fertile lands they occupied.[17] This binary of racial inferiority/superiority drove the interrelated projects of Black slavery and westward expansion via American Indian removal, fueling the growth of the US as nation founded by and for White people (particularly men).[***] Even in free states, most Whites assumed Black inferiority, aggressively excluding Blacks from society's basic economic engines. The racial project of constructing Whiteness shaped interactions with "new" racial groups, most notably Latino/as and Asians. As Anglo Americans moved beyond the Eastern states into Mexican territory, racial superiority justified land grabs and border wars, and the racially-coded slogan "America for the Americans" (i.e., for *White* Americans) became a rallying cry for the nation's "manifest destiny" to occupy the continent from coast to coast.[18] The American conquest of the West opened the doors to Asian immigrants, most of whom came to California as laborers in the railroad and agricultural industries. Shortly after their arrival, nativism turned Whites against the "strangers" from another shore, and the Chinese joined Blacks, Indians, and Latino/as in

[***] In recent decades, historians have argued that Whiteness should be understood as its own racial category with its own unique history. Many immigrant groups now generally understand as White, including Irish and Eastern European Jews, had to "work" over the decades to gain entry into the racial category "White" and reap the benefits of White privilege. The constructedness of Whiteness as an unstable, shifting category further calls all racial categories into doubt. See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Paula S Rothenberg, ed., *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, *3rd* ed (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008).

Figure 4. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Gast's iconic painting dramatically depicts the fulfilling of the United States' so-called "manifest destiny" to expand to the West Coast and claim all lands in between for the "American" (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) people. Gast envisions progress as a radiant, angelic White woman bringing enlightenment, represented by the book she carries, to previously "dark" territories, symbolized by the American Indians cowering in the shadows. Gast's painting reflects and reproduces an ideology that placed Whiteness on the top of a racial hierarchy that bolstered and justified an array of injustices against American Indians, Blacks, Latinos/as, and Asians, from slavery to Indian removal to the violent appropriation of Mexican territories. (American Social History Project, CUNY)

occupying the broad coalition of "racial others" played against the superiority of Whiteness, suffering low wages, exploitation, and social/political exclusion. Whites also racialized Chinese immigrants and assigned descriptors that overlapped with other racial groups: heathen, morally inferior, savage, childlike, and lustful.[19]

This brief historical summary of racial formation in the United States captures how the arbitrary creation of racial categories and the fixing of ideas and "inherent" qualities to racialized bodies ultimately served the needs of White supremacy. My use of the concept of race throughout this study grows out of awareness that these arbitrary

markers for organizing human diversity and culture has *drastically* structured the lives of individuals and communities throughout history and, as we shall see, has shaped the kinds of narratives and images that populate the historic and contemporary media landscapes.

Interracial Sexuality

By extension, the concept of race shaped the terrain of sexuality, particularly as individuals from categories seen as racially distinct interacted romantically and sexually throughout the centuries. Since this particular issue lies at the heart of the dissertation, I will define the term "interracial sexuality" and broadly examine its centrality in the intertwined stories of US history and White supremacy. I will frequently employ the umbrella term "interracial sexuality" to broadly refer to any human expression that falls under the category of cross-racial sexual relations.[†††] Film scholar Susan Courtney has theorized interracial sexuality as including all of the following practices: interracial sexual intercourse, dating, marriage/cohabitation, multiracial childbearing and parenting, and any other expression of cross-racial desire (e.g., flirting, kissing, hugging, etc.).[20] Interracial sexuality applies to any pairing of two individuals from racial categories historically constructed as different. The term includes both heterosexual *and* same sex pairings; however, film history has overwhelmingly privileged heterosexual interracial couplings, and queer interracial sexuality will occupy a far smaller space in my overall

[†††] I first encountered the use of this term in the work of Gina Marchetti. Jane M. Gaines and Erica Chito Childs also make frequent use of the term. Susan Courtney favors the anachronistic word "miscegenation," a term that has largely fallen out of contemporary use. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), ix; Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001), 89; Erica Chito Childs, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 2; Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

analysis. The term also includes interracial rape and sexual violence, a facet of US history and society that becomes crucial in the depiction of interracial sexuality in film. I acknowledge the potential problematics involved in including interracial rape and violence sexual with "consensual" sexual acts under the banner of "interracial sexuality." However, even a cursory glance at the history of interracial depictions demonstrates the importance of such images of violence in the history of racialized sexuality on film. The brief mention of *The Birth of a Nation* above shows how the interracial rapist has stalked the American film since the silent era, and this troubling trope proves central to the evolution of cinematic interracial sexuality as well as the contentious discourses linking such representations to the history of race in the US. While the vast majority of the films discussed in this dissertation focus on consensual acts of interracial sexuality, a handful of texts include the threat of interracial rape (as in *The Birth of a Nation*) or actual acts of rape (almost always occurring off-screen), particularly in the blaxploitation films of the 1970s. When such disturbing scenes appear, I will try to thoughtfully and carefully handle these images, acknowledging the chasm between consensual acts of intimacy and sexual violence. I will also show how filmmakers throughout time have employed interracial rape and sexual violence for a variety of purposes, most often to make a political point about the fraught dynamics of race relations or to nakedly exploit the most lamentable male drives for profit at the box office.[‡‡‡]

I also theorize interracial sexuality as a broad category that includes a number of racial groups and interracial combinations. This approach contrasts with that of the

[‡‡‡] All of the scholars surveyed above include some analysis of images of rape in their larger explorations of cinematic interracial sexuality, analyzing the various ways that filmmakers frame such violent filmic encounters to make a variety of race claims. See Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, 10–65; Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 238–239, 170–188; Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 4–32, 62–93; Childs, *Fade to Black and White*, 129–130, 184–185.

scholars discussed above, who typically focus on depictions of one interracial combination. Marchetti exclusively examines Asian/White film couples, while Gaines and Childs focus almost entirely on Black/White cinematic sexuality. Courtney includes various forms of White-plus-other interracial pairings in her analysis, and while she overwhelmingly privileges Black/White couplings, she demonstrates how examining interracial sexuality as a broad cinematic trope uniting a variety of interracial pairings reveals fascinating representational patterns that link to the roiling racial discourses of a given era. The scholarship on cinematic interracial sexuality has generally avoided Courtney's method, perhaps because the unique history of racialization for each major US racial group makes a comparative approach particularly daunting. For example, Asian/White pairings, while historically controversial, have not faced the same regimes of resistance and violence as Black/White couples have throughout history, nor have they incited the same levels of discursive vitriol. One could argue that lumping representations of both pairings under the generic label of "interracial sexuality" smooths over too many fine historical distinctions. I certainly recognize that disparate race and gender pairings have faced different challenges throughout history, and since cinematic representations of various interracial couplings inevitably reference and draw from these unique histories, the image of Black/White sexuality has looked very different than the image of Asian/White sexuality over time. However, Courtney's approach demonstrates that all types of filmic interracial pairings can be grouped into clusters of similar framing conventions linked to particular historical periods. In other words, in any given era, films present interracial couples via repeatable representational patterns and framing conventions that are not specifically tied to the racial and gender identities of the two

individuals but to the discourses of the time.[§§§] I am similarly theorizing interracial sexuality as its own representational schema that includes a host of possible interracial pairings. Seeing interracial sexuality as a broad category brings insight into the overall history of the evolution of this representational film trope, and I join Courtney in furthering this important approach.

In light of the ever-expanding multiplicity of racial categories, identities, and sexual orientations in US society, cinematic interracial sexuality could *potentially* result in individuals paired from a number of race and gender combinations. However, the history of cinematic interracial sexuality evinces broad patterns that have historically privileged certain race and gender pairings. Unsurprisingly, these patterns both reflect and reify the logic of White male supremacy that largely drove the overall history of racial formation explored above. Specifically, the history of cinematic interracial sexuality has been dominated by these trends:

1. Films depicting interracial sexuality have overwhelmingly paired a White person with a non-White person.
2. In such films, the narrative typically centers on the White protagonist, giving greater attention to his/her story and ascribing them greater agency. The racial other's voice is frequently deemphasized, and the non-White person is typically cast as a supporting character in the White person's story. This holds true in films where the plot centers on interracial sexuality as well as films where it plays a marginal/secondary role.
3. That White person will most typically be paired with someone from one of the four following racial/ethnic groups: American Indian, Black, Latino/a, or Asian American. Other pairings have appeared, but these pairings have been the most commonly represented.

[§§§] For example, a cluster of films released during the late 1950s/early 1960s framed mixed couples via integrationist rhetoric as cinematic arguments for interracial marriage as a civil right. Films from the era represented Black/White, Asian/White, Latina/White, and American Indian/White couples across a variety of disparate texts using this frame. Although each of the racial groups represented in these films is characterized by very different histories and experiences, I will consistently demonstrate how filmmakers in any given era represented a variety of race and gender pairings through a larger representational frame that was not uniquely linked to any one interracial pairing.

4. Out of all potential White-plus-non-White combinations, Black/White pairings have overwhelmingly received the most cinematic attention. This proves true both in numerical terms—Black/White sexual pairings appear in the majority of interracial films—and in discursive terms—Black/White pairings in film have incited the most discourse and appear in the most controversial and influential interracial films.
5. Although both White women and White men regularly appear in depictions of interracial sexuality, the White person in the relationship is male a majority of the time. Additionally, White men involved in interracial sexuality are typically given more agency and power than White women in interracial relationships.
6. The overwhelming majority of these films have been created—written, produced, and/or directed—by White men.

These trends are not hard rules that apply to every film under review here. They should be understood as broad patterns, and although we will observe some notable exceptions, these patterns characterize the representation of interracial sexuality throughout all historical eras, even the present time.

American filmmakers did not invent the trends for the depiction of interracial sexuality outlined above, and the complex ways in which cinema has presented interracial romance and desire grew out of the larger troubled history of racial/sexual relations in the US, both before and after its founding as nation. Concerns and obsessions over interracial sexual contact constituted a major force in the overall project of racial formation throughout US history, and fears of interracial mixture drove a powerful regime in which White lawmakers throughout US history passed and enforced so-called "miscegenation laws" to regulate race/sex boundaries.[****] I will more fully discuss the

[****] The word "miscegenation" appeared centuries after the introduction of statutes regulating interracial unions, although historical analyses of such laws often employ the term retroactively. During President Abraham Lincoln's 1864 reelection bid, Democrats launched an aggressive anti-Lincoln smear campaign denouncing emancipation as an insidious Republican plot to promote interracial mixing. An anonymously-authored pamphlet titled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro* (1864) began circulating in anti-abolitionist circles, marking the introduction of a neologism combining the Latin words *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race). Written from the perspective of a radical Republican, *Miscegenation* asserted the inherent equality of Blacks and Whites and recommended interracial mixing as a laudable outcome of abolition, urging the Republican Party to adopt it as a core

rise and fall of this now archaic American legal tradition in Chapter Two, but a cursory glance at miscegenation laws evinces certain patterns that would be echoed in the representation of interracial sexuality in popular film. These laws, which stretched from the early colonial period to the late 1960s, were not enacted to prevent interracial marriage as a general practice, but primarily existed to maintain *White* racial purity. White lawmakers did not generally worry about Black/Asian unions or marriages between Latinos/as and American Indians. Miscegenation laws almost exclusively targeted Whites intermixing with various non-Whites, a dynamic observed as early as the colonial period. As Europeans settled in colonies like Maryland and Virginia in the late 17th century and early 18th century, the growing presence of non-Europeans—Indian natives outside of their borders and enslaved Africans inside of them—presented a series of conundrums. What was to be done if a "Christian" married an Indian "savage?" What happened if a free White person married an African slave? More perplexingly, what was the status of the children of such unions, particularly the offspring of a White free person and an African slave? Were such individuals free or not?

Maryland was the first colony to sort out this mess with a 1661 statute that discouraged White women from marrying African men, downgrading a woman's status to slave if she married an enslaved African man.[21] A 1662 Virginia Colony law settled the issue of freedom vs. bondage for mixed race offspring by declaring that the "condition of the mother" decided the child's status.[22] In other words, a free mother birthed a free child, while an enslaved mother begat a slave child. These laws, created by

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political plank. The tract was, in fact, a hoax written by a surreptitious anti-abolitionist trying to frighten away would-be Lincoln voters. While its publication did not stop Lincoln's reelection, it did contribute the word "miscegenation" to the national lexicon. The term "miscegenation law" eventually came to refer to any legal statute regulating interracial marriage. Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *The Journal of Negro History* 34, no. 3 (July 1949): 274–343.

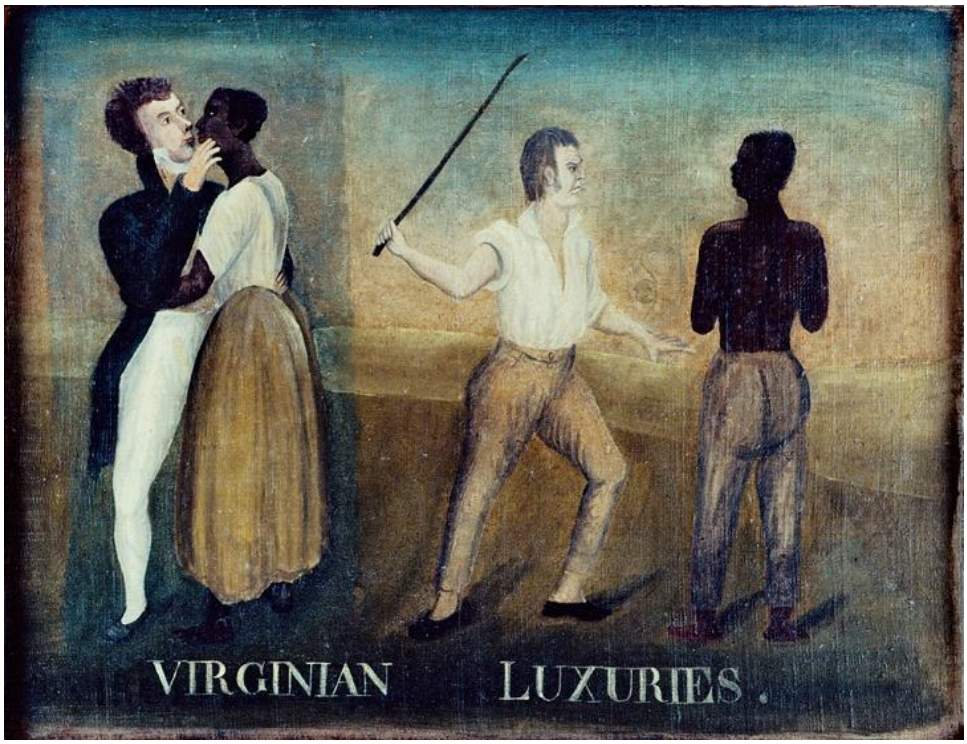

Figure 5. Unknown Artist, *Virginian Luxuries*, ca. 1825. The arresting painting *Virginian Luxuries* depicts the "luxuries" afforded White masters under America's race-based system of slavery, including sexual control over Black women as well as physical control over Black men. (Encyclopedia Virginia)

White men, afforded certain "luxuries" for White masters and overseers who routinely raped slave women with impunity, kept them as mistresses, and/or increased their slave population through fathering mixed race offspring.[23] These legal loopholes tied interracial sex relations to property, essentially permitting White slaveholders to gratify their sexual appetites while creating more chattel without having to purchase them.[24] Virginia eventually expanded its laws to include other racial groups with a 1691 statute declaring it illegal for "negroes, mulattoes, and Indians" to intermarry with Whites *period*, with a punishment of banishment from the settlement for offenders. The purpose of this law was clearly stated: "[F]or the prevention of that abominable mixture and

spurious issue which hereafter may increase in this dominion"—in other words, the prevention of mixed children overtaking the land, threatening White purity with their racial ambiguity. This created a perverse paradox: children of consensual interracial unions were considered "abominable," while law and custom essentially winked at White men who had children via raping Black women.[25]

These laws prove to be extremely gendered, generally permitting White men a large degree of sexual agency while obsessively regulating the interracial desires of White women, particularly for enslaved African men. Importantly, these laws exhibit an almost fanatical anxiety over the prevention of what one 1664 Maryland colonial statute identified as "shamefull Matches"—the sexual mixing of White women and Black men. Maryland's law insisted that such unions were "always to the Satisfaction of their [White women's] Lascivious & Lustfull desires," framing interracial desire as inherently debased, and scores of other similar decrees that followed in the subsequent centuries obsessively strove to protect the "purity" of White womanhood from the pollution of Blackness.[26] This burden to protect White womanhood dovetailed with powerful fears about the sexual ravages of racial others, particularly Black men, who generally bore the horrific brunt of White sexual racism. Thomas Jefferson typified such a view in his treatise *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) in a passage detailing the "inherent" sexual qualities of Black men: "They are more ardent after their female [than White men]: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation."[27] Jefferson's words capture the tendency for Whites to hypersexualize racial others, seeing non-Whites as controlled by "ungovernable and excessive sexual nature[s]" and brimming with irrational desires that threatened the

Figure 6. L. Seaman, *What Miscegenation Is*, ca. 1865. Lawmakers throughout US history exhibited a heightened fear of White women mixing with Black men, and they policed this particular race and gender boundary with a zealous fervor. After Lincoln's reelection in 1864, L. Seaman published *What Miscegenation Is*, a pamphlet depicting a grossly caricatured illustration of Black man kissing a White woman as the much-reviled fruits of Lincoln's return to the White House. This image would have inspired horror and revulsion in the minds of most contemporary Whites in the North and the South. (The Internet Archive)

ostensible chastity of White sexual traditions.[28] Despite Jefferson's dispassionate estimation of Black sexuality, a deep racial paranoia has gripped the White imagination throughout US history, and miscegenation laws were particularly obsessed with protecting White woman from non-White men and their alleged propensity to sexual excess. These laws existed to keep both White women and these threatening racial and sexual others in their place, and non-White men endured the most extreme retributions for such infractions, real or imagined. Such fears and myths drove the proliferation of lynching in the decades after the Civil War, an era where Whites in the North and the

South murdered thousands of Black men accused of (typically imagined) sexual relations with White women.[29]

Representation and Framing

The overall contours of miscegenation law parallel the broad representational patterns of cinematic interracial sexuality discussed above, evincing a parallel White androcentrism. To clarify, I am not saying that miscegenation law directly dictated the cinematic representation of interracial sexuality, or that film directors of any era consciously drew on such legal frameworks for narrative inspiration. I am saying that the fields of miscegenation law and cinematic interracial sexuality were both largely shaped by overlapping race/gender ideologies, and therefore unsurprisingly constructed interracial sexuality in complementary ways. Both reflect the racist and gendered views that dominated US history, reproducing the White, male-centric supremacy that suppressed White female agency and placed non-Whites on a racial hierarchy of relative inferiority. However, within these broad contours, cinematic interracial sexuality took a number of representational forms. Filmmakers throughout history shaped and molded the image of the interracial couple (consciously or not) to prove a variety of racial points. Sometimes filmmakers reproduced existing White racial ideologies (again, consciously or not), while other times they attempted to disrupt or counter the practices of White supremacy. Frequently, they evinced some ambivalent combination of the two. We have already seen how US lawmakers constructed interracial sexuality via the written law. Let us now more particularly examine how discourses of interracial sexuality became represented, or "framed," via the narrative film.

Throughout this study, I will frequently employ (and have already employed) the terminology of representation and film framing, two interrelated concepts that require

further explanation. In its most basic definition, to "represent" means to symbolically display or re-present something in a different form. All filmic images represent their subject matter in that recorded images are actual captured likenesses of real actors.[††††] Yet, films do not merely represent the world "as is." Filmic representations are inherently ideologically charged, and they work by constructing subjects in particular ways that bolster or reject a range of political, moral, or cultural positions about their subjects.[30] This process is also known as "framing." Erving Goffman describes framing as "the organization of experience," a fundamental human function by which people make sense of perception and social realities, providing "background understanding" for human endeavors.[31] Social scientists Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado have applied Goffman's ideas specifically to media representations. In the of context representations, frames become "interpretational structures that, consciously and unconsciously, shape what we see and how we see it . . . Framing refers to understanding a story you already know and saying, 'Oh yeah, that one.'"[32] Frames create mental shortcuts via familiar interpretive schemas: easily recognizable and repeatable characters, types, storylines, themes, and settings. Frames reduce complexity, presenting certain "truths" about their subjects while screening out competing ideas and information, much like a picture frame crops a photograph to simultaneously reveal and obscure parts of the image.

Our survey of miscegenation law has already demonstrated the process of representation and framing—in writing and enforcing such laws, legislators represented/framed interracial sexuality in a variety of ways: as a threat to White racial

[††††] I will primarily employ the word "actor" as a gender-neutral term applied to anyone, regardless of gender, who appears in a film playing an acting role. I will only use the word "actress" to delineate a female actor when quoting a source that uses the term or when referencing something that includes the word in its name, e.g., the Academy Award for Best Actress.

purity, as an unnatural aberration that demanded punishment, as a smokescreen for White male sexual privilege via interracial rape, etc. In the history of popular film, racial minorities have historically been framed via a set of recognizable cinematic stereotypes. For example, film historian Donald Bogle argues that Hollywood films have largely framed Black characters via five basic racial stereotypes: the subservient "Uncle Tom," the buffoonish "coon," the "tragic mulatto," the sassy "mammy," and the savage "buck."[33] Other racial minorities have been similarly subjected to racist framing traditions. Native Americans have been most frequently framed as sexually exotic "Indian maidens," bloodthirsty male savages, or, at the height of the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as seers of radical hippie chic and spiritual connectedness.[34] Latinos/as have historically been framed as passionate female spitfires whose presence can liven up the staid proceedings of White culture, and/or as suave, seductive male lovers brimming with passion and sexual allure.[35] Examples abound, but what is important to note is that media frames make claims about how people of particular identities "are," distilling and visually rendering cultural discourses about race, gender, sexuality, class, and a host of other subject positions into easily consumable and understandable representational patterns.

While the works of the scholars discussed above have invaluably modelled how to examine and interrogate the framing of interracial sexuality in US film, my research further diverges from theirs in terms of my understanding of framing. Generally, these theorists see frames as hegemonic and total—a representational regime marks any given period, performing White male desire and privilege in the vast majority of interracial films. The frames change and evolve as historical periods shift, but the dominant

representation of interracial sexuality almost always remains regressively "conservative," serving the gendered needs of Whiteness.[‡‡‡‡] I, however, see multiple discursive frames in any given era, often coexisting and typically offering conflicting images of interracial sexuality. Sometimes popular films reproduce the dominant racial ideology, framing the interracial couple via the racist wisdom of the day. Other times, films subvert and undermine the dominant frame, offering counterframes that challenge or transgress the official racial narrative. Any given cultural era exhibits a multitude of texts that offer divergent constructions of interracial sexuality, producing a discursive cacophony of images competing for attention. To further complicate things, some films mix frames, presenting multiple and even contradictory representations in the same text, presenting ambivalent messages on the meaning of interracial sexuality. In short, I see the narrative of cinematic interracial sexuality as a representational struggle over the meaning of such pairings. My research will demonstrate that the story of interracial sexuality in film cannot be boiled down to an oversimplified narrative denouncing the textual mischiefs of hegemonic White maleness, as the tale has often been told, and that many have worked to buck these trends from in and outside the system.

Periodization, Text Selection, and Film Analysis

Framing trends do not remain static—the framing conventions of any given era are always undergoing a process of evolution and revision, and these representational schema always link to previous frames which they build upon, reference, reject, and/or revise. In other words, while cinematic representations of interracial sexuality relate

[‡‡‡‡] Gaines proves to be the exception to this rule. She focuses extensively on race movies—silent films produced by and for Blacks that offered cinematic protests to texts produced by directors like D. W. Griffith. See Chapter 1 for a more robust discussion of the race movie industry and its role in producing filmic counterframes to the dominant frames produced by White filmmakers.

discursively to US society, they are also in conversation with other film texts which incite reference, allusion, homage, and repudiation in the work of subsequent filmmakers for decades to come. Filmic depictions of interracial sexuality over time can be historically *periodized*, meaning that dominant representational patterns can be clustered into particular historical periods or eras typified by reoccurring frames. In any given period, certain frames for interracial sexuality dominate, and these representations shift and alter as discourses about race evolve, expand, or contract. The act of historical periodization, the breaking down of history into distinct periods or epochs, is characterized by what historian Lawrence Besserman calls a "double ambiguity." On one hand, periodization proves highly useful and largely unavoidable in historical writing. On the other hand, it inherently reduces complexity and forces a narrative onto a series of events.[§§§§] Yet, the inherent constructedness of historical periods does not invalidate the act of periodization itself, and periodization can be done right, particularly if approached with the full recognition that epochal schemas are themselves constructions and interpretations of past events. I will employ the oft-used historical construction of the decade, periodizing the years 1956-2001 into four key decades—the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—one chapter for each. I am using "decade" as a flexible historical construction linked to the major discourses and filmic representations of interracial sexuality and not *necessarily* tied to an actual ten year period beginning with the numeral "0." More specifically, I will begin each decade with the year that one or more films introduced the decade's dominant

[§§§§] In recent decades, some have criticized periodization, emphasizing the constructedness of historical period-casting and expressing suspicion of such projects altogether. Frederic Jameson argues that historical periods "always secretly imply or project narratives or 'stories'—narrative interpretations—of the historical sequence in which such individual periods take their place and from which they derive their significance." Yet ironically, Jameson himself relies on periodization in his best-known work, *Postmodernism* (1991). Lawrence L Besserman, *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 3-4; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

frame and ending in the year of marked by the frame's decline and/or the emergence of a major counterframe. For example, the first chapter covers the 1960s, a decade that I periodize from 1956 through 1967 because the former year marked the appearance of a film introducing the decade's dominant frame while the latter stands both as the frame's high water mark and its swift decline. The final section of this chapter will more comprehensively outline the parameters of each decade and discuss how these periods are dictated by the major films under review. Before doing so, I must defend my choice to focus largely on interracial images in the movies (as opposed to other media), detail how films have been selected, and explain how they will be analyzed.

An astute reader may reasonably ask, "Why film?" Interracial images permeate all realms of historic and contemporary US media, including the movies, television, the stage, popular music, literature, and the ever-expanding landscape of the internet. Why select this particular medium, especially since cinema arguably no longer holds the power and importance that it once did? In response, I argue that film remains a particularly important medium through which to explore the narrative of interracial sexual representation. According to Robert Sklar, motion pictures appeared in the late 19th century as the "first modern mass media" and remained the most popular and influential realm of mass culture until the late 1940s.[36] As radio and television emerged to undermine film's national dominance, the movie industry struggled to adjust yet remained extremely powerful, and it has since enjoyed new channels of distribution through outlets that have ostensibly threatened its hegemony. Movies became indispensable products for cable television and home video markets (including VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray), and more recently, online video-on-demand and internet streaming

services. In other words, film powerfully endures as a central component of the US and global media industry, and it has arguably occupied a central role (and pre-internet, *the* central role) in transmitting images and narratives of interracial sex across the nation. Furthermore, film remains the only medium to bookend the 20th century, appearing before and enduring beyond this crucial century. The longevity, popularity, and accessibility of the movies across race and class boundaries has led film scholar Robert Burgoyne to posit cinema as especially crucial in "fostering a sense of national identity . . . [and] creating concepts of nation."[37] Courtney expresses similar views, insisting on the primacy of cinema's role in "the productions of race and gender in twentieth-century culture."[38] Seen in this light, cinema stands not simply as one medium among many, but as a crucial locus in the larger project of nation-building, a sight of debate about the meaning of race and interracial sexuality in discourse of "Americanness" so crucial to the history of this nation.

Any given era potentially produces scores or even hundreds of films depicting some form of interracial sexuality, far more than can be analyzed here. To this end, I have chosen for each chapter a body of texts that film historians Bruce F. Kawin and Gerald Mast identify as "important," a flexible qualifier that characterizes a film that proves to be one or more of the following: culturally or historically influential, popular, financially successful, innovative (in terms of content and/or form), and/or representative of a larger historical trend.[39] Kawin and Mast speak about film history in general, and I am applying their concept of film importance specifically to movies with depictions of interracial sexuality, selecting the important films that best represent the frames set out for analysis in each chapter. While there is obviously a degree of subjectivity to this

selection process, I will frequently supply in-text justifications for my choices. For example, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Jungle Fever* stand out as obvious choices in that both were extremely popular interracial films that have become the most oft-referenced filmic depictions of interracial sexuality. However, my study will also include a variety of more obscure texts chosen for other reasons, such as *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), an independent film about a Black lesbian who becomes entangled in a romance with a privileged White woman. *The Watermelon Woman* was neither "popular" nor "financially successful" by Hollywood standards. Yet, scholars have judged this small film as aesthetically groundbreaking for its self-reflexive mixture of documentary and narrative structures, and although it only played the arthouse circuit, its status as the first widely distributed feature by a Black lesbian filmmaker makes it an important historical artifact. It also stands as one of the only representations of queer interracial sexuality from a Black female perspective in the history of US film, making it an important text for its uniqueness.[*****]

Given the vastness of the historical film landscape, I am further narrowing my research to feature length narrative films produced primarily in the United States.[†††††] Feature length narrative films comprise the bulk of film history, and this delimiter

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[*****] The reader can and should assume that I have seen all of the films discussed in this dissertation. Some of the texts were not available to me, being either lost to the ravages of time or stored in a film archive inaccessible to me. If my analysis includes films that I have not seen, plot points have been drawn from scholarly literature or online film databases (such as Turner Classic Movies), and will be cited with a footnote. Unless otherwise noted, I have seen all of the films in this dissertation.

[†††††] I acknowledge the ambiguity of these qualifiers, and wish to clarify. Film historian David A. Cook defines "feature-length" as any film over 45 minutes, although the current industry standard is 90 to 120 minutes. As to "narrative" film, I am again using Cook's definition of a "film whose structure follows a story line of some sort." The qualifiers "US/non-US" should be seen as a guideline rather than a srict rule. Many American features throughout history have been jointly-produced by non-US film studios, problematizing this distinction. Additionally, the late 20th/early 21st Century saw the film industry conglomerating into international entertainment corporations with operations around the globe, further troubling the label. To clarify, I am looking at films made *primarily* in the US *for* the US film market, and will not be examining films *primarily* produced in other countries for other markets. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 4th ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 933, 936.

excludes depictions of interracial sexuality in documentaries, narrative shorts, experimental films, and pornographic videos; my focus on US films also eliminates movies produced in other countries. Additionally, my analysis will include both films produced by the Hollywood movie system as well as independent films that range from arthouse pictures aimed at an educated audience to low budget exploitation films designed to capitalize on risqué material that mainstream films historically would not touch. Occasionally, I will bend the rules of this heuristic when a film outside of these boundaries adds crucial depth or nuance to my analysis. In such cases, I will justify the incorporation of the film or films either in-text or via footnote.[‡‡‡‡‡] In focusing on feature length narrative films, I am aligning myself with the existing scholarship on interracial sexuality in US film, including that of Marchetti, Courtney, and Childs. However, my research on this point further diverges from (or perhaps, adds to) these scholars' works in that, collectively, they primarily focus on texts produced by mainstream Hollywood studios, while largely passing over texts produced outside of these film factories, including those emerging from exploitation and/or "indie" film traditions.[§§§§§] To this end, this dissertation will draw from all of these film pools, including traditional mass market Hollywood product, socially-conscious texts from Hollywood insiders, independent arthouse movies, and identity-conscious works created by directors seeking to represent their subaltern subject positions.

[‡‡‡‡‡] For example, US director Melvin Van Peebles' *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (1968), a film about a tragic interracial romance between an American GI and a French woman, was filmed, funded, and primarily screened in France, placing it outside of the scope of this paper. However, Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) stands as one of the most important interracial texts of the 1970s, and *Three Day Pass* demands inclusion in my analysis as crucial background information in discussing the seminal *Sweetback*.

[§§§§§] Gaines stands as the exception to this rule in her focusing on independent race movies of the silent era.

Finally, we come to the issue of how these films will be analyzed. I see all popular texts as participants in a discourse with the culture from which they emerge. I agree with cultural studies scholars Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, who argue that popular texts are not "discrete entities that stand alone . . . [Rather, they] exist in relation to a broad range of other discourses, placing media production . . . within a vast social and cultural configuration of competing voices and positions."[40] The "configuration" surrounding film texts demands consideration, and my work will consistently seek to read the cinematic representation of interracial pairings via their original discursive context, and vice versa. More specifically, cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality can best be interpreted against the social backdrop from which they emerge. Filmmakers frame their depictions of interracial sexuality using discursive materials widely available in the general culture, and a rigorous analysis of these texts must link these films to their larger racial, sexual, and political contexts. I have limited the "vastness" of the context by drawing on particular historical resources into order to direct my analysis of these films. First, I draw from a wealth of secondary historical accounts examining the relevant political, social, cultural, and racial dimensions of the decades under review. This will allow me to read these films' narratives as directly dealing with issues of contemporary social import. Second, I include a number of primary historical artifacts germane to these texts. These primary sources include data sets (such Census numbers tracking interracial marriages and opinion polls) that capture an aspect of the shifting attitudes towards race relations and interracial sexuality. I will also draw from primary sources related to the films themselves, especially promotional posters/advertisements, box office revenues, and film awards. Promotional artifacts can

demonstrate how the films were marketed to contemporary viewers, while revenue reports and awards can track their financial and critical impact. Director/film star biographies also offer keen insights into the meanings of these films as they were originally produced, exhibited, and debated.

Thirdly, I have heeded recent calls to consider the historic reception of film texts, acknowledging that the release of any given film incites "interpretive and affective experiences [which] circulate historically in specific social formations." Whenever possible or productive, I will draw upon what film scholar Janet Staiger calls reception "traces"—critical reviews, print articles, letters to the editor, publicity materials, and, when available, oral accounts from nonprofessional filmgoers documenting how viewers of various identity positions read particular films in the original years of release.[41] No one reception trace can speak for all viewers, and certain items (particularly nonprofessional oral accounts and viewer responses) proved relatively rare. However, Mike Chopra-Gant argues that even professional critical reviews can help the film researcher better understand "the wider social context, the debates and discourses of the time with which those viewers would have been familiar and which would have provided frames of reference within which to make meanings from the material provided by the film."[42] To this end, I have assembled a sizable archive of historical traces, largely from newspaper databases, that have become an important tool in my overall project of placing texts in their contexts and identifying the key discourses in which these films were participating.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One, "Imitations of Life: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1903-1955," provides a relatively brief albeit crucial historical survey of interracial sexuality in US

films prior to the period under review. Although this dissertation focuses largely on the years 1956 through 2001, the films released during the latter half of the 20th century only become intelligible by understanding the dominant representational trends pre-1956. Beginning with the first recorded incident of interracial intimacy in the silent short *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903) and roughly ending in late 1955, we will examine the dominant frames and major films contributing to the movie industry's discourse on the shifting meaning of interracial sexuality. This section is crucial to my overall research project for, as we shall see, most of the major interracial films post-1956 were to some degree responding to pre-1956 representations of interracial sexuality in ways that served to either reify, revise, or reject earlier constructions.

Chapter Two, "Marching Down the Aisle: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1956-1967," covers a period in which the activism and rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement largely seized the nation's racial discourse. Although by no means in lock step with the Movement, the film industry contributed to this era of racial protest through a spate of films framing interracial sexuality as a right not to be denied by White supremacism. A 1956 revision in the Motion Picture Production Code permitted this cinematic trend by allowing for scenes of "miscegenation" to appear on screen. Immediately following this regulatory alteration, two key interracial films appeared, *The Searchers* (1956) and *Giant* (1956), both epic westerns marking the moment when films began to frame interracial sexuality as a civil right not be denied by a racist society. The following year, *Island in the Sun* (1957) became the first movie to actually depict a Black/White coupling, even allowing one interracial pair a "Hollywood ending" in which they walked "happily ever after" into the sunset. However, the Civil Rights frame flourished alongside a competing

frame that presented interracial sexuality as a miscegenation spectacle, a lurid display of debased desire and fetishized flesh. Seedy B-movies like *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) capitalized on a perverse obsession with interracial sex and mixed race bodies, while tawdry exploitation pictures like *Murder in Mississippi* (1965) prodded popular segregationist fears of blurred racial and sexual lines brought on by integration. Chapter Two concludes with an extensive analysis of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, perhaps the most iconic interracial romance film of all time and the quintessential cinematic text arguing for interracial love as a civil right.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner appeared at the end of cultural turn and not the beginning of one, and as the Movement rhetoric of integration evolved into Black Power, many accused this "progressive" film of peddling outmoded ideas from a bygone era. Chapter Three, "The Revolution Will Not be Interracialized: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1968-1979," examines the state of cinematic interracial sexuality in an era when the politics of revolutionary racial separatism superseded the ethos of integrationist nonviolence. Black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles captured the zeitgeist, framing interracial sexuality as an eroticized weapon in a racial rebellion through his controversial film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). Concurrently, a wave of radical White auteurs like Arthur Penn and Hal Ashby stormed the gates of "Old" Hollywood to release personal yet confrontational films such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *The Landlord* (1970), texts that similarly placed interracial sexuality on a contentious countercultural battle for the meaning of race in a post-1960s United States. As in the previous decade, this frame coexisted uneasily with a contending frame that essentially revamped the previous decade's miscegenation spectacle for an era of racial consciousness. Violent,

sexually explicit blaxploitation films like *Honky* (1971) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) coopted *Sweetback*'s rhetoric to present "revolutionary" interracial sex as an arena of erotic exhibitionism.

Throughout the 1970s, a so-called "silent majority" of Americans expressed growing resentments towards countercultural radicalism and racial identity claims, lashing back at all things remotely "liberal" in US politics and popular culture. Chapter Four, "Colorblind Love: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1980-1989," notes a drastic shift in cinematic interracial relations that narrates the resurgence of a dominant conservative discourse, often marked with the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. An ex-Hollywood actor, Reagan argued that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved its goals and proven the efficacy of "colorblindness" as a panacea to all racial ills. Depictions of interracial sexuality shifted with/participated in this colorblind cultural rhetoric with a series of youth-oriented films that framed interracial couples as non-spectacular, ordinary manifestations of a burgeoning "consensus" that racial difference no longer mattered in American society. Teen musicals *Fame* (1980) and *Breakin'* (1984) presented 1980s youth culture as a racially integrated party in which differences dissolved in light of a shared love of music and dance, framing interracial sexuality as one big colorblind party. The romantic comedy *Soul Man* (1986) depicted colorblind love on campus as the inevitable result of affirmative action, proposing interracial romance as a balm for the soothing nation's collective racial ills. Concurrently, a crop of films proposed a counterframe to colorblindness, insisting that race still mattered, albeit in ways that performed the era's conservative tenor. Big budget blockbusters ushered in a resurgence of films framing interracial intimacy in shockingly regressive terms,

presenting mixed pairings as racialized sexual fetishes. *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *Year of the Dragon* (1985) exploited age-old stereotypes about the over-sexed, potent racial other, while *Angel Heart* (1987) brought the exploitation film's interracial exoticism to the multiplexes.

The 1990s marked a veritable "return of the repressed" as various marginalized groups grew increasingly vocal in articulating the meaning of identity in a multicultural society divided by difference. Chapter Five, "Mixed Reviews: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1990-2001," unpacks this contradictory era in which filmic depictions of mixed coupling evinced a kind of representational dualism. A diverse wave of subaltern filmmakers emerged to release a flurry of tests framing interracial sexuality as an explosive landmine on a multicultural battleground, flouting the dominant logic of colorblindness. Spike Lee's contentious *Jungle Fever* rejected colorblindness outright, presenting interracial sex as a deeply controversial and contested act which invited onlookers to take sides and wage rhetorical war over its pervasive presence. A new generation of identity-based auteurs joined Lee in cinematically representing the meanings of interracial sexuality within subcultural worlds outside of the White mainstream, most notably Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* which dissected queer interracial sexuality from the perspective of a Black lesbian. The "rediscovery" of identity also renewed battles over the place of difference and domination in US history, leading White independent filmmakers like John Sayles to respond with *Lone Star* (1996), a murder mystery in which the intertwined histories of race, sex, and power continue to haunt the unsuspecting residents of a small Texas town. Despite the flurry of identity conscious filmmaking, the colorblind frame ruled the decade, most notably in

The Bodyguard, an interracial romance blockbuster that framed such couples as incidental fixtures of a post-Civil Rights "consensus." The following years saw an explosion of incidental interracialism across a variety of film genres, while Hollywood proudly promoted a generation of mixed race movie stars—racially-ambiguous actors who exploited their mixedness to appeal to a diverse demographic, inviting some commentators to declare their fame and broad appeal as "proof" of the triumph of colorblindness.

This dissertation concludes with a brief epilogue that broadly outlines the important links between this interdisciplinary narrative and the crucial racial debates that have erupted since 2001, linking the interracial discourses of the 1990s with the Age of Obama. Specifically, I will argue that the 1990s essentially established all of the major cinematic frames for interracial sexuality that filmmakers still employ today. US films have for the past fifteen years been engaging in representational negotiation between a dominant colorblind frame arguing (either tacitly or explicitly) that "race does not matter" and a less dominant although no less insistent frame arguing that "race matters" a great deal. I will then offer suggestions for future study, detailing ways in which additional research could add to this field of study and address particular issues and texts that could not be covered here. We will also observe the "long shadow" of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, discussing how it still influences the persistent image of the interracial couple in contemporary Hollywood film, and how this text continues to resurface in contemporary debates about race, rights, and Black/White relations. I will close with a meditation on the significance of my research in light of contemporary racial debates,

tying my work to the significance of Barack Obama's landmark presidency to the "Black Lives Matter" movement protesting police violence in cities like Ferguson, Missouri.

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Chapter One

Imitations of Life: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1903-1955

In the core of the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted; rooted so deeply that it is not always recognized when it shows at the surface . . . Taken alone, it furnishes a sufficient mainspring for the rationalization of all the complexes of white racial superiority.[1]

James Weldon Johnson, 1933

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them . . . They know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking . . . [For this reason] pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing . . . Miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden.[2]

The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930

Introduction

In Warren Beatty's political satire *Bulworth* (1998), White Democratic politician Jay Bulworth (Warren Beatty) faces a looming defeat in his reelection bid for US Senator from California. Disgusted by the falsehood of American politics and exhausted by his fabricated public persona, he radically embraces truth-telling, shocking a church full of Black supporters by admitting that politicians exploit African Americans for their votes and then ignore them following election season. Reinvigorated by this experience, Senator Bulworth immediately becomes a media sensation, attracting a faithful following of acolytes enamored with his candor and sudden "discovery" of Black urban culture. Bulworth starts hanging out at a Black dance club and appropriating the rhyming cadences of hip hop music, delivering his scandalously honest public speeches in the form of rhyming raps. He also attracts the attention of Nina (Halle Berry), a Black activist from a blighted South Central neighborhood, who schools him in the complicated issues of urban poverty and race. The two become romantically involved as his popularity

grows, and they ultimately go public about their relationship, wading arm-in-arm through an ocean of giddy journalists and paparazzi. Cameras flash as reporters shout frenzied questions, and the crowd reaches a fever pitch as the two stop and engage in a lengthy, passionate kiss. Seconds before the kiss, a homeless person named Rastaman (played ironically by Black radical poet Amiri Baraka) quizzically shouts to the delirious crowed, "Why you lookin' like you never seen this before?"

What exactly is the "this" that we have apparently seen before? "This" can be read in at least two interrelated ways: first, as one instance in a long, distinctly American history of sexual encounters between two people of different races, and second, as another entry in voluminous library of cinematic images depicting interracial sexuality. To the first point, the words of Black writer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson prove instructive. Johnson, after a decades-long fight for racial equality and justice, reflected in his 1933 autobiography *Along This Way* that the "sex factor" remained deeply rooted at the heart of American racial issues. "Other factors are obvious," he stated, "but regardless of how we deal with these, the race situation will continue to be acute as long as the sex factor persists."[3] Seen in this light, Rastaman's question points to the tumultuous, complicated history of interracial sexual relations in the United States, a factor that has driven laws, social practices, and ideologies about racial difference since the era of British colonization. Although statutes governing interracial marriage and (by some accounts) attitudes towards interracial intimacy have changed dramatically over the decades, history continues to repeat itself as mediated images of interracial sexuality provoke comment and controversy, and Rastaman points to the sexual roots that continue to feed racial discourses in American society. The

second reading of “this” underscores the long tradition of representing interracial sexual desire in US narrative films. *Bulworth* appeared in a decade when scenes of interracial intimacy were flooding the big screen, most notably through popular texts like *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *The Bodyguard* (1992), films about which a majority of *Bulworth*’s audience probably knew. Rastaman incredulously asserts this as old news while paradoxically commenting on the potential spectacle and hysteria created by onscreen interracial sex and romance.

We have arguably “seen this before” in countless films and other electronic texts, and in the years since *Bulworth*’s release, interracial pairings have become increasingly commonplace fixtures of the media landscape. However, few modern filmgoers appreciate the pervasiveness of interracial sexuality in historic US film. There remains a largely-unearthed cinematic trove of interracial images stretching back to the motion picture’s earliest days, a lost genealogy of complicated and contradictory texts that narrate the shifting discourses surrounding race, sex, and the intersection of the two. Throughout the decades, these films have alternately entertained, enlightened, and scandalized audiences, eliciting a chorus of comment ranging from laudatory praise to apocalyptic condemnation. In fact, the film industry at one time considered cinematic interracial sexuality so problematic that it explicitly banned such depictions in the Motion Picture Production Code, an industry standard adopted by the major studios in the 1930s to regulate censorable film content. The Production Code accepted the entertainment industry’s responsibility to promote “moral progress” and “correct thinking,” explicitly citing filmic depictions of “sex relationship[s] between the white and black races” as contrary to that lofty aim. However, the nation’s complicated racial/sexual history could

not suppress the proliferation of interracial narratives and cinematic images before, during, and after the Code's miscegenetic embargo. As we shall see, lax enforcement characterized the early years of the Code, and the Code did not forbid pairing Whites with Asians, American Indians, Latino/as, etc. The Code's authors dropped the miscegenation ban in 1956, and Hollywood quickly explored its newfound representational freedom with a cycle of films exploring the racial and sexual politics of Black/White romance.

Rastaman's comment in *Bulworth* arguably points to the long and fascinating cinematic history of interracial sexuality, a story that becomes more obscure and distant with the passage of time. I conceived this dissertation as a correction to this historical amnesia. While this dissertation primarily focuses on the years immediately following the lifting of the cinematic miscegenation ban, the cinematic depiction of interracial sexuality began long before the ban began or was lifted. This chapter offers a schematic historical overview of interracial sexuality in US cinema from 1903 through 1955, order to contextualize the more in-depth examination films produced after 1956. This chapter is not a comprehensive history of interracial sexuality in pre-1956 cinema, and readers may find themselves wanting more elaborate analyses of the films or detailed discussions of how these texts link to a variety of contemporary social, political, and cultural trends. Subsequent chapters will offer more of this type of detailed analysis. I would direct readers wanting more information on interracial sexuality in the silent through the classical Hollywood era to the handful of scholarly monographs on the subject.[4] This chapter surveys the major images, tropes, and themes used by filmmakers prior to 1956, establishing the background knowledge necessary to understand what was to come. These

films also became discursive fodder for post-1956 depictions of interracial sexuality, providing a stock of frames that filmmakers would reference, repudiate, and/or reify for decades.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the years 1903-1926, covering the depiction of interracial sexuality in the early film shorts and silent features. The silent era produced three major representational frames that stood in a frame/counterframe relationship. The first frame represented interracial sexuality as a sexual threat, a blight and a horror deserving ridicule for minor infractions and violent retribution for the most grievous interracial trespasses. D. W. Griffith's pathbreaking (although divisive) film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) would come to epitomize this frame in its portrayal of Black masculinity as a menacing, marauding threat to its ostensible opposite—White femininity. Griffith's film would be joined by scores of similar texts that framed a variety of racial others as sexual threats to Whiteness, particularly presenting Latino/as and Asians as rapacious beasts. The second frame presented interracial sexuality as a tragedy, a fool's errand that produced heartbreak and sorrow for the misguided souls who deigned to leap across the color line for love. Interracial romance melodramas like *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) typically ended with the non-White woman's death, while films like *The Octoroon* (1913) personified interracial tragedy via "mulatto" characters, mixed race individuals whose tortured liminal state drove them to destructive decisions. The third frame emerged as a challenge to the previous tragic frame, a cinematic protest against White-dominated representations of interracial sexuality. Black filmmaker and "race movie" auteur Oscar Micheaux offered a compelling counterframe to these dominant terror and tragedy frames with films like *Within Our Gates* (1920), turning the tables and

depicting interracial sexuality as an abusive weapon in the hands of racist Whites that could be redeemed by an aggressive assertion of Black race pride.

The second section covers the years 1927-1955, the period beginning with the introduction of sound, in which Hollywood solidified the basic mechanics of US narrative cinema and established its first censorship apparatus, the Motion Picture Production Code. The early sound era predominantly employed a frame presenting interracial sexuality as racial/sexual exoticism, an exciting libidinal foray into taboo erotic territory. Hollywood productions like *Aloha* (1931) cast intrepid White male adventurers into far-flung jungles or unconquered Western prairies where they romanced exoticized racial others. Meanwhile, exploitation impresarios delighted mostly-White, male audiences with travelogues like *Virgins of Bali* (1932), pseudo-documentary films prominently displaying the seminude bodies and "savage" mating habits of dark skinned women from around the world. The exotic frame would overlap with and extend the silent era's interracial tragedy. Nearly every exotic picture ended in death for one or both of the racially mismatched lovers, while films like *Imitation of Life* (1934) personified interracial tragedy via a light skinned Black woman whose decision to pass into White society caused heartache for her mother and panic for the Production Code Administration. By the mid-to-late 1930s, four major frames had emerged that would dominate until 1956, the year in which the Production Code Administration eliminated the representational ban on "miscegenation." This allowed for the production of key interracial films like *Island in the Sun* (1957) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), which is where my project begins in the next chapter.

Cinemas of Attraction and Repulsion: Interracial Sexuality in the Silent Era

Mirth and Menace in Silent Interracial Cinema

A fashionably dressed White woman sits on a speeding train seated beside a Black woman dressed as a domestic worker. Behind the White woman sits a White man who is attempting (in vain) to woo her. She expresses polite annoyance at his refusal to release her hand, and his advances persist until the train enters a tunnel and the screen goes suddenly black. Seconds later, we emerge from the blinding darkness to see the Black woman, who has slyly switched seats with her employer, receiving a passionate kiss on the cheek from the White man. The women explode with silent laughter as the humiliated man collapses into his seat, finding no humor in their practical joke. This scenario describes the entirety of the Edison Manufacturing Company's short film *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903). This seminal one minute comedy marks the introduction of a cinematic image that would scandalize, confound, and fascinate audiences for the next century and beyond. History has left no record of contemporary audience reactions to it or director Edwin S. Porter's motivations behind the film's production. However, even a cursory reading of the short lays bare a crucial dynamic that would generally characterize the silent era. The film's humor and the viewer's ability to grasp the joke hinges on the assumption that Whites desiring non-Whites is inherently abnormal, even abominable. The spectator was expected to see the White woman as the "proper" object of White male desire and the Black woman as the "improper" object.[5] The hilarity emerges from the surreptitious swapping of correct for incorrect pairings under the cloak of darkness, and the man's response of anger and embarrassment registers as amusingly "appropriate" per contemporary racial logic. The "humor" becomes troubling in the face

Figure 7. Film still from *What Happened in the Tunnel*. In this foundational interracial film text, the White man kisses the "wrong" woman while entering a dark train tunnel.

of its obvious racism: it codes Black female sexuality as inherently undesirable, perhaps even repulsive, to White male sexual sensibilities.

What Happened in the Tunnel arguably found an audience since several films that followed in its wake essentially mimicked its comedic setup and brand racist humor. In the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company's *The Mis-Directed Kiss* (1904), an elderly, vision-impaired White man attempts to kiss a White woman's hand but accidentally places his lips on his Black maid's hand, realizing his mistake after viewing her through a magnifying glass.[6] In American Vitagraph's *Nellie, the Beautiful Housemaid* (1908), three elderly bachelors hire a "brunette" maid through a printed advertisement. They primp and groom themselves in anticipation of their "beautiful" housemaid, only to find upon her arrival that she is Black, and by inference, neither

beautiful nor brunette in the presupposed sense.[7] In Alice Guy Blachés' *Matrimony's Speed Limit* (1914), a humiliated White man flees after accidentally proposing to a Black woman whose racial identity is initially obscured by gloves and a White veil; nearly a decade after *What Happened in the Tunnel*, filmmakers still found hilarity in accidental interracial intimacy.[8] The humor in all of these films rests on improbable pairings between White men with racial others, but comedy quickly shifted to melodrama or tragedy when White women became objects of desire for non-White men. For example, in *The Tavern Keeper's Daughter* (1908), a "half breed Mexican" menaces a White barkeep's fair skinned daughter after she refuses his sexual advances, while a White man in *The Heart of an Outlaw* (1908) discovers his wife carrying on an affair with a Mexican lover and murders them both.[9] Biograph's *Mixed Babies* (1908) extended the scenario to the progeny of interracial sex by depicting a White woman, who has just adopted a White baby, grabbing the wrong perambulator and accidentally bringing home a Black baby to her horrified husband.[10]

Historians credit aspiring filmmaker D. W. Griffith with writing the scenario for *Mixed Babies*, an early assignment for Biograph that ultimately allowed him to direct both *The Tavern Keeper's Daughter* and *The Heart of an Outlaw* for the film company that same year.[11] Griffith's early career narrates the overall trajectory of interracial sexuality in silent film, moving quickly from framing such interactions as a series of improbable gaffes committed by unwitting White men to presenting interracial sexuality as the corrupted desire of marauding dark skinned menaces threatening helpless White women. In *The Tavern Keeper's Daughter* and *The Heart of an* Outlaw, Griffith explored a template that he would fully exploit in *The Birth of a Nation*, his Civil War and

Reconstruction epic that institutionalized the image of the racialized rapist. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), Griffith's historical film casts the South's secession as a just cause interrupted by needless Northern aggression. The end of the War and the Reconstruction period bring a reign of terror upon helpless White Southerners as Black politicians win election to public office and exact revenge on their former masters. Birth presents Black political demands for equality as a thinly-veiled plot to repeal miscegenation laws, and White women across the South suffer under a cruel regime of unwanted sexual advances from lust-crazed Black men. Dispossessed White males unite to form the Ku Klux Klan, in Griffith's hand a heroic force that protects the "Aryan birthright" from the stain of Black political despotism while rescuing White womanhood from dark skinned marauders through violent retribution. Two key story arcs typify *Birth*'s framing of the Black male sexual menace. The first concerns Silas Lynch (George Siegmann, a White actor wearing blackface), a corrupt "mulatto" who exploits the Black vote to win the office of Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina. Shortly after the Black legislature strikes down miscegenation laws, Lynch implores a prominent White politician's daughter to marry him, and, when she refuses, he kidnaps her and attempts to force her into wedlock. Another scene depicts a White Southern woman named Flora (Mae Marsh) going alone into the woods to fetch water, only to be approached by Gus (Walter Long, again a White actor wearing blackface), a Black freedman and soldier. Emboldened by the legalization of interracial marriage, Gus earnestly proposes, which provokes a scandalized Flora to run in horror. He pursues her to a cliff where she leaps to her death, as an intertitle informs us that "she found sweeter the opal gates of death."

Figure 8. Film still from *The Birth of a Nation*. In this dramatic and disturbing film still from Griffith's Civil War epic, the "heroic" Knights of the Ku Klux Klan seize Gus, who has recently chased Southern belle Flora to her death for not accepting his marriage proposal.

A gendered white anxiety of interracial sexuality saturates these scenes. Silas Lynch's psychopathic desire for White women and Gus' dogged pursuit of Flora both performed the ubiquitous although baseless fear that Black men would rape White women at alarming rates if permitted to do so.[12] Contemporary reviews of the film note the powerful emotional reactions it elicited from White audiences in the South and North. Flora's death would have no doubt electrified most White viewers, outraged that this Black brute forced an innocent White girl to choose the only honorable choice in the face of miscegenetic rapine. The scenes following Flora's death, which depict the White male townsfolk activating the forces of the Klan to swiftly execute Gus, elicited cheers from some White viewers who saw such actions as just and necessary.[13] *The Birth of a Nation* largely obsessed over Black male sexuality, but it casts similar aspersions on Black female sexuality. Lydia Brown (Mary Alden) is the mulatto housekeeper of Austin

Stoneman (Ralph Lewis), a Northern congressman largely responsible for the postwar Reconstruction policies that subjected the South to the "anarchy of black rule." An intertitle suggests a sexual relationship between the two, framing interracial desire as "the great leader's weakness that is to blight a nation," intimating that she seduced him into imposing racial equally on the defeated South. Although anxieties about interracial sexuality focused largely on Black male violation of White women, Lydia's supposed seduction reflected fears that miscegenation inherently preceded racial degeneration and moral degradation.[14]

Griffith almost single-handedly curated the representational shift from interracial mirth to menace, showing that the miscegenetic joke lost its humor when misdirected attraction turned to ardent desire, especially when the object of longing became a White woman. Additionally, his early films showed that the silent era frame of the racialized rapist could be transferred to any non-White body. A film contemporary to *The Birth of a Nation*, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915), framed Asian male sexuality as equality libidinous and threatening to White women. Set in contemporary New York, *The Cheat* follows materialistic White socialite Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward) who embezzles a large sum of money from a charity for which she works as treasurer. She begs a fellow socialite, a wealthy Burmese ivory trader named Haka Arakau (Sessue Hayakawa), to help her restore the funds, and he agrees to do so in exchange for sex. After receiving the money she refuses to make good on her promise, and he captures her in his palatial apartment where he savagely brands her raw flesh with a hot poker, marking her as "his" property, and attempts to rape her. She interrupts his assault by shooting him in the shoulder, and the film ends with his arrest and trial after Edith's reunion with her

husband. The film first introduces Haka as a fully assimilated immigrant, a racial outsider who has leveraged the capitalist market to carve out a niche in US society. However, when he encounters the lure of White female flesh, Arakau becomes an "Orientalized other," transformed into a racialized rapist as savage as Gus from *The Birth of a Nation*.[15] Although *The Cheat* did not command the same audiences as Griffith's film, journalistic accounts of the film's reception capture similar reactions among White viewers. Viewing the courtroom scene that nearly descends into anarchy resembling a lynch mob, some audiences cheered in support. A writer for the trade journal *Moving Picture World* reported that "one of the men that sat behind in the Strand Theatre said, 'I would like to be in that mob.'"[16]

The Birth of a Nation and *The Cheat* framed interracial sexuality as the domain of monstrous racial others hell-bent on sexually dominating Whites, either via raping White women or sexually manipulating White men. These images bolstered popular early 20th century beliefs that non-Whites possessed animalistic sexual drives that set them apart from the moral chastity of Whites, and they personified ideologies about fears of "mongrelizing" the White race through sexual mixing, degrading the potency of White blood and jeopardizing the inherent moral superiority of White racial stock.[17] However, a few films framed interracial sexuality in a somewhat more sympathetic light, particularly when a White man felt genuine desire for a racial other. For example, DeMille's *The Squaw Man* (1914 and 1918), a silent film he made two times, concerns an East Coast financier named James Wynnegate (Dustin Farnum, 1914; Elliott Dexter, 1918) who flees to Wyoming after being falsely accused of embezzling charity funds. He becomes a successful cattle rancher and meets and falls in love with Naturich (Lillian St. Cyr, 1914;

Ann Little, 1918), an Indian girl who saves him from an evil cattle rustler. *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) also permits a White man to love a non-White woman, this time an American named Allen Carver (Kenneth Harlan) visiting China who falls in love with a Chinese girl named Lotus Flower (Anna May Wong) after she saves him from drowning. These two films are significant—*The Squaw Man* and *The Toll of the Sea* avoid the racial hysterics of *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Cheat* and present the relationships as genuine, loving arrangements rather than as perverse, violent obsessions.

However, sympathy for interracial sexuality reaches a limit, and these films climax in unspeakable tragedy for the non-White woman. In both versions of *The Squaw Man*, James' estranged wife arrives in Wyoming to reunite with him, which causes Naturich to hand over her "half-breed" child to the happy couple and commit suicide. *The Toll of the Sea* contains a nearly identical plot: Allen ultimately returns to the US to marry his White sweetheart; a reunion years later leads Lotus Flower to hand over her half-White child to the couple and drown herself in the ocean. Ultimately, *The Squaw Man* and *The Toll of the Sea* employ interracial sexuality to weave cautionary tales about the folly of violating the color line. Although they initially present cross-racial romance as potentially legitimate and loving, they resolve in ways that "depict them as morally regressive acts (on the part of the [White] hero) . . . endanger[ing] the racial and moral structure" of the White nation.[18] *The Toll of the Sea* makes this explicitly plain in an early scene when the Allen first notices Lotus Flower's beauty; an intertitle informs us, "Perhaps it was the call of springtime—but the girl seemed very beautiful in the boy's eyes." In this formulation, the White man's desire for a Chinese woman is presented as an aberration, his judgement perhaps clouded by the irrational "call of springtime" which

Figure 9. Film still from *The Toll of the Sea.* Chinese woman Lotus Flower (the "improper" object of White male affection) reunites with her ex-lover Allen who has brought along "the sweet American girl" he was meant to be with all along. Shortly after this meeting, Lotus Flower will commit suicide by paying the "toll of the sea," i.e., suicide by drowning.

causes her to "seem," rather than simply be, attractive. Later, when he abandons her and returns home, we are told that "he had forgotten her [Lotus Flower]—in his awakened love for the sweet American girl he had known since childhood." In other words, an "American" (i.e., White) woman returned him to his senses, redirecting his gaze away from the improper desire of Asian women to the proper desire of White women.

Interracial sex also portended misfortune in the figure of the "tragic mulatto," a person of mixed parentage (typically a woman) who falls in love with a White paramour, only to be driven to loneliness or death by their racial impurity. As *The Toll of the Sea* and *The Squaw Man* asked viewers to sympathize with the doomed non-White interracial

lover, tragic mulatto films invited audiences to pity the mixed character. This invitation to White audiences to identify with mixed characters updated literary frames pioneered in 19th century fiction in which novelists employed tragic mulatto characters as instruments to garner support for a cause, typically abolition and equality of rights for Black citizens.[19] By contrast, although tragic mulattos in silent film were meant to be sympathetic, the only "cause" they stood for was the crusade against the foolish act of interracial sex itself, and sympathy for mixed characters did not spare them from certain doom. *The Debt* (1912) concerns a White slaveowner in the Old South who has two children simultaneously, a son born of his wife and a daughter born of his Black mistress. The children grow up together, neither one aware of the girl's racial identity. As adults, they fall in love and decide to marry, only to have their marriage plans shattered, not because of the incest taboo, but by the revelation that Black ancestry taints the woman's blood. *The Octoroon* (1913) similarly concerns a White Southern man who falls in love with a free "octoroon" woman living in a slave state. Her former overseer steals her freedom papers and purchases her at a slave auction. Although the authorities discover the overseer's evil plot and incarcerate him, they are too late: the octoroon woman has already committed suicide, choosing death over a life of slavery. A *Moving Picture World* review clearly identifies the overseer as "the villain," and noted that the film invited the audience to identify with "the unfortunate girl."[20] Silent filmmakers similarly employed tragic mulattos to stir up compassion for the plight of mixed individuals, but these gestures to a progressive racial vision ultimately reinforce traditional race and sex hierarchies, driving home the lesson that interracial sexuality inherently led to disaster and tragedy.

Oscar Micheaux: Interracial Sexuality and Race Pride

Although the twin frames of interracial sexuality as racialized rape and as miscegenetic tragedy largely dominated the silent era, these years also produced a counterframe through the so-called "race film." Race films were a series of pictures from the silent era through the early 1950s produced primarily by Black film companies for Black audiences. Race films intentionally countered negative racial images in White productions like *The Birth of a Nation*, offering filmic protests against racism while attempting to realistically and sympathetically portray Black life in early twentieth century America.[21] Although Black filmmakers produced hundreds of race films, none would become as successful or notorious as Oscar Micheaux, an itinerant filmmaker and distributor whose work posed cinematic challenges to White constructions of interracial sexuality. Micheaux's first film *The Homesteader* (1919), an adaptation of his novel inspired by his own experience with homesteading, joined popular western themes with Black race pride. Jean Baptiste (Charles Lucas), the only Black homesteader in the Dakotas, meets and falls in love with Agnes (Iris Hall), the daughter of a Scottish widower. Social custom against miscegenation forbids their wedlock, and he returns East to marry Orleans (Evelyn Preer), the daughter of arrogant Black preacher N. Justine McCarthy (Vernon S. Duncan). McCarthy disapproves of Jean for his refusal to give him the praise and respect he expects, pursuing a malevolent campaign of persecution against Jean that ultimately drives Orleans to suicide. Jean returns to South Dakota to find Agnes, who has discovered during Jean's absence that her deceased mother was Black, allowing the two to wed.

Although little is known about the particulars of the film's narrative twists and turns (no film print has survived), *The Homesteader*'s revelation of Agnes' status as half-

Black stands as an important inversion of the tragic mulatto trope in which the revelation of mixed parentage tore lovers apart. While the presence of Black ancestry in *The Debt* and *The Octoroon* signaled impurity and inevitably led to heartbreak and death, the *deus ex machina* of Agnes' Blackness brings joy and happiness, allowing the film's hero and heroine to live happily ever after. Micheaux inverts the stigma of mixed blood, countering White supremacy with race pride. Jane M. Gaines terms this a "race pride reversal:"

> In the race pride reversal, the one who is re-racialized immediately accepts and embraces his or her newfound identity . . . The race pride allegory produces a political benefit—it reverses the local logic of passing. "Since black blood is not detectable, light-skinned blacks can therefore live as whites" becomes "Since black blood is not detectable, those who discover their heritage will want to live as blacks," as in Micheaux's story.[22]

The "logic of passing" refers to the real-life tradition in which some very light skinned Blacks chose to "pass" as White and enter into White society, either temporarily or permanently.[23] This phenomenon had been previously explored through a host of memoirs and novels from the mid-nineteenth century through Micheaux's own time. The director viewed such acts as racial treason, and saw his films, which he self-distributed nationwide, as a powerful national medium through which to spread his message of race pride. His third feature *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) centers on Eve Mason (Iris Hall), a "quadroon" woman who moves from the Deep South to the Northwest to claim a mine inherited from her deceased grandfather. She meets a Black homesteader named Hugh Van Allen (Walker Thompson) who falls in love with her, but because he incorrectly assumes her to be White, he keeps his true feelings hidden. Hugh discovers oil on his property, and Eve helps him successfully defend his land from White swindlers and the "Knights of the Black Cross," a racial terrorist organization patterned after the

KKK. The film ends with Eve revealing her racial identity (Van Allen: "You! Of the black race!"), allowing the couple their happy ending.

Like *The Homesteader*, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* features a last minute race reversal that ultimately frames Blackness as a desirable trait, a veiled blessing that permits the two protagonists to wed. *The Symbol of the Unconquered* also includes a more overt statement on the politics of racial passing in the figure of Jefferson Driscoll (Lawrence Chenault), a light skinned Black hotelier who despises his race and passes into White society. An early flashback shows Jefferson denying his own dark skinned mother when she jeopardizes his courtship of a White woman. An intertitle interprets the "cursed moment" as the source of his racial self-hatred, while another intertitle describes Driscoll's refusal to allow Black patrons at his hotel as manifestation of a "ferocious hatred of his own race." He even aids the film's White villains in their attacks on Eve and Van Allen, joining the Knights of the Black Cross in their hooded campaign of terror. In some ways, Driscoll reifies aspects of the tragic mulatto frame—he is psychologically tortured and denied the love of his life because of his Blackness, and his racial liminality creates spite and vindictiveness towards all Blacks. However, if we read Driscoll via Micheaux's insistence that the presence of Blackness in mixed bodies signifies racial pride, the character's villainy arguably springs from his rejection of his own racial identity. Micheaux's contempt of passing, driven by a deep identification and affiliation with the Black community, is seen in Driscoll's death during the repulsion of the Knights' attack. Conversely, the revelation of Eve's "true" race, after Van Allen's misidentification, results in joy, companionship, and a reification of the desirability of Blackness.[24]

While Micheaux used interracial sexuality in *The Homesteader* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* as opportunities to preach the gospel of racial pride, the film he released between the two, *Within Our Gates* (1920), invoked interracial sexuality to counter a host of race/sex myths that gripped the White mind and supported a regime of racial terror. *Within Our Gates* centers on Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer), an educated light skinned woman who moves to the South to work for a free Negro school supported by donations. The school faces imminent closure due to dwindling funds, and when Sylvia returns home to fundraise, she meets Dr. Vivian (Charles D. Lucas), a handsome Black physician who immediately falls in love with her. Wanting to know more about her, Dr. Vivian probes Sylvia's cousin for her biography, and she recounts a lengthy tale that comprises approximately 1/3 of the film, all told in flashbacks. Sylvia was raised by Mr. and Mrs. Landry (William Stark and Mattie Edwards), Black adoptive parents and laborers for the wealthy Southern landowner Philip Gridlestone (Ralph Johnson). Sylvia, who is somehow able to afford schooling, helps her father track his finances and encourages him to stand up to his employer when they realize Gridlestone is cheating him. Mr. Landry appears at Gridlestone's office to discuss their financial arrangements when a poor White man, whom Gridlestone is also cheating, shoots the landowner through an open window with a rifle. Mr. Landry gets falsely blamed for the murder, leading an angry mob to seize brutally lynch Landry and his wife and then burn their bodies. Meanwhile, Philip Gridlestone's brother Armand (Grant Gorman) breaks away from the lynch mob to find Sylvia at home. He immediately purposes to rape her, and as he reaches to pull off her clothes, he notices a prominent scar just below her clavicle. The scar makes Armand realize that Sylvia is his "legitimate daughter from a marriage to a

Figure 10. Film still from *Within our Gates*. Oscar Micheaux counters *The Birth of a Nation*'s cinematic Black brute, revealing the true racial identity of the rapist stalking US history.

woman of her race." For unexplained reasons, Armand and his Black wife gave Sylvia to the Landrys to be raised, and he paid for her education while hiding his true identity for years. Following this harrowing story, Dr. Vivian proposes to Sylvia, and the last scene depicts their joyous wedding.

The militant Black paper *Chicago Defender* heartily endorsed it, calling it the "biggest protest against Race prejudice . . . ever written or filmed," although such accolades proved the exception rather than the rule. *Within Our Gates* shocked and scandalized many—community leaders White and Black attempted to block its exhibition in various cities or demanded that scenes be cut before it could be screened, while Black audiences who had flocked to *The Homesteader* generally avoided the troubling film.[25] No previous race film had offered such an unflinching portrayal of Southern lynching and

(attempted) interracial rape, and no filmmaker of any race would revisit such explosive topics for decades after. Notably, the lynching and attempted rape scenes are crosscut together, and as the screen jumps back and forth from the public deaths of the Landrys to the private travails of Sylvia, Micheaux links the tragic histories behind these two acts. As we have seen in *The Birth of a Nation*, White Southern mythology posited that Black male lust for White women demanded swift retribution via lynch mobs. However, history shows that economic concerns overwhelmingly drove lynchings, typically when Whites felt economically threatened by unemployment or Black progress, real or imagined.[26] Oftentimes lynchers invoked fabricated accusations of interracial sexual contact as justification for lynching, either before or after the act of mob justice. While the lynching in *Within Our Gates* contains no accusations of rape, the scene is intercut with shots of Armand's assault on Sylvia, creating a horrifyingly ironic tension—the scene of mob violence that often occurred over false accusations of rape is juxtaposed with a real instance of racially-motivated (attempted) rape. Although an intertitle describes Sylvia as a "legitimate" daughter from Armand interracial marriage to her mother, the scene no doubt invokes the tumultuous history of Southern interracial sexual relations dominated by White men raping Black women and/or keeping such women as concubines, and Armand's last minute decision to *not* rape Sylvia does not make his attempted act any less hideous. Micheaux's choice to intercut these two scenes simultaneously debunks the lie of lynching as a just response to Black-on-White rape as well as the denial of the "open secret" of widespread sexual abuse of Black women at the hands of White men, offering a cinematic protest against past and present race/sex realities.

The quaint visions of marital bliss via racial reversals in *The Homesteader* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* seem a far cry from the violent portrayal of White sexual aggression in *Within Our Gates*. However, I read all of these films as evincing different iterations of the same frame—interracial sexuality as race pride. White-produced films throughout the silent era presented interracial sexual contact as inherently objectionable. The undesirability could lead to a humorous social faux pas, such as in *What Happened in the Tunnel*, or to the "horrors" of interracial pollution, as in *The Birth of a Nation*, but in both cases, the White supremacist sentiments driving such texts were essentially identical. By contrast, *The Homesteader* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* argued that the "problem" of interracial sexuality was, in fact, not a problem. The problem was a racist ideology that posited racial mixture, something many Blacks possessed in their ancestry, as an inherently disgusting and degenerate state. Micheaux flipped such logic on its head, framing interracial mixture, particularly the Black ingredient in the mix, as a badge of honor signifying identification with a rich community with nobility, pride, and potential. The revelations of Blackness in these films' mixed protagonists were not simply plot vehicles to a happy ending, but crucial statements about the dignity and beauty of racial identity and Black love. This same race pride drives the framing of interracial sexuality in *Within our Gates*—again, the "problem" of interracial sexuality did not lie with sex-crazed Blacks and depraved mulatto women, but with White male rapists, a historical fact clouded by the insane mythology of lynching and White violence. Ultimately, Micheaux employed the image of interracial sexuality to counter cinematic constructions like *The Birth of a Nation* at every point, offering Black audiences textual affirmations of race pride in light of generations of forced interracial sexual relations.

Interracial Sexuality in the Classical Hollywood Era

"Interesting Combinations:" Interracial Exoticism

Micheaux continued to release films into the 1940s, consistently preaching the gospel of race pride while occasionally returning to the intertwined issues of interracial sexuality and mixed race identity. *The House Behind The Cedars* (1927), based on a novel by Black author Charles W. Chestnut, centers on a light skinned Black woman who passes into White society and romances a White man, only to repent of her racial sin, embrace her Blackness, and marry a Black man. Micheaux returned again to passing and race pride in *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), essentially a remake of *The House Behind The Cedars* with one key difference: *Veiled Aristocrats* included spoken dialogue, marking it as a "talkie" feature rather than a silent picture. With the release of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), film audiences of all races thrilled at the wonder of synchronized words and song, and the popularity of sound film signaled the inevitable decline of silent pictures. Although race movies survived the transition to sound, Micheaux's bold constructions of interracial sexuality as racial pride and protest proved the exception rather than rule, and most race movie directors generally focused on the production of all-Black versions of "safer," more popular genres such as westerns, musicals, and horror films. Additionally, the cost of sound film proved prohibitive for many race movie studios already operating on limited budgets, and race movie production generally declined in the sound era.[27] Filmmaking became a White-dominated field, and the introduction of sound marks an era when motion picture making had become a highly organized and concentrated industry, belying film's roots as a dime museum novelty peddled by vaudeville hucksters. By the early 1920s, future moguls like Adolph Zukor had systemized filmmaking, combining classic narrative storytelling with the vaudeville star system, producing films made in a

factory-like manner which were then distributed through Zukor's Paramount Player Company. Paramount was soon joined by other studios, most notably Lowes/MGM, Twentieth Century Fox, and Warner Bros., all clustered in Hollywood, California, increasingly *the* destination for aspiring screen stars.[28]

Wilhelmina Osterman was one such movie star, a Mexican-born actor who changed her name to Raquel Torres, reportedly to sell her "Latin looks" to Hollywood.[29] In 1928, film fan magazine *Photoplay* featured a full page photograph of the burgeoning actor, and informed readers that "Torres is half Mexican and half German, and you can't beat that for an interesting combination," adding that her portrayal of a sexy siren in the adventure film *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928) prompted Hollywood studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to sign her on a "long contract."[30] Her debut role in *White Shadows* featured her in a different sort of "interesting combination," namely an interracial romance in which she played Fayaway, a beautiful Polynesian islander who marries a White man. The film centers on Matthew Lloyd, a doctor employed by European colonists stationed in the South Seas, who becomes so thoroughly disgusted by the imperialistic horrors of Western society that he casts out into open waters. He shipwrecks on an uncharted island where the scantily clad native women discover him half-dead, assume his "white flesh" to be a sign of divinity, and bring him back to health via exotic oils dotingly massaged into his skin. Matthew and Fayaway eventually marry, but their love ends abruptly when he loses his life trying to defend the island from Europeans attempting to colonize and exploit her people. Torres would appear in about a dozen more films, most of which she would play the part of a sexually appealing racial "other" to a lusty White male lead. In the sound film *Aloha*, Torres plays another South

Figure 11. Photograph of Raquel Torres, 1928. Following her appearance as an exotic island beauty in *White Shadows in the South Seas*, film fan magazine *Photoplay* printed this photograph of Raquel Torres, touting her Mexican and German heritage as an "interesting combination." ("Raquel Torres," *Photoplay*, October 1928, 62.)

Seas islander named Ilanu who catches the interest of a White plantation overseer, while the comedy film *So This Is Africa* (1933) cast Torres as Tarzana, the leader of a light skinned, all-female African tribe who so doggedly pursues a pair of White expeditionary filmmakers that the two men must disguise themselves as tribeswomen in order to fend off the love-crazed women.

Raquel Torres' career captures the dominant frame for the representation of interracial sexuality in the early classical Hollywood cinema: an exoticized adventure, an alluring playground in which Whites could dabble with racial otherness and escape the

boredom of monoracial eroticism, typically occurring in some far-flung locale. *Aloha* stands as a representative text. First, the film privileges White character's story, while casting the racial other as an exciting although surprising addition to the White person's narrative. Second, interracial exoticism typically casts the other as a sensual savage, an uninhibited and even somewhat threatening element that introduces both excitement and danger into the White character's life. *Aloha* evinces both of these dynamics in its central character Jimmy Bradford, an American who falls in love with the uninhibited, "half-caste" South Seas islander Ilanu, who first captures his attention with a traditional erotic dance performed half-naked. Thirdly, *Aloha* shows how these plunges into the racial unknown often bring sorrow for both individuals, with the non-White character typically bearing the brunt of the suffering. In *Aloha*, Ilanu's sagacious grandfather foreshadows her fate, reminding her that her mother married a White man and became so plagued by woe that she ultimately sacrificed herself to the Fire Goddess (the island's active volcano). Jimmy and Ilanu marry, and he spirits her away to San Francisco, only to experience rejection from his horrified friends and family, particularly after Ilanu's performance of her libidinal island dance at a party scandalizes and frightens off potential investors in Jimmy's company. Spurned by American society, the pair eventually returns to Ilanu's island, where her anguish leads her to follow her mother's fate and leap into the volcano to placate the island's enraged gods.

Arguably, interracial exoticism marked a progressive step away from the more overtly racist frames of the silent era. Viewing a racial other as an object of transgressive excitement *at least* acknowledged that non-Whites could be worthy of affection and desire, an ostensible improvement over the framing of racial others as racialized rapists or

tragic mulattoes. However, interracial exoticism ultimately evinces a troubling reification of dominant racial hierarchies in hypersexualizing non-Whites (especially Blacks), bolstering views that racial others possess what Stuart Hall calls "ungovernable and excessive" sexual natures that could be dangerous (or exciting) for Whites who mingled with them.[31] Additionally, the rise of interracial exoticism as the era's dominant cinematic frame did not spell the end of the silent era's frames; as we will often see throughout this dissertation, the new representational frames coexisted and overlapped with the old. Sexually-menacing men of color continued to terrify White women, as in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) in which the titular Chinese supervillain (Boris Karloff) tries to conquer the world with the battle cry of "Kill the white man and take his women." More famously, *King Kong* (1933) depicts a gigantic prehistoric gorilla becoming captivated by White woman's beauty and abducting her as his mate, an image that film historian Eric Schaefer interprets as a stark realization of White "racial paranoia and [the] forbidden lure of miscegenation."[32] The interracial tragedy also persisted, typically melding with interracial exoticism, such as in *Aloha*'s suicidal finale. Despite the threat of cultural censure or cosmic retribution for crossing the sexual color line, interracial exoticism flourished in early classical Hollywood. *The Bird of Paradise* (1932) contains a nearly identical plot to *Aloha*, complete with White adventurer falling in love with a sensual South Seas islander who initially entrances him with an erotic dance. She clinches his interest after swimming nude to his boat, and against the objections of her father, they elope and escape to a nearby secluded island. *The Bird of Paradise* allows the couple to experience less social censure than in *Aloha* but similarly ends in tragedy when an erupting volcano can only be "appeased" by the sacrifice of woman's body.

This outpouring of interracial desire did not render all non-Whites as equally desirable, and the interracial party still observed the gendered rules of White supremacy. White men, of course, generally exercised greater cinematic license, romancing Latina spitfires, South Sea islanders, savage Indian maidens, and "Oriental" exotics with impunity. However, the women they loved often paid the price for their cross-racial adventurism, as in Paramount's adaptation of the opera *Madame Butterfly* (1932) in which Japanese girl Cho-Cho San commits hara-kiri after learning that her White Western paramour has married a White woman. *Never the Twain Shall Meet* (1931) spares all of death but casts similarly negative aspersions on interracial love. A White businessman, frustrated with his aloof socialite fiancée, romances a half-Polynesian girl, only to find that she is too wild and "other", confirming that "East and West" were indeed not meant to meet. Interestingly, the early sound era produced a few notable instances in which White women were permitted to romance non-White men, but once again such trysts always ended in tragedy and often death for the non-White person. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) resembles *The Cheat* in its depiction of White female captivity at the hands of twisted Chinese maniac, in this case the titular General Yen (Nils Asther), an officer serving on the losing side of the Chinese Civil War who imprisons a White missionary named Megan (Barbara Stanwyck) in his palatial abode. However, *General Yen* differs slightly from the previous films in permitting the White woman some romantic/sexual agency, if only a bit. This is dramatized in a fevered nightmare in which she sees General Yen as vampire-like sexual aggressor. A masked knight in shining armor rescues her, only to be revealed that Yen also lurks behind the mask, a conflicted figure of both interracial sexual threat and desire. She resolves her contradictory feelings

after learning of the true depth of his love for her, and she symbolically dons the garb of a Chinese woman and professes her dedication to him. However, she is too late—with his empire crumbling to the revolutionaries, General Yen drinks a suicide concoction as his White lover collapses weeping at his feet.

In a few rare instances, films dared to suggest, although never depict, White women desiring Black men. In the crime drama *Strange Justice* (1932), a drunken party girl suggests that her White entourage proceed to Harlem, "where there are no Ten Commandments and the hat check girls are boys!" Although she proposes no specific activities, her suggested expedition hints at racial and sexual adventurism, an evening of slumming into the forbidden, "dark" recesses of New York City where White socialites could cast off the burdens of Anglo Saxon propriety.[33] The film *Blonde Venus* (1932) contains a more explicit overture to interracial sex when a White night club singer (Marlene Dietrich) cavorts in a gorilla suit in front of an undulating chorus line of half-naked "African" tribal women. After frightening the crowd, she removes the gorilla outfit and sings a song called "Hot Voodoo," with these overtly interracially sexualized lyrics:

> Hot voodoo, black as mud
> Hot voodoo, in my blood
> That African tempo has made me a slave
> Hot voodoo, dance of sin
> Hot voodoo, worse than gin
> I'd follow a caveman right into his cave

"Hot Voodoo" posits White female desire for Blackness as both defiling ("black as mud") and exciting, a wonderful, terrible romp into the unknown suggestive of sexual encounters in dark, forbidden places with premodern savages ("follow a caveman right into his cave"). The African rhythms entice the singer into willing slavery, a perverse and flippant riff on the historical association of slavery with Blackness in the United States.

This short sequence from *Blonde Venus* demonstrates a dynamic observable throughout most of these films, namely that exoticized interracial attraction can and frequently does descend into overt fetishization—reducing a *subject*, in this case an entire group of people, into an *object* of fascination and obsession.[34] Critical theorist bell hooks notes that in such constructions, non-Whiteness "becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture."[35] In the films of early sound cinema, the sexual fetishization of dark flesh affords the White counterpart a passport to adventure and sexual transgression that ultimately exoticizes and commodifies the other as a racial/sexual curio.

These films evince another ironic pattern that further highlights the White supremacy lurking at the heart of interracial exoticism. While celebrating mixed relationships as interracial chic, nearly all of the interracial exotic pictures from early classical Hollywood denied any *actual* cross-racial contact through clever casting decisions. Most of these films cast Whites or light skinned actors to play racial others. The South Seas women in *Aloha* and *The Bird of Paradise* were played by fair skinned Mexican actors, Raquel Torres and Dolores Del Rio respectively. Spanish actor Conchita Montenegro played the half-Polynesian girl in *Never the Twain Shall Meet*, while Jewish American woman Sylvia Sidney donned heavy makeup for *Madame Butterfly*'s Cho-Cho San. Films in which White women were afforded a measure of sexual agency also featured White men in extensive makeup meant to look racially othered. American-born actor Richard Barthelmess bronzed up to play Chief Joe Thunder Horse in *Massacre* (1934), a film centered on a politically conscious Sioux man who romances White women. British actor Boris Karloff applied "yellowface" to play the title character in *The*

Figure 12. Photograph of Nils Asther and film still from *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. The Danish-born actor (*left*) donned elaborate "yellowface" makeup to play the sexually menacing yet alluring title character in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (*right*). Casting White or near-White actors in such roles allowed filmmakers to represent interracial sexuality without actually subjecting audiences to the sight of people of different races interacting intimately on screen.

Mask of Fu Manchu, while Danish-born thespian Nils Asther donned a heavy makeup to play General Yen. Perhaps the most inflammatory example of racial masquerade remains *Blonde Venus*'s "Hot Voodoo" number—the scantily clad "Africans" dancing behind Marlene Dietrich's nightclub singer were actually White women in blackface, ensuring that this bawdy fantasy of interracial lust dare not cast mixed races on the stage.

Epidermic Dramas and Undoable Stories

Despite its complicated cultural politics, cinematic interracial exoticism found an audience amongst the mostly-White filmgoing public, proving to be a bankable subgenre throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. However, not all welcomed such films. Cinematic interracial exoticism flourished in an era when film studios were increasingly exploring daring and adult film content, and such texts ran afoul of a powerful coalition agitating

against permissive film content. Ultimately, the outcry led to the creation of the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code (henceforth, "the Code"), a self-regulatory set of rules and proscriptions that drastically regulated and shaped film content for decades, including cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality. The origins of the Code begins in the early 1920s when, with no standards for regulating potentially offensive movie content, some states and municipalities formed government censor boards to preview movies and demand edits before they could be screened in their locale. Concurrently, the film industry suffered a series of nationwide scandals as Hollywood icons were implicated in drunken orgies, at least one sexual assault, and even several murders. Adding to the controversy, independent exploitation filmmakers created a subaltern movie industry turning socially important topics like sexually transmitted infections and prostitution into lurid spectacles masquerading as educational public awareness films.[36] This perceived wave of prurience on- and off-screen incited a chorus of outcry against the entire film industry, demanding that the movies be sanitized. In response, the major studios collectively formed the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a trade organization through which they publicly adopted a set of 1927 standards called the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls," a document that dictated what could and could not be shown on screen, including bans on sex perversion [homosexuality], white slavery, and miscegenation.[37] Hollywood, it seemed, had finally cleaned house.

Unfortunately for the moral crusaders, the Don'ts and Be Carefuls constituted little more than a sham public relations campaign, a moral smokescreen for studios to hide behind as they generally ignored the Don'ts and continued to push the moral envelope onscreen. To further appease critics, the MPPDA replaced the Don'ts with a

revised and expanded standard, the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code, publically enlisting Catholic leadership to help craft its language. However, MPPDA enforcement of the Code proved as lax as the Don'ts, and as the Depression pushed the cash-strapped studios to try anything to make a profit, the early 1930s produced a shocking torrent of racy images, inciting a sort of cinematic arms race in which filmmakers competed to insert more vixens and vice into their films.[38] This produced some of the more risqué depictions of interracial sexuality discussed above, including *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*'s depiction of interracial lust and captivity and *Blonde Venus*'s double entendre-filled ode to White "slumming" in Black ghettoes. As outraged pundits from academia and the religious community increasingly denounced the movies for assailing public morals, federal lawmakers threatened national censorship legislation—the film industry's collective nightmare. Hollywood finally caved to self-regulation, agreeing in mid-1934 to submit to the oversight of the Production Code Administration (PCA), a private but largely independent regulatory agency. The PCA essentially enforced the previously ignored 1930 Production Code, scrutinizing every studio script in light of the Code's mandates before shooting began. The studios often engaged in protracted arbitrations with the PCA's censor-in-chief Joe Breen, negotiating the elimination of a particular word or an entire scene until scripts were judged acceptable and given a seal of approval. Studios caught distributing movies without the PCA seal were threatened with a hefty fine of $25,000, and MPPDA affiliated theaters, which included first-run movie houses in the most lucrative markets, were barred from exhibiting unapproved films.[39]

The Code's effect on interracial sexuality would prove complex. Notably, all iterations of the Code, the original Don'ts and Be Carefuls as well as various revisions of

the Code between 1930 and 1956, explicitly forbade depictions of miscegenation. However, the full text of the clause proves instructive. Under the "Particular Applications" of the written Code, the second section includes the subheading "Sex," proceeded by the assertion that "pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing." Clause 6 of this section further clarifies: "Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden." This partially explains the erasure of Black/White sexuality from early sound film, affirming and propagating the widely held assumption that such "low forms" of sexual interaction were neither "accepted" nor "common."[40] As discussed earlier, the period from 1930 to mid-1934 before true enforcement of the Code produced a bevy of daring interracial texts, even allowing hints of Black/White sexual relations.[41] Enforcement resulted in three interrelated effects on cinematic interracial sexuality. First, the Code tacitly permitted the depiction of Whites paired with non-Black racial others (typically, Latinos, Indians, or Asians), and such depictions persisted with minor Code-mandated modifications. Second, the Code essentially erased Black/White sexuality from the screen, leading to the strict policing of any script that even hinted at such encounters. Third, the Code effectively pushed cinematic Black/White relations "underground" to the margins of the movie industry into the hands of exploitation filmmakers. I will unpack the first two points immediately below, while analyzing the exploitation film's handling of interracial sexuality in the following subsection.

The Code's clarification of "miscegenation" as applying exclusively to the "white and black races" permitted a series of what one *Variety* reviewer called "epidermic dramas," films capitalizing on the continued fascination of Whites with non-

Figure 13. The official seal of the Production Code Administration. This image appeared at the beginning of many PCA-approved films.

Black racial others via interracial exoticism. In the post-Code era, White men continued to romance exoticized sexual others—Latinas in *I Live for Love* (1935) and *In Caliente* (1935), beautiful Indian maidens in *Behold My Wife!* (1935), South Seas islanders in *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) and *Her Jungle Love* (1938), and Asian women in *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937). Unsurprisingly, tragedy still frequently befell the non-White half of these interracial flings. In *China Girl* (1942), a Chinese woman and an American photojournalist working in East Asia during World War II engage in a passionate romance that ends when the Japanese bomb her village in an air raid. *Broken Blossoms* (1936) depicts a romance between a Chinese immigrant and a poor White woman which ends after the woman's outraged father beats her to death, and the brokenhearted Asian man leaps into a burning building. However, the written production standards sanitized

post-Code films of the overt displays of lust and sensuality found in some pre-Code texts. When MGM submitted their script for *Mutiny on the Bounty*, a retelling of the real-life story of an eighteenth century British naval ship bound for Tahiti to collect agricultural samples, the PCA praised the "beauty of the story," permitting the depiction of the steamy romances between the English mutineers and the exotic Tahitian women. However, Joe Breen firmly forbade MGM from showing female nudity or "explicit" sexual behavior, perhaps aware that at least two pre-Code jungle pictures *Bird of Paradise* and *Tarzan and his Mate* (1934) included skinny dipping scenes which allowed audiences glimpses of full nudity via partially-transparent ocean water. Additionally, Breen insisted on the deletion of several lusty lines of dialogue that ostensibly crossed the line into obscenity, including one which the ship's Captain Bligh promises "a brown Jill for every [White] Jack."[42]

Interracial desire persisted into the post-Code era, although cleaned up for the PCA's regime of wholesomeness. However, the miscegenation ban largely erased Black/White sexual relations from the screen while subjecting scripts with even a *hint* of miscegenetic encounters to hyperscrutiny. The PCA repeatedly rejected MGM's request to produce a jungle film about a British plantation overseer marrying an exoticized half-African woman renowned for seducing White men. MGM resubmitted the request after changing her racial background to "Arab-Egyptian," a confusing combination that somehow satisfied the PCA to grant *White Cargo* (1942) a seal. Paramount faced bigger problems with *Lulu Belle*, a 1926 Broadway play about an affair between a Black woman and White man, which the PCA offices quickly rejected as an "undoable story." Between 1932 and 1948, at least three studios passed around and reworked the script, during which

time the title character underwent multiple racial makeovers, including a "negro wench from Harlem," a "wild child of nature," and a New Orleanian "part-Creole-part-French Canadian girl."[43] The PCA only granted a seal for *Lulu Belle* (1948) after Columbia Pictures abandoned the film's racial angle and simply made her White, casting as the title character Dorothy Lamour, a New Orleanian actor who made a career playing off-White exotics desired by White men in films like *Road to Singapore* (1940) and *Aloma of the South Seas* (1941). While the Code's ban on Black/White love threw films like *Lulu Belle* into miscegenetic limbo, it prohibited the rerelease of many pre-Code films, even silent pictures. When Universal proposed a 1939 rerelease of a silent version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), the PCA forbade it, citing the "serious problem of miscegenation" raised when slavemaster Simon Legree makes "overtures of an obviously sexual nature" towards his female slaves.[44] Sometimes the PCA censors made missteps and released material that offended sectional sensibilities. The PCA approved Paramount's innocuous musical comedy *Artists and Models* (1937) which featured bronzed-up White actor Martha Raye performing a jazzy number with trumpeter Louis Armstrong and a host of dancing Black men. When the film opened in Louisiana, a Shreveport newspaper editor penned an outraged letter denouncing the "practice of mixing races in pictures," warning against the folly of "sending to the South pictures in which negroes [sic] and whites . . . [appear] with no distinction drawn as to the races."[45]

Of all the early post-Code films, *Imitation of Life* (1934) produced a particularly prolonged crisis at the PCA, leaving behind an extensive archive of memos and letters that document their correspondence with Universal Pictures over the film. Based on Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel of the same name, *Imitation of Life* centers on White widow

Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) who takes in black housekeeper Delilah Johnson (Louise Beavers) and her fair skinned daughter Peola (Fredi Washington). United by shared financial struggles, Bea and Delilah become friends and, later, partners after starting a booming business turning Delilah's pancake recipe into a popular prepackaged mix. The PCA initially balked at this ostensibly inoffensive drama because of a subplot in which Peola, who often gets mistaken as White and loathes her African ancestry, passes into White society and severs all ties to her mother. She reappears at the film's end following her mother's death to beg Delilah's forgiveness during her funeral, after which Peola embraces her Blackness and returns to a Black college that she had previously abandoned. As we have seen, *Imitation of Life* was not the first treatment of passing in US popular culture—the topic had been a staple of Northern and Southern literature for over a century, and race film auteur Oscar Micheaux repeatedly explored passing through his race pride dramas. However, no mainstream Hollywood film had at that time ever represented passing, and the Irish Catholic who ran the PCA, Joe Breen, evinced nothing but nervous bewilderment about the "problem" Peola posed for the Code. Specifically, Breen noted that Peola's light skin unequivocally inferred "a white ancestor," deeming the script as a violation of the miscegenation clause and recommending that Universal abandon the project.[46] Ironically, the film includes no references to interracial sex, and in every version of the script both the dark skinned Delilah and Peola's deceased father are described as Black. The PCA even acknowledged this: "The act of miscegenation has occurred so remotely in the ancestry of the characters that it need not concern us." Despite this admission, Peola deeply "concerned" the PCA. Breen rejected several subsequent revised scripts, standing firm against the "big problem" with *Imitation of Life*:

"The girl's father and mother are both negroes though the father had white blood which gives the girl the appearance of a white person."[47] In the extensive memos and letters penned about the film, the discourse reaches heights of hyperbole as Breen and other PCA staffers alternately characterized the film and as causing "considerable worry," provoking "grave concern," containing "extremely dangerous subject" matter, and prodding a topic that has "always been taboo," leading the PCA to deem the entire project as "dangerous from the standpoint both of industry and public policy."[48]

Despite the PCA's stalwart resistance to *Imitation of Life*, the agency eventually greenlighted the production, although the PCA records curiously do not indicate what precipitated the reversal of decision.[49] It successfully screened across the Nation, proving particularly popular with Northern urban audiences and Black moviegoers in the North and South. Although modern assessments of the film frequently disparage the Delilah character as a grotesquely stereotypical mammy figure and criticize Peola as an archetypical Hollywood tragic mulatto, many contemporary Black critics and filmgoers praised it as a rare cinematic acknowledgement of Black suffering at the hands of White racism.[50] Additionally, Universal boldly chose to reject the contemporary practice of making up Whites to play non-Whites. Peola was played by Fredi Washington, a light skinned Black woman with features deemed so White-looking that she at one point received (and rejected) career advice to adopt a French surname and masquerade as White.[51] However, *Imitation of Life*'s racial realism and depiction of passing would prove the exception rather than the rule, and Universal's battle with the PCA demonstrates that even a hint of Black/White intimacy activated the full regulatory powers of the Code. Regardless of the film's success, Hollywood would not revisit the topic of passing for

Figure 14. Film still from *Imitation of Life*'s theatrical trailer. Light skinned Black actor Fredi Washington received critical acclaim for playing Peola, the archetypical tragic mulatto in this widely-seen melodrama. Washington reportedly rejected career advice to pass as White, refusing to mask her Blackness, although she retired from screen acting in 1937. (Turner Classic Movies)

many years, and the cautious climate imposed by the Code opened the door to a different kind of filmmaking that would plumb the depths of White fascination with forbidden interracial sex.

Forbidden Adventures: Sex and Savagery in Exploitation Cinema

While mainstream studios flirted with interracial desire in the 1930s, the exploitation industry reveled in the transgressive taboos of interracial fear and lust, pushing the representational boundaries of ethnic exoticism beyond what even pre-Code Hollywood would allow. Exploitation films constitute a pervasive yet oft-disregarded subaltern film industry that thrived at the margins of American cinema throughout the peak years of classical Hollywood and beyond. The origin of the exploitation film lies in a series of social problem pictures popularized in the mid-1910s. These Progressive Era films dramatized issues of contemporary social import, including birth control and

sexually transmitted infection prevention, educating audiences on the basic facts while teaching "correct" moral behavior regarding such topics. While these early films grew out of a desire to educate and shape the values of its mostly urban audience, cinematic exploiteers quickly capitalized on the interest in taboo subjects, cloaking themselves in educational respectability while ramping up the risqué content to "cater more noticeably to the public's lascivious desires."[52] Promotional materials employed lurid images and sensationalized taglines, and, although the films rarely showed as much as they promised, they proved so popular in the early 1920s that they contributed to the cries for censorship that ultimately led to the PCA and the Production Code. However, the exploitation film industry largely operated in defiance of the Code, existing via a roadshow network of second- and third-run movie houses unbeholden to exhibiting PCA-approved material.[53] In the subsequent decades, exploitation filmmakers touched on everything Hollywood could not. Threadbare plots and amateurish theatrics served as window dressing for the shameless presentation of a host of transgressive spectacles about childbirth, drug addiction, burlesque, nudist colonies, abortion, and, of course, miscegenation.[*]

The fascination/revulsion with interracial sex became fruitful fodder for this cinematic subculture, and there emerged a unique subgenre known as the exploitation travelogue. Travelogues (also known as "exotic films" or "goona-goona pictures") were essentially pseudo-documentaries about "uncivilized" tribal peoples that exploited a

[*] Scholars typically differentiate classical exploitation film from hardcore pornography. Prior to the early-1970s, pornographic material was essentially illegal, and so-called "stag films," short loops of soft- or hardcore sex, were illicitly exhibited in non-commercial, all-male spaces. Although exploitation films became increasingly sexually explicit throughout the 1960s, hardcore depictions of sexual intercourse did not enjoy public exhibition until a series of court cases as well as shifting public morals allowed for hardcore films like *Deep Throat* (1972) to reach a wide audience. See Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University, 2000), 192–266; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Reprint Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 58–92.

Western fascination with cultural and sexual otherness. Travelogues frequently appropriated legitimate ethnographic footage of cultures unfamiliar to early twentieth century Americans, inserting falsified scenes, often shot years or even decades later, and adding blatantly inaccurate narration that suggested a range of sexually tinged tribal practices. All exploitation travelogues included one defining cinematic ingredient that separated them from PCA-approved fare: ample shots of seminude (typically, topless) dark skinned women, luridly displayed under the guise of documentary authenticity.[54] Although the law prohibited exploitation travelogues from depicting actual sexual intercourse, Schaefer asserts that nudity "served as the primary spectacle of exotic films and was almost always alluded to in advertising and lobby displays . . . [with] words like 'naked' and 'raw.'" An early entry into the subgenre, *Virgins of Bali* (1932) follows a White narrator's tour of a family living in a small village on the island of Bali, a present-day province of the Republic of Indonesia. This approximately 40 minute film includes ostensibly real footage of ethnographic import—domestic scenes of the Balinese women feeding livestock and trading at an open-air market. However, the opening narration sets the tone as it introduces the ever-topless "virgins," two Balinese teenage sisters: "Bali is a land of beautiful women. They outnumber the men 5-to-3. They have fine features, and well-rounded, slender bodies." The fetishistic narration continues throughout the film, highlighting their racial/sexual otherness at every turn, underscoring their "shamelessly nude brown bodies" during their morning bath and noting their "velvety skin" as they apply protective coconut oil to their arms.

At *Virgins of Bali*'s 1932 New York premiere, *Variety* noted "the house was nearly full and not a score of women in the 300-seater." The article cited the nudity as its

obvious draw for the mostly-male audience, blithely referring to the film as a "bust picture."[55] Contemporary releases of *Goona Goona* (1932), *Isle of Paradise* (1932), and *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* (1935) similarly afforded heterosexual men vicarious sexual tourism, a chance to engage in exotic interracial fantasies from the comfort of a theater seat. However, as the exploitation travelogue moved towards territories with darker-skinned people, the already troubling tone grew more disturbing as desire for brown flesh transformed into fear and sexual loathing. *Blonde Captive* (1931) combines legitimate ethnographic film of Australian Aborigines with inserted footage of a White woman who has married into a "savage" tribe; the promotional poster nakedly stokes fears of interracial violation, luridly depicting a dark skinned native leering menacingly at a barely-clad White woman. *Gow the Killer* (1931) offered a tour of seminude and topless tribespeople from a variety of Pacific islands that essentially narrates a racist hierarchy of color. The tour begins with lighter skinned, and therefore more desirable, islanders, framing the exotic women of Bali and the Marquesas Islands as "just lovely." The narration becomes more disparaging as we move to the "vile, evil smelling" villages of the darker skinned Solomon Islanders, presenting them as prone to practices deemed the most savage in the White, Western imagination—human sacrifice (represented via fake inserted footage) and cannibalism, horrors unknown amongst the lighter skinned Balinese.[56]

The inflammatory exploitation travelogue *Ingagi* (1930) took the fascination/revulsion with "dark" sexual practices to extremes with the promise to show sex between African women and apes with a suggestive illustration captioned with: "Wild Women—Gorillas—Unbelievable!" *Ingagi* begins as a relatively innocuous

Figure 15. Promotional posters for *Virgins of Bali*, *The Blonde Captive*, and *Ingagi*. The exploitation travelogue offered taboo sexual/racial tourism and reified racist hierarchies of color.

travelogue following a British explorer's African adventures where he encounters all manner of jungle wildlife.[†] The intrepid explorer ultimately discovers a legendary tribe of African women who exclusively "traffic" with gorillas to whom they routinely offer virgin sacrifice. No print of *Ingagi* has survived, but reviews of the film describe the "unbelievable" scene as little more than a group of topless Black women prowling through the jungle until a gorilla emerges to drag one of the women away.[57] The film ends shortly after the White explorer shoots the gorilla and the African women sit mournfully around the beast's carcass. *Ingagi* became a sensation amongst the "stag population" of men drawn to the sight of "native women and apes." Even after investigations by the MPPDA and the Federal Trade Commission revealed that the gorilla

[†] All the legitimate jungle and wildlife scenes were stolen from *The Heart of Africa* (1914), a documentary record of a real British safari into East Africa. Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 240.

was simply a person in a suit and the African woman he menaces "a Los Angeles colored woman" from Hollywood's Central Casting, it continued to draw crowds.[58] *Ingagi* proved so popular that the exploitation travelogue *Forbidden Adventure* (AKA, *Angkor*, 1937) repeated the native woman/gorilla motif years later, and it spawned an unrelated sequel *Son of Ingagi* (1940), an all-Black cast horror film that kept the menacing ape but dropped the interspecies sex.

Even more so than *King Kong*, *Ingagi*'s rapacious ape performs some of the most troubling excesses of White fear of and fascination with Black sexuality. The gorilla captures the literalization of the Black male sexual beast from *The Birth of a Nation*, while the African tribeswomen's sexual worship of the ape ascribes similar levels of animalism to Black women. The film combined the exploitation travelogue staple of topless dark skinned women with the taboo of zoophilia, creating a troubling mixture of sexual desire and repulsion paraded before a mostly-White, male audience. *Ingagi*'s continued popularity following its revelation as a fake attests to the transgressive appeal that spectacles of interracial desire and racialized fantasy held for many movie patrons. Ultimately, the exploitation travelogue joins safer Hollywood fare like *Aloha* in framing interracial sexuality as an exotic spectacle, a transgressive playground for the White cinematic imagination. However, exploitation film's outsider status allowed it to push these representations to extremes impossible in mainstream Hollywood, either before or after the Code. The fetishized presentation of non-White women's breasts became the exploitation travelogue's calling card, vicariously permitting libidinous connections to "primitive" racial others under the guise of anthropological truth. Furthermore, these films exploited Black/White sexual desire in an era when Hollywood avoided the subject,

with *Blonde Captive* updating the silent era's racialized rapist and *Ingagi* titillating audiences with the most regressive White supremacist ideologies about debased Black sexual practices.

Conclusion: *Pinky* and The Code's Miscegenetic Limits

By the mid-1930s, the major frames had been established that would characterize the next two decades, expanding and contracting as particular representational modes and film genres went in and out of style. Dark skinned brutes, while generally falling out favor after World War II, occasionally reappeared to menace vulnerable White women in the voodoo themed horror movies *Ouanga* (1936) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), while *Mighty Joe Young* (1949) updated King Kong's racial/sexual coding in its portrayal of a giant gorilla capturing a White woman as his mate. Interracial exoticism flourished in both Hollywood and exploitation circuits as White men continued to find alluring racial others in all manner of far-flung locations. Sexy Indian squaws and untamed "half-breeds" drove the cowboys wild in westerns like *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *Broken Arrow* (1950), while White travelers continued to romance exotic Asian women in *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) and alluring South Seas islanders in the remake of *Bird of Paradise* (1951). Exploitation travelogues *Forbidden Women* (1948) and *Bowanga Bowanga* (1951) continued to traffic in topless dark skinned primitives in various stages of undress, and an American exploiteer reedited the British documentary *Mau Mau* (1955), a serious account of the titular mid-century anticolonialist revolt in Kenya, to include titillating shots of revolutionaries attacking topless "African" women.[59] The interracial tragedy also persisted, knit into the fabric of interracial exoticism. Westerns *Duel in the Sun* and *Broken Arrow* both end in the deaths of one or both interracial lovers,

while the 1951 version of *Bird of Paradise* ends identically to its 1932 predecessor as the White man's exotic Polynesian paramour throws herself into a volcano to appease the island's gods.

Tragedy also stalked the mulatto woman in *Pinky* (1949), a drama concerning a light skinned Black woman who passes into White society, only to lose her White fiancé after revealing her secret. More tragic is *Lost Boundaries* (1949), in which an entire light skinned Black family (parents and two children) passing as White helplessly have their relationships and careers destroyed after the father attempts to enlist in the military and a Navy Intelligence agent discovers and publicizes his hidden racial identity. As these images dominated both Hollywood and exploitation films, the frame pioneered by Oscar Micheaux, interracial sexuality as a badge of racial pride and protest, largely disappeared from US cinema, particularly as the output of race movies declined in the postwar period. However, a small number of films in the 1940s and early 1950s evinced significant representational shifts in response to a looming cultural paradigm shift. In the 1930s, New Deal liberalism and a surge in left-leaning unionism spurred calls for radical redress for racial oppression, while the Jewish Holocaust laid bare the horrors of racial supremacy, empowering many Blacks to agitate for "Double V"—victory over fascism abroad and racism at home.[60] In the late 1940s, Hollywood took slow steps away from the racist caricatures it had historically peddled, offering a small but significant crop of films denouncing racism as a social problem worthy of cinematic attention.[61] *Home of the Brave* (1949) depicts a paralyzed Black soldier who realizes that racist treatment has caused his psychologically-induced paralysis, while *Intruder in the Dust* (1949)

dramatizes the crazed racism of lynch mob justice via a story about a Black man wrongfully accused of murder by bloodthirsty White townsfolk.

Even the tragic mulatto films *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries*, while mired in regressive racial ideologies, marked progressive leaps forward. Although *Pinky*'s promotional poster exploited and sensationalized her racial two-ness by dissecting her face with a hard white line separating her "light" and "dark" sides, the film ultimately "blames" White racism more than the mixed character, depicting the town's Black citizens as victims of White oppression and economic exploitation. One scene finds Pinky in a verbal dispute with a Black couple. The police arrive and treat her with the utmost respect while abusing the Black couple, but after admitting she is "colored," the officers transform and roughly arrest all three of them. Additionally, the film culminates in a dramatic court case in which a jealous White woman tries to prevent Pinky's grandmother Dicey from receiving a sizable inheritance willed to her by a recently deceased White neighbor. *Pinky* even references the history of abusive interracial Southern sexual relations when two drunken White men, who know she is Black, unsuccessfully attempt to rape her. Even the film's finale in which Pinky loses her White lover is framed in a groundbreaking way: her fiancé desires to marry her even after learning her racial secret if she agrees to live in the North as a White woman. Pinky calls off the engagement, refusing to sever her identification with the Black community, and commits herself to racial uplift. *Lost Boundaries* casts the evils of White supremacy as the source of the family's woes, neither demonizing nor punishing mixed characters for their liminal racial status. *Lost Boundaries* ends with the lead character learning that the US government has abolished segregation in the armed forces, a laudatory nod to

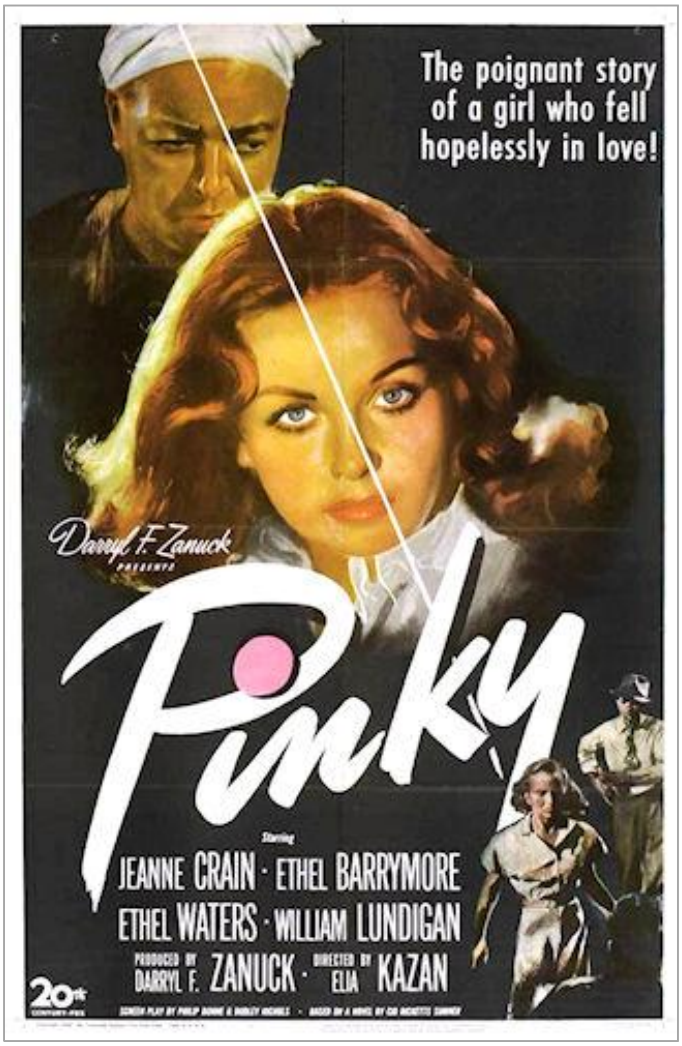

Figure 16. Promotional poster for *Pinky*. This advertisement captures the film's mixture of the interracial tragedy frame with a more progressive frame acknowledging the sexual abuses of White supremacy. The central image accentuates the title character's racial two-ness via a hard white line that roughly divides her face, metaphorically separating the lighter side of her face from the darker side bathed in shadow. In the bottom right corner, we see a rendering of the attempted interracial rape scene, a rare cinematic depiction of the hidden horrors of Southern racial/sexual relations.

President Harry Truman's recent 1948 executive order which integrated the US military.

The PCA heartily approved the production of *Pinky* and encouraged Twentieth Century Fox to openly acknowledge the title character's mixed racial heritage, even though the miscegenation clause remained on the books. Surprisingly, Fox received a supportive letter from Francis Harmon, the "house Southerner" of PCA's review board,

arguing for the film's importance in light of the South's suppression of the disavowed history of interracial sexual abuses under slavery and Jim Crow. "There is a constant conflict," Harmon wrote, "in Southern life and thought around this point: that Southern white people condone or tolerate 'social equality' on the level of vice [illicit sex] while shouting to high heaven their opposition to 'social equality' on the level of virtue." Harmon even submitted two and half pages of suggested rewrites, including a subplot in which the final courtroom scene reveals that Pinky's father was the brother of the wealthy White woman who willed Dicey her fortunes. Fox studio executive Darryl Zanuck thanked Harmon for his input, acknowledging the box office potential of the "illicit miscegenation angle," but declined the suggestion, unwilling to take the film "as far as you . . . suggest."[62] *Pinky* captures the Code in a time of transition, an era when shifting public morals and a desire for more adult film fare pushed the PCA to approve scripts that would have trigged censorial alarm bells a decade prior. It also represents the cinematic framing of interracial sexuality in a period of transition, one in which old frames persisted while some daring filmmakers, in the spirit of Micheaux, posited new frames whose time had not yet come. Zanuck's acknowledgement of the latent interest in suppressed miscegenation narratives would prove prescient, although the times were not yet right, as illustrated by his own apprehensions in exploring the full dynamics of interracial sexuality in US society.

Two factors emerged in the early 1950s that created the conditions necessary for the new frame to be fully birthed. First, and most importantly, the Civil Rights Movement started during the race and class struggles of the New Deal Era evolved into a struggle in the South and the North for rights and social justice, powerfully interrupting and

reshaping the racial discourse that had thus far dominated the twentieth century. Second, the PCA, threatened by its own obsolescence in light of shifting community standards, revised the all-powerful Code in 1956, deleting the ban on cinematic miscegenation. The calls for equal rights moved newly-empowered Hollywood studios and filmmakers to release a crop of films which framed interracial sexuality via the integrationist rhetoric of the expanding Civil Rights Movement. These films depicted interracial romance and marriage as a normal, natural choice that was unjustly denied and demonized by human bigotry and racism. This era produced groundbreaking films that cast Black/White love in a favorable light, and culminated in the release of US film history's most recognizable and oft-referenced miscegenetic. However, the regressive racial frames of the past five decades of film history did not disappear. Both Hollywood and the exploitation film industry produced a cycle of films framing interracial sexuality as a horrifying (yet titillating) miscegenation spectacle, drawing on the forbidden allure of miscegenation while prodding fears that integration and school desegregation would lead to rampant "race mixing."

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Chapter Two

Marching Down the Aisle: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1956-1967

If the liveliest racial issue right now happens to be desegregation in the schools . . . [film producers] can hardly be blamed for preferring the somewhat allied but much more appealing question of racial intermarriage. The preference is inevitable, for the popular arts have traditionally put sex ahead of politics.[1]

Richard Henry Popkin, 1957

Social order, public morality and the best interests of the races depend[s on keeping them separated]. This unmistakable policy of the legislature . . . has been shown by not only declaring marriages between whites and negroes [sic] absolutely void, but by prohibiting and punishing such unnatural alliances . . . The awfulness of the offense is shown by Section 20-57 [of Virginia's civil code] which declares "All marriages between a white person and colored person shall be absolutely void without any decree of divorce or legal process."[2]

Judge Leon M. Bazile, 1959

Introduction

In the late 1950s, Hollywood embraced interracial romance with open arms. Richard Henry Popkin of the Jewish magazine *Commentary* noted a new cycle of "miscegenation films," an explosion of texts pairing Whites with Indians, Asians, Latino/as, and, in a sudden reversal of Hollywood tradition, Blacks.[3] Between 1956 and 1967, the American movie industry would produce approximately fifty films depicting interracial romance and desire, more than in any prior era. Films of previous decades had certainly explored this thorny subject, but this new crop differed noticeably from the past, breaking fresh ground by depicting interracial romance as a basic right, a laudable personal choice made between social and moral equals. Released in an era when a national Movement for Black justice dominated the racial discourse, these images of mixed race coupling overtly embodied aspects of Civil Rights rhetoric, framing interracial love and marriage as a basic right historically denied individuals via White

supremacy.[*] *Island in the Sun* (1957) would prove to be the most important text at the beginning of this cycle, marking the first time a Hollywood film overtly depicted a romance between a White woman and a Black man while permitting an interracial couple the classic Hollywood ending of living "happily ever after." *Island*'s box office success in the North and South signaled that audiences were ready to "cross the color line" via the conventions of the Hollywood romance. A slew of provocative civil rights romance films ensued, culminating with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), US cinema's most iconic argument for interracial marriage as an individual right.

Historian Susan Courtney argues that these films were marked by "sensational extremes," both in the film studios' excessive promotion of these taboo breaking texts and in the polarized reactions they incited. Some critics, both White and Black, welcomed these films as bold and heartening signs of the changing times; horrified segregationists declared such movies as harbingers of racial/moral apocalypse; others scourged them for shamelessly exploiting a contemporary taboo subject for easy profit.[4] Many of these interracial romances enjoyed wide releases, sometimes successfully playing in US states where such unions were still illegal and punishable by law, and several enjoyed enormous box office returns despite public opinion polls consistently finding a majority of Americans opposed to such unions on moral grounds. When placed in the broader context of the contemporary film landscape, these movies prove to be part of a larger cinematic tableau of "sensational extremes." While *Island in the Sun* and like-minded films proposed a new era of interracial sexual equality, a cycle of low budget

[*] Throughout this paper, I will treat "Civil Rights Movement," as well as the shorter terms "Civil Rights" and "Movement," as proper nouns, capitalizing them whenever they appear. However, the term "civil rights" may occasionally appear in lowercase when I am speaking about the issue of civil rights in the abstract.

films invoked age-old obsessions with the taboo of miscegenation, profiting from the historic mixture of fear and fascination many Whites evinced towards this issue. Films such as *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) capitalized on America's historic preoccupation with interracial sex and racial hatred, while tawdry exploitation picture *Murder in Mississippi* (1965) prodded popular fears of blurred racial and sexual lines brought on by integration and the "invasion" of Civil Rights activists into the South.

The two quotes that open this chapter parallel the extremes highlighted by the release and reception of these films, while helping us place these provocative texts in their larger cultural/historical terrain. In a review of several recent "miscegenation films," Popkin argues that, in an era riven with contentious debates about integration and civil rights, the movie business chose to "put sex ahead of politics" and tackle these larger issues via the obviously related but more cinematically appealing topic of interracial sexuality. Although none of this era's big-budget studio films overtly referenced or depicted the Civil Rights Movement, I assert that the national struggle for Black freedom and social justice became the key cultural and historical discourse with which these films were engaging, distilling and borrowing from Movement rhetoric and filtering it through the cinematic trope of interracial sexuality. However, Popkin's article notes that not all received these films with open arms, reporting that the White racist terror organization the Ku Klux Klan picketed *Island in the Sun*'s exhibition in Jacksonville, Florida and Charlotte, North Carolina.[5] These episodes reminds us that many resented and feared this cinematic onslaught of sexual integration, and a vast legal, social, and ideological network of White supremacist thinking welcomed these texts with protest and resistance.

While liberal supporters of interracial romance and marriage saw such social unions as loving relationships between equals, White supremacists decried such "unnatural alliances" and "awful" affronts against the very foundations of order and morality. The words of Judge Leon M. Bazile that opened this chapter, uttered at the trial of a Virginia interracial couple prosecuted in 1959 for violating the state's miscegenation ban, captures how White supremacist thinking framed such cross-racial romances. The severity of the "offense" of miscegenation warranted a harsh punishment, and as an officer of the court, Judge Bazile applied his state's law which declared such unions "absolutely void." The auspiciously named interracial couple in question, Mildred and Richard Loving, appealed their case all the way to the Supreme Court, who in 1967 ruled that Virginia's miscegenation laws (and by extension, all such state laws) as unconstitutional violations of the Fourteenth Amendment.[6] However, this eventual victory for the Lovings would come after years of persecution and exile from their home state. The horror and revulsion captured in Judge Bazile's words bolstered antimiscegenation regimes and fueled the insurgent White violence aimed at Civil Rights protestors. Segregationists frequently justified their abuse of peaceful Movement workers on the grounds that integration would lead to anarchic interracial mingling and the degradation of the White race. However, such blocs of resistance rested upon a disturbingly ironic foundation—interracial sex, in the form of White men sexually exploiting Black women, remained an "open secret" in the South's past and present, and vociferous denunciations of race mixing coexisted with this tradition of widespread but disavowed interracial relations. This contradictory dynamic became cinematic fodder for exploitation filmmakers who would capitalize on the fear and the fascination with

interracial sex newly sparked by the struggle for racial integration, turning the Movement into a cinematic miscegenation spectacle that exploited the White obsession with race, power, and sex.

Ultimately, the national drama over Civil Rights and integration loomed large in the cinematic depiction of interracial sexuality, informing both the frame of interracial love as a societal right and the frame of the miscegenation spectacle. One frame, preferred by the major studios, represented Movement rhetoric the via the trope of the Hollywood romance, depicting defiant interracial couples proudly marching down the aisle while Civil Rights protestors marched in the streets. Another frame, favored by exploiteers, focused on the spectacle of racial violence and the interracial intrigue of integration, exploiting age-old miscegenetic obsessions provoked by the Movement. Throughout the decade, these two frames engaged in a representational battle over the meaning of interracial sex, marriage and romance in US society, producing scores of cinematic contributions to the national discussion about civil rights and sexuality. This film cycle roughly coincides with what activist Bayard Rustin termed the "classical phase" of the Civil Rights Movement, the period beginning with the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision nationally desegregating US public schools and ending approximately in the late 1960s as the rhetoric of integration and nonviolence evolved into cries for "Black Power" and armed resistance.[†] In the following pages, I will present a set of films released between 1956 and 1967. We begin in 1956, the year in

[†] In Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's essay "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," Dowd argues that the Civil Rights Movement should be understood as a much longer historical process, beginning in the 1930s with radical labor unions, continuing through World War II, expanding during the classical era, and culminating in the 1970s with Black Power and a "movement of movements." Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "classical Civil Rights Movement" in acknowledgement that popular memory often truncates a long, hard-fought battle to a few years in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

which the Production Code Administration eliminated the ban on cinematic miscegenation, allowing for the onscreen proliferation of "miscegenation films" that would give rise to the era's dominant frame. This era closes at the end of 1967 with the release of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Hollywood's definitive statement on civil rights romance, a text that appeared just as a chorus of contrarians denounced such polite, integrationist depictions of interracial sexuality as out of step with the increasing proliferation of racial consciousness.

Interracial Sexuality as a Civil Right

The Movement and the Movies

In 1956, director John Ford released *The Searchers*, an epic Western that would signal the beginning of a shift in filmic representations of interracial sexuality. Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), a hardnosed Texan and Confederate war veteran, returns home after years of absence to find that his young niece Debbie (Natalie Wood) has been kidnapped by a band of marauding Comanche warriors. Ethan joins a posse of Texas Rangers sent out to retrieve her, and after an unsuccessful altercation with the Comanches ends the mission, he embarks on an obsessive hunt for Debbie, accompanied only by her adopted brother Martin (Jeffrey Hunter). After years of fruitless searching, the two finally locate the itinerant Comanche tribe in New Mexico, only to discover that Debbie has been enculturated as an Indian and is now married to Scar (Henry Brandon), the Comanche chieftain. Debbie prefers living with "her people" over returning to her blood relations, and she rebuffs Martin's pleas to go with them. Ethan becomes unhinged with racist rage and tries to shoot her, and her life is spared only after Martin shields her and demand that Ethan stand down. The Comanche warriors interrupt this standoff as they attack to retrieve Debbie. After the two men narrowly escape, Ethan bitterly announces

that he is presently “without any blood kin” and bequeaths Martin all his property upon death. Martin angrily shouts, “Debbie’s your blood kin!” to which Ethan curtly responds, “Not no more, she ain’t . . . She been living with the bucks,” employing a derogatory term typically reserved for oversexed, “savage” Black men.[7] The two men return home defeated, but shortly thereafter receive a report that a military scout has located Scar. They again set out to find Debbie, this time with adequate military reinforcements. Dripping with palpable disgust at her racial pollution, Ethan announces his intentions to murder Scar and Debbie, insisting over Martin’s objections that “livin' with Comanches ain't bein' alive.” The posse ambushes the camp and kills Scar, and in a last minute reversal, Ethan decides to spare Debbie, although only after violently scalping Scar’s dead body.

Upon its initial release, many critics dismissed *The Searchers* as a compendium of tired Western tropes, although retrospective critical reappraisals of the film have judged it an important self-reflexive text interrogating the White supremacy endemic to the genre.[8] For our purposes here, it stands as a pivotal moment in the history of cinematic interracial sexuality, marking the moment when an American film text directly drew upon the rhetoric of civil rights to represent sexual relations across the color line. *The Searchers* appeared two years after the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision, and many have argued it explicitly deals with the cultural politics of integration and protests against the violence of White racism. Although it perpetuates some of the regressive racial clichés endemic to classical Hollywood Westerns (particularly, the bloodthirsty, rapacious Indian savage), it also “turns the concept of Western heroism inside out, showing the lone gunman . . . as a warped, destructive force” perhaps worse than Indian “savagery.”[9]

Figure 17. Film still from *The Searchers*. Ethan doggedly seeks out his niece Debbie who has been living as the wife of a Comanche Indian chief for years. His disgust at her sexual/racial pollution drives his mad quest to murder her, but once he locates her, Ethan has a sudden change of heart and spares her life.

Rather than demonizing interracial sex and marriage as an inherent act of folly that brings sorrow and shame, it posits White masculinist racism as "the" film's central problem. Although its depiction of interracial sexuality partially performs aspects of the interracial tragedy, ending as it does with Scar's demise, it also reverses the basic logic of the interracial tragedy. Ethan views Debbie as racially damaged goods in need of elimination, and his quest for racial cleansing amounts to a series of increasingly violent excesses that render this ostensible "hero" a deeply unsympathetic, even hateful, character. By contrast, *The Searchers* posits Martin, a "half-breed" mixture of Welsh and Cherokee, as the sympathetic voice of reason and tolerance, again breaking with tradition. Rather than casting Martin as a tragic mulatto tormented by his own liminality, he becomes the film's hero, a defender of Debbie's life and, by extension, of racial tolerance. Martin's mixed background ultimately does him no damage, and Ethan's frequent mockery of his tainted ancestry further underscores his irrational antimiscegenetic racism. Although Ethan

eventually, if somewhat inexplicably, lays aside his interracial revulsion and welcomes Debbie back into his family, this only occurs after Ethan's racist outbursts of extreme violence. Debbie's voice is largely silenced throughout the film, and she silently returns to her "White" family and her Indian lover's death, again reifying aspects of the interracial tragedy. However, her initial insistence that she desired to stay with Scar could be read as a rare assignment of agency to a woman in an interracial relationship, and as a tacit endorsement that such unions could actually be desirable and fulfilling.

In his 1980 essay "*The Searchers:* An American Dilemma," Brian Henderson argued that this "film about red-white relations in 1868-73 [should be read] as a film about black-white relations in 1956." [10] Henderson interprets Ethan's crusade to destroy Debbie as a metaphor for widespread Southern resistance to desegregation on the grounds that it would facilitate rampant miscegenation, turning public schools into a "savage jungle" of interracial sex, as stated by one piece of prosegregationist propaganda. To drive the point home, the tile of Henderson's article references Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), an influential study of race relations in Jim Crow America. Among Myrdal's many findings, he reports the results of a survey in which White male Southerners were asked to prioritize the facets of segregationist culture they judged as the most important in protecting their interests. Below is a paraphrase of the results arranged in order by those issues White male Southerners cited as least to most important:

Rank 6: Discrimination in securing property, credit, jobs, and public welfare
Rank 5: Discrimination in the courts and the legal system
Rank 4: Political disenfranchisement
Rank 3: Segregation of public facilities (schools, transportation, etc.)
Rank 2: Observance of racial etiquette (interactions in public, use of titles, etc.)

Rank 1: Prohibition of interracial marriage and sex with White women

Ethan's hell-bent resolve to eliminate Debbie and Scar after their tribal union parallels Myrdal's findings that White Southern men deemed sexual relations between White women and Black men as the most loathsome of all social practices, cinematically performing the extremes of violence that could emanate from such deep-seated prejudices. Ironically, Myrdal found that "the Negro's own rank order is just about parallel, but inverse, to that of the White man." While White fears of interracial sex remained "the keystone" of structural racism, it was an issue that was "easy for the Negro leadership to give up."[11]

Hollywood, however, found it difficult to give up on interracial sex. Several months after *The Searchers*, Warner Bros. released *Giant* (1956), an epic Western chronicling the lives of a fictitious Texas cattle ranching family. *Giant* explores a variety of contentious historical topics, including the legacy of imperialism in the Southwest as well as conflicts between traditional patriarchy and "modern" womanhood, while squarely tackling the issue of integration and White supremacy via the trope of interracial sexuality. In one subplot, the family patriarch Bick Benedict (Rock Hudson) learns that his oldest son Jordan (Dennis Hopper) has married Juana (Elsa Cárdenas), a woman of Mexican descent. Bick does not reveal his true feelings on the marriage until Juana is discriminatorily refused service at the salon of an upscale hotel. In discussing the incident, Bick tells his son, "You knew what you was doing when you married in that direction . . . You was asking for trouble . . . There's ways of doing things that folks abide by when they want to live right and happily." Jordan responds angrily, acknowledging that many people in "this part of the country" frown on interracial marriage, but insisting,

"If I'm concerned it has to do with the people that ought to know better, like my own father." Bick becomes extremely offended at his son's charges of racism and, as if to prove the point, displays his love for his Mexican daughter-in-law and her infant son when he gets into a fistfight with the owner of a diner who balks at Juana's presence in his Whites-only establishment. Jordan's insistence that people who "know better" should accept interracial couples and respect their right to marry implicates the "ways of doing things that folks abide by" as the central problem. *Giant* took further steps towards dignifying interracial sexuality, framing the couple as innocent victims of racism rather than martyrs for their own folly, as Bick insists they are. Although Jordan and Juanita's story comprises a small portion of *Giant*, it also ends with the couple still together, another reversal of the interracial tragedy in which tormented interracial couples split up, either via death or mutual agreement, marking it as another transitional text arguing for mixed race romance as a civil right.

While a critical contemporary eye might find much fault with the racial and sexual politics of antiquated films such as *The Searchers* and *Giant*, these texts were notably progressive for their times, particularly in light of the climate of conservative timidity that characterized Hollywood at the beginning of the decade. In the early 1950s, Hollywood found itself beset by forces struggling to define the industry's role in the postwar United States as Cold War tensions fueled a radical anticommunist movement determined to purge the movies of subversive undercurrents. In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began to investigate communist infiltration of the film industry, eventually placing hundreds of alleged Red sympathizers within the film industry on a career destroying blacklist. As anticommunists attacked Hollywood as

a bastion of subversive liberalism, others assailed it for being too *conservative*, denouncing the film world for bending to Cold War paranoia and turning a blind eye to roiling social issues like anti-Semitism and racism. Confirming Ronald Brownstein's assertion that "Hollywood resists any agenda—political or social—other than turning a profit," studio executives of the early 1950s generally embraced conservative caution as the safest route to box office profitability.[12] The number of socially conscious films sharply declined, while classic conservative genres like Westerns and biblical epics proliferated. Additionally, the attack on anything remotely left-leaning led the film industry to largely ignore the national outcry against Black oppression and economic exploitation, avoiding such contentious issues as anathema to its mostly-White filmgoing public.[13]

The chill cast by the Cold War began to thaw by the mid-1950s, and Hollywood did offer small but notable contributions to the struggle for Black freedom, producing a crop of daring films contemporaneous to *The Searchers* and *Giant* that examined the nation's repressed racial ills. *12 Angry Men* (1957) explored how unacknowledged racism could lead to unjust convictions in the courtroom, while *The Defiant Ones* (1958) depicted two escaped convicts, one White, one Black, who find themselves handcuffed together, moving from mutual loathing to respect as they must struggle to overcome the barriers facing them. The film colony also took steps towards integrating its lily White star system, welcoming a modest but important influx of Black actors, most notably Dorothy Dandridge, Sidney Poitier, and entertainer/activist Harry Belafonte. These performers proved to be statistical minorities with little control over the kinds of roles offered to them. Yet against all of the odds of Cold War conservatism and White

domination of Hollywood, they provided some of the first ever humanizing cinematic portraits of Black life and Black people, arguably becoming the first non-stereotypical Black film stars to appeal to large numbers of White filmgoers.

This emergence of a new generation of Black stars and the growth of a national struggle for Black freedom led to fascinating alliances between the Movement and the movies. Martin Luther King, Jr. tapped Belafonte to work his Hollywood connections in support of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the site of King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech.[14] Belafonte came through, convincing a respected and diverse coterie of actors, including Sidney Poitier, Charlton Heston, Marlon Brando, and Joanne Woodward, to appear in D.C. for support.[15] The marriage of Hollywood glamour and hardscrabble protest proved short lived. Other than Belafonte, who would put his film career on hold to work full time for the Movement, the Hollywood/Civil Rights connection begat few visible, long term alliances. The movie industry continued to drag its feet in regards to integrating its own ranks. Postwar Hollywood could boast no Black directors, and a 1963 *Variety* survey found zero Black members in the Hollywood unions representing grips, electrical workers, soundmen, and film producers. When several White stars threatened an industry-wide boycott if studios did not hire more racial minorities, industry leaders held a token meeting with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) where they pledged to reform hiring practices, then quickly returned to business as usual, keeping none of their promises.[16]

The intersection between the Movement and the movies accomplished little in terms of tangible initiatives or political partnerships. Hollywood's biggest contribution to the Civil Rights era appeared in the form of the interracial couple. Performing Popkin's

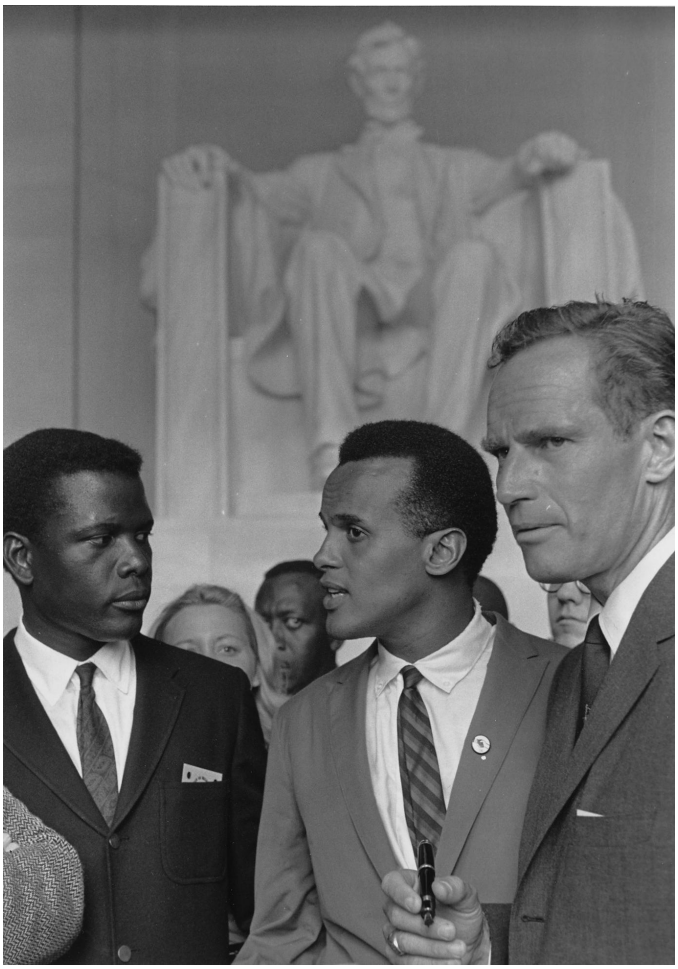

Figure 18. Photograph of Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Charlton Heston at the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., 1963. Three Hollywood icons appear on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in support of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a massive Civil Rights rally famous for hosting MLK's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. (US Information Agency. Press and Publications Service)

assertion that the movies tend to "put sex ahead of politics," the film industry heartily embraced integration at the altar while it nervously dodged the issue of activism in the streets. *The Searchers* and *Giant* represent Hollywood's initial, tentative steps towards this frame, and the representation of interracial sexuality evolved over the subsequent years to more boldly assert the rhetoric of the Movement. Many of these movies were extremely popular and played even in areas of the country where such unions violated the law, and they stand as important contributions to the ongoing national discussion over

race and rights. Additionally, all of the aforementioned new Black stars built careers appearing in films that melded the call for integration with the call for intermarriage rights, and their work produced some of the era's most influential cinematic texts on U.S. race relations via the metaphor of interracial sexuality.

Island in the Sun: A Ticket to Integration

In late 1956, newspapers across the US informed readers that movie mogul Darryl F. Zanuck, who had recently resigned as head of Twentieth Century Fox, was independently producing *Island in the Sun*, a film adaptation of the popular novel by Alec Waugh centered on interracial intrigue on a fictional Caribbean island. Rob Roy of the historically Black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* reported that it would feature Harry Belafonte, in "quite a bit of personal contact" with a White woman, as well as Dorothy Dandridge, who would be romantically involved with a "non-sepian." The article predicted "a probable Dixie revolt" for Zanuck's decision to leave the interracial angle in the film. The producer remained firm on this point, insisting, "Whatever the story calls for will be included when it hits the screens."[17] Of course, "whatever the story calls for" would have been essentially impossible to depict a year earlier. The Motion Picture Production Code, written in the prewar past of the 1930s, still explicitly forbade "sex relationships between the white and black races," and movies could not explore this most disavowed yet widespread form of interracial sexuality.[18]

The times, however, were changing. Younger Americans had overall become "more worldly" following the shocks and dislocations of World War II, and the popularity of texts like the Kinsey reports and *Playboy* magazine fueled a burgeoning national interest in sexuality.[19] Additionally, the postwar proliferation of television sets in US homes resulted in sharp declines in theater attendance. As the industry suffered

plunging box office revenues nationwide, studios increasingly relied on the cinema's capacity for sensation, promoting big screen spectacles like Technicolor, 3-D movies, and widescreen projection, while injecting their films with increasingly taboo content, knowing that the risqué always piqued audience interest.[20] The Code remained in force throughout this period, and industry insiders increasingly deemed it at odds with their goal of remaining profitable and relevant. Some rogue producers openly challenged the Code. Otto Preminger defied the system with the risqué sex comedy *The Moon is Blue* (1953), releasing the film without a PCA seal of approval and reaping huge box office profits. A crop of successful adult-themed films followed in its wake, either ignoring the Code or pressuring the PCA to cave and approve scripts in clear violation of it. Aware of its growing obsolescence, the MPAA revised the Code in late 1956.[21] In the spirit of reflecting changing tastes and standards, the updated Code permitted a number of previously prohibited topics, including abortion and drug addiction. Notably, the miscegenation clause did not appear in the text of the new Code, and with this intentional omission, the PCA quietly lifted the ban on Black/White sexuality in force since 1934. Zanuck made good on his promise, delivering a film that would become a watershed in the cinematic history of interracial sexuality. *Island in the Sun* takes place on the fictitious Caribbean island of Santa Marta, which has recently democratized under a newly adopted constitution. The island's first election looms close, and its mostly-Black inhabitants, who have suffered under oppressive British rule for decades, evince a growing anticolonial discontent that portends a shakeup in Santa Marta's ruling ranks. The changing political tides deeply trouble Maxwell Fleury (James Mason), a plantation owner of esteemed British ancestry struggling to maintain his family's economic power.

The public face of Black discontent becomes David Boyeur (Harry Belafonte), a union organizer of African descent running for the legislature with popular support from the island's poor and oppressed. Maxwell vainly attempts to hold on to his family's dynasty, and he launches a counter-campaign against David for the legislature. Shortly afterward, a journalist publishes a scathing exposé revealing that Maxwell's great-grandmother was Black, leading to opprobrium from the islands' White residents. Maxwell pathetically attempts to use his mixed ancestry to identify with Black voters, but this only incites mockery from the Black islanders who have lovingly rallied behind David's inspiring, racially conscious stump speeches. Maxwell's mental state deteriorates as his power crumbles, and he murders that a retired war hero after developing a paranoid delusion that he is sleeping with his wife. At this point, the film turns into a somewhat standard whodunit as the police search for victim's killer and eventually arrest Maxwell in a state of utter disgrace.

Although *Island in the Sun* focuses largely on Maxwell's story arc, it features an ensemble cast and weaves together multiple narratives around the shared themes of race, romance, and class conflict. In addition to the revelation of Maxwell's hidden Black ancestry, it includes two crucial subplots involving interracial romance that became the film's most promoted and most controversial plot points upon its 1957 release. The first subplot finds Denis Archer (John Justin), a White man who works as the aide to the island's governor, meeting and falling for Margot Seaton (Dorothy Dandridge), a Black drug store clerk. What begins as an affair develops into a serious relationship, and the film ends with Dennis professing his love for Margot and whisking her away on a plane to England in order to escape the persecution of White Santa Martans (including his

disapproving boss, the governor). The couple constitutes only a minor subplot, but as we shall see, their symbolic importance outweighs their negligible screen time. The second interracial subplot occupies far more screen time than the first and concerns a budding romance between Belafonte's character David and Mavis Norman (Joan Fontaine), an upper class woman who hails from a prominent White family. David and Mavis become acquainted at a party at the governor's mansion after David turns an awkward run-in with Maxwell into an electrifying speech about the demand for full Black equality. Mavis finds David's rhetoric fascinating and refreshing, and his life of struggle and political commitment contrasts sharply with her comfortable world of wealth and privileged aimlessness. David takes Margot on a personal guided tour of the island's Black poor villages and labor sites, engaging in an honest dialogue about the its current racial tensions and past grievances. Mavis also reveals to David her family's racial secrets, taking him to a decaying family plantation where several of her ancestors died during a slave uprising.

While visiting the crumbling plantation site, Mavis first makes overt romantic advances towards David, asserting that the horrors of the past can be overcome through interracial love. "That was more than a hundred years ago," she explains calmly to David, "and now you're here, and I'm here." Throughout these scenes the characters never kiss, an exchange that would have certainly occurred between characters of the same race. According to film historian Ellen C. Scott, the script originally included a kiss between David and Mavis, but producer Zanuck, who worked closely with the scriptwriters, insisted that "the feeling of romance or sex" be kept out of their relationship.[22] However,

Zanuck did permit signifiers of their sexual attraction, including one subversive challenge to the Black man/White woman taboo, allegedly devised by Belafonte and Fontaine:

> [In one scene] I [Belafonte] was to slice open a coconut with a machete and offer it to Joan so she could sample the milk inside. What I did . . . was hand it to her and watch, intensely, as she drank. Then I took it back . . . Slowly and deliberately, I put my lips where hers had been. Then I took the sip that consummated the moment. For anyone who followed it carefully enough, the scene would have, in its own way, a passionate climax.[23]

While such a heavily coded display of passion may hardly seem "subversive" to contemporary viewers, even this relatively innocuous exchange of intimacy broke decades of cinematic taboos that prohibited even the slightest hint of sexual equality or desire between a Black man and a White woman. The film ultimately resolves the sexual tension between the two characters in the pair's final scene, in which Mavis posits the transgressive suggestion that they move to another country in order to be together. David rejects her offer, bluntly insisting "my skin is my country" and arguing that his Blackness means they will face opposition no matter where they go. Ultimately, however, David spurns her advances for political reasons. His social commitment to his people and their advancement outweighs his desire for personal companionship. Santa Marta's Black population would interpret his interracial marriage as betrayal, comprising his position as a leader in the freedom struggle. The two split acrimoniously, and the film ends with David literally walking off into the sunset, returning to his people that he so deeply loves.

Belafonte's screen role as a racially conscious political agitator dealing with the politics of interracial sexuality could not have been more symbolically appropriate, and his *Island* role paralleled his personal life in fascinating ways. Belafonte was raised in Harlem during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and early exposure to the writings of Black thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois imbued Belafonte with a radical racial

Figure 19. Film stills from *Island in the Sun*. The film's interracial intrigue included a budding, but ultimately denied, romance between Mavis and David (left) as well as the consummated relationship between Margot and Denis (right).

consciousness, while his participation in the theater in the mid-1940s introduced him to left-leaning Black entertainers like Ossie Davis and Paul Robeson.[24] Belafonte's good looks and singing voice helped him become an enormously successful performer and crossover recording artist, and he used his tremendous crossover appeal with White audiences to break into film. According to historian Steven J. Ross, "Belafonte went to Hollywood determined to change a nation, not just to entertain it . . . He envisioned film as a powerful tool for reshaping national ideas about race."[25] His first two movies, *Bright Road* (1953) and *Carmen Jones* (1954), attempted to offer humanizing portraits of Black American life. *Island in the Sun*, Belafonte's third feature film, offered audiences an even rarer image of Black political empowerment in an era when Hollywood blatantly avoided direct representation of the Civil Rights Movement. The film stands as a largely unprecedented representation of a Black man "winning" over a White man without help

or support from a powerful White establishment.[26] David's political ambitions mirrored Belafonte's own activism—his extensive political activities included his coalition building with President John F. Kennedy and his fundraising for many key Movement organizations, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the younger, more radical Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[27] Additionally, the same year that *Island* hit screens, Belafonte divorced his first wife Marguerite, a conservative Black woman, and married his second wife Julie, a White dancer and political radical. Belafonte remarked that *Island in the Sun*'s release and reception metaphorically played out like a "celluloid version of my interracial romance . . . mostly good reviews above the Mason-Dixon Line and wrathful reactions below it."[28] A Virginia prosegregationist group called the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberty petitioned Defense Secretary Charles Erwin Wilson to bar its showing at all armed forces installations, and 100 members of the Ku Klux Klan protested at a Jacksonville, Florida movie house with placards asking filmgoers "Why Expose Yourself to Race Filth?"[29] The Alabama House of Representatives passed a resolution that pled with film distributors not to "brainwash the American public into acceptance of race mongrelization."[30] Memphis, Tennessee simply banned the film through its local censor board on the grounds that its depiction of miscegenation was "offensive to moral standards and no good for either white or Negro."[31] The city of Atlanta also banned it, and a sheriff confiscated a print of the film at a drive-in outside the city limits.[32] Belafonte reportedly received dozens of hate letters, included one which addressed him as "Nigger Commie," threateningly intoning, "You have overstepped the mark. Your time has come."[33]

Despite all the controversy, or perhaps because of it, the movie played throughout the nation, including a few Dixie states, becoming the year's sixth-highest earner.[34] In light of the strong responses *Island* incited, Zanuck's refusal to permit Belafonte and Fontaine to kiss certainly could be deemed a justifiably shrewd decision. If drinking from a coconut could incite statewide bans and death threats, then what horrors would a White woman kissing a Black man have wrought? Zanuck's decision to temper the film's audacity with a helping of hesitant restraint arguably proved wise in light of recent events that demonstrated the dangers of overstepping the hard miscegenetic line of White racism. *Island* appeared approximately two years after the 1955 murder of Emmitt Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy maimed and killed by two White Mississippians for making passes at a White woman. After an all-White jury declared the two men "not guilty," Emmitt's mother Mamie Till published his story along with a photograph of his horribly disfigured body in several national publications, sparking an outcry against the violent excesses of Southern racism.[35] Additionally, twenty-eight US states still enforced miscegenation laws in the year if *Island*'s release, legal reminders of the powerful resistance to such unions, real or cinematic.[36] Additionally, *Island in the Sun* contained multiple narrative elements that could have potentially infuriated segregationists deeply committed to Black oppression: it endorsed Black voting rights, depicted a Black political victory over a White man, and denounced economic exploitation based on race. It also featured a romance of equality between a White man and a Black woman, a less inflammatory although certainly controversial image. However, Belafonte argued that the outrage singularly centered on the fact that "never before has a Negro [man] been allowed to be in love with a white woman on screen."[37]

In addition to *Island in the Sun*'s status as the first Hollywood film to depict, however cautiously, romantic interest between a Black man and a White woman, it also deserves credit for allowing a Black/White couple to remain intact through the duration of the film. The movie grants Dandridge's Margot and her White lover Denis a classic "Hollywood ending" in which they run off to marry and, by inference, live happily ever. Although Hollywood endings such as this reinforce traditional heteronormative ideologies that would suffer heavy criticism in the following decades, the racial element of this plot twist directly challenged the film frames of the past, the interracial tragedy in particular. A Hollywood narrative had never treated interracial romance so kindly. Instead of "punishing" the couple with catastrophe or death, they are simply afforded a life together, permitted the romantic rights afforded White couples in countless previous films. Margot and Denis' Hollywood ending stands as *Island in the Sun*'s most clear articulation of interracial romance as a civil right, and the positive light in which the film portrays the couple essentially extends Movement calls for racial equality to the realm of romantic and sexual intimacy. More so than *The Searchers* or *Giant*, *Island in the Sun* marks the introduction of this new frame for the depiction of interracial sexuality, drawn directly from the Civil Rights rhetoric of integration. Additionally, the David/Mavis romance, although ending prior to the film's close, plays out in a way that squares with Movement rhetoric (and even presages the more militant stances of Black Power). David's decision to not act on his attraction springs not from some revulsion over the wrongness of interracial sex but out of his racially conscious desire to remain culturally and politically relevant to his people and their struggle for freedom. Films of the past would have forced the couple asunder as a penalty for the inherent foolishness and/or

immorality of their doomed romance. Instead, *Island in the Sun* drew from the rhetoric of racial pride, offering a compelling end to an interracial romance that emerged from one character's acute racial consciousness.

Island's production history and the media attention it incited confirm the historical links between the film's interracial romance and the Civil Rights Movement. Zanuck, who had previously overseen the production of racially conscious films *Pinky* (1949) and *No Way Out* (1950), worked closely with the film's scriptwriter Alfred Hayes to ensure that racial conflict be emphasized, insisting he wanted a film about "black-versus-white" rather than another tepid "South Seas" romance picture. He also sought advice from left-leaning playwright Irvin Shaw and chose formerly blacklisted director Robert Rosen to direct, pushing the script in a decisively more liberal direction.[38] Publicly, Zanuck vociferously denied any connections between the film and Civil Rights, contending that it "deal[s] with British West Indian problems and conflicts which have nothing in common with southern racial issues . . . Our film does not have any relation with these current American problems."[39] I read this as a disingenuous statement made to improve the film's marketability and box office potential. In fact, many of *Island*'s prosegregationist detractors drew opposite conclusions from Zanuck's equivocations, interpreting the film as an open endorsement for integration. The aforementioned KKK protestors in Jacksonville, Florida carried placards reading "A ticket to this show is integration."[40] Members of the White Citizens Council shut down a drive-in theater in Wetumpka, Alabama attempting to screen the film, cutting the power lines and later spreading rumors that the NAACP had paid the White manager to play the film.[41] A

review in Maine's *Lewiston Daily Sun* predicted that the film's theme was "bound to focus attention on the Southern argument against school integration."[42]

One could judge *Island in the Sun*'s privileging of sex over politics as frivolous in an era when Civil Rights activists endured insults, suffered physical brutality, lost jobs, and even sacrificed their own lives for the cause of freedom and justice. However, its release marks the ascendance of a new cinematic frame for the representation of interracial sexuality, an important historical moment in which the Movement received symbolic support from a major Hollywood film. Its impressive box office performance pointed to a broad audience for such film fare, and the movie industry would release scores of such films in the months and years following its release. These films would present a number of race/gender pairings and span a variety of popular film genres, but all would echo the rights-based frame presented by *Island in the Sun*. Let us briefly examine the basic features of this frame, outlining the broad contours of the representation of interracial sexuality as a civil right in this film and the many that would follow after it. First and foremost, this frame presented interracial desire and romance as a "positive" or morally acceptable act. Films of the past had historically presented interracial desire as a horror, a moral travesty, a fool's errand, an exotic fetish, or some combination thereof. By contrast, *Island in the Sun*, despite its gendered flaws and hesitancy in presenting actual Black/White contact, boldly posited such relationships as acceptable, even desirable, social arrangements between moral and racial equals. Secondly, these films framed interracial sexuality as an individual right that should not be infringed upon by a racially regressive agenda. When Denis' racist boss insists that he stop seeing Margot or lose his job, Denis simply quits, asserting his right to choose his

partner. When Denis explains that he must return to England, Margot insists on going with him, stating that they should be together, wherever that may be. In the David/Mavis story arc, the former ultimately rejects the latter not because it is morally wrong or, but because the demands of his racial identity and his people's freedom keep him from marrying a White woman, tacitly exercising his right to intermarrying in his refusal to exercise that right. Thirdly, these films always include some dramatization of the excesses of White racism, pitting these couples as dissidents bravely facing a resistant, and at times, violently hostile society. Although *Island in the Sun* focused more on character relationships and less on outside views of those relationships, the film does depict outside resistance via Denis' boss forcing him to choose between his job and lover. As we shall see, subsequent films would more explicitly depict the persecution of interracial couples.

Off of the Island and into Your Neighborhood

Released several months after its representational predecessor, *Sayonara* (1957) became the first post-*Island* film to extend the civil rights frame to White/Asian romance. Although set in a foreign land, it ends with a promise to move interracial sexuality off the island and bring interracial love to the segregated towns of White America. Based on James A. Michener's novel, *Sayonara* centers on Major Lloyd Gruver (Marlon Brando), an American Air Force pilot stationed in Japan during the Korean War. Joe Kelly (Red Buttons), one of Lloyd's officers, asks him witness his marriage to a Japanese local, Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki), despite official military discouragement of such unions and US laws prohibiting Japanese wives entry into the country. Lloyd marvels that Joe would prefer a "slant-eyed" woman over a home-grown "American" girl, but he reluctantly agrees to witness the marriage. Lloyd's views become challenged after he who meets

Hana-ogi (Miiko Taka), a performer in an all-female Japanese theater troupe. Lloyd quickly falls for her and abandons his White fiancée to secretly pursue Hana-ogi against military policy. In an effort to clamp down on such "fraternizations," the military enacts a discriminatory policy that reassigns all GIs who marry Japanese women to other locations. Heart-stricken by their looming separation, Joe and Katsumi commit lovers' suicide. Shortly after the couple's deaths, the US government announces a forthcoming law allowing such marriages, and the film closes with Lloyd and Hana-ogi publicly announcing their engagement to an excited crowd of reporters and shocked onlookers.

Sayonara attempts to represent the real phenomena of Japanese "war brides," the tens of thousands of marriages between Japanese women and American GIs stationed in Japan after its defeat by the Allies in World War II. Military bureaucracy made the application process for such marriages intentionally difficult, and xenophobic US laws passed decades prior barred easy immigration for Japanese women regardless of marital status. Congress passed two postwar laws (1945 and 1946) allowing servicemen to bring back their foreign wives, but this applied only to women of "White" nationalities. The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act finally allowed Japanese women to immigrate to the US, although a racially restrictive quota system permitted only a small number each year, forcing GI/Japanese couples who desired to relocate to US shores to compete for a minute number of spots.[43] Although *Sayonara* clearly references this recent history, I concur with film scholar Gina Marchetti's insistence that "civil rights is the issue closest to the emotional heart of *Sayonara* and, certainly, more recently on the minds of its 1957 audience."[44] Like *Island in the Sun*, it cinematically represented the rhetorics of classical phase of Civil Rights without directly mentioning the Movement. *Sayonara* depicts the

Figure 20. Promotional poster for *Sayonara*. Advertisers prominently displayed the film's central interracial couple, promoting it as a "story of defiant desire."

two interracial couples as star-crossed lovers navigating a world of discriminatory policies that render them as second class citizens unworthy of the benefits afforded same race couples, broadly referencing the network of racially discriminatory laws that Movement activists were concurrently targeting. The film ties its story of overseas intrigue to the racism of the American South in the form of Colonel Craford, a bigoted Southern officer whose hatred of interracial marriage moves him to push the policy that reassigns GIs married to Japanese women. In one scene, Colonel Craford orders soldiers to spy on an enlisted man who recently married a Japanese woman in order to catch him doing something "irregular," an eerie reminder that interracial couples often experienced increased scrutiny and governmental interference into their personal lives, particularly in segregated states. The couple's suicides could be read as a stand-in for the horrifying

Southern violence that could unleashed upon those brave enough to cross the racial/sexual color line in the South. Additionally, director Joshua Logan stated that star Brando played Gruver with a Southern accent because "he felt that the situation of a boy being in love with a girl from a different race would be more vivid and dramatic if that boy came from the land of segregation."[45] The addition of this subtle detail connects the world of *Sayonara* with Southern racism and clearly grounds the film in current events, a decision made even more significant in retrospect as Brando would become an early Hollywood supporter of the Movement.

Sayonara end not with a marriage but an engagement, a point that I see as symbolically important. In the film's final scene, Lloyd and Hana-ogi board a plane destined for the US, swarmed by reporters eager to hear about why they chose to get engaged despite resistance from the "big brass." Hana-ogi calmly explains: "There are many people in his country who will be disturbed by this . . . l hope they will learn to understand and someday approve." She also reveals their plan to proudly have children and raise them, ostensibly in whatever Southern state Lloyd calls home. Asserting the couple's fundamental right to live and have racially mixed children, Hana-ogi and Lloyd intend to leave Japan to bring their message of sexual integration to the US South. While *The Searchers* and *Giant* set their pleas for interracial tolerance in the wild Southwest and *Island in the Sun* exported its civil rights inflected romances to a fictitious Caribbean island, *Sayonara* promised to bring interracial sexuality home. In the following years, this new cinematic frame would indeed come "home," metaphorically speaking—interracial couples would boldly assert their right to love all manner of film genres that had

historically been mute or regressive in their representations of interracial issues, while increasingly doing so in contemporary times and in everyday American spaces.

In *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), the popular science fiction genre embraced interracial romance, arguing that crossing the color line could save the human race from the apocalyptic bigotry *literally* threatening to destroy the world. The film places a White woman named Sarah (Inger Stevens) and a Black man named Ralph (Belafonte in his first post-*Island* role) as the only survivors after a global nuclear holocaust. They become friends out of necessity, but Ralph vigorously maintains racial/sexual boundaries, insisting they live in separate apartment buildings. Ralph grows distant after Sarah begins to express attraction to him, due to his inability to accept their racial difference. Complications multiply when they discover Ben (Mel Ferrer), another White survivor who feels entitled to Sarah's affections because of his race. When she rejects his advances, he interprets it as choosing Black companionship over White, and the tensions between Ralph and Ben escalate into a violent duel. In a plot twist that echoes the burgeoning strategy of the Civil Rights Movement, the feud ends only after Ralph adopts a stance of nonviolence, convincing his White antagonist that cooperation remains the only key to their mutual survival. The movie concludes with Ralph finally taking Sarah's hand and reconciling with Ben, and the three walking hand in hand over a closing title that reads "The Beginning." Belafonte reportedly made "racial concessions" in making the film, again allowing no onscreen interaction between his character and Sarah beyond a scene in which she asks Ralph to cut her hair, leading some critics to castigate the film's romantic timidity.[46] *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* argued that racism perhaps posed a greater ultimate threat than the Cold War becoming hot and

Figure 21. Film still from *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*. Three survivors of a nuclear apocalypse must learn to overcome their racial/sexual prejudices in order for the human race to continue. After the two men finally end their sexist feud over whom the lone woman should "belong" to, the three walk hand-in-hand down the deserted streets of New York City.

obliterating human life on earth, again promoting interracial sexuality as a right, if not a necessity, in a world riven with racial hatred and division.

The Hollywood musical also began to argue for interracial sexuality as a civil right in *South Pacific* (1958), an adaptation of Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1949 Broadway musical that follows the story of two cross-cultural romances on a fictional South Seas island during World War II. One coupling is an interracial romance between a White US lieutenant and a Tonkinese woman, while the other concerns a Frenchman with biracial children courting a White military nurse who balks at the prospects of marrying a man who had previous relations with a racial inferior. The lieutenant and the nurse are separately struggling to accept their lovers' racial otherness, working to reconcile their feelings with the strong racist views of their upbringing. In one of the film's most notable

musical numbers, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," the lieutenant struggles to overcome this cognitive dissonance, insisting:

> You've got to be taught to be afraid
> Of people whose eyes are oddly made
> And people whose skin is a different shade.
> You've got to be carefully taught.

South Pacific supports the era's dominant interracial frame, arguing culturally constructed racist values as the problem facing mixed couples, again countering frames of the previous era in which such a desire for interracial liaisons grew out of some debauched recesses of a lustful miscegenetic heart.

While *South Pacific* still placed interracial romances in far-flung locations, the popular musical *West Side Story* (1961) examined interracial relations in that most American of locations, the hard-scrabble streets of contemporary New York City. This modern update of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* recasts the duo as two cross-racial lovers trapped between two racially divided, antagonistic cultures—the Jets, a working class Polish-American gang, and the Sharks, a gang of Puerto Rican immigrants. Tony (Richard Beymer), former Jet member, and Maria (Natalie Wood), sister of the Sharks' leader Bernardo (George Chakiris), fall in love and begin a secret romance. As tension between the gangs rises, Maria encourages Tony to stop a fight scheduled to occur at night, although his efforts backfire and the evening ends with Tony stabbing Bernardo to death. The film culminates with an angry Shark murdering Tony, and as he collapses into Maria's arms, she bitterly informs the gathering crowd that his death was caused "not with bullets and guns, [but] with hate." Like *South Pacific*, *West Side Story* argues that the fundamental problem lies not with the folly or immorality of interracial love, but with the inherently destructive evils of racism.

One of the more remarkable trends observed in several of these films, including *The Searchers*, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* and *West Side Story*, is the textual linking of interracial sexuality with acts of racial violence. In an era when Emmitt Till's mutilated body still pervaded many peoples' minds and the news media routinely broadcasted scenes of brutal White aggression against peaceful Movement protestors, these films joined in cinematic protest against the aggression often meted out in the name of policing the racial/sexual color line. A notable text in this regard is *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), an adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize winning novel centering on a court case in which a White man falsely accuses a Black man named Tom Robinson (Brock Peters) of raping his daughter in a small Alabama town. Tom maintains that the White girl tried to seduce him and that her repulsed father beat her and accused Tom in order to hide her secret. Despite the town's star lawyer presenting overwhelming evidence of the defendant's innocence, an all-White jury finds Tom guilty, and a mob subsequently kills him during an attempted escape. *Mockingbird* boldly challenged the myth of the Black rapist, demonstrating that such charges were historically excuses for Whites men to commit violence against Black people for any number of illicit reasons. It directly challenged a powerful cinematic precedent enshrined by *The Birth of a Nation*, offering an insurgent corrective to the dark skinned rapist that had stalked American cinema for decades.

While the film industry extended the civil rights romance to many of its classic genres, the burgeoning world of the independent art film also turned its attention to this issue, offering compelling examinations of the politics of interracial sexuality with a complexity rarely seen in late 1950s/early 1960s Hollywood. John Cassavetes' *Shadows*

(1959), a landmark text in the history of US independent art film, exhibits many of the qualities that would become the director's signature style—improvised dialogue, episodic structure, and a privileging of character interactions over narrative.[47] *Shadows* also proves important to the narrative of cinematic interracial sexuality, arguing that even ostensibly liberal social circles practiced sexual racism. The film centers on a loose-knit interracial coterie of hipsters and jazz musicians, collectively struggling to eke out a living and find love in New York City's bohemian subculture. One of the film's most prominent episodes follows Lelia (Lelia Goldoni), the light skinned sister of a Black jazz singer, who begins dating a White man named Tony (Anthony Ray) who is unaware that she is Black. The two have an unsatisfying and somewhat alienating first sexual encounter, but Tony continues to romantically pursue Lelia, wooing her with a charming emotional vulnerability. His interest in Lelia comes to a crashing halt when her brother Hugh (Hugh Hurd) comes home to the family apartment after a gig, revealing to Tony her true racial heritage. Tony takes one look at Hugh and immediately becomes agitated, nervously announcing that he has an appointment. Hugh quickly assess the situation and intercepts Tony's attempted speedy exit, tersely insisting that he stop hurting Lelia (who is weeping in the background) and promise to never speak to her again. *Shadows* does not reference the Movement, and the film's focus on character-driven performance presents a more nuanced and ambivalent picture of racial issues than overtly moralistic fare like *Sayonara*. However, *Shadows* presents the Tony/Lelia episode via the civil rights frame. Tony's horror over Lelia's Blackness performs the disgust many Whites held towards (equal) interracial sexual relationships. Hugh's paternalistic insistence that he does not want him to "hurt anything of mine" reads as a reaction against Tony's racist panic at

Figure 22. Film still from *Shadows*. Hugh warns Tony to never speak to his sister Leila again after Tony expresses shock and discomfort upon learning of her Blackness.

accidentally sleeping with a Black woman, and he implicitly accuses Tony of viewing Blackness as a tainting, polluting blemish on his racial/sexual purity.

Lelia and Tony's vignette from *Shadows* presents interracial intimacies as potentially good relationships ultimately harmed by the prejudices of White racism, dramatizing the emotional harm sexual racism could inflict upon those struggling against a stigmatized racial status. Several years later, the independent drama *One Potato, Two Potato* (1964) extended this episodic analysis to a feature length text, depicting the first Black/White married couple in a US film as sympathetic victims of institutionalized White racism. The film centers on Julie Cullen (Richard Mulligan), a White suburban mother whose emotionally cruel husband abandoned her several years ago, forcing her to work at a local industrial plant to provide for their preadolescent daughter Ellen (Marti

Mericka). At work, Julie meets Frank Richards (Bernie Hamilton), one of the only single Black men in the mostly-White town, and the two quickly fall in love. Opposition to the couple comes almost immediately. Local police stop them after assuming Ellen to be a prostitute, and Frank's father chides him for paying back his years of hard work and struggle by dating a White woman. Eventually, the two marry, and the community generally tolerates their union. Frank becomes a wonderful stepfather to Ellen, and the couple gives birth to a son whose presence wins over Frank's resistant father. However, their fortunes change when Julie's ex-husband Joe Cullen (Richard Mulligan) moves back into the area, hoping to reconnect with his estranged daughter. Joe quickly learns that Ellen has married interracially, horrified that a Black man is raising his daughter despite Ellen's deep affection for her stepfather.

Joe turns to the courts filing suit for full custody of his daughter. The judge acknowledges Frank as a superior father over Joe and admits that resistance to interracial marriage is based on nothing but bigotry. However, he further states that "the background of a Negro home [will] affect this child's chances of happiness in an adult world," ruling that Ellen's best interests lie with her absent, albeit White, father. Ultimately, race trumps good parenting, and the film ends bleakly as Joe drives a screaming Ellen away from her happy home and despairing parents. *One Potato, Two Potato* strove to dignify interracial marriage, depicting the screen's first union between a White woman and a Black man as a deeply loving relationship beset on all sides by racist resistance. Even the judge acknowledges the absurdity of racist bigotry, but ultimately rules with the status quo of White supremacy, blaming a racist society for treating such families as "pariahs" while coolly ripping this happy interracial family apart. Like *Shadows, One Potato, Two Potato*

does not overtly reference the Movement, but it translated Civil Rights protest against the injustices of White racism into the familiar form of the Hollywood melodrama, capturing the horrors that a racist legal system could inflict upon racialized individuals and communities.

Something Old, Something New

The sum total of these diverse film texts amounts to a crucial moment in the history of cinematic interracial sexuality. Taken as a group, these films introduced a groundbreaking frame for the depiction of interracial sexuality as an individual and civil right, offering movie audiences a revolutionary cinematic image. Some of these films, particularly *Island in the Sun*, proved extremely popular and widely-seen. Other films, like *Shadows* and *One Potato, Two Potato*, reached only niche audiences and connoisseurs of European-style art film. Countering decades of movies in which interracial sexuality evoked disgust, terror, or lurid curiosity, this cycle of "miscegenation films" echoed and bolstered the race conscious rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, presenting such relationships as demands for equality in the face of White resistance and violence. This frame would be reproduced and refined throughout the decade, culminating with the era's most famous integrationist star Sidney Poitier and his performance in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the most recognizable interracial romance of the era and, arguably, of all time. The importance of this frame in our story cannot be overstated for this cinematic cycle ultimately laid the groundwork for the ubiquity of "colorblind" romances that dominate contemporary US media.

Despite the novelty of the images in this film cycle, cinematic interracial sexuality could not totally shed enduring stereotypes and decades-old racist/gendered Hollywood clichés. Susan Courtney argues that the "'new' interracial package [of such films] was

thoroughly mired in 'old' rhetorics of miscegenation," keeping one foot firmly planted in the regressive frames of the past while taking an ostensibly bold step towards radical racial equality.[48] *Island in the Sun* exemplifies this phenomenon. While it boldly featured a Black man and a White woman expressing mutual romantic desire, Darryl F. Zanuck's much publicized decision to deny David and Mavis their traditional (by Hollywood standards) onscreen kiss can be read as the indirect reification of the protection of White women from sexually threatening Black men. *Island* also demonstrates stark differences in the way it presents its two principal female characters, Mavis and Margot, performing race/gender dynamics that posit White women as more powerful and chaste, and, conversely, Black women as less powerful and hypersexual. In Mavis' interactions with David, she is given almost equal times in terms of dialogue, and the film presents their relationship as a tense yet dynamic back-and-forth exploring the complexities of race and color. By contrast, Margot allows her White paramour to make all the decisions, gladly offering to abandon her entire life to follow him to England. Mavis and her upper class set of society women are consistently clothed in conservative, pale-colored clothing accentuating their chastity. By contrast, Courtney notes that Margot "limbos in a bikini top and sarong, fully reclines on her lover's bed in the middle of the day for us to view (with him) from head to toe, and regularly bursts forth in low-cut dresses of bright [colors]."[49] Ultimately, Margot's characterization and onscreen presentation reifies many aspects of interracial exoticism of the 1930s and 1940s—although afforded a "happy ending," she becomes an erotic object to be paraded around at mostly-White parties, a passport to exotic love for a strong White man to whom she subsumes her will.

Sayonara exhibits similar mixtures of old and new, blending a call for civil rights at the altar with traditional racial and gender norms. Like the Margot/Denis story in *Island in the Sun*, the relationship between Lloyd and Hana-ogi perpetuates the so-called "White knight" frame in which a strong, courageous White male rescues a non-White woman from some state of powerlessness or impurity.[50] Midway through the film, we learn that Hana-ogi, the oldest daughter of a very poor family, was essentially sold into sexual slavery and only escaped by pledging her lifelong commitment to the dance troupe where she works and lives. Lloyd appears as Hana-ogi's White knight, rescuing her from the cloistered all-female theater group overseen by male managers who forbid all romantic entanglements. A likeminded film from the era, *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), demonstrates this even more vividly as an American painter and eventual White knight Robert Lomax (William Holden) moves to China for artistic inspiration and falls in love with a Chinese prostitute named Suzie Wong (Nancy Kwan), whom he rescues from her life of squalor and exploitation through an offer of marriage. Additionally, both of these films bolster the enduring racial/sexual stereotype held by many Western men that Asian women were closest to the "feminine" ideal of womanhood, content to be passive, subservient, dependent, and domesticated.[51] We see this in *Sayonara*'s promotional poster which reproduces a line from the film where Hana-ogi, enthralled by Lloyd's affection, meekly coos, "I will love you if that is your desire." Prior to their mutual suicide, Joe and Katsumi's marriage reinforces images of her happy subservience: Katsumi dutifully defers to him, cooks and serves his food, and even bathes him. Throughout *Sayonara* and *The World of Suzie Wong*, Asian women are framed as virtual slaves to love, helpless and acquiescent actors in a romantic world of White male fantasy.

Figure 23. Promotional poster for *The World of Suzie Wong*. The white knight arrives to rescue the helpless racial other. The small box slightly below Suzie's shoulders includes this telling tagline: "You are the first man I ever loved . . . and the world has only just begun . . ."

Arguably, the most overt way in which these new films reified old stereotypes was through the common practice of making up White or light-skinned actors of color to play non-White parts. As we have seen, this cinematic tradition stretched back to the silent era, and provided a means for filmmakers to represent interracial sexuality without actually calling upon people of different races to interact physically, particularly when the plot paired a White woman with a non-White man. A subplot in *Sayonara*'s finds Lloyd's fiancée Eileen falling for a Japanese stage actor named Nakamura whom she

begins to see regularly. The contrast between this relationship and the Sayonara's other two Asian/White pairings, Hana-ogi/Lloyd and Katsumi/Joe, reveal telling gender anxieties. The film's producer allowed actual interracial contact between Lloyd and Hana-ogi, even permitting kissing between the two. It also allowed Joe and Katsumi to kiss at their wedding ceremony. By contrast, the Eileen/Nakamura affair, which never actually blooms into a full-fledged romance, evinces the same racial nervousness around *actual* White women interacting with non-White men seen in the Mavis/David romance in *Island in the Sun*. Producers cast White starlet Patricia Owens as Eileen, pairing her not with a Japanese thespian but with Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán, who sported a kimono and furnished a phony Japanese accent to play Nakamura.

Other films of the era followed suit. White actor Charlton Heston bronzed up and wore a pencil thin mustache to play a Mexican drug enforcement official married to a White woman in Orson Welles' noir drama *Touch of Evil* (1958), and a tanned Elvis Presley played a half-Kiowa Indian in the Western *Flaming Star* (1960). Director Douglas Sirk's glossy remake of *Imitation of Life* (1959) cast Susan Kohner, the daughter of a Mexican American woman and a Jewish man, as the light skinned Black woman who passes for White, even though the film's 1934 predecessor permitted light skinned Black actor Fredi Washington to play the part. Hollywood starlet Natalie Wood offers a particularly interesting case study in racial role-switching in that between 1958 and 1962, she starred in a string of interracial romances, jumping races and ethnicities between productions. Wood (born Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko to Russian immigrants) played a half-Black/half-White woman in *Kings Go Forth* (1958), a Jewish college student who romances a Gentile man in *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958), and the Puerto Rican girl

secretly romancing a White gang rival in *West Side Story*. Cross-racial casting was so widespread at the time that one comedy film, *My Geisha* (1962), lampooned the practice through a story in which a White woman actor wants so desperately to star in an all-Japanese cast version of *Madame Butterfly* that she puts on yellowface and poses as a Japanese woman to successfully land the part. These films illustrate an important point: representational frames are never singular or "pure." When landmark films put forth a new representational frame, this frame still evinces lingering influences from the old frame(s) that preceded it. While *Giant*, *Island* and *Sayonara* introduced a pathbreaking, paradigm shifting frame into Hollywood's repertoire, the civil rights frame for interracial sexuality by no means eradicated or shed the influences of previous frames, often commingling the old with the new to create a complex, hybridized representational mixture. In fact, while some saw such texts as uplifting arguments for basic rights evenly applied across racial lines, other critics lambasted them as "sweaty" exercises in interracial exoticism.[52]

If the transgressive thrill of crossing the sexual color line lurks just beneath the surface of the civil rights romance films, it is hardly surprising that actors of color struggled to find dignified roles in Hollywood's love affair with miscegenation. In the biography *Everything and Nothing: The Dorothy Dandridge Tragedy*, the *Island* actor discusses how her light skin attracted a lurid fetishization directly shaping the screen roles offered to her: "There was a limit to the professional vehicles available to me," she states. Studios largely offered her roles as "a wanton, a prostitute, not as a woman seeking love . . . Nothing that I had—beauty, money, recognition as an artist—was sufficient to break through the powerful psychological bind of racist thinking."[53] The

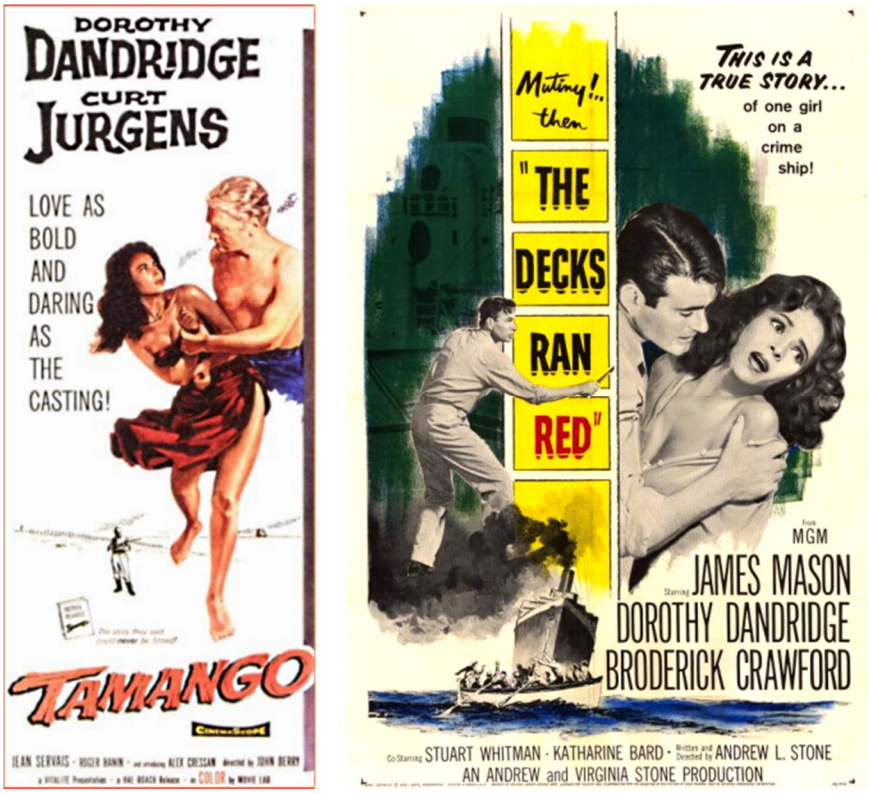

Figure 24. Promotional posters for *Tamango* and *The Decks Ran Red*. Following *Island in the Sun*, Dandridge's screen opportunities grew increasingly narrow, and she accepted a series of films that framed her as an exoticized, eroticized other. The promotional posters for both films disturbingly present Dandridge's characters as racially-othered objects of White male sexual aggression, exploitively dangling the lure of interracial sexual intrigue and rape fantasy before its prospective White male viewers.

screen roles Dandridge accepted following *Island* narrate a sort of downward miscegenetic spiral, becoming increasingly lurid and degrading as her film career declined. In *Tamango* (1958), she plays the mulatto mistress of a cruel nineteenth century Dutch slaver. *The Decks Ran Red* (1958) casts Dandridge as the exotic wife of a cook aboard an American cargo boat whose constant flirtations drive the White sailors into a collective sexual mania, leading to an attempted rape and inciting a near mutiny. In the all-Black cast musical *Porgy and Bess* (1959), her only post-*Island* in film in which she was not sexually pursued by White men, Dandridge played a drug-addicted, "liquor-

guzzling slut," an image that bolstered deeply racist stereotypes about the lustful excesses of Black female sexuality.

Ultimately, while *Island in the Sun* and films of its ilk invoked interracial sexuality to argue for integration and racial/sexual equality, such movies could not completely rise above their taboo, exploitable subject matter. Dandridge's film career highlights and nadirs perform how well-meaning, progressive exercises in cinematic uplift via civil rights romances could literally descend into the depths of the miscegenetic White imagination. In fact, while the new civil rights frame dominated the cinematic representation of interracial sexuality during the decade, a slew of contemporaneous movies stoked age-old fears of racial mixing and depicted interracial sexuality as the debauched and dangerous (although luridly fascinating) miscegenation spectacle, offering a stark counterframe to interracial romance as a civil right. While Hollywood self-congratulatorily promoted the values of equality, tolerance, and racial integration through the image of cross-racial romance, the exploitation movie industry concurrently churned out scores of films that presented interracial sexuality as something fordidden, abnormal, and perhaps even transgressively fun.

Miscegenation Spectacles in the Exploitation Film

Epidermic Intrigue in Night of the Quarter Moon

The 1959 film *Night of the Quarter Moon* demonstrated the exploitable potential of interracial sexuality in an era of Civil Rights. It also captured the basic elements of the miscegenation spectacle, a film frame capitalizing on the forbidden pleasures of sexual integration. *Night of the Quarter Moon* opens with Chuck Nelson (John Drew Barrymore), a Korean War veteran recovering from a traumatic prisoner-of-war experience, travelling to a small Mexican fishing village with his brother for a season of

post-traumatic relaxation. The brothers contract with a commercial fisherman who introduces Chuck to his beautiful daughter Ginny (Julie London), whom he encounters while swimming nude in a scenic lagoon. An enraptured Chuck passionately pursues her, although a nervous Ginny feels that she must be transparent about her racial background: her maternal grandmother was "pure Portuguese-Angolan," which she translates to "100% Black," making her "one-quarter" African. Unfazed about her mixed racial status, Chuck proposes to her, and they return to his home of San Francisco to marry. Chuck's wealthy and influential family immediately accepts her, until a muckraking newspaper breaks a front page story that Ginny is a "quadroon," which almost immediately incites a campaign of humiliating harassment from neighbors and bigoted police officers. Chuck's "liberal" mother Cornelia (Agnes Moorehead) begins a crusade to destroy their marriage after candidly informing Ginny: "I always thought we should have equality for all the people in the world until it happened to me." Cornelia essentially imprisons her son at the family estate, recreating conditions that provoke flashbacks of his POW experience, sedating him and refusing to let him leave. After bringing Chuck to a state of psychological breakdown, Cornelia files for a divorce under his name, manipulating Chuck into claiming that Ginny fraudulently masked her racial background and that he only discovered her Blackness during their postmarital union. The melodrama climax in a dramatic courtroom scene in which Ginny's Black lawyer, insisting that no White man could failed to see her obvious Blackness, rips the back off of her dress to reveal her dark skin. (Although Ginny was played by the obviously-White actor Julie London, Ginny baring her back inexplicably "proves" her Blackness to the courtroom.) Furious, Chuck awakes from his stupor, leaping out of his chair and covering up his humiliated wife. The

film ends with the couple publicly reaffirming the validity of their marriage before snapping newspaper cameras.

Night of the Quarter Moon was very loosely based on a real life interracial drama occurring three decades prior. In 1924, New York socialite Kip Rhinelander married Alice Jones, a light-skinned Black woman. His horrified wealthy parents forced him to divorce her, culminating in a much publicized trial. The prosecution argued that Jones lied about her mixed race ancestry and tricked Rhinelander into marriage, while the defense ultimately rest their case on the ability to prove that Rhinelander, who had been sleeping with her, knew of her race prior to marrying her. The case ended in a lurid courtroom peepshow in which the defense "proved" Jones' Blackness by having her bare her breasts to the jury, arguing that Rhinelander could only have known she was Black. The couple eventually reached a settlement, but this public miscegenetic drama stirred up nationwide interest, particularly after the tabloid *New York Evening Graphic* circulated a lurid faked image of the courtroom stripping scene composed by cutting and pasting together photographs from various sources.[54] The film revisions the basic details of the Rhinelander case, changing it to more overtly exploit the roiling contemporary debates over integration and interracial sexuality. In fact, Heidi Ardizzone, one of the few scholars to treat *Night of the Quarter Moon* to a historical analysis, reads the movie as drawing from the same rhetorical sources as *Island in the Sun*. Ardizzone reads *Quarter Moon* as "directly address[ing] the question of interracial marriage as a civil rights issue," casting Ginny and Chuck's opponents as racist hypocrites denying the their essential rights.[55] Other textual markers ostensibly frame the couple's marriage as a morally acceptable privilege of consenting adults. When Ginny reveals her racial background to

Figure 25. Composograph of Alice Rhinelander in court, 1925. Newspapers and tabloids widely publicized the lurid details of the Rhinelander divorce trial. The *New York Evening Graphic* published this "composograph" (a faked image made of multiple photographs cut and pasted together) representing the courtroom scene in which Alice Jones removed some of her clothing to "prove" her Blackness. (PBS' American Photography Project)

Chuck early in the film, he asserts that he does not care what she is "one quarter of." As Ginny enters the courthouse to begin the trial, supporters line the steps, screaming, "This is America! You can marry anybody you want!"

Despite the film's direct paeans to interracial love as a civil right, the overall tone of the film clearly emphasizes the spectacle of miscegenation. An analysis of its production and promotion suggests that it was conceived and released in order to capitalize on the controversial and titillating topic of interracial sex. Although Ardizzone posits *Quarter* moon as a landmark Civil Rights film, I read it as a bawdy exercise in cinematic exploitation, nakedly drawing on Movement rhetoric in order to capitalize on a long-standing fascination with interracial sex and the transgressive allure of the mixed race woman. *Quarter Moon* was the brainchild of cinematic exploiteer Albert Zugsmith,

known for producing popular drive-in fare with less-than-subtle titles like *Sex Kittens Go to College* (1960) and *Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1962).[56] To direct *Quarter Moon*, Zugsmith chose Hugo Haas, a Czechoslovakian actor and filmmaker who emigrated to the U.S. to escape Hitler's forces. Despite being respected in his home country as a cinematic auteur, Haas could only find work on the margins of the US film industry, directing sleazy exploitation pictures like the adultery themed *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (1953). Given the film's genesis in the exploitation industry, the film's marketers unsurprisingly promoted it as a lurid miscegenation spectacle. Nearly all of *Quarter Moon*'s advertising posters featured a close-up of Julie London's dress half-ripped dress with the sensational, racially tinged tagline, "I don't care <u>what</u> she is . . . She's mine!"

Metro Goldwyn Mayer distributed the independently produced *Quarter Moon* in the spring of 1959 to little fanfare, and the mainstream press reacted with disgust. Specifically, critics considered the film's depiction of interracial marriage a case of vulgar profiteering from sensitive racial issues, further bolstering my argument that it should be seen as an exploitive miscegenation spectacle. Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Tribune* scourged it as a "completely tasteless attempt to capitalize on racial discrimination with a sordid, sexy tale."[57] Charles Stinson expressed comparable sentiments: "The script isn't anywhere close to the weight sufficient to carry the burden of such a drama or of such a message as that of justice . . . among the races of man . . . It is, in a sense, criminal to use such a serious subject as a vehicle for stunts and low-brow sensationalism."[58] The film's lurid credentials were further certified when an independent film company purchased and rereleased it in 1961 under the exploitation title *Flesh and Flame, marketing it with a new promotional poster showing Ginny with even more*

Figure 26. Promotional posters for *Night of the Quarter Moon*, *Flesh and Flame*, and *The Color of Her Skin*. Exploiteers often rereleased a film under different names to milk each product for all its worth.

exposed flesh and an image that did not appear in the film of Chuck without pants.[‡] Above this bizarre image, a tagline stirs up epidermic intrigue, inviting potential viewers to gaze on her half-naked body and ask, "Why is she untouchable?" A poster for an even more excessive rerelease of *Quarter Moon* retitled *The Color of Her Skin* featured a nude silhouette of a woman which, again, did not appear in the film, and wooed curious audience members with the tagline, "When his lips touched hers the color line melted." To drive the point home, an additional tagline tied the film's contemporary interracial sexual theatrics to its lamentable roots in sexual abuse during America's era of racialized slavery: "A hundred years of hate and passion explodes [sic] across the screen!"

[‡] Retitling films was a common practice in the exploitation film industry, and served a variety of purposes. First, it allowed distributors to tailor a film to more carefully target audience tastes and promote particular sensational aspects of the film's plot. Second, it often extended the life of a film, allowing distributors to roadshow a film for years or decades under different names. As seen in the previous chapter with the exploitation travelogues, some exploiteers even purchased films or film segments from other directors and put them back into distribution under another title. This is precisely what happened with *Night of the Quarter Moon* and its various permutations. Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 59–61.

Hate and Passion: Miscegenation and the Movement

While the "hate and passion" promised in the poster for *The Color of Her Skin* (the rechristened version of *Night of the Quarter Moon*) touted the film's collision of racial hatred and interracial intrigue, this phrase also succinctly captures the contradictory sentiments aroused by the Movement. In fact, this film appeared in an era when established Civil Rights organizations like the NAACP and younger student led groups like SNCC were exploring bolder, more direct acts of protest that challenged the staunchest traditions of Southern racism, provoking a horrifying backlash of racial violence and abuse. A wave of sit-ins swept across the South in early 1960 as groups of Black activists assembled at segregated public establishments and demanded service at counters reserved for White patrons only.[§] In 1961, various Civil Rights groups began organizing "Freedom Rides"—racially integrated bus trips meant to test recent court rulings that declared segregation on public buses unconstitutional.[59] These and other increasingly bold acts of peaceful disruption incited escalating waves of retribution from angry Southern Whites and police forces backed by segregationist state and local leaders, culminating in the infamous Selma-to-Montgomery marches of 1965 in which armed Alabama state troopers mercilessly assaulted hundreds of peaceful marchers with billy clubs and tear gas.[60] Such scenes of extreme brutality flickered across the nations' television screens via the increasingly important medium of the nightly news, bringing shocking images that became an important tool in gaining national sympathy for the

[§] Sit-ins did not originate in 1960. The earliest successful student-led sit-in occurred in Baltimore, Maryland in January of 1955. However, historians often credit the 1960 Greensboro sit-in as sparking the subsequent "wave" of sit-in protests across the South. Eli Pousson, "Why the West Side Matters: Read's Drug Store and Baltimore's Civil Rights Heritage," *Baltimore Heritage*, January 7, 2011, http://baltimoreheritage.org/education/why-the-west-side-matters-reads-drug-store-and-baltimores-civil-rights-heritage/; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters : America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 272–275.

Movement.[61] However, these televised dramas of racial repression also hardened the resolve of segregationist Whites who viewed such "foreigners" as Northern interlopers trying to destroy the sacred racial balance of Southern life. Novelist John Steinbeck took a more cynical view of these images, arguing that for many TV viewers, the "strange drama" of enraged Whites besieging peaceful Black protesters held "the same draw as a five-legged calf or a two-headed foetus at a sideshow," a horrifying but fascinating spectacle of anger, violence, and racial conflict.[62]

For Movement workers, the violence was no sideshow, but an ever-present danger that could claim lives, as it did with several prominent Civil Rights figures including Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary for Mississippi who was assassinated in front of his home in June of 1963. Despite the pervasive threat of harm, Movement activists directly and boldly challenged the legacies of racism in the South *and* North, risking their lives to denounce segregation, denial of voting rights, unfair housing policies, discriminatory employment and compensation practices, and economic exploitation of the poor.[63] However, Civil Rights leaders intentionally and strategically left one issue off of the agenda: the right to interracial marriage. In 1959, twenty-nine states, including states in the South, Midwest, and West, had miscegenation laws barring interracial marriages.[64] Such laws originated in the era of British colonization when the Virginia Colony passed a 1691 statute declaring it unlawful for "negroes, mulattoes, and Indians" to intermarry with Whites. Throughout the 1700s, laws regulating interracial marriage spread north and south so that on the eve of the American Revolution, only four colonies did not have such statutes. The newly established US government allowed the states to settle the issue, and many quickly passed laws regulating such unions.[65] Even after the

Civil War, national resistance (especially among Whites) to interracial unions remained high throughout the ensuing decades, and miscegenation laws persisted well into the twentieth century.

These statutes serve as a fascinating archive of dominant White racial ideologies, and a closer look at the nation's patchwork of miscegenation law sheds some light on the racial and interracial hysteria fueling the violence of the Civil Rights backlash. It should be first understood that miscegenation laws were *not* fairly-applied statutes barring interracial marriage as a general cultural practice. They explicitly existed to maintain the "racial integrity" of the White population. For example, the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924, a modern update of the state's archaic miscegenation statute, ordered the Registrar of Vital Statistics to deny a marriage license to engaged couples if one of the individuals was deemed not "of pure white race." The concern was not "racial integrity" in the abstract. White racial purity remained its chief goal: "It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person." If the production and protection of White supremacy lie at the heart of miscegenation law, the insistence on Black inferiority proved inextricably linked to this racial project. The White imagination has historically viewed Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and Black sexuality as the moral opposite of White purity. Although all non-White groups have throughout history experienced varying degrees of discrimination and oppression, Blacks have always been "the most consistently visible subjects of . . . discourses about non-Whites in the United States."[66] Unsurprisingly, miscegenation law narrated a particular obsession with Black/White sexuality, demonstrating flexibility with racial groups deemed closer to White and increasing in rigidity as groups moved closer towards

Black. For example, lawmakers evinced a legal ambivalence towards White/American Indian marriages—some states prohibited them while others allowed them, particularly in regions where intermarriage afforded White men rights to protected tribal lands.[67] Surprisingly, no miscegenation laws explicitly barred marriages between Whites and Mexicans or other Latino/a ethnic groups, although Southwestern officials routinely prohibited marriages between Whites and darker skinned Latinos/as deemed descendants of racially "inferior" stock.[68]

The diversity of miscegenation law ends with Blackness—in every era, states with miscegenation statutes consistently forbade Black/White marriages. Miscegenetic hysteria pushed some lawmakers to invent calculations determining what amounts of African "blood" could legally mix with Whites, barring intermarriages with "mulattos" (half-Black), "quadroons" (one-quarter Black), or "octoroons" (one-eighth Black). Some states sidestepped ancestral mathematics with the "one drop rule," banning people with the most infinitesimal traces of Blackness from contaminating White purity.[69] Miscegenation laws did not target any other racial groups with such meticulous exactness or panic-stricken fervor. Even in states without such laws, Blacks always found themselves the prime targets of White racism. While miscegenation laws reflected and reified racial hierarchies, they also prove to be exceedingly gendered—although such laws identified White purity as the chief goal, their historic enforcement demonstrated a heightened concern for White women mixing with racial others and a lesser concern for the activities of White men. Peter Bardaglio explains:

> The legal process exhibited a degree of toleration for white males who had sexual contact with black females, as long as the liaison was kept casual and discreet . . . Overall, the twofold goal of miscegenation laws was to keep black men and women in their place and to protect the purity of white womanhood . . . Generally

> speaking, only white men could cross the color line . . . without incurring severe social and legal penalties.[70]

These statutes essentially institutionalized interracial rape, enabling generations of White slavemasters to abuse female slaves, keep Black women as willing or unwilling mistresses, and own as legal property any mixed children these relations produced.

Civil Rights leaders and activists found much to protest in regards to miscegenation laws. In the early twentieth century, the NAACP assailed such regulations for propagating the notion of Black inferiority, further decrying miscegenation laws as "camouflage" for White men in Jim Crow states to sexually abuse Black women while routinely lynching Black men under the guise of protecting White womanhood.[71] However, the NAACP opposed such laws without "endorsing the practice" of interracial marriage, fearing that open promotion of miscegenation would hurt the larger struggle for Black justice. In fact, in the years leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the organization increasingly distanced itself from such campaigns, viewing protests against miscegenation laws as a liability in the more exigent fight against segregation.[72] By the early 1960s, Movement leaders largely agreed that protests against miscegenation laws should stay off the Civil Rights plank. While many privately judged such laws unjust, they took pains to publicly inform Whites that intermarriage was not a goal of integration. To this end, Black minister and NAACP member Charles H. King, Jr. published a 1964 open letter to White supremacists titled "I Don't Want to Marry Your Daughter," tersely informing Southern White men that Civil Rights workers were too focused on "organizing demonstrations, marches on Washington, sit-ins, picketing . . . to be thinking of the future welfare of your daughter."[73] More militant Black leaders like

Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X took an even stronger (although tacitly misogynistic) stance: "[We] are violently opposed to intermarriage . . . Let the white man keep his woman, and let us keep ours . . . Our fast awakening people don't want you to bring her [a White woman] back into our neighborhood anymore to live with us."[74]

Despite their best efforts, Movement leaders could do nothing to pacify White hysteria over "race mixing" from exploding as segregationists felt threatened by a succession of Civil Rights victories throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The *Brown* decision in particular provoked fears of interracial mingling in the minds of segregationists, and forces throughout the South quickly mobilized a wall of opposition to school integration in the name of White racial purity. Jackson, Mississippi's *Daily News* predicted that "White and Negro children in the same schools will lead to miscegenation . . . [and the] mongrelization of the human race."[75] Of course, segregationists were less concerned with "the human race" than they were with the "mongrelization" of Whites with Blacks. A flier circulated by the White People's Party of Asheville, North Carolina reached a fever pitch of miscegenetic delirium. Above a photograph of Black boys dancing with White girls, it portended that court-mandated busing to achieve racial integration would produce a "wave of crime, extortion, rape, cannibalism," and worst of all, "a shocking increase in interracial sex."[76] White interracial sex panics were not exclusive to the South. When Dr. King and a coalition of organizations protested housing discrimination in Chicago's urban ghettos, they experienced a violent backlash from thousands of enraged Whites, including members of the far right National States Rights Party who publicly resisted fair housing on the grounds of defending White womanhood.[77]

Integration did not produce the prophesied wave of apocalyptic interracial sex, but

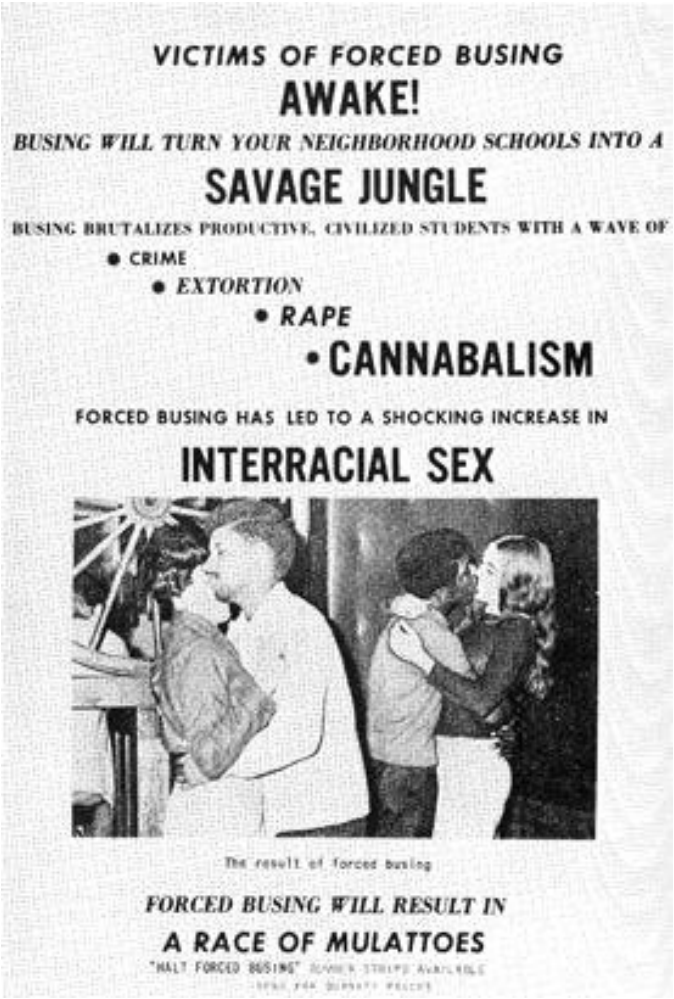

Figure 27. Anti-busing flyer, ca. 1962-65. The White People's Party of Asheville, North Carolina distributed this flyer to stoke anger against court-mandated busing to desegregate schools, warning that integration would bring a flood of debauched social/sexual practices. (Alexander Historical Auctions)

miscegenetic fears again spiked in the early 1960s as racially mixed groups of college students "invaded" the South to integrate segregated facilities, orchestrate Freedom Rides, and register disenfranchised Black voters. Mystified by White participation in the Movement, segregationists judged that such bizarre behavior could only be explained as sexual slumming, and they constructed a chain of sexual narratives to discredit these "race mixers" and the cause they supported. Southern opponents gleefully spread fabricated tales of integrated orgies while placing obscene phone calls to Movement field

offices inquiring about the sex habits of the interracial rights workers. Racist law enforcement officials taunted jailed activists with accusations of sexual debasement. The entrenched White woman/Black man taboo made White female rights workers particularly vulnerable for verbal abuse, and many endured public epithets like "slut" and "whore."[78] To the chagrin of Movement leaders working vigorously to assuage the miscegenetic fears of White supremacists, interracial flings and serious romances *did* occur, realizing the worst segregationist nightmares. Renee C. Romano writes that for some activists, interracial marriage "represent[ed] the ultimate expression of the political ideals of the early movement, which stressed human brotherhood and pushed for a transformation in social relationships between blacks and whites."[79] Younger, college-aged activists in particular celebrated interracial love as outgrowths of core Civil Rights commitments, although such radical gestures towards equality proved irksome to the leadership. Knowing the folly of parading interracial couples before White racists while demanding full equality, most Movement organizers vigorously discouraged interracial love, even sending White volunteers home if they openly engaged in such romances.[80] At the height of the classical phase of the Movement, the presence of interracial sex and romance proved to be a source of anxiety both for Civil Rights leaders and their segregationist foes, although to different degrees and for distinctly different reasons.

Murders in Mississippi

In light of the rhetorical furor and physical violence that interracial sexuality could provoke from White segregationists, it is hardly surprising that some saw films like *Night of the Quarter Moon* as particularly lamentable. John Beaufort of the *Christian Science Monitor* deemed it harmful to contemporary racial discourse: "The irresponsible treatment is the more regrettable at a time when race relations . . . require the most

sensitive of handling possible."[81] Exploitation filmmakers rarely heeded such sober advice, and in the years following *Quarter Moon*, a cycle of films appeared that uniquely framed interracial sexuality as a miscegenation spectacle set against the backdrop of the ongoing clashes between Civil Rights protestors and segregationist forces. In some ways, these films could simply be read as updates of frames popularized in prior decades, representational revisions of the exotic South Seas romances and the exploitation travelogues that thrilled audiences throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. However, the miscegenation spectacles differed both from contemporary Hollywood fare *and* from exploitation films of the previous decades. Unlike mainstream "miscegenation films" like *Island in the Sun* and *Sayonara* that alluded to the Movement through the idiom of interracial romance, these films more directly referenced and represented issues surrounding the national struggle for Black freedom and racial justice, specifically latching onto the fear and frenzied violence that interracial sex could incite. These films exploited the mixture of revulsion and fascination that had historically revolved around interracial sexuality, particularly in the South, where White men throughout slavery and Jim Crow enjoyed easy access to Black women's bodies while violently enforcing sexual barriers between White women and Black men. Sometimes, Civil Rights stood as a token reference used to quickly leap into the spectacle of miscegenation. Other times, exploitation films actually represented the Movement itself, particularly capitalizing on accusations of interracial perversion leveled at integrated student groups. This cluster of films became the only cinematic representations of Civil Rights that appeared *during* the classical phase of the Movement itself, an important point no matter what motivations may have driven the production of these texts.

The first post-*Quarter Moon* film to explore these uneasy dynamics was *The Intruder* (1962), a surprisingly serious exploration of interracial sex panic in integrated Southern schools directed by legendary exploitation filmmaker Roger Corman. The film centers on a White supremacist named Adam Cramer (played soberly by William Shatner) who arrives unannounced in a small Southern town just as the schools are beginning to comply with federal orders to desegregate. Cramer has been sent to the South by the fictitious Patrick Henry Society, a right-wing organization offering help to towns resisting court-mandated desegregation. Cramer delivers electrifying anti-Black speeches portending the end of White civilization, whipping the townsfolk into a racist frenzy that results in the bombing of a Black church and an attack on a newspaper editor who tries to escort a group of Black students into a White school. Not satisfied with these exploits, Cramer manipulates a White high school girl into falsely accusing a Black male student of raping her in the school basement. An enormous lynch mob descends upon the school and seizes the boy with the intention of administering Southern justice, until the girl stops the illicit proceedings by tearfully admitting that the incident never occurred.

According to Corman, who is best known for producing hundreds of low budget exploitation/horror movies like *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (1955), *The Intruder* became one of the only box office flops of his otherwise lucrative career. In his autobiography, Corman blames the film's failure on its curious mixture of dramatic realism and b-movie sensibilities—too sober for the drive-in circuit, yet too pulpy for the arthouse.[82] Subsequent releases by fellow exploiteers "corrected" this error, focusing more heavily (and less seriously) on the exploitable elements of school desegregation. *This Rebel Breed* (1960) borrows the template of *West Side Story* but amps up the racial

Figure 28. Film stills from *The Intruder*. A White supremacist organizer (*left*) whips a small Southern town into a murderous frenzy after convincing a White high school girl to falsely accuse a Black male student (*right*) of attempted rape.

tension, pitting not two but *three* gangs (Black, Latino, and White) against each other as they fight for supremacy in a newly integrated high school. The film paints integration as a messy collision of interracial sex and racial violence. Lola (Rita Moreno), a Mexican girl, is secretly romancing the leader of the Black gang, while a member of the White gang incites a race war by spreading untrue rumors about her affair with a gang member. Meanwhile, the White gang leader is dating a light skinned Black girl who he thinks is White, and the revelation of her Blackness adds fuel to the roiling gang rivalries. In the midst of this racial turmoil, *This Rebel Breed* includes token Movement rhetoric. A gang battle ensues after a White kid throws a bucket of white paint onto a Black gang member and sarcastically declares that he was "integrating" him. In another scene, Lola delivers a stirring Civil Rights-inflected classroom speech in which she argues that society loses when it prevents people from functioning as equals. Despite Lola's paean to racial equality, *This Rebel Breed* ultimately reads as a tawdry exercise in racial/sexual

intrigue. The film loses further credibility through one sexually charged scene designed to please the mostly-male audience for which the filmmakers spliced some burlesque footage into the movie and clumsily work it into the plot.

While *The Intruder* and *This Rebel Breed* implicitly referenced Civil Rights by focusing on the particular issue of school desegregation, several subsequent films more directly represented/exploited the Movement's Southern struggle for racial justice. *Free, White and 21* (1963) plays off the interracial intrigue of integrated Civil Rights workers via a lurid miscegenetic courtroom drama. The film concerns a Swedish woman named Greta Mae Hansen (Annalena Lund) who previously travelled to the US to work as a Freedom Rider for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), eventually settling in Texas and linking up with the NAACP. While staying at a Black-owned hotel that housed young activists, Hansen claims that she was raped by Ernie Jones (Frederick O'Neal), a Black adman. She alleges that he invited himself into her room under the false pretense of assessing her fitness to appear in one of his advertising campaigns, plied her with drinks, and forced himself on her after she refused his advances. Jones insists that she pursued him, consensually slept with him, then later regretted the decision and attempted to pin a false rape charge on him. Ultimately, the court finds Jones not guilty, deeming Hansen "indecent . . . White trash" who crossed the oceans to practice "free love" with Black men, performing the accusations of debased interracial desire levelled at White Movement women by Southern segregationists.

Director Larry Buchanan patterned *Free, White and 21* on a 1961 Texas court case in which a British Civil Rights activist charged a Dallas Black man of rape; like the film, the man won the case, marking the first time a Dallas County court acquitted a

Black man accused of raping a White woman. The director allegedly based the dialogue on the actual court transcripts, and the film plays out as a relatively conventional (if not outright boring, by exploitation standards) courtroom drama.[83] Buchanan spiced up the proceedings with a series of flashbacks that reenact the interracial sexual encounter as told first by Hansen and then by Jones on the witness stand, complete with a jazzy, burlesque-style musical soundtrack. Although no actual onscreen sex occurs (including the alleged rape), the reenactment scenes prominently feature Jones touching and "posing" Hansen in various stages of undress for his photo shoot on her hotel room bed. Such suggestions of interracial contact would have been deemed too far for mainstream Hollywood. Recall that contemporary Hollywood films still had not permitted Black men and White women to interact physically, and how Belafonte and Fontaine sharing a coconut in *Island in the Sun* several years prior was deemed "subversive." Additionally, some critics expressed alarm at *The World, The Flesh, The Devil* for allowing Belafonte's Ralph to aggressively trim Sarah's hair, reading "sexual undercurrents" in this act of grooming.[84] By contrast, *Free, White and 21* features rollicking scenes of interracial contact, taking place in a private bedroom at a Black hotel and set to a brassy score, a spectacle of miscegenation ultimately brokered by the Civil Right Movement's closeted interracial fetishists. In fact, Rob Hunter of the *Chicago Daily Defender* worried that the film's linking of Movement activism and sexual intrigue "could cause harm" to Civil Rights organizations like CORE and the NAACP.[85]

While *Free, White and 21* employed the Movement as a narrative backdrop for miscegenetic spectacle, two subsequent films would more aggressively exploit the interracial melodramatic potential of Civil Rights: *Murder in Mississippi* (1965) and *Girl*

Figure 29. Promotional poster for *Free, White, and 21*. The film depicted a Black man interacting intimately with a White woman on a hotel room bed, a "violent shock" of images the likes of which Hollywood had not yet depicted.

on a Chain Gang (1966). *Murder in Mississippi* appeared the same year that National Guard members brutalized peaceful protestors in Selma, Alabama, and the film examines the brutal extremes of violence to which racist Southern law enforcement could go in resisting integrationist "intruders." The film centers on Carol (Sheila Britt), a White college student working with an integrated group travelling to Mississippi to register Black voters. En route, corrupt lawmen stop and arrest them, erroneously accusing Carol of having sex with Tyrone (Martin St. John), a Black rights coworker. The two accused activists refuse to sign a phony written confession, and the corrupt sheriff murders Tyrone and rapes Carol. Carol's brother Dick (Richard Towers), a wealthy film star, arrives to find his sister held for ransom and angrily demands she be released. The officers hire a Black prostitute to seduce him, photographing the encounter to use as

blackmail. Luther (Lew Stone), the Black leader of the group, arrives and springs Carol from jail, and the two escape into the woods where they end up passionately kissing each other, an improbably moment of passion that erupts even though the murderous lawmen are aggressively searching for them. They are discovered mid-embrace by the sheriff's men who quickly castrate Luther with a hunting knife and haul Carol back to the sheriff's office. The film ends with Dick, silenced by the photograph of him with the Black prostitute, cooperating with the sheriff to lie to an FBI agent and confirm their false story that Carol was raped by a "Yankee nigger."

The lurid spectacle of sex and racist violence in *Murder in Mississippi* proved a bankable template, and the following year saw the release of *Girl on a Chain Gang*, a film with a similar setup. Three "Yankee" activists, Black man Audie (Matt Reynolds), White man Ted (Ron Segal), and White woman Jean (Julie Ange), travel to the heart of Mississippi to join the Movement. Racist cops quickly arrest them on trumped-up prostitution charges, and the town's cigar-chomping sheriff Sonny (William Watson) immediately begins a campaign to destroy them. Sonny hires a local White prostitute to seduce Audie in his jail cell, promising a night of interracial sexual pleasure if he will only sign a false confession. After Audie angrily refuses her offer, Sonny intentionally leaves the cell doors unlocked, permitting Audie and Ted to attempt an escape, ultimately allowing the sheriff's men to murder both of the fleeing "convicts." With her companions disposed of, Sonny rapes Jean in her cell, and afterwards cajoles the town doctor to examine her for "proof" that she had been sleeping with her both men. A trial ensues, and the kangaroo court finds Jean guilty of "carnal relations" with Ted and Audie. Jean delivers an embittered soliloquy to the packed courtroom, calling them "a bunch of

perverted hypocrites with one sense of morality in public, and the other for private," and thereafter receives a sentence of ninety days labor on an all-Black male chain gang. Jean conspires with a Black convict to escape, and they film ends with Jean being rescued by a sympathetic state marshal.

Murder in Mississippi and *Girl on a Chain Gang* collectively present a sordid, melodramatic morass of interracial intrigue and violence, and they initially read as a buffoonish rendering of the Civil Rights Movement in which the miscegenation spectacle takes center stage. Their tawdry credentials are further solidified by the filmographies of the men who produced them: *Murder in Mississippi*'s director Joseph P. Mawra is best known for sadomasochistic "sexploitation" pictures like *Olga's House of Shame* (1964), while exploitation director Jerry Gross went on from *Girl on a Chain Gang* to produce gory shockers like *I Drink Your Blood* (1970)**.** Recalling Steinbeck's assertion that many viewed images of the Southern Civil Rights struggle as a carnival sideshow, it is hardly surprising that pulp movie directors found the intersection of racial terrorism and interracial sex a cinematic spectacle difficult to resist. In the words of Sharon Monteith, exploiteers "cannibalize[d] images that represent[ed] the real terror and hysteria that surrounded the freedom struggle," regurgitating scenes of violence via titillating tales of interracial sex and Southern redneck debauchery. However, Monteith further proposes the exploitation movie as "a culturally suggestive product that should not be ignored," asserting that these films offer flawed yet compelling images of the racist brutality experienced by thousands of activists throughout the era.[86] No matter how shameless or hyperbolized, *Murder in Mississippi* and *Girl on a Chain Gang* remain rare depiction of the real-life sexual hysteria that moved countless White Southerners to savage acts of

antimovement aggression. Along with *The Intruder*, these two films frame White retribution as a normal response to the "threat" of interracial sex, offering striking cinematic images that contrast with Hollywood movies like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which alluded to White violence without graphically showing it on the screen.

Additionally, *Murder in Mississippi* and *Girl on a Chain Gang* notably placed their miscegenation spectacles in the state of Mississippi, which had by the mid-1960s become notorious among Movement workers as a hotbed of virulent, violent antimovement resistance. Emmitt Till's 1955 murder took place in Mississippi, as did the much publicized 1964 deaths of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, three Civil Rights workers shot by the KKK while attempting to register disenfranchised voters. As early as 1963, commentators decried the state as an "orgy of lawlessness" as Whites routinely terrorized peaceful protestors. One veteran rights worker found "no parallel or precedent" for the level of cruelty witnessed in Mississippi, while SNCC chairman John Lewis labeled the state "the stronghold of the whole vicious system of segregation."[87] While the choice to locate these films in the heart of the South no doubt exploited the state's reputation as well as the widely publicized murder of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, these two films also stand as some of the only direct cinematic acknowledgements of this recent and ongoing history. These films' characterizations of Mississippi lawmen and judges as cartoonishly monstrous and figures with no respect for the law parallels the real-life legal limbo of the Deep South, a place where police routinely jailed Blacks on fabricated charges and employed illegal violence in the name of racial repression. Monteith argues that these films "pinion the grotesque at the heart of the southern civil rights story in an apocalyptic pantomime of

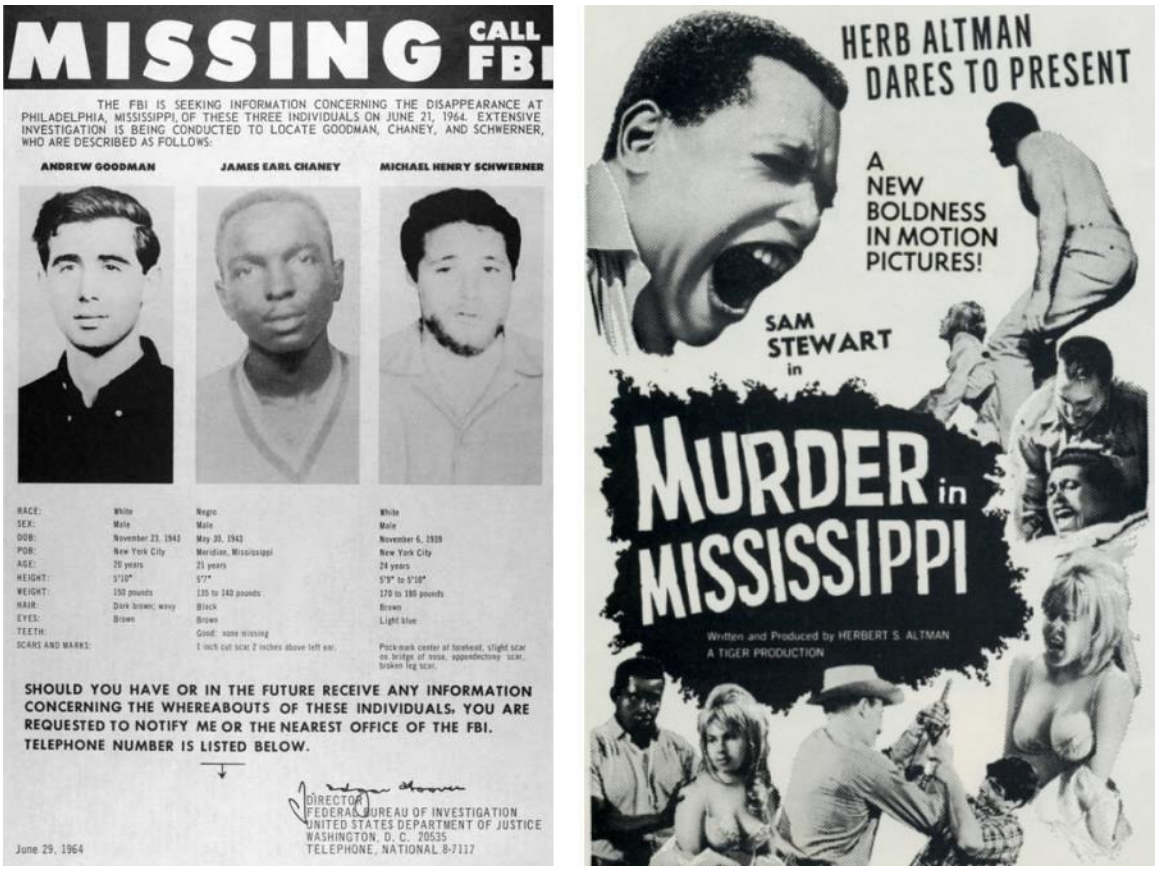

Figure 30. Poster of Missing Civil Rights Workers in 1964 and promotional poster for *Murder in Mississippi*. After federal authorities discovered the bodies of three Civil Rights workers murdered in Mississippi in 1964, exploiteers capitalized on the tragedy with the violence and interracial sex-themed *Girl on a Chain Gang* and *Murder in Mississippi*. (Federal Bureau of Investigation)

social breakdown," cinematically representing the spectacle of violence and racial discord viewed by millions of Americans on the TV news.[88]

Unsurprisingly, contemporary tastemakers and mainstream media outlets generally viewed these films and exploitation in general with disdain and disgust. The exploitation industry lived at the movie market's edges, generally catering to male viewers in drive-ins and crumbling urban movie houses. With the exception of *Night of the Quarter Moon*, which enjoyed limited distribution from MGM, newspapers and film trade publications routinely paid little to no attention to such disreputable fare, making it

nearly impossible to historically judge the impact these texts had on viewers. However marginal or disreputable these films may have been, they stand as compelling cultural and historical artifacts in their willingness to represent the shameful and sordid excesses of White racism during the Civil Rights era. While *Island in the Sun* and films of its ilk used interracial sexuality to point to a progressive way forward, *Quarter Moon* and its ilk remind us that what some called progress, others called decay and disorder, particularly the millions of Americans who still viewed interracial dating and marriage as a loathsome aberration.[**] Even if those producing these films were exploiting a controversial topic for fast money, these texts fascinatingly capture the complicated intersections of White racism, obsession with interracial sex, and fear of miscegenation that underpinned the segregationist crusade against the national struggle for Black freedom. Interracial exploitation films attempted to lure filmgoers with shocking tales of racial strife and sensational miscegenation spectacle, but they also offered surprisingly incisive contributions to the discourse around race, rights, and sexuality, despite how obscure or disreputable these movies may be.

***Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*: Sidney Poitier, Integrationist Superstar**

Stepping across the Interracial Threshold

Ironically, as exploitation films presented an increasingly grim and contentious view of race relations via the image of interracial sexuality, Hollywood was poised to release its most hopeful, progressively optimistic, and soon-to-be-famous interracial romance picture yet, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. This film arguably stands as *the*

[**] For example, a 1963 poll by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., found 90% of White respondents objecting to their teenage child dating a Black person, while a 1965 Gallup poll found 72% of Southern Whites and 42% of Whites outside the South approved of laws "making it a crime for a white person and a Negro to marry." Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Interracial Socializing," Public Opinion Quarterly 37, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 290, 292.

archetypical film text for the representation of interracial romance as a civil right. Popular memory has enshrined the film as the first Hollywood movie to allow a Black man and a White woman to marry and live happily ever after, and it is the most-referenced film on the subject of interracial romance in the movies. It also crystallized and popularized a representational frame for interracial romance that would influence films for years to follow, while simultaneously providing a framework against which many subsequent films would rebel. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* centers on Joey Drayton and John Prentice, a young interracial couple who have fallen in love and flown to her parent's home city of San Francisco to ask for their blessing. Joey expresses no concern that she is White and he is Black: "My dad is a lifelong fighting liberal who loathes race prejudice and has spent his whole life fighting against discrimination." Additionally, Joey knows that her parents will marvel at John's impressive professional achievements—he is, after all, an Ivy League graduate, a respected doctor, a health worker for the United Nations, and a Nobel laureate. John remains skeptical, and has secretly decided that he will not marry Joey without her parent's blessing. Joey's mother Christina (Katharine Hepburn) quickly warms up to the idea, but John's reservations prove valid when her father Matt (Spencer Tracy) expresses incredulous shock at his daughter's folly. As the evening progresses, John's parents join the dinner party and add more fuel to the fire as Mr. Prentice joins Joey's father in denouncing the engagement while Mrs. Prentice joins Joey's mother in condemning the two fathers' bullheadedness. Mrs. Prentice eventually confronts Mr. Drayton, accusing him of forgetting the power of true love in his old age, claiming that if he really remembered how intensely he felt for his wife at one point, he

could not possibly block his daughter's marriage. In the end, Mr. Drayton eventually approves, and the credits roll as the gathering commences with dinner.

Dinner appeared in theaters nearly a decade after like-minded films *Island in the Sun* and *Sayonara*, but of all the films of this era, it most explicitly and even didactically argued for interracial romance as a civil right. The movie essentially amounts to a series of conversations about interracial marriage all taking place in one evening, and unlike ensemble the film *Island in the Sun*, it squarely places the issue at the center of every piece of dialogue. Like its predecessors, it discursively drew from the rhetoric of Civil Rights in its framing of interracial sexuality as a morally acceptable and unalienable right. The core of the film's message is perhaps best captured in one of its final scenes in which Mr. Drayton awards his consent after delivering a lengthy monologue explaining the challenges the couple will face:

> There'll be a hundred million people right here in this country who'll be shocked and offended and appalled at the two of you . . . Anybody could make a case, and a hell of a good case, against your getting married. The arguments are so obvious that nobody has to make them. But you're two wonderful people who happened to fall in love and happen to have a pigmentation problem. And l think that now no matter what kind of a case some bastard could make against your getting married, there would be only one thing worse. And that would be if, knowing what you two are . . . and knowing what you two feel, you didn't get married."

Via the sage voice of Mr. Drayton, *Dinner* ultimately counters the historical cinematic precedents that framed interracial sexuality as a tragedy, a disaster, and/or an exotic fetish. Rather, the real tragedy is a racist society where "some bastard" would dare to prevent people from exercising their basic rights. It frames racial prejudice as the true problem facing interracial couples and proposes that individuals work to overcome their racist views and allow racial others the full rights of citizenship, including intermarriage.

Figure 31. Film still from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The film shattered a Hollywood taboo by allowing a Black man and a White woman to enjoy a passionate kiss. We witness the kiss via the rearview mirror of a taxi cab, sharing the White male driver's view of the incident. The kiss itself occupies an extremely small portion of the screen, and Kramer's decision to present the kissing couple via a small mirror perhaps could be read as a hesitancy to fill the entire frame with this volatile image.

Conversely, it encourages interracial couples to claim and exercise those rights in the face of opposition, despite how "offended and appalled" millions may be.

As we have already seen, this remained a risky message and potential box office poison in 1967, particularly since the film centered on that historically volatile combination of a White woman and a Black man. Although *Island in the Sun* scored box office gold while permitting a Black woman to marry a White man, we have already seen the lengths to which producer Zanuck went to disallow its Black man/White woman couple from kissing or embracing. No Hollywood film had ever before allowed this pairing to interact physically, and director Stanley Kramer knew the risks involved. A veteran Hollywood insider known for provocative films that tackled controversial subjects, Kramer originally conceived *Dinner* as an assault on a taboo that was, in his own words, "supposedly too strong to challenge."[89] Kramer also discarded the ban on

physical intimacy observed in *Island* and *The World, The Flesh, The Devil*, allowing his leading man Sidney Poitier to kiss his costar Katharine Houghton, despite the potential outrage it could provoke:

> When he [Poitier] embraces and kisses Katharine Houghton in a taxicab as they come into San Francisco to meet her parents, movie audiences saw for the first time in an American film an open and unabashed show of affection by a black man for a white woman. The cabdriver, representing a large portion of the American public, looks askance at them through his rearview mirror.[90]

Kramer's words are certainly understandable. A 1965 Gallup Poll that found 42% of Northern Whites and 72% of Southern Whites supported legal restrictions on interracial marriages.[91] Another nationwide 1965 poll found 82% of non-Southern Whites and 98% of Southern Whites objecting to a close friend or relative marrying a Black person.[92]

Additionally, the relationship so dreamily depicted in the film was still a crime in seventeen states when *Dinner* commenced production in early 1967.[93] However, the film would prove a prescient text, for by the time theaters began screening it in December, the Supreme Court had unanimously decided that no state could deny an interracial couple the fundamental right to marry, effectively striking down all state miscegenation laws that still remained. Although miscegenation laws remained strong in the South, Midwest and West for the first half of the 20th century, a crack in this legal regime appeared in 1948 when the California Supreme Court declared that such laws violated the fundamental right to marry.[94] That ruling only applied in California, but it signaled a historic watershed for the decline of miscegenation laws. Slowly, state legislatures began to repeal these laws so that by 1959, less than half of US states maintained them. That same year, an interracial couple in Virginia named Richard and Mildred Loving (a White man and a Black woman) were found guilty of breaking the state's miscegenation laws

Figure 32. Photograph of Mildred and Richard Loving, 1964. This image of the Loving family taken by photographer Grey Villet appeared in LIFE magazine as part of a human interest piece about the couple and their "illegal" marriage. (International Center for Photography)

after getting married in Washington, D.C. and returning to Virginia. Judge Leon Bazile handed them a suspended sentence of one year in jail if they agreed to leave the state. The couple moved to D.C. and tried to adjust to life away from their beloved community, until Mildred Loving wrote a letter to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1964 begging for help. The ACLU accepted their request, bringing a case against the state of Virginia that eventually wound its way through the legal system to the United States Supreme Court.[95] In June of 1967, the Supreme Court wrote a decision on *Loving v. Virginia* in favor of the Lovings, declaring the state's miscegenation laws an unconstitutional violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Although this sweeping case struck down all state laws barring interracial marriage, many states proved reluctant to abide by it. Maryland was the first to obey and repealed their miscegenation laws in 1967, but it took two years for Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas to follow suit. By the end of the 1970s, most states had officially taken miscegenation laws off of the books, although some states left these unenforceable statutes in writing well into the 2000s.[96] Despite the Supreme Court's landmark ruling, some deemed the US at large unready for such a cinematic love affair, and the stubbornness some states showed in complying arguably pointed to a resistant antimiscegenetic bloc that could have spelled trouble for the film. A. S. Doc Young of the historically Black newspaper the *Los Angeles Sentinel* celebrated the film as a "Hollywood break-through" for its "defying the 'greatest' of all American racial bugaboos," but predicted that it "will create a certain amount of controversy."[97] Others deemed the nation ready to accept such a union. Marilyn Beck of the *Hartford Courant*, declared that Hollywood had successfully stepped across "the inter-racial threshold," a reference to the traditional practice of grooms carrying their brides across the threshold of their home.

In spite of trenchant national resistance to interracial marriage and declarations of shattering age-old taboos, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* became a huge success. The film played nationwide, and despite a few KKK demonstrations at theaters in several cities, it screened throughout the South, quelling predictions that a movie starring a Black romantic lead would bomb in Dixie.[98] It reportedly grossed between $70 and $80 million (roughly $480 and $550 million in 2015 figures), became the highest-grossing film of Kramer's career, and received 10 nominations at the 40th Academy Awards, taking home

awards for Best Original Screenplay (William Rose) and Best Actress (Katherine Hepburn).[99] *Dinner*'s surprising success can be explained by a number of factors. First, its timing could not have proved more auspicious, for it appeared in an era marked by a rhetorical flurry of interracial discourse, much of it laudatory. In addition to the *Loving* decision, the Secretary of State Dean Rusk's daughter married a Black man in a highly publicized interracial wedding that made the cover of *Time* magazine and sparked a national wave of discussion. Mark Harris argues that

> the wedding, even more than the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, brought the subject of interracial marriage to the forefront of the national conversation about race, with articles and editorials that typically focused on such issues as where "mixed" couples could live and what biracial children would have to endure and offered vague and uneasy prognostications about what intermarriage would "lead to."[100]

When *Dinner* appeared, the subject of interracial marriage was very much a hot topic, and the film easily inserted itself into the popular discourse surrounding the increased visibility of interracial couples. Additionally, *Dinner*'s success partially rested on its cast of bankable stars that collectively boasted a broad demographic appeal. Older moviegoers flocked to see the last screen performance of the legendary duo Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy.[††] The racial angle attracted Black filmgoers, a typically ignored demographic, that comprised 30% of the movie's audience. Younger viewers flocked to see Sidney Poitier, an actor newly christened as a Hollywood powerhouse.[101]

In fact, Poitier proved so beloved by White audiences that some critics often cited his presence as *the* primary reason for the film's success. Ironically, when *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* lost the Best Picture aware in 1968, it did so to *In The Heat of the Night* (1967), a police drama starring none other than Poitier as a Black detective battling

[††] Hepburn and Tracy had previously starred together in eight films and sparked a highly-publicized off-screen romance; furthermore, Tracy passed away shortly after shooting wrapped up, creating a large buzz for the duo's final performance.

racist interests in a Mississippi town, a testimony to his star power. The actor began appearing in 1950s social problem films like *No Way Out (*1950) and later gained widespread notoriety for becoming the first Black man to win the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in *Lilies of the Field* (1963). His appearance in the teen film *To Sir, With Love* (1967), in which he played an idealistic teacher assigned to a tough classroom in a working class British neighborhood, garnered him a huge following amongst young moviegoers, clinching his popularity with the Hollywood establishment as well as the increasingly important youth demographic.[102] By the decade's end, Poitier earned the title of the highest paid actor in the world.

Historians have argued that Poitier's popularity would have been impossible prior to the Civil Rights Movement's impact on the national consciousness, further contending that his screen roles reciprocally helped humanize Black people for White audiences, mentally and emotionally preparing them for integration.[103] Although Poitier's personal activism proved minimal, his status as the first Black actor wildly popular with White audiences at the height of the Movement makes him something of an integrationist superstar, the most symbolically significant Hollywood figure of the classical phase of the Civil Rights struggle. Some read *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as echoing the Movement's cries for equality, including Vernon Scott of the *Chicago Daily Defender* who asserted: "Plainly, the director is crying out for tolerance, an end to racial discrimination."[104] Others expressed supportive surprise at Kramer's ability to win sympathies for something so unpopular as a sign of the times. Roger Ebert marveled: "Kramer has taken a controversial subject . . . and insulated it with every trick in the Hollywood bag . . . Here is a film about interracial marriage that has the audience

throwing rice."[105] His acclaimed film had successfully taken White America across the interracial threshold via the most feared and loathed race/gender pairing in all of US history. In an era when the courts defended interracial marriage as a fundamental right and the press increasingly celebrated such unions, this film articulated the rhetoric of Civil Rights via the trope of the cinematic romance, all while catapulting a Black man to the very heights of film stardom.

Arguing Over Dinner

It seemed that *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* stood poised to be enshrined as *the* Hollywood Movement film, the ultimate cinematic distillation of the national struggle for integration and Black freedom. However, while audiences flocked to the film and the Academy honored it with nominations and awards, many reacted with scorn, positioning the film, its director, and its star as objects of derision and even righteous indignation. Many attacked Kramer's decision to equip John Prentice with an encyclopedic list of accomplishments, interpreting him as an impossibly unrealistic character that trivialized the film's message. Joseph Morgenstern of *Newsweek* mocked *Dinner*'s Prentice as "a composite of [Albert] Schweitzer, [Jonas] Salk, and Christ colored black for significance."[106] Some Black critics expressed sharp disappointment with the film's polite veneer of unreality. The *Chicago Daily Defender*'s Dave Potter complained that the film "had to put the crème de la crème atop a wedding cake to make a point."[107] Kramer also became the object of professional opprobrium as critics disparaged *Dinner* as an out-of-touch exposé on a pseudo-controversial issue. *Time* magazine accused the film of making false claims to intrigue, flatly stating that "marriage between whites and blacks is hardly a major national concern."[108] In *Life* magazine, a publication that was extremely influential in 1967, Richard Schickel wrote a scathing review accusing a

hopelessly outmoded Kramer for "earnestly preaching away on matters that have long since ceased to be true issues."[109]

Kramer felt stung by the critical backlash against the film, particularly since he fancied it a daring, taboo-shattering statement that would resonate with younger, "hipper" audiences. His previous outings had boldly tackled tough subjects that most filmmakers would not touch— *On the Beach* (1959) explored the threat of Cold War era nuclear devastation and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) examined Nazism and the Holocaust— and he viewed his latest venture as another entry in his progressive film portfolio. Although adolescents and young adults did make up a large portion of the film's audience, many of the burgeoning young radicals that would define the zeitgeist of the 1960s hated the film. This clash was dramatized in the spring of 1968 when Kramer embarked on a university tour to gain the counterculture's seal of approval for his decades-long crusade for cinematic justice and human rights. After visiting nine college campuses, Kramer was stunned to discover that students viewed his film as a "copout" marred by "the same hand-wringing, hypocritical take on race relations that they had been hearing from their parents for years."[110]

Guess Who's Coming Dinner proved to be a film that provoked extremely contradictory receptions. Some received its take on interracial sexuality as controversial and even deeply offensive. Many saw the film as a compelling and important plea for tolerance, while others deemed it a naïve, anachronistic diatribe on a non-issue. The reaction of the latter group proves particularly important, for the countercultural rhetoric used to denounce the film would define ultimately define the 1960s in the popular memory and will become crucial to understand the films examined in the next chapter.

The reaction against *Dinner* and Poitier's pristine screen image can best be explained by examining undercurrents in the Civil Rights Movement itself. After years and decades of tireless work, Civil Rights activists had by the close of 1965 achieved a series of significant milestones, notably the Civil Rights Act of 1960 which established federal inspection of local voter registration polls and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin by governments agencies and public accommodations. These victories were achieved through a variety of means, but Movement leaders had generally insisted that the doctrine of nonviolence be the tie that bound all Civil Rights actions together.

However, nonviolent resistance did not sit well with all involved in the struggle for Black freedom. Black groups like the Louisiana-based Deacons for Defense and Justice mounted armed patrols to protect Black neighborhoods and Civil Rights marchers from White violence, and Malcolm X famously denounced the Movement's nonviolence, advocating self-defense and even retaliation against White aggression.[111] Many within the Movement began to question and even vocally denounce the wisdom of nonviolence following the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama that incited some of the most brutal and excessive police aggression that peaceful civil rights demonstrators had ever seen. Additionally, younger Black rights workers from organizations like SNCC grew impatient with the Federal government's ostensible unwillingness to intervene in the Southern struggle. By the mid-1960s, many younger rights workers embraced a more radical agenda, culminating in the now famous cries for "Black power" and liberation by any means necessary, and a new spirit of racial separatism led to the expulsion of White volunteers from SNCC.[112] SNCC's militancy inspired fledgling New Left organizations

led by White radical college students like Students for a Democratic Society, and many Whites with previous involvement in the Civil Rights Movement joined or started new movements focusing on issues from women's liberation to protesting the Vietnam War. While Black radicals agitated for more intense measures in the Southern freedom struggle, America's Northern cities experienced two straight summers (1966-1967) of unprecedented Black rebellions in the rapidly deindustrializing, decaying urban ghettoes like Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee, and militant separatist groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense captured the national attention with their bold rhetoric of armed resistance to White authority.

By 1967, an increasingly militant rhetoric of racial separatism and aggressive Black resistance threatened to eclipse Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call for an interracial "beloved community" of nonviolent freedom fighters. *Guess Who's Coming Dinner* appeared in this climate of unprecedented racial division and tumultuous violence in the North and the South. For some, Poitier's genteel onscreen composure and charm offered a peaceful reassurance that America's roiling race relations could be tamed through calm and reasoned discussion. However, his deferential Blackness held little resemblance to the growing anger and assertiveness embraced by millions of African Americans, and, in the words of historian Aram Goudsouzian, "bashing the Poitier icon became high fashion" for many Black critics.[113] Black scholar Larry Neal called him a "million dollar shoe shine boy" for making movies uninformed by a "revolutionary value system," and Black radical H. Rap Brown sarcastically remarked "even George Wallace would like that nigger," conjuring up images of the genial Poitier befriending the notorious segregationist politician.[114] Black dramatist Clifford Mason penned a particularly

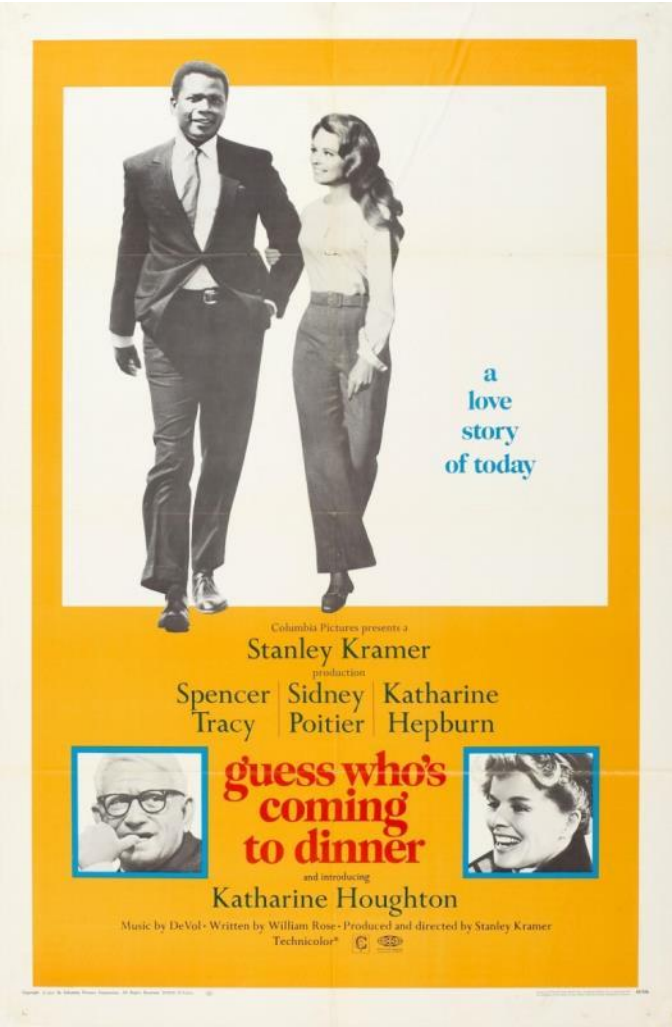

Figure 33. Promotional poster for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Columbia advertised the film as "a love story of today," pitching it as being keyed into the racial zeitgeist of the integration era. However, many attacked the film and/or Poitier as an anachronistic relic that refused to grapple with the radical racial consciousness and calls for separatism emerging from the Civil Rights Movement.

memorable condemnation of Poitier for the *New York Times* titled "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" in which he denounced the actor's entire career as a succession of imaginary, ingratiating ebony saints designed to sell a scrubbed-up image of Blackness to White audiences:

> It is a schizophrenic flight from identity and historical fact that makes anybody imagine, even for a moment, that the Negro is best served by being a black version of the man in the gray flannel suit, taking on white problems and a white

> man's sense of what's wrong with the world . . . [Poitier] thinks these films have really been helping to change the stereotypes that black actors are subjected to. In essence, they are merely contrivances . . . In all of these films he has been a showcase nigger . . . [helping] the white man solve the white man's problem.[115]

Poitier enjoyed one post-*Dinner* hit with *For Love of Ivy* (1968), a film notable for being one of the first romantic comedy films to position a Black couple at the story's center. But critics hated *For Love of Ivy* for ignoring the racial unrest engulfing America's inner cities, best captured by a *New Yorker* review which castigated it for offering "the comforting illusion that this long, hot summer of infamous dread doesn't exist."[116]

The following year, Poitier mounted a cinematic defense against his critics with *The Lost Man* (1969), a film in which he plays an urban Black revolutionary overseeing a plot to rob a White-owned factory to fund Black political demonstrations. According to film historian Donald Bogle, *The Lost Man* failed at the box office, and Black audiences evinced particular hostility towards a subplot in which his character romances a White social worker.[117] Although most Black Americans did not openly promote violent rebellion, the Black Power messages of pride, self-reliance, and Black beauty had by 1969 found wide acceptance in the Black community, particularly in inner city ghettos. Many interpreted *The Lost* Man's interracial subplot as a self-hating reification of the desirability of White women, a plot twist hopelessly out of step with the growing cries of "Black is beautiful."[118] Additionally, a White man (Robert Alan Aurthur) wrote and directed *The Lost Man*, contributing to the film's perception as a gross misunderstanding of Black Power, an offense endemic of an ill-informed White film industry. By the end of the decade, as the countercultural spirit overtook American racial discourse, Poitier, along with the integrationist, Civil Rights-based frame for interracial sexuality, had been judged irrelevant and even damaging to the cause of racial pride and progress.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* remains the most important interracial film of the classical Civil Rights era. More than any other movie, it perfectly captured the decade's dominant cinematic trend towards representing interracial sex, romance and marriage as an individual and civil right that the legacy of White supremacy and racism had denied interracial couples for too long. *Island in the Sun* officially introduced this frame a decade earlier, and a string of films followed in its wake, stretching the frame to include all manner of White-plus-other couples in a across a variety of Hollywood genres. However, popular memory has enshrined *Dinner* as the quintessential Hollywood film arguing in favor of interracial romance. The film also remains an important text in its reception—reactions to the film crystallize the growing cultural divides over race and interracial sexuality that would become even more pronounced in subsequent decades. Many traditionalists still viewed interracial sexuality as a vile, subversive perversion, a plague unleashed by the destructive liberal forces of the Movement. Younger, more liberal voices often proved of two minds on the issue, either viewing interracial love as a normal and natural desire to be denied no one, or seeing such romances as affronts to the burgeoning ethos of race pride.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner appeared at the end of a cultural turn and not the beginning of one, and as Civil Rights rhetoric evolved into Black Power, many accused this "progressive" film for peddling antiquated ideas from a disappearing era. The critical reaction to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* perfectly marked a watershed where one cultural discourse was falling into decline and being overpowered by another. The Civil Rights ideology of integration via nonviolent protest laid the discursive groundwork upon

which *Dinner* would build. But by 1967, this progressive program was overtaken by the more radical and discontented voices from within the Movement, and calls for revolution and urban rebellion rendered the nonviolent strategies of more seasoned rights workers irrelevant and archaic. Responses to the film, as captured in the print media of the day, capture a similar backlash, with Black critics and White filmgoers struggling to make sense of the scores of inner city rebellions erupting each summer, attacking films like *Dinner* as innocuous interracial sermons from a bygone era.

The exploitation film industry thrived throughout the classical phase of the Movement, and a small cluster of films discovered a profitable, exploitable formula in the drama of Civil Rights. Cinematic miscegenation spectacles like *Night of the Quarter Moon* and *Murder in Mississippi* capitalized on the televised clashes between Black protestors and White segregationists, plumbing the fears of interracial sex that helped fuel the most extreme atrocities of antimovement violence. These texts provided a counterframe to the high-mindedness of films like *Island* and *Dinner*, echoing the real-life violence endemic to the struggle for Black freedom in ways that indirectly presented a more truthful image of Civil Rights than the polite, genteel images of romantic integration offered by mainstream Hollywood.

If *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* proved out of step with the evolving racial discourse of the day, and if its framing of interracial sexuality drew from a conceptual framework in decline, then it stands to reason that the cinematic framing of interracial sexuality would undergo a dramatic change in the ensuing years. This is, in fact, precisely what happened in the following era, the subject of the next chapter. As the spirit of youth radicalism fostered by Black Power and the New Left occupied a more preeminent

position in the national discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s, young, upstart directors stormed Hollywood's gates to release confrontational films in which interracial sex became a weapon wielded in a countercultural war over representation, cultural politics and the meaning of race. While Hollywood stubbornly updated its archaic images of interracial romance to match the militancy of the youth culture, the exploitation industry also adapted with the times, producing a wave of explicit films that framed interracial sex as a celebration of cultural degeneracy and interracial fetishism. Just as exploiteers during the classical phase of the Movement twisted integrationist rhetoric to fit the exploitable trope of miscegenation, they updated their imagery for the era of racial assertiveness, shamelessly wedding Black Power references with titillating spectacles of interracial sex.

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Chapter Three

The Revolution Will not Be Interracialized: Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1968-1979

The whole black outlook is a fallacy if the reality is that black men are increasingly turning to white women . . . [It is hypocritical] to be talking about black power, black control of our resources and then turn around and go to my white home in the suburbs because I've married this white doctor . . . In order for us black people to survive, we have to come together, culturally and socially. I think that saying to a black person, "You are beautiful, you are worth something" . . . is necessary. But when a black woman sees a black man with a white woman this is not helping.[1]

Lisbeth Gant, 1970

A revolution depends not on sexual skill . . . Nobody ever f***ed his way to freedom.[2]

Lerone Bennett, Jr., 1971

Introduction

In the spring of 1971, the most provocative and popular expression of racial revolt and cultural radicalism appeared not in the angry streets of America's inner cities, or on its roiling college campuses, but at the movies. Black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), an independent film depicting a Black man who violently resists and kills oppressive White police officers and emerges triumphant after repeatedly escaping capture with the help of sympathetic Black community members. *Sweetback* scandalized critics of all colors who were shocked by its grim view of ghetto life and graphic depictions of sex—the title character draws upon intimate relations with Black women as a source of sexual revolutionary strength, while another scene finds Sweetback liberating himself from a marauding White biker gang by "defeating" their female leader in a bizarre interracial sexual duel. A likeminded spirit of revolution shook the Hollywood establishment as a coterie of young film auteurs filled screens with personal, frequently political, and often

controversial expressions of a distinctly American countercultural cinema. These New Hollywood filmmakers collectively addressed a host of pressing social concerns raised by the radicalism of the 1960s, from the Vietnam War to Black Power to the renewed importance of interracial sexual politics. Hal Ashby's *The Landlord* (1970) offers a prime example—this dark comedy depicts a rich White man who buys a tenement house in a poor urban area in hopes of gentrifying the neighborhood, only to become emotionally and romantically entangled with the neighborhood's Black residents who challenge his racial privilege and his interracial sexual slumming. These and other provocative films marked the introduction of a new cinematic frame for the depiction of interracial sexuality, one that represented such encounters as symbolic landmines on the rocky terrain of a countercultural battlefield, wielding interracial sexuality as a politically charged weapon assaulting the legacy of systemic racial and sexual power dynamics.

The cinematic image of interracial sexuality never remains static or singular, and as filmmakers reshaped and re-presented the meaning of filmic interracial encounters, new frames continued to blend with the old, and a counterframe arose alongside the dominant frame. The genteel, idealized image of Sydney Poitier's John Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), patiently imploring his White lover's parents to permit him to integrate their family, had all but evaporated by the early 1970s. The racial and cultural politics of the Civil Rights Movement had evolved, and as the ethos of Black Power and racial separatism overtook the rhetoric of nonviolence and integration, the filmic image of interracial sexuality had to change. This "new" frame of interracial sexuality as a countercultural revolution came with "old" problematics—it was essentially developed and disseminated by an all-male, mostly-White coterie of

filmmakers, and these radical films tended to reify traditional race/gender norms, even as they worked to destabilize such traditional norms. Additionally, the success of *Sweetback* inspired the exploitation film industry to churn out scores of imitative "blaxploitation" pictures—inexpensive Black action movies taking advantage of urban viewers' eagerness to see Black empowerment on the screen. Blaxploitation films flipped the formula introduced by *Sweetback*, mimicking the political assertiveness of Black Power via narratives of individualistic violence and triumph, frequently injected with copious amounts of lurid and disturbingly violent forms of interracial sexuality. For example, blaxploitation icon Pam Grier starred in *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), both of which feature Grier as a strong Black female lead ostensibly informed by the assertive rhetoric of Black Nationalism and feminism. However, Grier's strong female leads only defeat the villainous White men by drawing upon seductive sexuality as a weapon, offering viewers a spectacle of interracial sexuality that calls into question the Black Power undertones. Ultimately, blaxploitation films offered a counterframe to *Sweetback*'s framing of interracial sexuality as a countercultural weapon, instead presenting such encounters as an erotic exhibition, exploiting the transgressive and near-pornographic potential of interracial sex in ways that far surpassed the miscegenation spectacles of the previous decade for sensationalized presentation of raw sexual activity.

The two quotes that open this chapter exemplify the extreme and volatile reactions interracial sexuality incited in an era of raised racial consciousness. Writer Lisbeth Gant represents the "black outlook," arguing that interracial relationships stood inherently opposed to the doctrine of racial pride. "Black is beautiful" became a rallying cry for Black Power advocates levelling an anti-integrationist call for strengthening the

community from within, and many saw intermarriage as directly at odds with communal solidarity and self-love. Her words condemn both Black man/White woman pairings as well as Black woman/White man pairings ("I've married this white doctor"), although she particularly cites romances between Black men and White women as threatening to expose the entire cultural project of Black Power as "a fallacy." The very existence of the Black community rests on this ethos of racial *and* sexual separatism: "In order for us black people to survive, we have to come together." Furthermore, the prevalence of Black men pursuing White women was ultimately "not helping" the Black community, and Gant's rhetorically measured assessment points to more vitriolic attacks from Black Power advocates. Prominent Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver diagnosed Black desire for White as a "revolutionary sickness" that particularly infected Black men and prevented them from resisting oppression, while renewed racial consciousness moved many to mock Blacks romantically involved with Whites as racial traitors guilty of "consorting with the enemy."[3]

Sweetback rode this wave of interracial revolt, depicting sex between Black men and women as empowering (although deeply gendered) exercises in community building and liberation serving a larger program of revolution. Conversely, it framed Sweetback's loveless sexual conquest of a White woman as a vivid, alarming image of the rejection of White women as a symbol of sexual and racial oppression. However, not all viewers accepted *Sweetback*'s revolutionary claims, and many saw the focus on the cultural politics of interracial sexuality as a lurid distraction from *actual* political revolution. In a scathing essay for *Ebony* magazine titled "Emancipation Orgasm," Black historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. derided *Sweetback* as a degrading, dehumanizing sideshow of

pseudo-revolutionary posturing. sarcastically closing his article with the arresting assertion: “If f***ing freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago.”[4] The blaxploitation films that followed capitalized on the sexual spectacle embedded in *Sweetback*’s message of interracial insurgency, arguably realizing Bennett’s worst cinematic fears. Fueled by a market-driven desire to cash in on the popular interest in cinematic Black Power images, scores of films followed in *Sweetback*’s wake, wrapping transgressive scenes of interracial erotic exhibitionism in a thin patina of revolutionary rhetoric.

This chapter will unpack this ongoing battle over the meaning of interracial sexuality in US films, focusing on the two major representational frames competing for attention throughout the 1970s. One frame, preferred by Black filmmakers like Van Peebles and the New Hollywood upstarts, presented interracial sexuality as racial and sexual revolution, a crucial point on the symbolic terrain of a countercultural battle. Another frame, favored by exploitation filmmakers, wedded the rhetoric of racial revolution to the age-old obsession with transgressive interracial sex, essentially updating the previous era’s miscegenation spectacle for the era of Black Power. To tell this story, I have selected a set of films between 1969 and 1979. 1968 marks the year in which the film industry retired the aging Production Code and replaced it with a more liberalized film ratings system that permitted a wave of explicit interracial interactions that would have been impossible in any prior year. This era closes in 1979, the year that marked the last gasps of both blaxploitation and countercultural filmmaking, as the importance and power of the Hollywood blockbuster presaged the market-driven cinematic conservatism of the Reagan Era.

Emancipation Orgasm: Interracial Sexuality as Countercultural Revolution

Ghetto Guerrilla: Sweet Sweetback and Black Power Filmmaking

Melvin van Peebles, tired and disgusted at Hollywood's refusal to make a "victorious" Black film, set out in 1970 to make a "film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other's eyes." Van Peebles knew that such a film had to be produced outside of the studio system: "The [White] Man has an Achilles pocket and he might go along with you if at least there is some bread in it for him. But he ain't about to go carrying no messages for you, especially a relevant one."[5] The result was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, an experimental urban drama that centers on the titular Black Los Angeles sex performer (played by Van Peebles) named so for his phallic prowess. One night following a performance, Sweetback witnesses two White policemen illicitly beating a Black suspect and instantly becomes radicalized after rebelling and knocking the officers unconscious. Sweetback spends the bulk of the film fleeing the law and heading towards the US/Mexican border, finding en route a host of sympathetic members of the inner city Black community who collectively aid him in evading capture. The film includes multiple scenes of Black witnesses lying to the police about Sweetback's whereabouts, and depicts a group of Black children distracting the authorities by setting a police car on fire so that Sweetback can escape. The film culminates with Sweetback crossing the Mexican border after a bloody shootout with the police, ending with a title screen that warns: "A baadasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues."

Van Peebles wrote, directed, and starred in *Sweetback*, and the film's aggressive, masculinist take on Blackness make sense in light of his previous two productions, both

of which narrate the politics of interracial sexuality under shifting historical circumstances. Van Peebles' first film was a French language production titled *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (French title *La Permission*, 1967), a movie that chronicles the story of an African American GI stationed in France who falls in love with a White French woman during his titular three days off duty. Like many contemporary American films of the classical Civil Rights era, *Three Day Pass* is highly sympathetic to the couple as they face racist indignities from bigoted French passersby and American servicemen offended by their presence. Although *Three Day Pass* was technically a French production, it paralleled US films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* in framing the issue of interracial sexuality as a civil right, an unsurprising fact given Van Peebles' American pedigree. *Three Day Pass* caught the eye of Columbia Pictures who funded Van Peebles' next film, *Watermelon Man* (1970), a dark comedy about a middle class White man named Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge) who awakens one day to find that he has mysteriously become Black. The film follows the new social and sexual challenges he faces. His presence in his all-White neighborhood incites a police search of his house, and he endures threatening phone calls from racist neighbors. On the sexual front, his disgusted wife refuses to sleep with him as a Black man, while his Swedish secretary finds him suddenly irresistible and relentlessly pursues him. Apparently nervous about the film's farcical handling of volatile racial issues, Columbia's promotional poster informed audiences that waking up as a different race "won't happen to you, so you can laugh," although the movie's comedic tone evaporates at the end when Jeff rejects White society (and White women) and joins an underground Black self-defense group. This a narrative turn that foreshadowed Van Peebles *Sweetback*'s revolutionary imagery. The

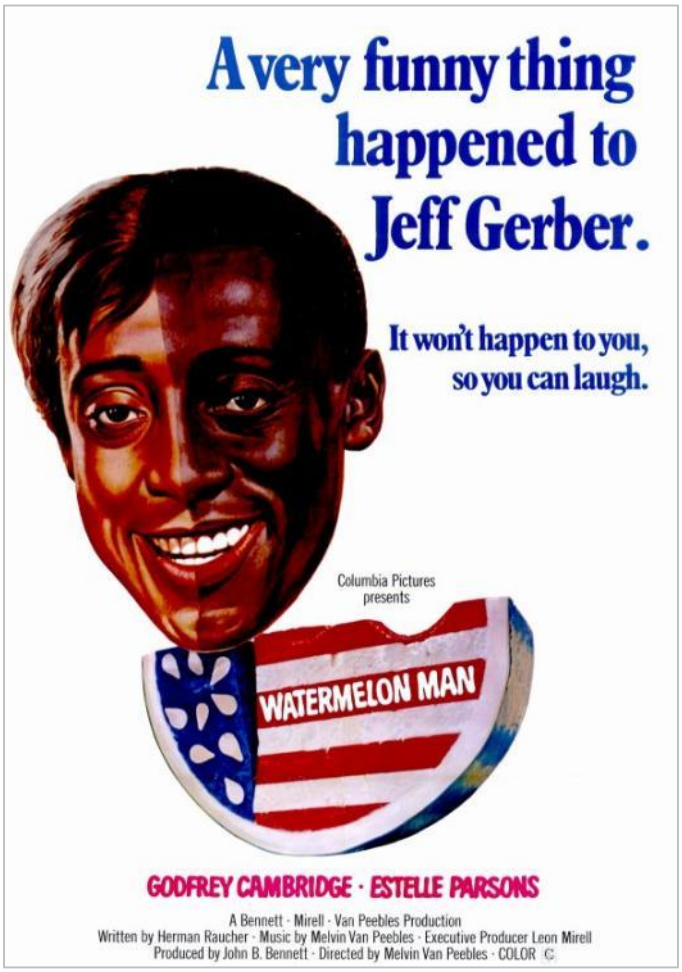

Figure 34. Promotional poster for *The Watermelon Man*. Melvin Van Peebles' relatively light-hearted comedy hinted at the director's desire to explore a more aggressive racially conscious cinema in its denouement, which features Jeff joining a militant Black self-defense group.

director found working with Columbia deeply frustrating, and began to envision a bold Black film that no White-owned studio would ever release.

Van Peebles knew a revolutionary art film would not appeal to the Black masses, he packed the film with violence, graphic sex scenes, and shockingly unvarnished portrayals of ghetto life, ensuring strong reactions. However, he still wanted *Sweetback* to reach a wide audience and submitted his film to the MPAA for a rating, reacting with fury when his "Black" film received an X rating from this apparently "White" ruling body. When Van Peebles submitted Sweetback for a rating, the system had only been in

place for several years; in 1968, the MPAA finally scrapped the increasingly irrelevant Production Code Administration and replaced it with the Classification & Ratings Administration, an organization tasked with viewing films and assigning a rating based on a scale measuring relative adult content. The ratings system placed included G for general admission, M for mature audiences (the precursor to today's PG), R for restricted (no one under 16 admitted without a parent or guardian), and X for no one under 16 admitted, period.[6] In practice, the new system freed filmmakers to explore themes that had been restricted for decades, although the MPAA deemed *Sweetback* too explicit for anyone under 16. The X rating did not initially delineate pornography as it eventually would, although the rating potentially limited a film's audience and carried a stigma that led many newspapers to adopt a policy of not running print ads for X films.[*] Van Peebles feared the rating would limit his distribution and exhibition options. He threatened to bring an ACLU-backed lawsuit against the MPAA, claiming that the ruling reflected total ignorance of Black culture on the part of the raters, further insisting that his movie was "black" and could not be judged by anyone else.[7] Van Peebles never pursued the lawsuit and defiantly released *Sweetback* uncut, proudly informing potential viewers via the film's promotional poster that it had been "rated X by an all-white jury."

Despite Van Peebles' incredulity at the MPAA's rating, *Sweetback* arguably did contain content that easily rendered it ineligible for anything but an X, including an opening sequence depicting a young Sweetback (disturbingly played by Van Peebles's

[*] In the rating system's early days, the X was often given to non-pornographic films with content deemed unsuitable for minors, including the 1969 Oscar winner for Best Picture, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). However, the MPAA did not copyright the X rating, which opened the door to the budding pornography industry to essentially hijack it. Pornographers so extensively marketed their films as "X-rated" so that eventually the rating exclusively signified pornography and the MPAA stopped using it. See Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, 70; Lewis, *Hollywood V. Hard Core*, 149–154.

preadolescent son Mario) losing his virginity to an adult female prostitute who rechristens him "Sweetback" in response to his phallic prowess.[†] In another key scene, an adult Sweetback has escaped police custody but is still in handcuffs, and he ducks into a Black female friend's house and asks her to unshackle him. She agrees to, but only after having sex with him. Some of the film's defenders interpreted these scenes as revolutionary signifying, the symbolic use of provocative imagery to illustrate a larger point. Black Panther Party cofounder Huey Newton lauded *Sweetback* as "the first truly revolutionary Black film," penning a 12-page article for the Party's official newspaper in which he reads the film's sexuality as a metaphor for Black liberation through unity: "When Sweetback engages in sex with a sister, it is always an act of survival, and a step towards his liberation."[8] Newton further reads the scene in which the adult Sweetback exchanges sex for freedom from his handcuffs as "signif[ying] that it is the unity between the Black man and the Black woman which is able to liberate them both."[9]

Van Peebles included one other vignette that raised a copious amount of critical ire in which a Hell's Angels-like motorcycle gang corners and menaces the fleeing Sweetback on a country road. The gang refuses to release him unless he engages their White female leader Big Sadie in a "duel." When asked what his weapon of choice will be, Sweetback simply states, "fucking." The two strip before the cheering crowd, lay on the ground, and engage in a coital duel. After roughly a minute of explicit thrusting and changes in sexual positions, Sweetback brings Big Sadie to orgasm as her legs flail and she joyfully screams, "Yeah, Sweetback!" Just as *Sweetback*'s sexual union with

[†] Additionally, several contemporaneous films directed by White directors received X ratings for far less explicit content than *Sweetback*, including *Midnight Cowboy* and Russ Meyer's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), casting some historical doubt on Van Peebles' reading of the situation.

Figure 35. Film still from *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Sweetback (*right*) wins his freedom from a marauding biker gang after engaging their leader Big Sadie (*left*) in a sexual context which ends in a victory for Sweetback.

Black women affords him liberation from White police oppression, so his phallic powers can be turned into a weapon, allowing him to defeat the threatening force of White womanhood that many Black Power advocates saw as harming the agenda of race pride. Stephane Dunn further reads Sweetback's sexual defeat of Big Sadie as a symbol of "Sweetback's growing empowerment, his breaking beyond the established boundaries of white patriarchal power."[10] As discussed previously, the historic project of White masculinity had enshrined White womanhood (and the protection thereof) as the pinnacle of White society, viewing the pollution of White women with their sexual and moral opposite, Black men, as the ultimate violation of Whiteness. Van Peebles no doubt had such historical taboos in mind when writing this scene, and his aggressive sexual victory over Big Sadie stands as a symbolic trampling of the very core values of White patriarchy.

Talking Black While Sleeping White: Interracial Sexuality and Black Power

Sweetback's challenging and disturbing mixture of racial assertiveness and male aggression becomes more intelligible in light of the overall history of the Black Power Movement and the charged rhetoric from which the film directly drew. Black Power evolved out of the late-1960s Civil Rights Movement as younger activists increasingly deemed the nonviolent strategies promoted by influential leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. as fruitlessness and ineffective to bring about Black freedom. Following bloody police repression experienced during the 1966 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, SNCC activist Stokely Carmichael began calling for a rejection of integrationist nonviolence and for embracing "Black Power." Carmichael advocated for arming protestors and echoed Malcolm X's call for Black freedom "by any means necessary," preaching a gospel of racial nationalism and voluntary but aggressive separation from Whites.[11] After a gunman assassinated King in April of 1968, Black ghettos across the nation exploded in anguished protest and vengeful violence, Carmichael publically intoned: "White America has declared war on black people . . . Go home and get your guns."[12] Militant racial nationalism increasingly replaced integrationist nonviolence as the dominant voice in the struggle for Black freedom, and Black Power began to take hold in racial ghettoes from Harlem to Oakland. Oakland had been the birthplace of the Black Panther Party, a militant organization founded by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton in 1966 around a program of radical demands that included armed resistance to police brutality, Black controlled education, and full employment for the chronically jobless. The Black Panthers heavily recruited in working class and poverty-stricken Black urban neighborhoods, and their free breakfast and health care programs proved particularly popular among ghetto residents.[13]

Militants like the Panthers quickly became a target of covert federal counterintelligence programs and state law enforcement, largely White-run outfits terrified by the rise of militant Blackness. By 1976, most of the Party's key leaders had been incarcerated or assassinated.[14] While government repression largely quashed Black Power as a political movement, the Black Power ethos transformed many communities, particularly inner cities, altering racial consciousness and inculcating oppressed communities with a vibrant sense of cultural pride. Historian Renee Romano writes:

> The cultural politics of the Black Power period took many forms. Blacks were encouraged to leave their hair natural rather than straightening it. Across the country, African-inspired fabric and clothes like Kente cloth and dashikis became popular urban outfits. Nationalists created new holidays such as Kwanzaa, which celebrated African values. A wide variety of acts assumed greater political and symbolic weight. Personal acts such as dressing, listening to music, speaking, and dating were politicized as markers of black identity.[15]

As Black Power advocates strove to extend the rhetoric of racial pride and community solidarity to all realms of life, political and personal, hostility towards interracial romance and marriage logically followed, leading many to see relationships with non-Blacks (particularly Whites) as the utmost examples of racial treason. Alex Haley's bestselling *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) brought Black separatist thought to mainstream attention, including Malcolm X's controversial statement that he was "right with the Southern white man" in opposing integration as a slippery slope leading to intermarriage.[16] Ideological purity led some to break off interracial marriages entered into during the heyday of integrationist rhetoric. Poet activist Amiri Baraka divorced his White wife in 1965 shortly after penning a play in which he indicted White society as a "cancer" that could best help solve racial issues by dying.[17] Others attacked intermarried Blacks as not truly committed to Black freedom. At a 1972 African Liberation Day rally

in Washington, D.C., George Wiley, a prominent Black activist married to a White woman, was heckled by a group of Black women who chanted "Where's your White wife?" and accused him of "talking black and sleeping White."[18]

Although Black Power stood as the most nationally visible and, for the White majority, anxiety inducing racial discourse of the era, other racial minority groups generally mirrored the Black community's story of growth in racial consciousness and political assertiveness, inciting a small but notable backlash against interracial relationships. Latinos and Chicanos experienced a burst of political energy inspired largely by the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement. Community activists like Caesar Chavez organized migrant farm workers to strike for better wages in California grape fields, while Los Angeles-based Chicanos founded the Brown Berets, a militant self-defense group dedicated to struggling against "the invader" (White society) for control over their own communities.[19] Leaders within the Chicano Movement sought to build positive racial identities as they struggled for economic justice for Mexican-Americans, which for some included "an aversion to intermarriage. . . [and] cultural assimilation."[20] Many young Asian Americans experienced an awakening of consciousness in the late 1970s as college students questioned their parent's insistence on striving for assimilation, embracing their cultural roots through campaigns for ethnic studies on campus and the formation of identity based cultural institutions.[21] Some Asian American activists denounced interracial dating, a common practice in the 1970s amongst West Coast Asian American college students, seeing intermixing as a dilution of Asian identity and a threat to political unity.[22] Finally, American Indians, the smallest and most marginalized of all racial groups, fought against a long history of oppression and near extermination through

the American Indian Movement (AIM), a group of militants who protested the unequal treaty relationships with the government by seizing Wounded Knee on South Dakota's Pine Ridge reservation for seventy-one days in 1973 and engaging in gunfire with federal marshals and assimilationist American Indians. Although AIM failed to reopen treaty negotiations, it inspired a "Red Power" movement that encouraged American Indians from tribes across the nation to rediscover and reclaim abandoned tribal traditions and religious practices.[23] The American Indian Movement encouraged Native Americans, the most intermarried of all US racial groups, to reclaim their ethnic pride. Many mixed race American Indians who had previously followed the assimilationist impulse to identify as "White" rejected that identity and reclaimed the identith "Indian," leading to a marked increase in the Native population on the 1970 and 1980 US Censuses.[24]

Cultural nationalists who saw outmarriage as racial treason had much to worry about. Not all embraced the urge to reject interracial sexuality, and the radical rhetoric of sexual disassociation coexisted with markers that showed interracial love and marriage both becoming more accepted and more common. Interracial sexuality appeared to be losing some of its power to offend and scandalize the general population, and polling data capture a growing acceptance of cross-racial romance, particularly among Whites. A 1970 Gallup poll found that three years after the Supreme Court's nullification of all state miscegenation laws in *Loving V. Virginia*, only 35% of the White populace still favored the existence of laws prohibiting Black/White unions, down from 48% just five years prior.[25] Almost ten years later, a 1979 study published in the academic journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* found only 29% of White Americans still holding such views, with roughly 20% of Northerners and 50% of Southerners still supporting legislative bans on

intermarriage.[26] Minority views on interracial marriage from this era prove more difficult to quantify in that polls largely concerned themselves with White opinions, although a few pollsters did survey Blacks and found them generally more accepting of interracial dating and marriage than Whites. A 1972 Gallup poll found 25% of White men and women approving of Black/White marriage as opposed to 58% of Black respondents.[27] Census data shows interracial marriages growing sizably in the years after *Loving*, increasing for every US racial group over the following decade.[28] The US Census Bureau found that interracial couples comprised only .4% of all US marriages in 1960; by 1970, the number climbed slightly to .7%, and increased sizably to 2% of all marriages by 1980.[29] Black men in particular began to exercise their right to date and intermarry, and unions between Black men and White women jumped from 25,000 in 1960 to 122,000 by 1980.[30]

The quote from Lisbeth Gant in which she asserted that "black men are increasingly turning to white women" turned out to be, at least in terms of marriage statistics, somewhat true.[31] Black men who dated and married White women particularly came under heavy criticism from Black nationalists who released a flurry of essays and articles denouncing the rising interracial tide. Black feminist Michele Wallace sarcastically condemned Black men for misidentifying White women as a status symbol representing freedom and liberation: "A black man can walk down the street with a white woman unmolested. What a victory for the black revolution."[32] Sociologist Calvin Hernton saw White women as a sexual plague on the Black male psyche: "The Negro man is secretly tormented every second of his wakeful life by the presence of white women in his midst, who he cannot or had better not touch."[33] Eldridge Cleaver also

A sister debates a brother on

THAT BLACK MAN-WHITE WOMAN THING

Chicago psychiatrist Dr. Kermit Mehlinger moderates discussion between young woman writer Lisbeth Gant, and young psychologist, Danny K. Davis

Figure 36. *Ebony* magazine article—"A Sister Debates a Brother on That Black Man-White Woman Thing." As racial consciousness and Black Power rhetoric influenced millions of Blacks to see their Blackness as a source of group pride, the "Black man-White woman thing" became a source of heated discussion and debate. This image from a 1970 article in *Ebony* magazine visually renders the view that many Black women felt rejected by Black men whom they saw as increasingly abandoning them for the status symbol of being with a White woman. (Kermit Mehlinger, Lisbeth Gant, and Danny K Davis, *Ebony*, August 1970, 130-131.)

viewed such desire as pathological, offering perhaps the most disturbing and widely-read Black Power statement on interracial sexuality in his essay collection *Soul on Ice* (1968). Cleaver narrates the development of his racial consciousness as a personal sexual history, charting how his rage at White supremacy moved him from worshiping White women as a sexual ideal to diagnosing his desire for White flesh as a social sickness. Cleaver ultimately declared White sexuality an evil, oppressive ogre to be resisted and attacked, even with sexual violence:

> I [as a Black man] was indoctrinated to see the white woman as more beautiful and desirable than my own black woman . . . I arrived at the conclusion that, as a matter of principle, it was of paramount importance for me to have an

> antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women . . . I became a rapist . . . Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, that I was defiling his women.[34]

It is nearly impossible to read Cleaver's virulent misogyny and casual justification of rape without shuddering. Although Cleaver later repented of his acts of inhumanity, regret hardly repairs the damage done to the women he assaulted during his experiment with interracial insurrection.

Black Power advocates almost ubiquitously rejected the horrific tactic of interracial rape, and, as stated previously, Cleaver himself repudiated his crimes as the misguided, angry acts of frustrated young man. However, Cleaver's possessive word choice—"my own black woman" and "his [the White man's] women"—reveals a troubling male-centered sexism underpinning these acts of sexual violence, an ideology that assumes women of whatever color "belong" to men of their respective race. In fact, the dominant strain of Black Power rhetoric perpetuated the sexism inherent in Cleaver's words, and the mostly-male leadership often strove to relegate Black women to supportive, subordinate roles in the Movement in ways that paralleled the gendered privileges of White patriarchy. Kimberly Springer writes: "The Black Power Movement, although varied by organization, attempted to redefine black women's role as childbearers for the revolution. Certain groups issued calls for black women to, figuratively and literally, walk behind black men."[35] Male leaders often labeled Black women who asserted themselves or assumed leadership roles as "castrators" trying to emasculate the masculine project of consciousness raising, while castigating advocates of access to birth control as promoting racial genocide.[36] Black women did not remain silent and simultaneously fought the sexism within the Movement and the racism and sexism

Figure 37. *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*—promotional poster and detail. Van Peebles' divisive film featured scenes of sex and violence from the film with a disclaimer (bottom right corner) defiantly proclaiming it "rated X by an all-white jury." A detail from the poster (right) reproduces images from two of its most controversial scenes: the Black prostitute who brings the preadolescent Sweetback into "manhood" by taking his virginity and a shot of Big Sadie at the climax of her erotic duel with Sweetback.

outside of it. As Black Power advocates debated the place of women in the movement, Kathleen Cleaver, wife of Eldridge and communications secretary of the Black Panther Party, succinctly captured the gendered irony of the debate, by pointing out that "no one ever asks what a man's place in the Revolution is."[37]

Sweetback appeared in the midst of these roiling internal debates and public acts of racial pride and repudiation of White authority. On its most basic level, *Sweetback* took the aggressive rhetoric of Black Power, including its resistance of Whites as oppressors and its desire to speak primarily to poor Blacks living in urban ghettoes, and distilled it via an exciting, signifying tale of violence and sexual triumph. It also offered the era's most controversial, visually arresting, and widely-discussed statement on the

intersection of Black Power and interracial sex, framing interracial sexuality as an act of countercultural rebellion, a weapon in a symbolic struggle over cultural meaning and racial power. Films of prior decades had wielded interracial sexuality as an instrument to bludgeon audiences with a political viewpoint, but not since *The Birth of a Nation* had a movie done so with such aggression and raw explicitness. It presented a visual rhetoric in which an empowered, radicalized Black man triumphed over oppressive authority and symbolically enacted Cleaver's "trampling upon the white man's law" via an act of sexual conquest of a White woman.[38] Although Sweetback did not rape Big Sadie as Cleaver did his victims, this confrontational scene exudes an arresting level of sexual aggression as he and his sexual rival engage in a coital duel to decide Sweetback's fate. When Sweetback "defeats" Red, he flouts centuries of sexual custom and symbolically challenges the deification of White womanhood historically prized by White male culture—the ultimate "target" of this scene is not White women, but the dominant White male culture that constructed White womanhood as the ultimate untouchable taboo for Black men. However, just as the race pride rhetoric of Black Power rested partially on the symbolic and organizational oppression of women, so Sweetback's freedom ultimately comes at the sexual expense of women, White and Black. The unnamed Black woman who removes his handcuffs acts as a disposable revolutionary sexual muse, an erotic pit-stop that further aids him in his quest for personal liberation, while Big Sadie acts as a White sexual ogre he must conquer in order to gain his freedom. In short, *Sweetback* offered audiences a complicated mixture of consciousness raising, revolutionary violence, and interracial sex, an X-rated filmic exercise in the complicated cultural and sexual politics of Black Power masculinity.

The Cultural Politics of the Sweetback Revolution

The film's extreme content and aggressive posture ensured that Van Peebles would struggle to distribute and exhibit *Sweetback* through mainstream channels. "Everybody turned it down," he recounts, "[and] only two theaters in the entire United States would show it," one in Detroit and another in Atlanta. It broke records at both theaters and quickly spread across the nation as Black urban audiences came out in droves to see it. Mario Van Peebles recalled that "the audience loved every hairy minute of it."[39] *Jet* magazine's editor Chester Higgin also testified to the film's popularity: "Blacks simply love the film. The love is profound in a very personal way that says reams about the Black condition."[40] *Sweetback* reportedly earned somewhere between $10 and $20 million at the box office, most of which came from Black viewers in cities like Detroit, New York, and Atlanta.[41] White critics in the mainstream press mostly ignored it and proved extremely slow to even acknowledge its existence, perhaps lending credence to Van Peebles' insistence that it was for Blacks only. The *New York Times* did, however, carry early reviews, one by White critic Vincent Canby and another by Black critic Clayton Riley. Canby dismissed *Sweetback*, accusing it of "merchandizing" injustice while purportedly dramatizing it and shabbily dressing up a spectacle-ridden escape drama in faux-revolutionary clothing.[42] Riley strongly disagreed, defending it as a frighteningly accurate document of the daily horrors of ghetto life:

> [*Sweetback* is a] dizzying romp through a portion of the Republic, encountering or passing by its disgraceful streets, the crumbling houses in which live its pimps, whores, its witless members of the law enforcement world, its thieves and assassins who . . . are the Republic's victims . . . In spite of the absence of positive portraits, there are no inaccuracies, just exaggerations, larger-than-life scale models of Black folks caught in a life that should not—but *does* exist.[43]

For Riley, *Sweetback* stood as a shockingly true portrait of a world that few outside of the urban ghettoes understood or wanted to see, dismissing the film's detractors as denying the harsh and horrifying realities of contemporary ghetto life.

This hidden urban universe had never truly been depicted in mainstream a Hollywood film. The mélange of sex workers and street people that populate *Sweetback*'s world stand in stark contrast to the "respectable" images of Blackness popularized in Poitier's pre-1967 films, and the film registers no traces of recent Civil Rights victories. Some critics protested *Sweetback*'s obsessive focus on the negative aspects of contemporary Black life as it disavowed contemporary markers of racial progress. Federal affirmative action programs brought tens of thousands of Blacks into public and private sector jobs, and Black representation in urban municipal administrations and the houses of Congress grew sizably.[44] Fair housing legislation illegalized residential discrimination practices that kept racial minorities trapped in crumbling urban cores, and handfuls of Black families across the nation began to migrate to all-White suburbs that were previously closed. Yet these important gains mostly benefitted middle-to-upper class Blacks who were increasingly leaving city ghettoes for greener suburban pastures, and the political gains did little to help the majority of Blacks experiencing drastically deteriorating prospects in underdeveloped and abandoned urban ghettoes.[45] Sociologist William Julius Wilson found that throughout the 1970s, Blacks living in inner cities faced a shrinking labor market largely comprised of low-wage, low-skill jobs on one hand, and high-skill jobs that were essentially off limits due to inferior educational opportunities. The flight of jobs and capital to the suburbs and the disappearance of industrial jobs exacerbated this dilemma, and the result was a growth in dependence on public assistance

and the creation of an impoverished, socially isolated community of mostly-Black inner city communities largely denied the prospects of upward mobility and economic advancement.[46]

The film's opening credits brashly proclaim that the film starred "The Black Community," a commentary on the extent to which Van Peebles perceived it to speak for and to the disadvantaged Black masses that many White Americans wanted to forget. Many ghetto viewers accepted the film's claim to represent them, and *Sweetback*'s popularity with urban audiences deeply disturbed most Black leaders. *Ebony* printed a letter from Marilyn Allman, an eighth grade New York City teacher, in which she called *Sweetback* a "counter-revolutionary film" that presented no meaningful alternatives to inner city youth, chiding Van Peebles for "ego-tripping at the expense of a colonized and spiritually-decimated people."[47] A Chicago-based Black arts collective named Kuumba Workshop mounted an "anti-*Sweetback* movement" and (vainly) fought the film's expansion into area theaters. Kuumba Workshop founder Val Gray Ward lambasted the film's conflation of sexual release with liberation from oppression: "Some supporters argue that . . . [the] deaths of white policemen and excape [sic] of the black man who does the killing make the film "revolutionary." But they completely ignore the negatives: the hero is a stud . . . who jumps at (or onto) every woman in sight."[48] The radical feminists of the New York-based underground newspaper *Women's LibeRATion* agreed, reprinting the film's iconic poster with handwritten antisexist and antiracist slogans scrawled along the margins, including "fuck this racist bullshit" and "smash sexism."[49] Don L. Lee, a Black educator and poet who would adopt the Swahili-influenced name Haki R. Madhubuti several years later, expressed similar sentiments in an article for

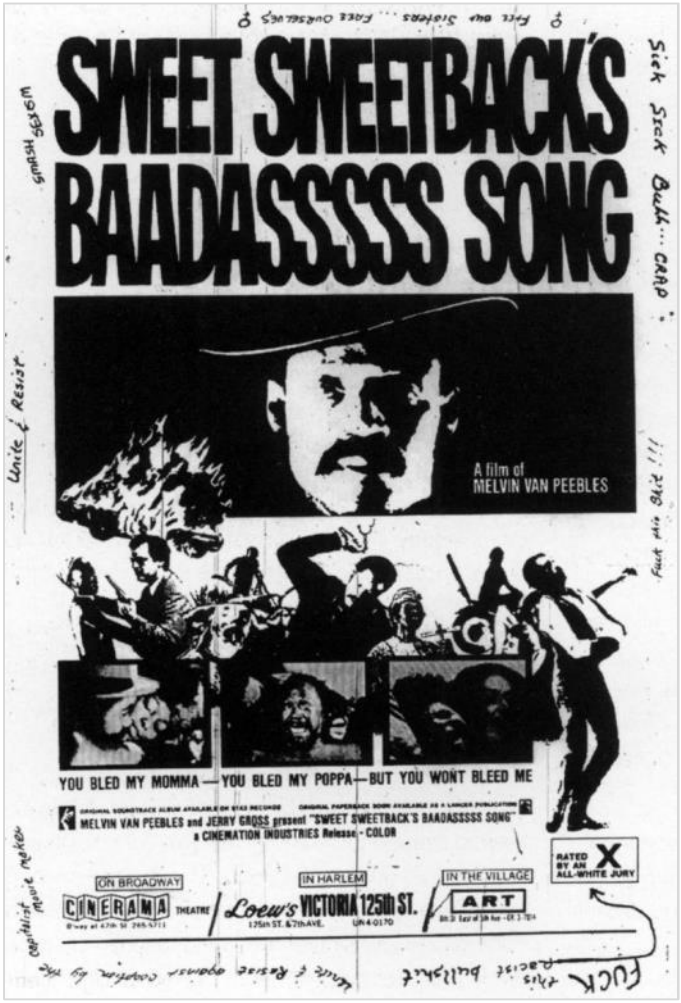

Figure 38. *Sweetback* poster with editorial comments from *Women's LibeRATion.* The new York-based radical newspaper reprinted this film poster with handwritten messages denouncing it as racist, sexist, capitalist nonsense. Clockwise from the top: "Free our sisters . . . free ourselves;" "Sick sick bull . . . crap;" "Fuck this shit;" "Fuck this racist bullshit;" "Unite & resist against cooption by the capitalist movie maker;" "Unite & resist;" and "Smash sexism."

Black World: "Is *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss* [sic] *Song* a revolutionary film? No! Not in the definitions of a Frantz Fanon, a Malcolm X . . . But we know that smoking pot is revolutionary to some brothers, so it gets down to whose definitions you are using." Lee punctuated his analysis with a repudiation of Van Peebles' mixture of racial consciousness and revolutionary sexuality, denouncing the absurd impossibility of "screw[ing] your way to freedom."[50]

Lee's comments capture a larger discussion about the cultural politics of Black Power versus the "traditional" politics of the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Although Black Power organizations like the Panthers proposed a holistic agenda that sought civil, economic, political, psychological, and cultural liberation, Black Power's encouragement of racial pride and a conscious Black identity and culture arguably left the biggest imprint on the racial discourse of the era. In other words, despite the diversity of what Komozi Woodard calls the "cultural and political formations" of the Black Power era, its immediate impact was more *cultural* than political, helping to reshape a world in which identity-based activities, actions, and expressions took on increasing symbolic weight. *Sweetback* undoubtedly participated in this process. From the title character's cinematic victory over corrupt White officers to his interracial sex duel, *Sweetback* symbolically enacted and represented the revolutionary, hypermasculinized rhetoric of Black Power, inviting the Black audience to join Sweetback on his journey of revolution and expanded consciousness. Huey Newton resonated deeply with the film's symbolism, seeing Sweetback's violent rebellion as a network of layered messages showing "how the victims must deal with their situations . . . and the key routes to our survival."[51] However, Don Lee, who had previously been a foot soldier for SNCC, dismissed *Sweetback*'s revolutionary claims, arguing that it mistook symbolic cultural rebellion, i.e., smoking marijuana and participating in transgressive sex acts, for actual revolutionary thought and political action along the lines of Malcolm X.[52]

Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s previously mentioned essay offers an even more insightful analysis of what some perceived as the gap between *Sweetback*'s identity-based cultural

revolution and actual political and social change. Bennett offered one of the few extended analyses of the film's interracial sexual duel, correctly identifying the scene's symbolic importance in *Sweetback*'s overall message. Bennett begins his analysis by placing the film in a long tradition of White-produced media distortions depicting Blacks as lazy, oversexed, and dishonest—stereotypes that late 1950s/early 1960s Civil Rights activists resisted with the construction of positive, oppositional identities:

> In the pre-black [Power] days, Negroes generally reacted to the white image by [trying] . . . to become opposite Negroes, the opposite, that is, of what white people said Negroes were. This symbolic strategy is being abandoned by . . . [Black Power advocates] who are defining themselves as . . . [the opposite] of what Negroes said Negroes were. The danger, put bluntly, is that will go around and around in circles and end up in an old harbor of white clichés, with the mistaken impression that they are discovering new land.

Bennett further argues that the Black Power movement pushed the community into a state of "symbolic confusion," one that equated "real" Blackness with degrading squalor, romanticized ghetto poverty as a revolutionary training ground, and elevated pimps as folk heroes. *Sweetback* stood as the logical but lamentable conclusion to this symbolic confusion, and it offered audiences pseudo-revolutionary images of Black triumph that, in practice, embraced counterrevolutionary ideologies:

> *Sweet Sweetback* tells us nothing about the nature and dynamics of revolution; it doesn't even tell us how to escape the police . . . The movie relies on the old John Wayne rugged individualism crap, the great big hero, slaying all the dragons, seducing all the women . . . One wishes that the movie had made clear that there are no supermen and that a revolution depends not on sexual skill or panicky individual response, but on the organized and deliberate responses of the masses.

Bennett read the film as privileging personal liberation over collective action, which he esteemed as the prerequisite for societal change. Instead, Van Peebles offered a Black version of "John Wayne rugged individualism," a Black Power Era update of the classic tropes of Hollywood masculinity masquerading as communal struggle.

Ultimately, Bennett charged the film's obsession with sexual conquest as symbolically conflating individual assertiveness for revolution, confusing emancipation with orgasm. He sums up his views in the provocative statement discussed in the opening of this chapter: "Nobody ever f***ed his way to freedom . . . If f***ing freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago."[53] Whether one agrees with Bennett's assessment of the film's symbolism as pseudo-revolutionary confusion, his comments acknowledge that the interracial sex in *Sweetback* was never "just" sex, and that Van Peebles included this provocative scene as a statement of rebellion and countercultural revolt against one of the greatest racial prohibitions in America's history—sex between a Black man and a White woman. Whether one agrees with Newton's assessment of *Sweetback* as a truly revolutionary cinematic text, sides with Bennett's dismissal of the film as pseudo-revolutionary hogwash, or lands somewhere in between, *Sweetback* remains significant as a representative text of an emerging cinematic frame for the representation of interracial sexuality in which such acts were brandished as a symbolic and transgressive weapon in a countercultural war. This new frame largely swept away the civil rights romance typified by *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, replacing it with a representational schema that cinematically located interracial sexuality as a crucial point on the terrain of countercultural revolution.

Love and Theft: Interracial Sexuality in the New Hollywood

New Hollywood, New Left, New Frame

Although *Sweetback* remains the most important example of this new film frame, Van Peebles was not the first countercultural filmmaker to cinematically re-represent interracial sexuality via the rhetoric of cultural revolution and rebellion. Two years prior, Veteran Hollywood director Arthur Penn released *Alice's Restaurant*, a hippie-themed

comedy that arguably marks the introduction of the countercultural frame for interracial sexuality that Van Peebles so provocatively adapted via the masculinist rhetoric of Black Power. Penn based his offbeat film on a song by radical folk singer Arlo Guthrie about a group of hippies living in a deconsecrated church. The commune runs afoul of local law enforcement when they illegally dump months of accumulated garbage at the foot of a cliff and receive a fine for littering. The lead character Arlo Guthrie (played by himself) dodges the Vietnam War draft when his "criminal" record (the littering charge) makes him ineligible for the draft. Arlo and his friends happily clean up the illegally dumped material, and the film ends with Arlo happily enjoying his newfound freedom with his hippie comrades. *Alice's Restaurant* stands as an example of Hollywood trying to capitalize on the radical youth movements that had swept the nation in the late 1960s. As thousands of young people nationwide "dropped out" of mainstream society to form communal groups centered around drugs, sexual experimentation, and a radical gospel of peace and love, the film industry struggled to keep up, nervously courting progressive directors like Penn to tap into this important demographic.

Penn had previously scored a tremendous surprise hit with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) a violent, nihilistic gangster picture whose themes of angst and alienation angered older movie critics while electrifying younger audiences.[54] Much to the confusion of seasoned studio executives, *Bonnie and Clyde* performed amazingly well at the box office for Warner Bros., and Penn would follow up his symbolic Depression Era paean to contemporary youth rebellion with a more direct representation of the hippie movement via *Alice's Restaurant*.[55] The film includes cultural referents inextricably tied to the hippies: communal living, free love, drug use, and antiauthoritarian posturing. It also

Figure 39. Film still from *Alice's Restaurant*. Arthur Penn represented the hippie lifestyle as a racial utopia where Black and White sit as equals and interracial love emerges naturally as an expression of countercultural commitments. Arlo and Mari-chan (*seated second and third from the left respectively*) meet over a communal Thanksgiving dinner and quickly fall in love.

references the widespread countercultural act of draft evasion—the open refusal to participate in the youth draft for the Vietnam War—when Arlo proudly flaunts his criminal record in order to avoid conscription into the military. Additionally, *Alice's Restaurant* includes a notable subplot in which the White main character Arlo romances Mari-chan (Tina Chen), a Chinese girl whom he meets at a communal Thanksgiving dinner. Interestingly, the interracial romance is not overtly commented upon in the text; the film assumes Mari-chan's suitability as a partner for the White lead Arlo Guthrie without mention of her race, a fact that I read as part of the counterculture's program of normalizing traditionally "abnormal" sexual arrangements. Additionally, the pairing of an Asian woman and a White man at the height of the Vietnam War directly challenged the basic Eurocentric racism that helped fuel anti-Asian sentiment during the War. Although

racial concerns are generally not cited as a major antecedent for the Vietnam War, Jacqueline E. Lawson has argued that racism became "crucial" to the military's strategy, as dehumanization of the Vietcong bolstered a rationale for the entire conflict: "Reducing the Vietnamese to mere 'gooks'—something between a woman and an animal—helped bolster the morale of the troops . . . [The Vietnamese] were considered stupid, cowardly, small, ugly, poor, [and] to be killed." Disturbingly, the year before the release of *Alice's Restaurant*, American GIs raped, mutilated, and/or murdered 450-500 South Vietnamese civilians, most of them women, in the village of My Lai, a horrifying testament to the wartime ravages of sexual racism.[56] In this light, Arlo and Mari-chan's interracial romance stands as a humanizing countercultural contrast to the racist, anti-Asian violence propagated by the U.S. military during the Vietnam conflict.

Arlo and Mari-chan's relationship occupies a small part of *Alice's Restaurant*, and the film has received scant scholarly attention, typically overshadowed by its incredibly influential predecessor *Bonnie and Clyde*. However, both of these films stand as representative texts of a cinematic revolution taking place in the industry as "Old Hollywood," dominated by aging movie moguls unable or unwilling to connect with the rapid changes in youth consciousness, gave way to the "New Hollywood," a generation of rebellious filmmakers offering uncompromisingly countercultural critiques of American life. The New Hollywood was essentially comprised of two groups: young, film school-trained directors like Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather* [1972]) and Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver* [1976]), and older, seasoned Hollywood insiders like Dennis Hopper (*Easy Rider* [1969]) and Arthur Penn who previously could not make the liberated texts they desired under the strictures of the classical Hollywood system.[57]

Although diverse by age, the New Hollywood was essentially an all-male, all-White coterie of filmmakers united by antiwar, antiestablishment, and/or socially liberal tendencies. The movies of the New Hollywood assailed many of the foundational myths of American society that had been enshrined through classical Hollywood film; revisionist texts like Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970) critiqued the genocidal traditions of "manifest destiny" and White supremacy celebrated by the Western genre, while Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* (1970) employed the war picture to question the Vietnam conflict, portraying the US military as a collection of desensitized misfits trapped in a pointless struggle.

The New Hollywood is best understood as a convergence of market-driven exigencies and rising countercultural tides. The film industry had been struggling with declining cinema patronage since the early 1950s, and the downward slide continued through the following decade: between 1960 and 1970, audience attendance halved.[58] The industry hit a nadir in 1969 with a devastating economic recession and a string of expensive flops that collectively bled the studios of hundreds of millions in lost revenues.[59] Simultaneously, Hollywood struggled to connect with younger audiences, particularly the millions of American youth swept up in the countercultural revolutions of the late 1960s/early 1970s. The radical calls for Black freedom and justice that came out of the Civil Rights Movement both incited and roughly coincided with a complex and interconnected network of social movements created by young people embracing radical political ideologies and social mores. As the hippie subculture, women's liberation, the antiwar movement, the sexual revolution, gay liberation, and radical political groups like Students for a Democratic Society captured headlines and galvanized public attention,

commentators identified the emergence of a "the New Left," a diverse "movement of movements" making bold demands for freedom, recognition, and justice.[60] As discussed previously concerning the impact of Black Power, the era's revolutions arguably altered the nation's cultural expressions as much as (if not more than) its political formations, introducing new values and mores that appealed to many young Americans while shifting public morals in a more liberal direction. Social scientist Daniel Yankelovich studied public opinion polls between 1967 and 1973, finding college students increasingly embracing the sexual permissiveness of the radical 1960s insurgents, evincing an openness to sexuality unthinkable a generation before.[61] Commentators, particularly conservative pundits deeply dismayed by the shift in public morality, cited cultural referents as disparate as the prevalence of long hair for young men, the growing acceptance of nontraditional lifestyles, and the growth of sexually explicit entertainment as proof that the political movements of the 1960s fueled an ongoing cultural revolution throughout the 1970s.[62]

These radical shifts in youth culture vastly transformed mainstream popular culture, particularly as marketers discovered that the countercultures' styles, speech, and aesthetic expressions held wide appeal beyond the minority of young people who actually participated in 1960s radicalism.[63] The growing fan base for rock music, the popularity of hippie fashions like tie-dye clothing, and the explosion of adult content in mainstream entertainment represented just a few of the many new lucrative markets open to tuned-in capitalists. For a film industry terrified by these radical shifts in the youth market, the New Hollywood bridged the gap between the Old Hollywood and the counterculture, fostering a peculiar symbiotic relationship. The New Hollywood allowed the industry

access to a previously impervious market and (sometimes) made the studios millions. Conversely, the studios often gave these upstart directors unprecedented freedom to pursue their personal cinematic visions, providing a national and international infrastructure to support the release of politically-charged and provocative texts that would have been inconceivable a decade prior.

Collectively, the films of the New Hollywood explored nearly every issue of contemporary import, surveying the turbulent topography of US culture and offering progressive takes on a host of divisive issues, from the war in Vietnam to post-Black Power racial politics. As hinted at in *Alice's Restaurant*, interracial sexuality remained an important outpost on the contested terrain of countercultural politics, and just as cultural insurgents revolted against their parents' received political and moral wisdom, New Hollywood rejected the previous generation's views on interracial sexuality. The civil rights frame epitomized by *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was deemed laughably conservative, simplistic, and anachronistic, and *Alice's Restaurant* stands as an early example of a film text repositioning the cinematic frame for interracial sexuality, brandishing the image of such pairings as a symbolic weapon in a countercultural struggle for meaning. A small but important cluster of New Hollywood films would follow *Alice's Restaurant*, employing interracial sexuality to explore various identity claims and power dynamics. Although these films did not present a unified view on the matter, all would employ the malleable trope of interracial sexuality to represent (and perhaps advance) a host of interrelated countercultural practices, goals, and rhetorics.

In fact, Penn would follow up *Alice's Restaurant* with a film in which interracial sexuality would play a more central symbolic role, the revisionist comedic Western *Little*

Big Man (1970) that recast George Armstrong Custer's famous military campaigns against the Plains American Indian tribes as a racist, genocidal slaughter. *Little Big Man* centers on Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman), a White orphan raised by Cheyennes in their traditional customs and cultural practices. When he is sixteen, US cavalry troops attack and capture Jack, provoking him to renounce his Indian identity and embrace his Whiteness in order to save his own life. After reentering White society, he embarks on a series of failed ventures that lampoon various Hollywood Western tropes until finally joining the US Army's 7th Cavalry Regiment under the leadership of General Custer. After witnessing the 7th Cavalry's merciless slaughter of Indians, Jack rebels against Custer and reclaims his Indian upbringing, returning to the Cheyenne camp where he marries four Indian sisters including Sunshine (Chinese actor Aimée Eccles), his youngest and most beloved wife, with whom he fathers a child. Custer and his men execute a surprise attack on the camp which takes the life of Sunshine, her three sisters, and Jack's child. Deeply distraught by the slaughter of his family, Jack rejoins the 7th Cavalry in order to surreptitiously lead them into a trap at Little Bighorn, where a coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors annihilate Custer and his men.

Although Jack's blissful interracial marriages to Sunshine and her sisters comprise one episode in *Little Big Man*'s meandering 139 minute narrative, these scenes symbolically perform the counterculture's rejection of traditional racial/sexual values more overtly than the brief interracial romance in *Alice's Restaurant*. In one scene, Sunshine encourages Little Big Man (Jack's Cheyenne name) to sexually engage her three unmarried sisters, an act that M. Elise Marubbio reads as "an endorsement of the 1970s' sexual revolution and the hippie generation's support of communal living and free

Figure 40. Film still from *Little Big Man.* Sunshine proclaims her love for Little Big Man after he marries (makes love to) all three of her unwed sisters in Penn's revisionist western.

love."[64] For Jack, interracial love becomes a means to reclaim his Indianness—"I reckon right then I come pretty close to turning pure Indian . . . with Sunshine and her sisters," his voiceover narration explains. These unions also act as a repudiation of his Whiteness, and Jack's decision to reclaim his Indian racial identity performs a rejection of the White man's racist, conquest-mad militarism epitomized by Custer and his 7th Cavalry. Influential film critic Pauline Kael has noted that the casting of an Asian woman as Sunshine was meant to remind audiences of the humanity of Vietnamese people: "The Indians . . . [had] Vietnamese faces. The key girl we saw killed in slow motion [Sunshine] in *Little Big Man* was definitely an Oriental."[65] Kael incorrectly identified the Chinese actor cast as Sunshine as Vietnamese, yet she accurately read the casting of an Asian actor for the part as an overt reference to the Vietnam conflict, tying this cinematic instance of interracial sexuality to the countercultural protests against the ongoing war in Southeast Asia.

Little Big Man captures how New Hollywood directors recast age-old film tropes to represent multiple overlapping countercultural concerns, reframing the classic Western

image of romantic/sexual liaisons between the White adventurer and the Indian maiden as a liberal critique of the nation's past and present racial ills. Just as *The Searchers* (1956) employed the Western genre to represent Black/White relations in the era of integration, Penn conceived *Little Big Man* as a parable for the genocidal horrors of Vietnam, confirming Kael's reading of the film as referencing the ongoing conflict in Southeast Asia.[66] Simultaneously, the film strove to radically revise the image of the American Indian, protesting decades of Hollywood Indian savagery by presenting these tribes as embattled communities struggling to survive the onslaught of genocidal White violence. Penn reportedly attracted cooperation from contemporary Crow and Cheyenne tribes living on reservations near the actual site of Little Bighorn, employing hundreds of extras happy to support "one of Hollywood's few pro-Indian films."[67] *Little Big Horn* appeared alongside a series of revisionist Westerns that similarly deconstructed the Western genre, presenting an overtly pro-Indian, anti-frontiersman framework that progressively bucked decades of film tradition. Sydney Pollack's *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) follows the exploits of a jaded Mexican War veteran whose discontent with American society leads him to "drop out" and marry a Flathead Indian woman. Ralph Nelson's graphically violent *Soldier Blue* reenacts the 1864 Sand Creek massacre of the Cheyennes in the Colorado Territory with jarring scenes of White soldiers raping Indian women modeled after the aforementioned My Lai Massacre in which American servicemen gang-raped and murdered innocent Vietnamese women.[68] Taken collectively, the revisionist Westerns connected America's tragic racist past with the Vietnam War's racism and militarism denounced by the antiwar movement and the countercultural Left, while forwarding an

alternative image of interracial relations in which racist Whites could be transformed and liberated by interacting with racial others as sexual equals.

The Cultural Politics of Radical Interracial Sexuality

While *Little Big Man* attempted to revision the Western genre from a Native perspective and recast White/Indian sexual relationships as a countercultural act, this film and many similar-themed projects were largely helmed by White male directors. Some have accused these progressive films of invoking racial and sexual difference to further a distinctly liberal White, male critique while perpetuating a number of cinematic clichés and racial and gender stereotypes. Specifically, while both *Little Big Man* and *Jeremiah Johnson* challenged many of the conventions of the Western, they also perpetuated a problematic film archetype stretching back to the silent era— the sexual exoticization of the Indian woman. M. Elise Marubbio typifies this paradigm:

> The revisionist westerns in which the Celluloid Maiden [her term for the Indian woman] appears present the figure as a beautiful and sexually uninhibited woman who woos her [White] husband further into "savagery" and the wilderness . . . Her sexuality is her filmic cachet, but it often accentuates negative racial stereotypes about Native American women's sexuality . . . She symbolizes the white hero's moment of rebirth and self-awakening and his . . . acts of "embracing the wilderness" and "going native."[69]

While revisionist auteurs laid bare the inherent racism of the Western, they often did so from a White male frame, weaving tales of White male radicalization catalyzed by stereotypically cast sexually "savage" Native women. *Little Big Man* ups the ante by embroiling its White male hero in a polygamous web of interracial relationships, and his emerging racial consciousness and rejection of White society becomes sealed after an evening of transgressive sexual unions. Thus, just as Van Peebles' *Sweetback* presented women, White and Black, as erotic conquests in a hypermasculinized journey of revolution and liberation, *Little Big Man* shows how male New Hollywood directors

often framed racial others as sexually fetishized objects in a project of White male radicalization.

Interestingly enough, the cinematic framing of interracial sexuality as a process of White radicalization correlated with potentially troubling countercultural practices and rhetorics occurring off-screen, although often in less overtly gendered ways. *Little Big Man*'s framing of White/Indian relations as leading to peace and tranquility between warring races parallels the tendency of some White counterculturalists to romanticize Native American cultures and Indianness as idealized symbols of "social harmony." Hippie communalists often appropriated Native symbols (teepees, feathered headbands, fringed leather jackets, etc.) as celebratory markers of their desire to reject mainstream consumer culture and reclaim the "authentic" aspects of a premodern "savage" American utopia.[70] Indian imagery often appeared in rock concert posters or countercultural artwork, and RCA's original cast recording album of the 1967 production of the hippie musical *Hair* featured two of the show's White male cast members spliced into a photograph of unidentified American Indian warriors. Philip J. Deloria points out a painful irony in these acts of appropriation, stating that "communalists tended to value Indian Otherness and its assorted meanings more than they did real native people." Some hippie communalists even went as far as to visit Indian reservations searching for spiritual connection and inspiration, although such encounters reportedly frustrated and disappointed both sides of the uneven cultural exchange.[71]

This appropriation of racial otherness as a signifier of countercultural rebellion extended beyond Native American cultures as White counterculturalists similarly looked to Black culture for models of rebellion and resistance. Many hippies admired Blacks for

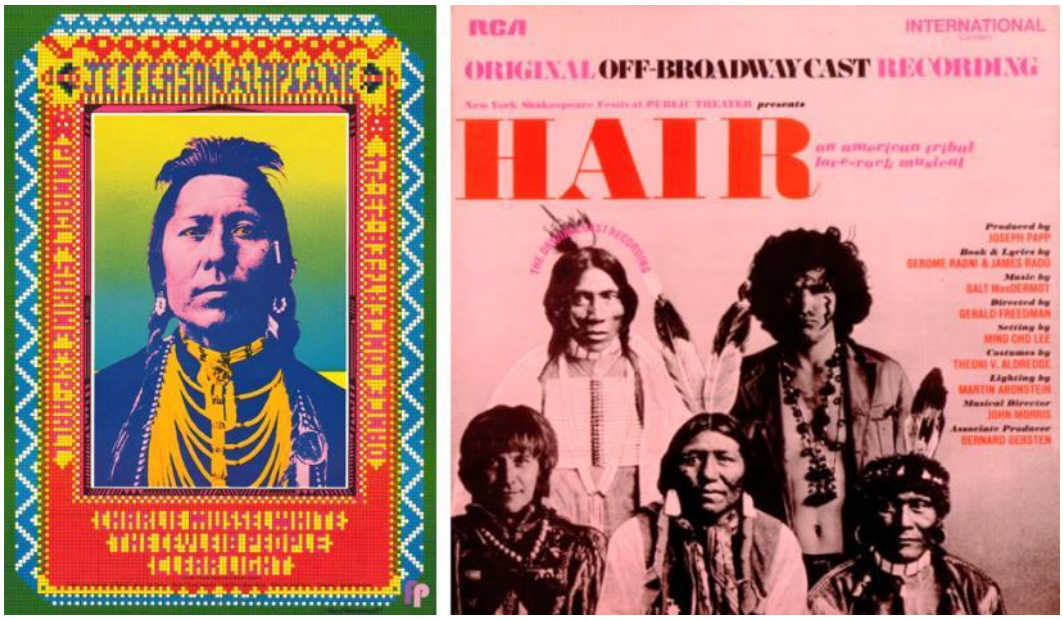

Figure 41. Jefferson Airplane concert poster, 1968 and album art for *Hair* cast recording, 1967. Hippies frequently appropriated American Indian iconography, and even American Indians themselves, in their cultural expressions. A poster for the rock band Jefferson Airplane (*left*) advertises a concert by placing a psychedelically recolored image of a American Indian man in the middle of a traditional quilt, while the soundtrack to the stage musical *Hair* (left) splices two of its White cast members with images of Indian warriors.

supposedly being "more emotional, sensual, [and] uninhibited" while appropriating much of hippie jargon from Black slang.[72] Paul R. Spickard has also noted the rise of post-1960s "ethnic chic—the cultivation of friendships with minority group members . . . [as a] form of White liberalism. To say with conviction, "Some of my best friends are Negroes," was a badge of honor at White liberal cocktail parties."[73] Additionally, White political revolutionary organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and the Weathermen idolized the Black Panthers, directly taking cues from their rhetoric and borrowing their slang and public posture.[74]

White liberals and counterculturalists who engaged in such acts of appropriation saw minority cultural symbols as a means to shed their privileges and ties to a racist mainstream culture, and one could arguably read these acts as the height of respect for the

inherent value of these historically devalued groups. However, history has shown that appreciation can often slide into outright theft and even fetishization, particularly when those of relative privilege (e.g., White, middle-class young adults) draw from the aesthetic expressions of oppressed minority cultures. In fact, the history of American popular culture demonstrates that the vernacular expressions of minority groups, particularly Black popular culture, have always been fodder for White rebellion, a means for conscious objectors to distance themselves from their Whiteness. bell hooks sheds light on this counterculturalist desire to make contact with the traditions (and the bodies) of racial others, arguing that such seekers construct non-White sexuality as "unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for . . . asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects. They call upon the Other to be both witness and participant in this transformation."[75] Greg Tate agrees, accusing Whites of stealing "everything but the burden" from Black vernacular culture, a tendency notable decades before the counterculture existed in everything from blackface minstrel music to 1940s White hipsters to Elvis Presley.[76]

Equally problematic was the counterculture's casting of minority sexuality as something mythically exotic and "other" as they romanticized Blacks and Native Americans as models of sexual expression and sensuality.[77] Several New Hollywood directors found this dynamic problematic and included interracial sexuality in their films as a means to self-reflexively critique the fetishization of non-White sexuality. Brian de Palma's dark comedy *Hi, Mom* (1970) centers on a Vietnam vet named Jon Rubin (Robert De Niro) who joins a mixed race experimental theatre troupe after a failed stint as an adult filmmaker. The film's most notable sequence documents a performance of a

Figure 42. Film stills from *Hi, Mom*. A group of marauding "Whites" (left) physically and sexually menace a group of helpless "Blacks" (right) who have elected to endure such abuse by attending the fictional play *Be Black, Baby*.

shocking fictitious play called *Be Black, Baby* in which White theatergoers are forcibly made up in blackface by Black actors in whiteface, all so that Whites can experience what it's like to be Black in America. The theater patrons suffer non-simulated abuses from the actors: thugs confiscate their personal belongings, a policeman beats one patron with a nightstick, and two of the "White" men (Blacks in whiteface) sexually assault one of the "Black" women (a White woman in blackface) while the other "Blacks" watch helplessly. The sequence ends with interview-style shots of the blackened-up White audience members raving about the show and promising to recommend it to their friends, physical and sexual violation notwithstanding. This clever plot device uncomfortably lampoons White liberal pretentions in empathizing and identifying with Blackness as the badly shaken patrons appeared nonplussed by the abuse, happy to have learned greater empathy from their horrifying cross-cultural experience.

An even more overt critique of the counterculture's racial tourism can be found in Ralph Bakshi's *Fritz the Cat* (1972), an X-rated animated feature based on the work of underground comic artist Robert Crumb.[‡] *Fritz the Cat* follows the exploits of Fritz, a feline college student (all of *Fritz*'s characters are anthropomorphic talking animals) caught up in the sex, drugs, and revolutionary ideals sparked by the 1960s. *Fritz* essentially exists to satirize and critique the counterculture, presenting the era's young rebels as empty-headed hedonists taken in by radical rhetoric possessing no political substance. Several scenes particularly mock the White counterculture's fixation with Black culture, including an early scene where Fritz (voiced by Skip Hinnant) witnesses three White female college students approach a Black man (represented by a cartoon crow) and attempt to impress him with racially conscious platitudes. One woman proudly announces, "I've read everything James Baldwin's written. He has a true sense of the problems of black people." Another cheerily adds, "I worked for Head Start for free last summer—Black kids are so much groovier!" In a later sequence, Fritz grows weary of his college life and abandons his studies to explore the world, making Harlem the first stop on his consciousness expanding mission. He wanders into a Black bar where he engages in a conversation with Duke (John McCurry), a cigar-chomping crow:

> *Duke*: Don't lose your coolness, cat. I mean, don't lose your coolness.
>
> *Fritz*: Well, easy for you to talk. You're a crow. I wish I was a crow. If I was a crow, I'd fly away, man. I'd fly away from this miserable town for good.
>
> *Duke*: You think being a crow is a big motherfuckin' ball? All you cats the same, man . . .
>
> *Fritz*: Look, I know it isn't a ball, man. I studied the race problem. See, I know.

[‡] Recall that "X-rated" at this point did not yet signify pornography, but rather an adults-only feature with mature content.

These scenes capture the critique that radical “cats” (i.e., White people) fetishized “crows” (Black people) for their “coolness,” romanticized their struggle, and held up knowledge of their history and culture as proof of their identification with the Black experience. Duke bemoans that cats “come up here to try to find out where it's at,” alluding to the practice of White people looking to Black culture for markers of hipness, and his insistence that one must be “a crow” to understand the race problem counters Fritz’s insistence that studying race in school equals racial consciousness.

Duke ultimately divines what Fritz is really seeking when he takes the cat to meet Bertha (Rosetta LeNoire), an aging jazz singer with whom Fritz falls madly in love after smoking a few marijuana cigarettes. Bertha gives in to Fritz’s sexual advances, although it is implied that she only does so because she misses the pre-1960s era in Harlem “when white money was boss and them fine, white cats came up to Harlem spreading it all around.” As the two begin to copulate, Fritz cries “that old black magic got me,” and in a frenzy of interracial ecstasy, he stands up and shouts “I must tell people about the revolution!” He leaves Bertha and runs into the streets of Harlem where, in a fit of political fervor, he jumps on top of a car and preaches violent revolution, accidentally starting a bloody race rebellion after two terrified police officers start shooting into the Black crowd. Fritz’s transformation from armchair radical to racial insurrectionist via interracial sex offers an ironic twist on the trope in which the White lead finds enlightenment and a means to renounce their Whiteness through interracial trysts. Ultimately, *Fritz the Cat* scathingly indicts the counterculture of pandering to Black culture for its own faux-radical ends, and casts the revolutionary desire for interracial sex as the ridiculous pseudo-revolutionary fetish of misguided children of privilege.

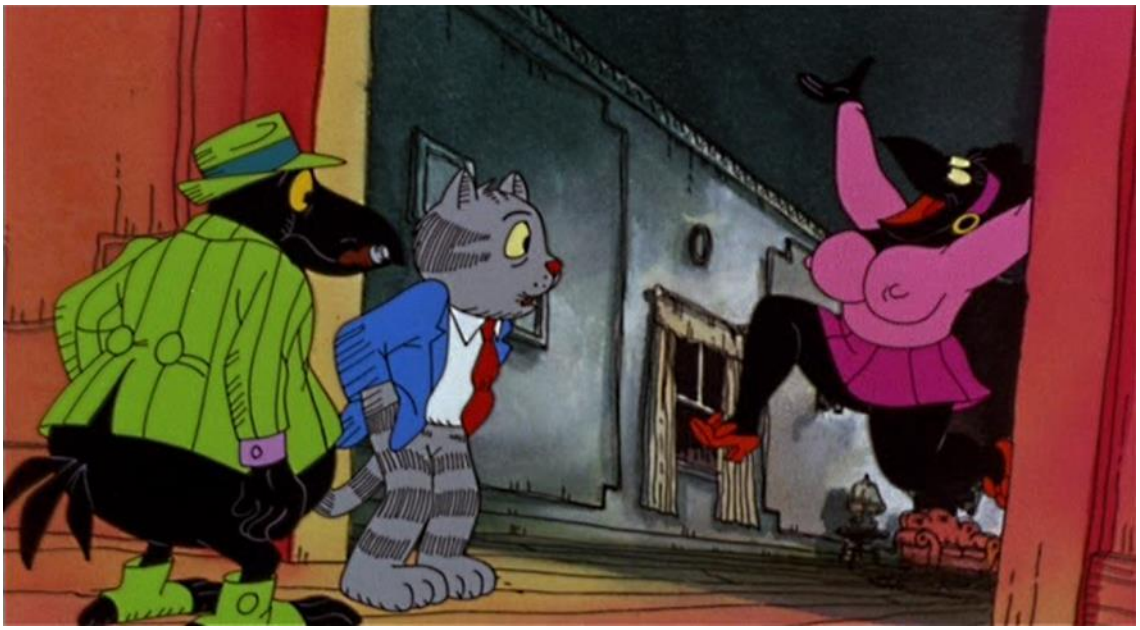

Figure 43. Film still from *Fritz the Cat*. Duke the Crow introduces Fritz the Cat to Bertha, the ultimate sexual fulfillment of Fritz's revolutionary dreams.

The Landlord: Privilege and the Possibility of Love

In an effort to distance himself from his parent's racism and rebel against their White supremacism, Elgar plunges head-first into Black culture, visiting a Black dance club where he meets Lanie (Marki Bey), a mixed race woman who he initially mistakes for White. The two quickly connect and become romantically involved, even after Elgar learns of her racial heritage. As Elgar fixes up the building as his future residence, he begins to develop an uneasy affinity for his renters, including Fanny (Diana Sands), an ex-"Miss Sepia" beauty pageant winner and wife of Copee (Louis Gossett, Jr.), a Black radical who chronically stints in jail due to his revolutionary commitments. One evening, Elgar accepts an invitation to a rent party thrown by one of his tenants. After an evening of drinking and dancing with Fanny, she invites him back to her apartment and the two sleep together. Afterwards, Fanny informs Elgar that she loves Copee and their affair was just a one night stand, but their secret tryst becomes public after Fanny discovers that she

Figure 44. Promotional poster for *The Landlord*. Despite the film's overt racial message, its promotional poster erased all references to race and opted for a bawdy visual gag marketing the film as a sex comedy.

is pregnant with Elgar's baby. The film climaxes when Copee discovers that his White landlord has impregnated his wife, and Elgar narrowly escapes death at the hands of a crazed, ax-wielding Copee. The film ends after Fanny gives birth to the baby, who is taken in to be raised by Elgar and Lani, and a humbled Elgar signs the deed to the apartment building over to Fran and Copee, ostensibly as payment for his sins.

The Landlord received critical assessments that ranged from dismissive to celebratory. Its champions included the *New York Times*, which lauded it as a "dead-serious appraisal of senseless racial awareness, white and black," while detractors included Gene Siskel, who felt that it too awkwardly veered between comedic satire and heavy-handed social commentary.[78] *The Landlord*'s uniquely unsettling blend of social comedy and race/class tragedy did not appeal to a large audience and it fared disappointingly at the box office. Its content also posed a challenge for distributor United

Artists, whose ad campaign downplayed the racial elements and overplayed its sexual content through a crass promotional poster depicting a finger hovering over two doorbells positioned to look like a pair of female breasts.[79] Despite the film's relative obscurity and trivializing ad campaign, it remains the most provocative statement on Black/White relations via the trope of interracial sexuality to come out of the New Hollywood. Through both the comic and the melodramatic scenes, *The Landlord* ties the long history of White exploitation of Black people to the fraught nature of interracial sexuality, all represented through the countercultural urge to love Black culture while ignoring/disrespecting Black people. When Elgar first enters the apartment building, one of the female renters greets him with a shotgun and accuses him of being a rapist. Film scholar Christopher Beach characterizes the encounter as being humorously ironic in tone, particularly in light of Elgar's "innocuous appearance and the fact that he arrived in a white Volkswagen Beetle filled with potted plants." Although played for laughs, the female tenant's rape accusation hearkens back to the long tradition of White men exploiting Black bodies, economically and sexually, and the incident takes on a greater significance after Elgar's interracial adventures bring chaos and sorrow to all involved. By the film's end, Elgar's actions have moved from comic to destructive—Elgar has impregnated a poor Black woman and schemed to evict his tenants in pursuit of his dream home, and the film "clearly ask[s the audience] to make a connection between his actions and the rapes, both literal and metaphorical, perpetuated on black people by white men throughout American history."[80]

The Landlord makes the link between Elgar's interracial lust and the history of White-on-Black domination abundantly clear during the rent party scene, during which

Elgar receives an informal education about the vulgar ironies of White fetishization of Blackness juxtaposed with the stigmatized status Black skin has historically been given. After a few drinks and a flirtatious dance with Fanny, Elgar engages in a challenging conversation with several Black partygoers that serves as a narrative warning against the transgression in which Elgar is about to partake (sleeping with Fanny). The scene is edited in a rather unconventional way, and bears some careful explanation. It begins with a disorienting cut away from the party to a shot of Elgar's White elementary school teacher standing in front of the class, asking, "Now children, how do we live? [Pause. Points directly at the camera.] Elgar?" We are back at the party, where various Black partygoers stand around Elgar and starkly utter a one-word answer to the teacher's question: "Black." The camera then cuts to another disorienting shot of Elgar standing alone against an empty white background, holding a drink and looking confusedly inebriated. The camera intercuts between this image and shots of the Black partygoers looking intently at the camera as the following dialog unfolds:[§]

> Black partygoers: Black! Baby, Black is a whole new thing. And *you* are going to have to reckon with it.
>
> Elgar: Is it a fad, though? See, that's the thing.
>
> Black partygoers: Man, that is *not* the thing. It's like you got a mole. Dig? You got a mole right here [points to forehead]. And you'd do anything to get rid of this mole, because everybody that doesn't have moles got you to believe like it's real ugly. So you'd do anything! I mean you'd hide your face. Anything! Walking backwards. Anything! You'd do everything, I mean *anything*! [Pause.] Then one day . . . One day . . . One day, moles are in. Moles are *in*. People are getting out their eyebrow pencils, marking them on, and you've got one naturally right in the middle of your forehead. You're gonna know what pride is for the first time, baby. For the *first* time! [Pause.] You whiteys screaming about miscegenation, [laughs] and you done watered down every race you ever hated.

[§] The scene is edited in a particularly unconventional way, with a series of seemingly random cuts between various unnamed partygoers all delivering the same dialog. It is quite difficult to explain in print, and readers are encouraged to watch a clip of the scene via the hyperlink above.

The scene ends with a shot of Elgar as a child, awkwardly standing humbled in front of his elementary school class.

Elgar's uninformed question about Blackness being a "fad" is countered via a lengthy dialogue sequence in which the historically despised status of dark skin is metaphorically represented as a mole in the middle of the forehead, an object of blemish that is suddenly declared "in" by the majority White culture. While Elgar indulges his fascination with Black culture and Black bodies as an act of rebellion and liberation, the residents of his target neighborhood find it pitifully insulting in light of the centuries of stigma surrounding African heritage. Furthermore, the partygoers enlighten Elgar to the cruel irony in the majority culture's continued resistance to interracial sex despite Whites having "watered down [sexually intermingled with] every race you ever hated." This scene stands as a textual rebuke to Elgar's fetishization of Blackness (visiting Black clubs as a form of rebellion, sex with Black women, etc.). It also presents a self-reflexive countercultural rebuke, critiquing the explosion of interest in Black culture among White liberals in the late 1960s/early 1970s. The shots of Elgar's childhood classroom that bookend the scene metaphorically capture Elgar being "schooled" in matters that his (ostensibly elite) education did not address, and the seemingly odd choice to end with a shot of a preadolescent Elgar standing embarrassed in front of his classroom captures the humbling he experiences from having his racial misconceptions aggressively corrected. Of course, Elgar does not learn his lesson, and the rent party is immediately followed by his one night stand with Fanny.

While *The Landlord* presents a complex critique of the counterculture's fetishization of Blackness and Black culture as a marker of rebellion, it also builds on the

Figure 45. Film stills from *The Landlord*. An inebriated Elgar (*top left*) receives a much-needed lesson in racial and sexual politics from his Black tenants (*top right*). The scene ends with a shot of Elgar as an elementary school student (*bottom left*), visually rendering his discomfort at this unwelcomed lesson. Elgar ignores his lesson and sleeps with Fanny (*bottom right*), ultimately reifying the criticism that Whites have "watered down every race [they] ever hated."

rhetoric of the integrationist interracial films of the previous era by critiquing those whom White counterculturalists were rebelling against, namely the majority White culture "screaming about miscegenation." This is best demonstrated in a scene where Elgar informs his mother (Lee Grant) of his relationship with Lani during a game of croquet on the family grounds. He interrupts her game to bluntly tell her "I think I love a girl who's a Negro." She looks at him with shock as the camera cuts to a one second insert shot of an African woman dancing to a tribal drum beat, an ironic image of his mother's one-dimensional view of Blackness as equaling "savagery." Appalled, she desperately warns Elgar that some Black people "live to set traps for rich White women." When Elgar informs her that he is not a rich White woman, she exclaims in exasperation, "Didn't we all go together to see *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*? It's just, Elgar, you

have to realize all Negroes are not like that!" In a fascinating instance of metacommentary, *The Landlord* acknowledges *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as a foundational interracial text, but situates it as one that speaks to a prior generation who have no problem holding onto regressively racist ideas while cheering for the exceptional Sydney Poitier to marry the White girl, simultaneously critiquing *Dinner*'s widely criticized genteel pandering to White tastes and mores.

However, despite *The Landlord*'s simultaneous critique of liberal racial fetishism and conservative sexual racism, it also upholds the possibility of real love and intimacy across racial lines, albeit in a fascinatingly complex way that exceeds *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*'s simplistic love-conquers-all narrative. Arguably, *The Landlord* somewhat follows in *Dinner*'s footsteps in allowing Elgar and Lani to stay together through the end of the film despite racist resistance from family. However, it ends on a more somber note that contrasts with *Dinner*'s saccharine idealism—when Lani learns of Elgar's fetishistic affair and Fanny's pregnancy, she professes her love for him despite his destructive choices. This ending affirms the possibility of interracial love in a racially-divided world, but seems to intimate that such relationships are only possible when those involved move past youthful rebellion or simplistic race-neutral idealism and accept the existence of racial baggage that we all carry. Additionally, Elgar and Lani's story demonstrates that such relationships take place in a social and economic structure in which Whites have historically exploited Blacks, and that love, despite its varied benefits, does not conquer all injustices. In short, *The Landlord* presents a more sober, and arguably realistic, view of the American racial divide while holding out the possibility of interracial love in such a context, bridging the gap between the straightforward

celebration of interracial sexuality evidenced in *Little Big Man* and the cynical skewering of it in *Fritz the Cat*.

On the whole, the New Hollywood offered compelling reassessments of the meaning of interracial sexuality following the political and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, although not all New Hollywood filmmakers agreed upon what that meaning was. *Alice's Restaurant* and *Little Big Man* presented interracial sexuality as a form of countercultural currency, a symbol of rebellion against the previous generation's racism that also afforded White (male) enlightenment. *Hi, Mom* and *Fritz the Cat* found such an ethos problematic, and instead presented White countercultural fascination with interracial sexuality as a form of fetishism that trivialized and created false identification with the *real* ongoing struggle for Black freedom and dignity. *The Landlord* offered a more complicated, ambiguous picture, decrying both overt White sexual racism and youthful interracial fetishism as lamentable vestiges of America's tragic interracial past and racially-divided present. However, *The Landlord* did hold out the possibility of interracial love, arguing that such relationships could endure in the face of deep historical and contemporary racial inequities. Despite the range of opinion, the films of the New Hollywood all agreed that interracial sexuality remained contested terrain, a politically-charged symbol that could be framed via the rhetoric of revolution to prove a variety of points and fit various countercultural agendas.

Interracial Sexuality as Erotic Exhibition in the Blaxploitation Film

Exploiting the Revolution

While the New Hollywood thrilled critics and hip audiences tuned into the countercultural zeitgeist, their films did not generally appeal to Black audiences, even when White filmmakers took up race-themed subjects. *The Landlord* offers a case in

point: although director Ashby took great pains to represent the inner city Black experience as best as possible, it did not attract a large Black audience. Ashby built friendly ties with the mostly-Black Brooklyn community of Park Slope where the shooting occurred, hiring a number of local extras and working collaboratively with the Black cast members to authentically capture the nuances of contemporary Black life and vernacular.[81] However, Ashby's attempt to represent the politics of interracial love in an era of Black Power still privileged a White perspective and centered on a White protagonist, and *The Landlord* generally impressed White audiences more than Black ones. One Los Angeles screening found Black viewers expressing verbal anger over Copee's refusal to kill Elgar, judging the film's resolution as not satisfying their appetite for assertive Blackness on the silver screen.[82] Of course, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* attempted to, and for some Black viewers, did, fulfill this appetite. Appearing a year after *The Landlord*, Van Peebles' *Sweetback* drew from the same symbolic waters as the New Hollywood, presenting a cinematic experience of rebellion and revolution from a distinctly Black perspective largely missing from the White film auteurs concurrently making waves in the mainstream. *Sweetback* earned windfall profits and shocked the industry into taking notice, proving the existence of a largely untapped and ignored demographic hungry to see filmic images of Black triumph. It appeared that the success of Van Peebles' revolutionary cinematic opus signaled the beginnings of an aggressive, assertive Black cinema that would parallel the New Hollywood and similarly challenge the mainstream film establishment with a wave of countercultural texts.

By most scholarly and popular accounts, this did *not* happen, and *Sweetback*'s success instead inspired both major studios and exploitation filmmakers to capitalize on

the desire for strong Black cinematic leads triumphing over corrupt Whites with a cycle of low budget Black-themed films. Like *Sweetback*, these films focused on the more sordid aspects of contemporary Black life, representing urban America as a carnival of drug addiction, random violence, crime, and sexual license. Unlike *Sweetback*, these films were generally not driven by a Black revolutionary ethos, were typically written and directed by White men, and drew widespread opprobrium from Black critics for exploiting ghetto suffering in the pursuit of naked profit while dressing up the proceedings in a veneer of Black power.[**] The first major film to follow in *Sweetback*'s wake was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Shaft* (1971), a detective drama about a private investigator named John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) who becomes embroiled in a feud between the Italian mafia and a Black-led drug ring. *Shaft* was originally written for a White actor, but the script was rewritten for a Black audience and assigned to Black director Gordon Parks. The gamble paid off for MGM and *Shaft* grossed over $10 million at the box office on a $1.2 million budget.[83]

Sensing the beginning of an emerging trend, Warner Bros. distributed the independently produced *Super Fly* (1972), a film about a successful Black New York cocaine dealer (Ron O'Neal) who outsmarts corrupt White cops to pull off a deal so lucrative that it allows him to retire from drug pushing. According to historian Ed Guerrero, *Super Fly*'s popular funk soundtrack, chic costuming, hip street slang, and portrayal of cocaine use directly influenced the styles of urban Black youth:

[**] The roots of the blaxploitation film genre actually predate *Sweetback* with a handful of late-1960s Black-themed films, including Black director Gordon Park's coming-of-age drama *The Learning Tree* (1969) and the violent western *100 Rifles* (1969). Both turned profits for the major studios that financed them, particularly *100 Rifles*, whose interracial love scene between Black lead/pro football player Jim Brown and sex symbol Raquel Welch allowed the studio to successfully market it as a steamy action picture that did well in urban areas. Major studios did not, however, fully court the Black urban audience until *Sweetback* demonstrated the lucrative potential of Black action films.

> Afro hairdos and dashikis were soon replaced by long, chemically straightened locks and wide sideburns of the *Superfly* [sic] coiffure, along with the film's gaudy clothes and customized Cadillacs. . . . *Superfly* [sic] was widely recognized for making fashionable the gold necklaces with attached coke spoon, and, as critics have noted, for contributing to the dramatic increase in cocaine use among inner-city black youth.[84]

Super Fly's ostensible glorification of drug dealing provoked widespread outcry in the Black community that led to a protest against these new Black film. Black opinion leaders coined the pejorative neologism "blaxploitation," a portmanteau of the words "black" and "exploitation," to smear these films as lowbrow cinematic garbage.[85] Ironically, the derogatory name stuck, and as the genre grew in popularity, a coterie of Black leaders and Civil Rights groups ramped up the protest, denouncing them as a scourge on the Black community. Noted Black psychologist Alvin F. Poussaint diagnosed the films as pathological, Reverend Jesse Jackson of Operation PUSH called for a boycott of all Blaxploitation films, and the NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC all contributed to the formation of the Coalition Against Blaxploitation to resist the exhibition of these movies.[86] The protests did not stop the flow of blaxploitation films—between1971 and 1978, the industry churned out over 200 Black-themed movies.

Much has been written about blaxploitation, and scholarly assessments of the film movement generally focus on the genre's marriage of gendered Black Power rhetoric and ostensibly empowering narratives of rebellion that, for better or for worse, spoke to many Black filmgoers.[87] Oddly enough, scholars have generally not commented on the pervasive presence of interracial sexuality in the blaxploitation film cycle. My research has shown that interracial sexuality appears nearly ubiquitously in these films, beginning even with the genre's foundational texts. The male leads in *Shaft* and *Super Fly* both sport a White mistress that they hide from their Black girlfriends. Although Shaft and

Figure 46. Promotional posters for *Shaft* and *Super Fly*. Both films depicted their Black male title characters as powerful, decisive, and sexually aggressive, a trope introduced by *Sweetback* but popularized by these influential films that kicked off the "blaxploitation" film cycle.

Youngblood Priest (*Super Fly*'s drug dealing protagonist) lived on different sides of the law, their affairs with White women simultaneously serve as commodified symbols of their upward mobility and as provocative images meant to titillate the audience as both men brashly flaunt the race/sex taboo between White women and Black men. In fact, as scores and later hundreds of Blaxploitation films followed these influential movies, there emerged the ascendance of a counterframe to the representational practices of *Sweetback*, *The Landlord*, and texts of their ilk. Whereas the interracial sex in countercultural texts like *Sweetback*, however graphic, ultimately served as a metaphor for aggressive Black resistance of White power, the interracial sex in blaxploitation films generally flipped the equation, exploiting the ethos of Black empowerment through narratives of violence and scenes of transgressive Black/White sex or sexual desire. As Van Peebles and the New

Hollywood filmmakers looked to mixed race sexual relations as a malleable image to posit and prove a variety of countercultural points, exploitation filmmakers (re)discovered the extravaganza of interracial sexuality, recast in the light of the era's roiling racial tensions and cultural nationalism. Just as exploitation filmmakers during the Movement's classical phase pushed the cinematic miscegenation spectacle as an alternative to the civil rights romance, blaxploitation framed interracial sex as an erotically transgressive exhibition, a sensationalized update of the previous era's miscegenation spectacle wrapped in a patina of the era's rhetoric of racial unrest and assertive consciousness.

Love Stories . . . Of Hate

The largely obscure blaxploitation film *Honky* (1971) captures the genre's mixing of rebellion, lurid interracial sex, and violence. *Honky* concerns two high school students—naïve White boy Wayne (John Neilson) and Black girl Sheila (Brenda Sykes)—who are drawn to each through mutual sexual curiosity and a desire to rebel against their repressive middle-class parents. Sheila's thirst for personal revolution leads her to cajole Wayne into pot smoking and small-time drug peddling, and getting high together at a party. After Wayne steals and crashes his parent's car, the pair hitchhike across the country to escape the consequences. From this point forward, *Honky* largely appropriates the rebellious road trip formula explored in countercultural films like *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, but climaxes with a graphic spectacle of interracial sexual violence. As the pair flee further away from their hometown, they find themselves stranded in a remote rural outpost where they are happened upon by two White racist hillbillies. Alternately amused and disgusted by the couple, the men offer them a ride while making lurid sexual passes at Sheila. After the pair firmly decline the offer for a

ride, the men beat Wayne unconscious and mercilessly gang rape Sheila. The film closes open-endedly as the credits roll over a shot of the scarred couple wordlessly and sorrowfully starring into each other eyes.

Although the framing of interracial sex in this film resembles *Shaft* and *Super Fly* in exploiting interracial sex for pure audience titillation, *Honky* approaches extremes that exceed most Hollywood films of the time—it includes a lengthy love scene between the couple, and the brutal rape scene effectively ends the film with no denouement or commentary, begging accusations of shock for its own sake. Of course, exploitation cinema specialized in shock for its own sake defined, and although *Honky* ostensibly contained social referents to crucial contemporary issues like youth rebellion, drugs and sexual liberation, it was promoted and generally received as a transgressive interracial sex show. *Honky*'s brash promotional poster touted it as "a love story…of hate," accentuating its narrative collision of doomed love and racial animosity. The poster also advertised interracial sex as its primary feature, including images both from the interracial love sequence and the violent rape scene. Exploitation film historian Bill Landis has testified that the film catered to the sleaziest racial/sexual interests of its mostly-male audience, stating that *Honky* did particularly well with fans of "race-hate" movies, a term Landis coined for blaxploitation spectacles that mixed racial discord and explicit interracial sex.[88]

Honky's erotic interracial exhibitionism captures the overall trend of blaxploitation's framing of post-1960s interracial sex, as cinematic exploiteers revisioned the previous era's miscegenation spectacle for the Black Power era. Although blaxploitation was considered a "new" film genre, it essentially reworked classic

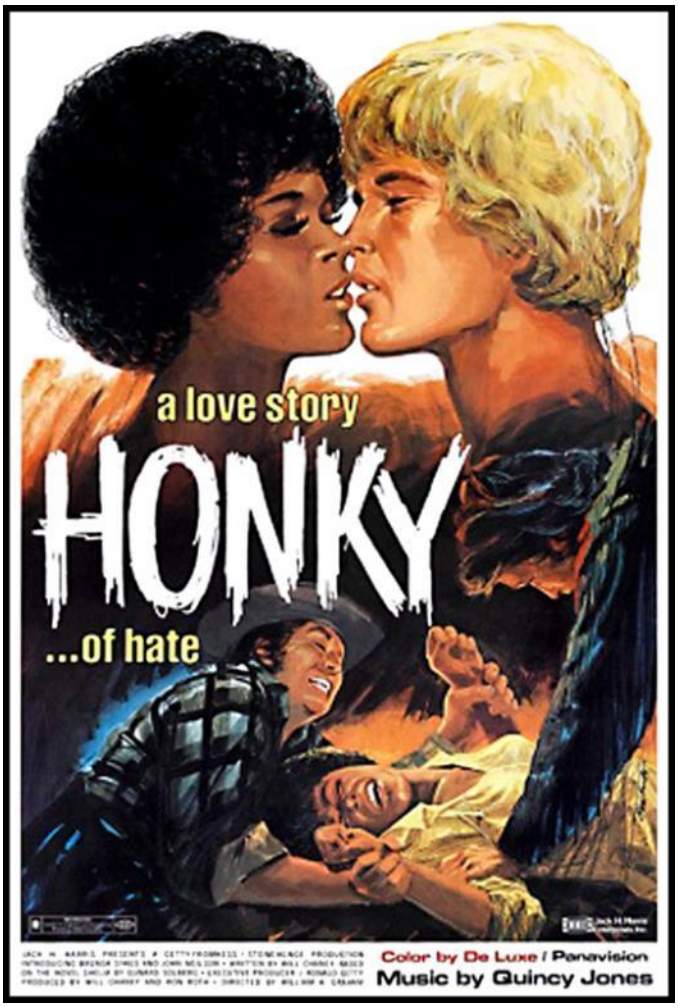

Figure 47. Promotional poster for *Honky*. Exploitation marketers emphasized the film's interracial romance, which comprises the promotional poster's central image, and the violent interracial rape scene, which occupies the bottom 1/3 of the image. The film's tagline, "a love story . . . of hate," could not be more appropriate in capturing its disturbing mixture of rebellious teenage interracial love and racially-motivated sexual violence.

exploitation staples like nudity, graphic violence, youthful rebellion, racial strife and interracial sex. During the era of integration, filmmakers cashed in by linking interracial sexuality with deep-seated fears of (and fascinations with) miscegenation. However, the rhetoric of integration no longer dominated the national discussion, and crafty exploiteers capitalized on the rhetoric of aggressive racial resistance, reimaging the interracial frame for the era of Black nationalism. Although blaxploitation can be understood as the

exploitation industry updating a tried-and-true frame for changing times, erotic interracial exhibitionism differed from previous exploitation subgenres in at least two ways. First, these films presented interracial sex far more graphically than pre-1970s exploitation movies. From the topless natives of the 1930s travelogues to the miscegenation spectacles of the 1950s and 1960s, cross-racial desire has consistently fascinated the mostly-White, mostly-male audience of the exploitation film. Actual depictions of interracial sex were rare, if not nonexistent. In the exploitation travelogues, the White explorers always looked but never touched; in the miscegenation spectacles, the interracial sex took place in the confines of marriage, as in *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), or occurred off-camera, as in *Free, White, and 21* (1963). However, the institution of the 1968 MPAA ratings system freed filmmakers, Hollywood auteurs and exploiteers alike, to explore more mature themes and images, including the entire range of human sexuality. Independently produced blaxploitation films generally presented interracial sexuality in more explicit and sensationalized terms than mainstream fare, and in service to the logic of the exploitation genre, these movies surpassed Hollywood in mixing racial strife with sexual desire. Blaxploitation's interracial exhibition also differed from contemporary Hollywood as well as exploitation films of previous eras with an increased focus on interracial sexual violence. While *Shaft* and *Super Fly* presented consensual interracial sex, *Honky*'s depiction of Sheila's rape represented a larger trend in blaxploitation to mix sexual violence with interracial lust, pushing the boundaries of taste in the quest to shock and please its mostly-male audience.

The notorious blaxploitation movie *Mandingo* (1975) performs all of these complex dynamics, demonstrating how the genre mixed the rhetoric of racial

assertiveness with the erotic exhibition of interracial sex.[††] Set in the antebellum South, *Mandingo* takes place on Falconhurst, a decaying plantation for selling slaves of a particularly exceptional pedigree. Faclonhurst's young master Hammond Maxwell (Perry King), who unashamedly forces himself upon his female slaves in the hopes of impregnating them and expanding his chattel, begins to develop an uneasy romance with a beautiful slave girl named Ellen (Brenda Sykes) whom he prefers to his sexually spurned wife Blanche (Susan George). As the film progresses, the mutual attraction between the master Hammond and the slave Ellen grows into a tenuously loving relationship. Emotionally and sexually rejected, Blanche responds to this affront by demanding sex from Mede (Ken Norton), her husband's prizefighting "Mandingo buck," blackmailing the slave with accusations of rape if he refuses. Blanche becomes pregnant by Mede the slave, but convinces her husband, who grudgingly granted his jealous wife one night of union to satisfy his father's desire for an heir, that the child is his. The film climaxes when Blanche gives birth to a Black baby. Hammond becomes furious with hypocritical rage, inciting a flurry of violence and murder. Hammond poisons his wife and murders Mede. When his slave mistress Ellen tries to stop Hammond's rampage, he informs her that she is nothing "but a nigger" to him and casts her aside. Hammond's violence provokes a slave revolt that results in his father's murder. The film closes with the lives of the denizens of Falconhurst in complete devastation, wrenched apart by the horrid institution of slavery.

Director Richard Fleischer conceived *Mandingo* as a revisionist plantation epic that strove to correct romanticized Hollywood images of slavery as a benign, even

[††] Much of the text in the following three paragraphs appears in a previously published piece about *Mandingo*. See *Andrew DeVos, "'Expect the Truth!' Exploiting History with Mandingo," American Studies* 52, no. 2 (October 22, 2012): 5–21.

Figure 48. Detail from promotional poster for *Mandingo*. In this image, the film's two central interracial couples passionately embrace over a collage of scenes from the film depicting the violent excesses of chattel slavery in the antebellum South. The poster overtly references the iconic poster advertisement for the Hollywood slavery epic *Gone with the Wind* (1939), a text that director Fleischer identified as a negative inspiration for the film. Allegedly, *Mandingo*'s producers hired the original artist of the *Gone with the Wind* illustration in order to authentically recreate its graphic look.[89]

beneficial, social arrangement in which slaves happily served their beloved White masters. The film's promotional poster, which offered an ironic interracial twist on the image of Rhett Butler embracing Scarlett O'Hara from the classic movie poster for *Gone with the Wind*, prompted audiences to "expect the truth" about the American slavery system. The slave revolt that closes out the film simultaneously represented the history of actual slave rebellions while recasting these events via the contemporary rhetoric of Black liberation via any means, including violence. Despite this image of racial revolt, the film's sensationalized and sexualized content became the focus of the discourse surrounding its release.[90] The sex scene between Blanche and Mede was particularly prolonged and explicit for an R-rated movie, far more than *Honky*, leading several

reviewers to condemn it as outright pornography. The film's transgressive interracial imagery made it a staple feature in seedy Times Square grindhouse theatres throughout the 1970s.[91] History has further obscured the film's political messages—popular memory has enshrined the word "Mandingo" as slang term for Black male phallic prowess.[92]

Mandingo represents the pitfalls of the cinematic marriage of Black empowerment and interracial eroticism. It promised to reveal "the truth" about the ubiquity of sexual exploitation in US racial history, but the film's instances of sensationalized interracial eroticism generally eclipsed whatever revolutionary/revelatory message it purported to carry, a trend that arguably characterized the blaxploitation genre in general. Although director Fleischer fancied it a serious examination of American slavery, it was largely promoted as a lurid exercise in interracial exhibitionism, and critical reactions to *Mandingo* narrate a tidal wave of disgust, with critics reading it as another lamentable text in a perceived explosion of cinematic racial violence and pornography. Critics such as Roger Ebert interpreted *Mandingo* as a cause for a more aggressive censorship apparatus: "The film has an R rating, which didn't keep many kids out . . . If the city [Chicago] believes *Mandingo* should be shown to children, then there are no possible standards left." Marylin Beck and Ellsworth Redinger jointly wrote a *Chicago Tribune* article titled "As Taboos Topple, the Porno Parade Begins," decrying the perceived onslaught of films that "test public passion for intense vicarious transfer" by "appealing to the base instincts of man." Of course, blaxploitation was not pornography, and even *Mandingo*'s lurid interracial sex scene did not approach the explicitness of hardcore pornographic movies that became extremely popular in the early 1970s. However, blaxploitation's popularity rested partially on the promise of sexual and

interracial display, and these films consistently injected their narratives of Black struggle against White racism with transgressive pageants of interracial sex, offering titillating skin shows to satisfy the demands of the exploitation audience.

Radical Exhibitionism in the Films of Pam Grier

Arguably, no blaxploitation figure captures the genre's uneasy union of revolutionary pandering and interracial sexual spectacle better than the so-called "Queen of Blaxploitation," actor Pam Grier. Nostalgia has enshrined Grier as the spokeswoman of the genre's mixture of assertive, proud Blackness and overt sexuality, but little has been said of the pervasive image of interracial sexuality and desire in her blaxploitation films.[93] Although these films resembled *Sweetback* in framing interracial sexuality as a weapon in an aggressive cultural war against evil Whites, Grier's empowered roles present interracial sex in the most lurid ways possible, emphasizing it as something tawdry and kinky—the purview of lowlifes, perverts, and patrons of the sex trade. Grier began her career in show business with legendary exploitation independent American International Pictures (AIP) by starring in a series of salacious "women-in-prison" films like *Women in Cages* (1971). After the success of *Super Fly*, AIP decided to do a "black woman's revenge" film and cast Grier in the title character of *Coffy*, a nurse-turned-vigilante who exacts rogue justice on crime syndicates whom she blames for her sister's drug addiction.[94] Throughout the film, Coffy constantly draws on her sexual allure to seduce the men of the criminal underworld into vulnerable positions permitting her to manipulate and ultimately murder them. Coffy begins her revenge by posing as an exotic Jamaican prostitute and infiltrating an upscale brothel run by head pimp King George (Robert DoQui). She captures the eye of an Italian mob boss running the drug cartel responsible for getting her sister hooked on heroin, and he hires her for sexual services.

Coffy proceeds to unravel the cartel from within, and by the end of the film, she has directly or indirectly caused the deaths of several drug dealers, hustler King George, the cartel leader's men, a corrupt police officer, and her boyfriend, a crooked city councilman who, she discovers, has been secretly working with the mob.

Coffy grossed over $2 million in film rentals, and AIP scrambled to place Grier in a follow-up feature, 1974's *Foxy Brown*.[95] *Foxy Brown* has a nearly identical plot to *Coffy*, and again finds Grier's titular character posing as a prostitute to infiltrate a crime ring responsible for harm to a loved one, in this case her police officer boyfriend murdered for getting too close to breaking up the crime ring. Life Coffy, Foxy infiltrates the syndicate and offs or disables the organization's key players, aggressively exploiting her sexuality as a weapon against the (mostly White) men who stand in her way. Grier would continue to star in a number of largely forgotten blaxploitation films throughout the waning years of the genre, but *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* popularized and solidified her iconic screen image that melded aggressive resistance, assertive sexuality and racially encoded sassiness. Contemporary critics either expressed disgust at these films or offered ambivalent praise of Grier's significance as a Black female star in a White man's industry, despite the lurid material her studio handed her. James P. Murray of the *New York Amsterdam News* found her films "blatantly coarse" in their celebration of sex and violence, while *New York Magazine* journalist Mark Jacobson characterized her movies as "full of racism and gore . . . [but] a step forward" in light of the weak roles traditionally afforded Black stars.[96]

Retrospective assessments of Grier's blaxploitation films have generally reified the same dynamic, falling into what film scholar Mia Mask calls the "'good, politically

progressive role model' versus 'bad, regressive black stereotype' binary."[97] For example, Yvonne D. Sims sees Grier's characters as slyly manipulating regressive stereotypes and positively contributing to the era's redefinition of sexuality, womanhood, and pro-Black standards of beauty, while Stephane Dunn has argued that *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* reinforced regressive stereotypes about Black women as exoticized, deviant sexual objects to be gazed at.[98] Both perspectives offer insight into Grier's contribution to the shifting cinematic discourse about the meaning of interracial sexuality. These revenge fueled interracial encounters capture how the ever-evolving image of interracial sexuality, a cultural signifier that is never inherently "progressive" or "regressive," can evince a variety, if not a contradictory combination, of meanings. On one hand, some celebrated Grier as an assertive, aggressive female lead possessing a curvy body type that played against the Hollywood archetype of the meek, skinny, blonde starlet.[99] *New York Magazine* crowned Grier the "Sex Goddess of the Seventies," a title notable for its race neutrality, and Grier herself has argued her status as an important crossover figure, helping White audiences to accept the possibility of a beautiful Black leading woman.[100] Weiler of the *New York Times* and Lindsay Patterson of the *New York Amsterdam News* referred to her in print as "well-endowed," and a staff writer for the *Atlanta Daily World* seemed obsessed over her figure, repeatedly referring to Grier and her *Foxy Brown* costar Juanita Brown as "pretties" and "beauties" possessing "voluptuous, sensuous" qualities.[101]

After even a cursory viewing of *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown*, one can hardly be surprised at the critic's obsession over Grier's body as an eroticized object. In addition to analogous hypersexualized plots, both films similarly share a sustained focus on Grier's

Figure 49. Promotional posters for *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. The posters' collages present Grier's title characters as simultaneously assertive women, yet hypersexualized objects of male desire.

body, which is always highly exposed, frequently unclothed, and obsessively documented by the camera's gaze. The promotional posters for both films present Grier in skimpy clothing, and one lobby card for *Coffy* promised (male) filmgoers sexual satisfaction with the not-so-subtle double entendre "Coffy . . . she'll cream you."[102] Of course, both films find Grier constantly drawing upon her sexuality as a weapon, creating plot devices that inherently sexualize her as she manipulates villainous White men into vulnerable positions allowing her to exact her revenge. In one particularly troubling scene in *Coffy*, Grier's character has successfully infiltrated the crime ring by posing as a prostitute and capturing the attention of Vitroni (Allan Arbus), an Italian mob boss running the drug trade. Vitroni sees Coffy as a means to perform his racist sexual fetishes, calling her a "dirty nigger bitch" and ordering her to crawl on the floor to him. Unwilling to blow her

cover, Coffy plays along, begging for his "precious White body," until she draws a gun on him (after he spits on her), calling him a "White motherfucker" and vowing to urinate on his grave.

Such a crass and shocking racial/sexual scenario captures the extremes of blaxploitation's mixture of Black assertiveness and sensationalized interracial sexual display. Coffy ultimately emerges triumphant from all of her encounters, drawing from the racial rhetoric of Black Nationalism and the gendered decisiveness of feminism to overcome the racist and sexist men who stand in her way. Grier's rising star power following *Coffy* allowed her to gain some control over the development of *Foxy Brown*. Against AIP's initial wishes, Grier insisted that Foxy appear in a variety of outfits and hairstyles throughout the film, a move that Yvonne D. Sims reads as a nod to the changing standards of beauty among contemporary Black women.[103] Additionally, despite the two films' complementary plots, the character of Foxy Brown showed far less skin than Coffy. However, Grier could not escape the conventions of the exploitation film, and one particularly disturbing scene in *Foxy Brown* arguably surpassed *Coffy* for sheer racial/sexual shock and outrageousness. Shortly after Foxy uses her prostitute ruse to humiliate a crooked judge, she is captured by Katherine Wall (Kathryn Lode), a White woman who heads the targeted crime ring. Wall orders that Foxy be doped up with heroin and deported to "the Ranch," an undisclosed rural location run by "the boys," two White rednecks who process drugs for the crime ring. After a failed escape attempt, the boys drug her again, tie her to the bed while mercilessly spewing racist slurs, and proceed to rape her (although in a rare moment of tact, the rape is implied and not shown, as Foxy passes out from her drug-induced stupor during the actual act of sexual violence). Of

course, Foxy ultimately emerges triumphant, freeing herself with a razorblade carelessly left on a nightstand and burning the men alive with a bucket of gasoline and a lighted match.

Foxy's rape scene again demonstrates the convoluted racial and sexual politics endemic to the blaxploitation film. On one hand, the scene can be read as an acknowledgement of the sexual violence that Black women faced at the hands of Southern White men since the time of slavery. Stephane Dunn argues that Foxy's rape performs "the historic function of rape in slavery," reading that "the Ranch" where the White men live and work as a "metaphoric slave-breaking plantation where troublesome girls are sent."[104] Although the scene creates space to explore and acknowledge the history of White-on-Black abuse and sexual violence, it ultimately serves the transgressive logic of the exploitation genre, presenting another lurid spectacle of interracial sex and violence. This is made fairly plain after Foxy wakes from her drug stupor and the camera lingers on her exposed and battered body as she struggles to secure the razorblade with her tongue and cut herself free. Interracial sexuality becomes a weapon for cultural revolutionaries like Coffy and Foxy Brown to use against White patriarchy. But, this weapon also created an interracial sexual spectacle that served (and by all accounts, pleased) the mostly-male audience of the blaxploitation film.

Ironically, Grier's onscreen struggles with White men paralleled her off-screen battles with her White-owned studio as she tried to leverage her burgeoning star power to agitate for more respectability in her post-*Foxy* roles. She played more professional characters in her next two AIP films, *Sheba, Baby* (1975) and *Friday Forester* (1975), and although Grier was still presented as an object of sexual desire, she showed far less

Figure 50. Film still from *Foxy Brown*. Foxy uses her sex appeal as a weapon, posing as a prostitute in order to sexually humiliate and publically disgrace Judge Fenton **(**Harry Holcombe), a crooked jurist who routinely delivers favorable court rulings for members of an organized crime ring.

skin than in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. Grier also used her new fame to publically criticize both the roles she helped to pioneer and the blaxploitation cycle in general. In a 1975 interview with the *Chicago Daily Defender*, she opined: "Our writers, directors and producers should get away from sex, having babies, from the dope pushers, the pimps and whores."[105] Grier's comment proved cruelly ironic in that she attempted (unsuccessfully) to escape these limited roles even as the output of blaxploitation films continued to wane as the decade wore on. Subsequent films find Grier playing parts that continued to exploit interracial sexuality as an exotic exhibition, including *Mandingo*'s sequel *Drum* (1976), in which she plays a slave mistress to a White master, and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), where she appears as a homicidal ghetto prostitute who serially murders her mostly-White clientele. Grier spent most of the 1980s and early 1990s playing bit parts in television dramas. In another ironic twist, Grier saw her career

revamped after starring as the title character in *Jackie Brown* (1997), director Quentin Tarantino's postmodern homage to blaxploitation in which he romantically paired Grier's character with a White man. In a 1997, Grier reflected on her contribution to the history of interracial sexuality, arguing that she helped change ideas about race, gender, and sex: "We redefined sexuality for America. Suddenly it was acceptable to desire a black lady." This contrasts sharply with comments made in 1975 during her disputes with AIP, when she dismissed her previous films as "bang, bang, bang, shoot 'em up tits and ass," disgustedly adding that AIP contended itself to "give the niggers shit."[106]

Conclusion

Grier's contradictory accounts perform the complexity of representing interracial sexuality in a post-1960s world, demonstrating the fuzziness of the line between the celebration of interracial sex as a progressive, countercultural act of insurrection and the exploitive blending of racial animosity and hardcore sex. We first observed this tension in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a film whose aggressive vision of Black Power rhetoric, classic American vigilantism, and explicit interracial sex divided critics and audiences who praised it as an authentic expression of revolutionary sexual signifying or scourged it as a desperate confusion of political action with symbolic racial/sexual politics. The films of the New Hollywood also demonstrate the slipperiness of the issue. *Alice's Restaurant* and *Little Big Man* brandished interracial sexuality as a flag of countercultural rebellion, a weapon in a generational and conflict over cultural politics and racial identity. Other New Hollywood texts offered a more critical, sobering assessment, with *Fritz the Cat* and *The Landlord* lampooning the counterculture's flirtation with interracial sex as pseudo-revolutionary slumming that trivialized, or worse,

exacerbated the deep economic and structural divides underpinning American race relations. Simultaneously, the blaxploitation films confirmed the worst fears of *Sweetback*'s critics as *Mandingo*, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* offered sensational spectacles of violence, racial strife, and interracial sex, dressed up with token references to Black Power and women's liberation.

The revolutions of the late 1960s and early 1970s had politicized the personal in ways that drastically altered the symbolic meaning of race and sex in American life, and although the representation of interracial sexuality varied across these texts, all of the films surveyed above stand as textual attempts to work out the meaning(s) of interracial sexuality in a post-classical Civil Rights world. Although radical countercultural movements focused on a variety of issues, from political mobilization to economic power, their greatest collective impact on popular culture was the introduction of a new morality, a progressive and (for some) shocking set of standards and cultural assumptions that flew in the face of traditional codes of conduct and belief. In such an environment, countercultural ferment proved big business for upstarts like Van Peebles and the New Hollywood mavericks, and as these filmmakers wielded interracial sexuality as a weapon in a multi-front war over racial meaning, their cinematic statements reached a diverse audience hungry for such challenging cinematic images. Blaxploitation filmmakers, however one judges their motives and their movies, wedded Black Power rhetoric with roadshow staples like sex and violence, birthing a new subgenre that capitalized on racial consciousness while offering spectacles of interracial sex and strife to a mostly-Black clientele hungry for images of cinematic empowerment.

While the countercultural films and blaxploitation ostensibly lie at opposite ends of a representational spectrum, both capture moments in which countercultural rhetorics entered the marketplace of popular cinematic images to be packaged and sold to a wider audience. Auteurs like Van Peebles and the White New Hollywood directors saw this as using the tools of "the enemy" to get a message out to the filmgoing masses. However, the marriage of subcultural cinematic protest and profit-driven entertainment would prove short lived, and a number of factors conspired to bring this film era to an abrupt close. Historian David Mark Chalmers argues that by the early 1970s, the counterculture had been increasingly "absorbed by its fratricidal twin, the great American consumer culture . . . an aggressive market society that seized upon it and packaged it for sale to the young."[107] As clever capitalists skillfully appropriated the attitudes and images of countercultural mavericks, many influential groups like the Black Panthers receded and/or splintered under the pressures of internal fragmentation and external state repression.[108] Even as early as 1973, opinion polls that found younger Americans becoming more culturally and sexually liberal also showed their attitudes moving closer to the larger conservative society in regards to politics and work, leading some to declare that the revolution was officially "over."[109] Concurrently, a White (largely male) majority across the nation was becoming increasingly vocal in denouncing the roiling movements for racial justice and cultural nationalism, seeing movements like Black Power and feminism as a threat to inherited rights and traditional privileges. Many Whites viewed themselves as exploited victims of "reverse discrimination" through redistributive liberal policies like affirmative action and busing ordinances that sent their children to mostly-Black public schools in order to comply with desegregation rulings.[110] The most

prominent symbol (and beneficiary) of White backlash was Richard Nixon, winner of the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections, who appealed to the "silent majority" of victimized Northern and Southern Whites. Nixon successfully courted the "nonshouters" who opted out of the radicalism of the 1960s, presenting himself as their representative-in-chief in the cultural war against liberal bureaucrats, radical antiwar demonstrators, and racial revolutionaries.[111]

While these cultural factors signaled a cultural turn away from racial revolution that portended the eventual demise of blaxploitation and New Hollywood, the true historical gravestone for these disparate film movements would appear in 1977 with the release of the science fiction adventure epic *Star Wars*, a text officially marking the growing dominance of the Hollywood blockbuster both as a popular film text and as an industrial practice. In the early 1970s, blaxploitation pictures and New Hollywood recruitment were both tactics for film studios to remain relevant in the changing entertainment marketplace, and appealing to niche markets with taboo images and hard-hitting topics proved (temporarily) lucrative. By mid-decade, such aggressive and cynical images of racial conflict and cultural criticism produced diminishing returns for both independent and major studios, and Hollywood in particular began to abandon niche marketing for broadly appealing blockbuster filmmaking. The industry still released the occasional countercultural text: MGM distributed the film adaption of *Hair* (1979), the hippie musical that depicted radical interracial sex as one of the counterculture's insurgent weapons. Additionally, a few exploiteers attempted to ride the blaxploitation wave after it had already crested—Marvin J. Chomsky's shocking *Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff* (1979) depicted a Black public school janitor who routinely sexually abuses a

White female teacher after the students leave for the day. The cynicism of the New Hollywood and the racial animus of blaxploitation found less and less favor as American moviegoers embraced the broad thrills of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars*. Hollywood blockbusters hijacked the basic formula of classic exploitation movies (high concept plots, reliance on genre conventions, saturation booking, and media spectacle) while largely abandoning the auteurist vision of personal, political filmmaking. Through the outrage of Nixon's disgrace with Watergate and the malaise and economic recession of the Carter years, Hollywood soothed a wounded populace with a return to the spectacle-ridden, escapist fare that had historically been its bread-and-butter.

In such an environment, the radical politics of the New Hollywood and the racial/sexual insurgency of blaxploitation seemed increasingly anachronistic as the decade stretched on, and the zeitgeist portended changes that would again bring about a realignment in the major cinematic images of interracial sexuality. The rising dominance of the blockbuster largely shattered the assumption that mass movies might permanently embrace liberal critique and personalized artistic visions. Countercultural radicalism receded from the screen and the national political stage, pushed out by a politically organized and culturally insurgent New Right emerging to shatter the "illusion of a liberal political consensus" created by the 1960s movements.[112] Ronald Reagan, an ex-Hollywood actor, won a landmark presidential election by embodying the very conservative values that the New Left and the New Hollywood struggled to undermine and deconstruct. The blockbuster's simplistic good-versus-evil narratives and happily-ever-after endings provided the perfect corollary to Reagan's return of 1950s-style morality, and images of interracial sexual insurgency would be largely erased by a

representational backlash reflecting the complex shifts in the era's racial discourses. As the dominant conservative logic argued that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved its goals and enshrined "colorblindness"—the refusal to see race or acknowledge racial difference—as the panacea to all racial ills, Hollywood both reflected and propagated this new racial gospel, presenting cinematic worlds in which cross-racial romances (particularly amongst communities of young people tuned into popular culture) were non-spectacular, ordinary fixtures. No longer politicized objects of countercultural import, interracial coupling on film increasingly appeared as a symbol of a burgeoning post-Civil Rights consensus that the significance of race in American society was on the decline, with accessible and easygoing interracial romances dominating the age of the blockbuster. Ironically, the new racial climate came with a shadowy side in the form of a disturbing counterframe, and the 1980s saw a crop of mainstream films that borrowed from decades of exploitation film framing, presenting interracial sexuality in luridly regressive terms. As colorblind romances represented a "new" conservative take interracial sexuality, an older frame reemerged to depict racial others as sexual savages or ethnic exotics for White male consumption.

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Chapter Four

Colorblind Love
Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1980-1988

I think it's fair to say that we've come a long way in the pursuit of racial fairness in our country . . .We're committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, and so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a colorblind society, a society that, in the words of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, judges people "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."[1]

President Ronald Reagan, 1986

I think a Black and White relationship is definitely the 1980s. I don't see anything wrong with it. When it comes to love, skin color should make no difference . . . When they [the producers of the daytime soap opera *General Hospital*] told me I was going to have a girlfriend, I thought "great." And when they told me she was going to be Black, I thought "GREAT!" It was something different . . . A story line like this, Black and White, is something new.[2]

Actor David Wallace, star of *General Hospital*, 1988

Introduction

If 1970s cinema framed interracial sexuality as a conflict zone in a countercultural war, the 1980s arrived to declare the war officially over, throwing a huge multiracial party to reconcile the battling factions and celebrate the cease-fire. Colorblindness was the dominant order of the day—interracial sex, romance, and marriage were no longer "a big deal," especially with the young, open-minded, hip denizens of the cinematic post-Civil Rights era. The youth-oriented musical film *Fame* (1980) set the tone for the decade, representing interracial sexuality as a "normal" and unnotable fixture of 1980s youth culture. *Fame* marked the introduction of the colorblind frame for the cinematic representation of cross-racial love, and its commercial success sparked a spate of youth musicals including *Flashdance* (1983) and *Breakin'* (1984) that presented narrative worlds where the race and class divides that balkanized older generations could be

bridged through romances formed around shared interest in dance and popular music. These colorblind romances occasionally acknowledged the continuing existence of racism, but whatever ills the past had left behind could easily be conquered by young, optimistic individuals committed to cross-racial romance. The romantic comedy *Soul Man* (1986) further captures this trend, presenting a tale in which a White graduate student poses as a Black man to win a minority scholarship to Harvard Law School, only to experience racism and discrimination in 1980s America. His cross-racial tourism introduces him to the world of interracial romance, and after a budding relationship with a Black woman affords him a chance at redemption for his racial faux pas, the film ultimately reaffirms colorblind love as a triumph that atones for our collective racial sins, past and present.

The seeds of this representational counterrevolution were planted several years prior as the "blockbuster syndrome" increasingly gripped Hollywood and largely pushed countercultural filmmaking to the side.[3] Many industry personnel had, for a time, profited from the insurrectionist fervor of auteurs like Melvin Van Peebles and the New Hollywood mavericks, as well as exploitation outfits that cashed in on racial discord and minority assertiveness. But the decline of countercultural cinema and the enormous success of spectacular, genre based blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977) signaled an emerging trend that would significantly shape filmmaking in the following decade. Blockbusters essentially appropriated the basic formula of classic exploitation movies, banking on broadly accessible plots and eye-popping spectacle. While family oriented films like *Star Wars* eschewed the adult content that had been exploitation's specialty, a subsequent cycle of high concept wide releases brought sex and violence out of the

grindhouses and into the multiplexes, and in doing so updated the image of interracial exoticism for the blockbuster era. A cluster of these films framed interracial sexuality in shockingly regressive terms, and the proliferation of colorblind romance coexisted with a resurgence of mainstream films that presented interracial encounters as pageants of sexual exoticism and racial fetishism. The popular teen romantic comedy *Sixteen Candles* (1984) depicted Asian men as hypersexual, racialized animals, and the crime drama *Year of the Dragon* (1985) presented Asian women as exotic others who submitted to interracial sexual assault with passionate abandon, and both films incited protests from an increasingly vocal Asian American activist community. Additionally, the noir drama *Angel Heart* (1987) depicted Black female sexuality in a bestial manner that harkened to the previous era's grindhouse exploitation fare, sparking outrage from Black leaders angry at yet another instance of filmic sexual stereotyping.

Both colorblind love and the reappearance of cinematic interracial fetishism emerged against the backdrop of the political and cultural ascendance of "the New Right," a broad but powerful coalition that brought together evangelical Christians, social traditionalists, corporate elites, antifederalist intellectuals, and "neoconservatives" (ex-liberals turned Cold War hawks) under the figurehead of film actor turned archconservative President Ronald Reagan.[4] The quote that opens this chapter captures the President articulating the era's dominant racial ideology that would largely shape both conservative politics and popular film. Although the *concept* colorblindness borrows language from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream Speech" and ostensibly has roots in the liberal calls for radical racial equality born out of the Civil Rights Movement, the *rhetoric* of colorblindness was wholeheartedly embraced and propagated

by New Right leaders that opposed Civil Rights legislation, and it would become the dominant frame for understanding race relations in the 1980s. In a speech delivered just days before the first federal celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Reagan posited racism and discrimination as problems of the past overcome through Movement activism and the sacrifice of bold individuals like King. In this view, the Nation had made enormous gains "in the pursuit of racial fairness," and the time had finally come to end the use of race as a marker for special treatment—be it the racist treatment of the past or the preferential treatment of the present. In other words, Reagan and the Right argued *not* seeing race and racial difference (being literally "blind" to race) as the best way to fulfill King's dream; conversely, seeing race and using racial difference as criteria for redress ("we oppose the use of quotas"—an antagonistic reference to affirmative action programs) was cast as a betrayal of King's dream of a "colorblind society." Ironically, Reagan and the New Right's appropriation of King's words stood in direct opposition to the Movement leader's call for social justice and radical solutions to racial disparities. Civil Rights activists throughout the era denounced such discourses as a twisting of King's words to support policies he would have opposed, but the ideology of colorblindness created a powerful rationale for New Right politicians to undermine Civil Rights initiatives in the name of racial equity.[5]

While Reagan and the New Right became the chief national mouthpieces for the gospel of colorblindness, Hollywood films significantly contributed to the proliferation of colorblind narratives and cinematic representations of a burgeoning post-Civil Rights consciousness, particularly through the depiction of interracial romance. Throughout the 1980s, a spate of popular movies that shared in the accessible, high concept spirit of the

blockbuster framed interracial sexuality as a celebration of colorblind love, presenting such relationships as non-spectacular, ordinary manifestations of a post-Civil Rights "consensus" that the significance of race in American society was on the decline. This is captured in the above quote from David Wallace, star of the daytime soap opera *General Hospital* (1963-present), which became in 1988 the first mainstream soap to feature an interracial romance. Upon finding out that his character Dr. Tom Hardy (a White man) would be romantically paired with Simone Ravelle (played by Black actor Laura Carrington), Wallace told *Jet* magazine that "a Black and White relationship is definitely *the 1980s* [emphasis mine]," but that it was also "something new."[6] In other words, while the newness of interracial romance on daytime TV signaled a break from the racism of the past, it also perfectly fit into the colorblind spirit of the age in presenting interracial love as "GREAT!"

The Reagan Era's conservative ethos, the major cinematic trends of the 1980s, and the proliferation of colorblind discourses share a complicated relationship, and all of these factors prove important to understanding the shifting onscreen representation of interracial sexuality. Representations of interracial sexuality in 1980s movies certainly mark a dramatic turn from the raucous and antagonistic countercultural frame of the 1970s towards a softer-edged representational schema that emphasized such romances as hopeful, unifying triumphs, proving that the conservative ideology of colorblindness could compensate for a horrific racial past. However, the representational rhetoric of blaxploitation lived on in a cluster of disparate texts that updated the previous era's interracial sex spectacles for the Hollywood blockbuster, countering the colorblind romance to argue that race still mattered, albeit as a fetishistic sexual thrill. This chapter

will chronicle the ongoing battle over the meaning of interracial sex, romance, and marriage in US films, focusing on the two major representational frames of the 1980s: colorblind romance and interracial sexuality as racial fetishism. I will be selecting a set of films between 1980 and 1988. I begin in 1980 with the teen movie *Fame*, arguably the text that introduced youthful colorblind romance into the representational vocabulary of Hollywood film, analyzing the broad contours of colorblind romance that have since come to largely dominate cinematic interracial sexuality. I end in 1989 with the release of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, a key text that assaulted many of the basic assumptions of colorblindness and marked the rise of a minority filmmaking that would flourish in the following decade.

Perfect Harmony: Colorblind Love in the 1980s Youth Musical

Fame: Young, Colorblind, and in Love

In *Fame*, a multiracial cast of young people meet and fall in love with almost no reference to race or the politics of interracial sexuality, marking the introduction of a frame that would be echoed in a cycle of youth-oriented musical films. The film centers on a fictional group of teenagers at Manhattan's real-life High School of Performing Arts, a public school with concentrations in dance, music, and other performing arts. Although *Fame* contains a large ensemble cast, it focuses on eight teens of diverse race and class backgrounds as they navigate the pitfalls of adolescence and juggle the demands of training for a competitive arts and entertainment career. Structurally, the movie has an episodic plot broken up into sections that correspond with the four years of high school; rather than presenting a cohesive closed narrative, it jumps around to chronicle key vignettes in the characters' lives that highlight various themes (career ambition, family dynamics, sexuality, etc.). *Fame* was advertised as an ensemble film featuring "a dozen

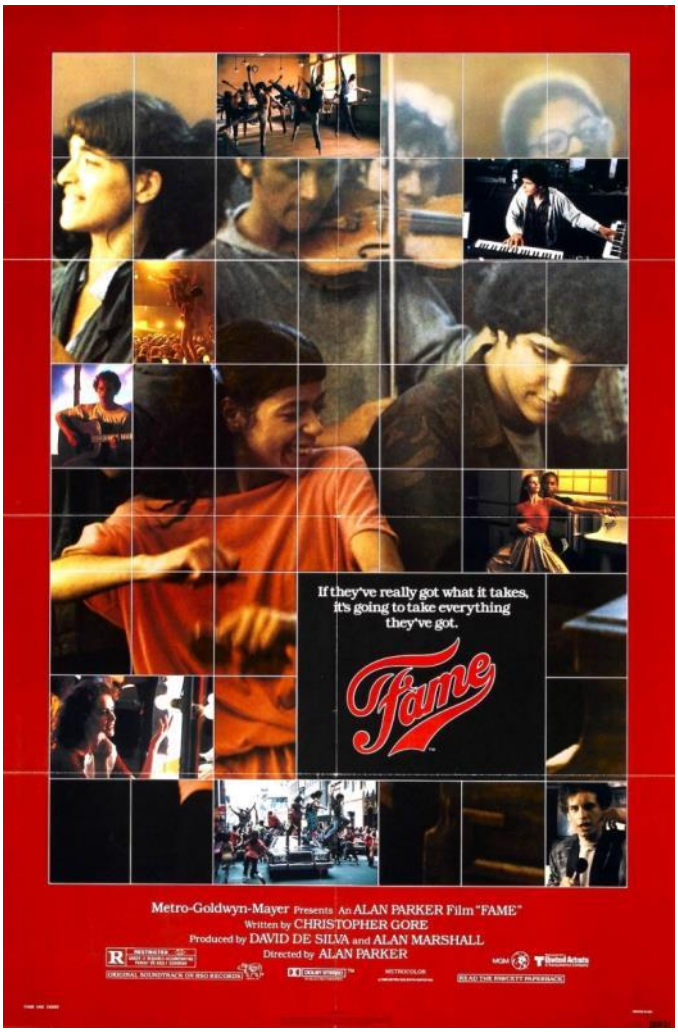

Figure 51. Promotional poster for *Fame*. MGM emphasized *Fame*'s multiracial cast and hinted at cross-racial pairings while choosing to not focus centrally on interracial romance, presenting such couplings as incidental to the movie's theme of these young performers giving "everything they've got" to achieve stardom.

races pitching in and having their crack at the American Dream," and in the movie's mixed milieu, nearly all of the core characters engage in interracial romance and/or sex at some point. The film pairs up Ralph, a budding Puerto Rican American comedian, with actor Doris, a shy Jewish girl pushed by her domineering mother into showbiz. The second important coupling finds the outgoing Coco, a Black singer and dancer, pursuing a relationship with Bruno, an introverted Italian-American teen whose futuristic

electronic music threatens the school's traditionalist music teachers. The third major pairing finds streetwise Leroy, a Black dance prodigy from a tough New York ghetto, with Hilary, a snobbish, rich White girl with a classical education in ballet.

Fame became a respectable success for British-born director Alan Parker and parent company MGM, earning over $20 million at the box office and ranking as the 32nd highest grossing film of 1980.[7] It received generally positive critical reviews, exemplified by the *Wall Street Journal*'s Joy Gould Boyum who praised the realistic presentation of the performers' social world while avoiding the "sophomoric" depictions of adolescent misbehavior that tended to dominate contemporary teen film.[8] Malcolm L. Johnson of *The Hartford Courant* represents the film's detractors, finding the writing hackneyed and the film's serious tone trivialized by the inclusion of two ensemble song and dance numbers that broke the dramatic frame of the film and threw the characters into the unbelievable choreographed world of the Hollywood musical.[9] For our purposes, the critical reviews are notable for the near total lack of comment on the abundance of interracial sexuality strewn across the movie's meandering narrative. Out of fifteen reviews and articles surveyed, only one even mentioned interracial sexuality, namely Philip Harrigan of the *New Pittsburgh Courier* who found the "interracial angle" an unnecessary feature "thrown in" to add interest, particularly citing Leroy and Hilary poor boy/rich girl relationship as unbelievable.[10]

Fame stands as a crucial text in the narrative of cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality, marking the rise of the colorblind frame that would typify most depictions of interracial encounters in 1980s films and beyond. Although the specifics vary from film to film, the basic characteristic of the colorblind frame presents interracial pairings in

ways that downplay race or racial difference to a veritable non-issue. Although visual racial differences (as historically understood) mark these couples as "interracial," dialogic silence and lack of narrative comment essentially ignores this marker. In *Fame*, six of the eight major characters participated in some form of interracial romance/sex, and in only one instance did the film's narrative highlight racial difference, a point I will return to later. For the most part, *Fame* presents its three interracial romances as deracialized, mere teenage romances involving people who happen to be of different races. For example, the relationship between Ralph and Doris (the couple that enjoy the most screen time over the film's episodic structure) begins in their junior year and extends through the end of the film. Their love becomes a narrative means through which to explore some of the movie's core themes: they connect over their shared struggles to overcome their dysfunctional family backgrounds, and their emotional bond becomes tested as Ralph's positive reception at a local comedy club pushes him to alienate Doris in his irrepressible quest for stardom. However, their status as an interracial couple receives no comment within the film's narrative. This is not to say that Ralph and Doris are totally deracinated. Ralph tries to educate Doris about the nuances of Puerto Rican family traditions, and frequently peppers his comedy routines with racial jokes. The film also highlights Doris's Jewish heritage, and her expressed desire to break with certain cultural expectations endemic to her Jewish upbringing becomes crucial to her character arc. However, the film never explores the impact that racial difference has on their relationship, and frames their love merely as a romance between two teens who *happen* to be of disparate racial backgrounds. This dynamic also characterizes the romance between Black female Coco and White male Bruno; their relationship develops with no

mention of race, and receives nothing but unequivocal acceptance from Bruno's working class Italian American father.

With *Fame* framing interracial sexuality as a series of colorblind romances, it marks a key moment in the filmic normalization of the image of the interracial couple. These young race-blind lovers representationally toppled the two major frames of the previous era, namely interracial sexuality as countercultural revolution, typified by *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), and interracial sexuality as erotic exhibition, epitomized by Pam Grier's blaxploitation films like *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). However, as seen in previous instances, the introduction of a new cinematic frame always partially rests on certain aspect of the frames it is replacing. In other words, *Fame*'s colorblind romances still maintained certain representational features of the two major interracial frames of the previous decade as it reshaped and countered those frames. For example, *Fame* counters *Sweetback*'s interracial countercultural protest with depoliticized, deracinated interactions while answering blaxploitation's sexually explicit interracial violence with softened, casual interracial romances. In the colorblind world of *Fame*, interracial romance has ceased being political struggle, a weapon in a culture war, or a fetishized power play, instead settling down to become something more "normal," domestic, and uncontroversial. However, *Fame* still maintained certain elements of the previous era's frames even as it countered them, acknowledging that such relationships could occasionally suffer under the legacy of America's racist past, albeit in a seriously diminished and/or largely dismissible form. The relationship between Black male Leroy and White female Hilary illustrates this. The film characterizes Leroy as a streetwise teen with incredible talent who projects a tough exterior to mask the poor education he brings

Figure 52. Film stills from *Fame*. The film placed three interracial couples at the center of its narrative, including Coco and Bruno (*left*) as well as Hilary and Leroy (*right*).

to the rigorous School of Performing Arts. He develops a complicated relationship with his English teacher Mrs. Sherwood who pushes him to achieve academically even though he can barely read, while Leroy pushes back, angrily informing her that "where I come from, it don't pay to read and speak white." Hilary appears mid-film in the student's sophomore year as a transfer student who flaunts her wealth and elite pedigree. We first meet Hilary in ballet class where she immediately announces her desire for Leroy when, during a practice routine, she whispers lustily to a classmate "I dig his black ass." When Coco (who at this point in the film is dating Leroy) discovers that Hilary is pursuing her boyfriend, she bitterly asserts "he's not into vanilla." Hilary retorts: "Might be a nice change from black cherry."

Collectively, these two scenes point to the continued existence of the structural and individual racism that loomed large in the films of the 1970s. Leroy's clashes with his English teacher nod to the history of underfunded and neglected public schools that urban Black communities have been offered for decades. Towards the end of the film, Leroy receives a post-graduation job offer with a choreographic company, but his poor grades in Mrs. Sherwood's class jeopardize his standing with the school. After she flatly

refuses to show him any grace, Leroy astutely assesses his predicament when he angrily shouts: “You [White] people make a big deal about pulling us out of the gutter, yet you still won't eat with us. You know where that leaves people like me? Nowhere!” While the legacies of structural racism shape Leroy’s relationship with Mrs. Sherwood, sexual racism governs his romance with Hilary. Hilary’s initial advances clearly grow out of a racially fetishistic impulse (“I dig his Black ass”), and her disparagement of Coco as a “black cherry” reveals a casual racial supremacy which assumes inherent desirability of her Whiteness and undesirability of Coco’s Blackness. Leroy’s race-conscious statements somewhat trouble the colorblind narrative that race no longer matters in 1980s America, and Hilary’s simultaneous fetishization of Leroy’s Blackness and mocking disparagement of Coco’s color acknowledges that harmful racial attitudes persisted into the Reagan Era.

However, these nods to continued racism appear downright tepid in comparison to the interracial wars of the previous decade, and they are largely overwhelmed by *Fame*’s colorblind foundation. This is further illustrated when Hilary brings Leroy home to her posh apartment and introduces him to her stuffy White parents with: “This is Leroy. Homework.” Although Dad and Stepmom register surprise on their faces at her boyfriend’s presence, they sit by mutely as the couple enters Hilary’s bedroom and shut the door behind them. Hilary’s cinematic parents would have been certainly registered shock or furor had this scene appeared in a movie a decade earlier. One of Hilary’s final scenes in the movie also shows that the new colorblind frame even shapes and perhaps tempers her old school racism. The scene opens with Hilary, in what we eventually learn is the lobby of an abortion clinic, vocally debating with herself the reasons why she cannot carry her recently discovered pregnancy to full term. Interestingly, all of her

rationalizations are professional—a recent offer from the San Francisco Ballet, the desire to perform in Europe, etc.—and she makes no mention of the fact that Leroy is the father and her child will be biracial/Black. The absence of this line of discourse in Hilary's monologue stands as significant in that the "problem" of mixed race children has been a persistent theme in US cinema, from the silent era to the passing films of the 30s and 40s (*Imitation of Life* [1934]) through the 1970s blaxploitation cycle (*Mandingo* [1975]). In a notable break with filmic tradition, Hilary reacts to her interracial pregnancy with a race-neutral response, citing other concerns for her decision to terminate it early.

In sum, while Leroy and Hilary's character arcs show that race still structured their life experiences, and that racism still persisted, race was a far less volatile and divisive subject than in the previous film decade. *Fame*'s colorblind frame maintained aspects of the previous era's representational schema, noting that interracial love could sometimes be marred by racism, exoticism, and power imbalances. The exploitive romance between Hilary and Leroy demonstrated that interracial sexuality could still amount to a fetishized encounter, although their tryst proved to be a far less carnivalesque and extreme spectacle than those found in the films of the blaxploitation era. Ultimately, the persistence of racism and racial fetishism did not hamper *Fame*'s other young performers from developing successful interracial romances, and the film's colorblind lovers stand as forerunners of the era's dominant representational schema for interracial sexuality in which cross-racial romance stands as a "normal," unremarkable fixture of Reagan's America.

The Content of Their Character: Colorblindness in Reagan's America

Fame stands as an important transitional text in the narrative of cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality, capturing the emergence of a new frame and the

demise of the previous era's frames. It illustrates both the promises and pitfalls of the ideology of colorblindness. One could read its integrated mélange of interracial lovers as the ultimate filmic expression of liberal racial tolerance, an onscreen adaptation of King's "dream" of a world in which people did not judge by skin color. Conversely, colorblind romance could be interpreted as a misguided cinematic twisting of the Civil Rights Movement's aims, a premature declaration of progress that papered over the persistence of deep racial disparities and antagonisms. To better understand the cinematic image of colorblindness, we must better understand the political rhetoric of colorblindness propagated by the New Right as it pursued the reversal of the political, social, and moral revolutions of the 1960s. The various movements of the 1960s and early 1970s had wrought tremendous change in US culture, most of which alarmed and affronted many middle class White Americans who felt they had lost ground during that turbulent period. Richard Nixon skillfully harnessed the acrimony of White backlash to capture the White House twice, but for those hoping for a new conservative era, Nixon's presidency proved a false dawn—he expanded affirmative action and environmental protections, and temporarily tarnishing conservativism following the revelations of his administration's moral bankruptcy.[11] Jimmy Carter captured the presidency for one term in 1977 due in part to evangelical Christians energized by his born-again credentials, but his moderate-to-liberal position on sexual and social issues disappointed religious conservatives yearning for a presidential champion of traditional values, while Carter's policy of Soviet diplomacy and arms limitations horrified conservative Cold War hawks.[12]

Despite these setbacks for conservatism, the 1970s witnessed an explosion in right-leaning constituencies that would lay the groundwork for the so-called "Reagan

revolution" of the 1980s.[13] A backlash against feminism drove "pro-family" activists like Phyllis Schlafly to effectively shut down the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (a proposed constitutional amendment that would guarantee equal rights for women), while Reverend Jerry Fallwell's organization the Moral Majority encouraged Christian voters to fight abortion and gay rights.[14] These traditionalist populist strains coincided with a growing pro-business, anti-tax movement in states like California that popularized the idea that government expansion stifled economic opportunity, a compelling argument in light of the persistent inflation, growing unemployment, and decline of real wages that marked the Carter years.[15] Historians have noted the complex tensions inherent in the New Right coalition. The Republican Party's new focus on social issues like abortion and the call to mandate daily Bible reading and prayer in public schools disturbed anti-government libertarians committed to fighting state intrusion into personal freedoms, and the conservative grassroots surges threatened intellectual elites like Daniel Bell who insisted "a society has vitality [only] if it has a strong establishment."[16] However, the disparate New Right factions generally united around a shared aspiration to overturn the changes of the 1960s and reinstate a "lost" moral order, often captured by the world of the 1950s, an epoch remembered as being characterized by American military power, patriotism, prosperity, and traditionalist "small town" virtues.

At the head of this conservative political and cultural revolution stood Ronald Reagan, the national figurehead of and anti-1960s ideology. Reagan possessed an impressive rhetorical ability to appeal to a nostalgic past and posit simple political solutions to deeply rooted social and economic problems: "At the heart of our message should be five simple, familiar words . . . family, work, neighborhood, freedom, peace."[17]

Reagan ran as the Republican presidential candidate in 1980 on a campaign of lower taxes, a smaller government, and an expanded military, soundly defeating the unpopular Jimmy Carter.[18] He ran again in 1984 with the slogan "It's Morning Again in America," a phrase celebrating his first term as the reinstitution of a lost era. His paeans to patriotism and traditionalism resonated with enough voters to hand Reagan the White House in a landslide, clobbering Democrat Walter Mondale with 97.6% of the Electoral College votes.[19] Commentators hailed Reagan's popularity as marking a rightward turn in US society in general. Journalists Rowland Evans and Michael Novak claimed that "the great mass of people . . . shar[ed] his ideology," while historian Garry Wills posited Reagan as "the great American synecdoche"—the embodiment of the Nation's pure conservative soul that had been temporarily darkened by the mists of 1960s liberalism.[20] Historians such as Nancy L. Cohen dismisses such as claims as rhetorical hubris, largely attributing Reagan's electoral victory to a widespread dissatisfaction with Carter's presidency, while citing polls during Reagan's two terms that find voters becoming more conservative on foreign policy and the role of government yet *more liberal* on social issues like women's liberation.[21] If Reagan did not signal a ubiquitous rightward turn, his mystique of small town virtues and simple truths elicited a chorus of soaring praise from the Right and flabbergasted denunciations from the Left that rendered him a crucial public figure in practically every discourse of the 1980s.

The rise of Reagan and the New Right marked the ascendance of a powerful conservative schema that framed all of the burning issues of the day—political, economic, sexual, and, of course, racial. 1980s US culture evinced some trends that suggested progress in race relations, and the Right interpreted these signs as evidence that

American society had essentially fulfilled King's vision of a colorblind world. Black representation in public office had increased from barely one hundred in the mid-1960s to nearly seven thousand, while Black enrollment in colleges and universities had quadrupled. Most notably, the quarter of a century since the 1964 Civil Rights Act saw sizable increases in gross receipts of Black-owned businesses and an expansion of the Black professional class.[22] The Asian American population grew sizably in the 1980s, due largely to relaxed immigration restrictions, and the highly publicized success of Asian Americans in US universities led mainstream media outlets like *60 Minutes* and *Newsweek* to declare them the "model minority."[23] American Indians won economic and political victories throughout the decade, including the expansion of oil, gas, mining, and gaming operations, as well as a series of lawsuits that enforced long-ignored treaties establishing certain rights of first nations to exercise sovereignty in areas of land rights, fishing, hunting and regulation of gaming operations.[24] Latinos also enjoyed increased political power as the number of voting-age adults rose from 8.8% of the US. population to 12.9% between 1980 and 1988, resulting in the election of the first Latino mayor of an American city, Henry Cisneros of San Antonio, Texas, and the election of the first Latina to Congress, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida.[25]

For conservatives, these indicators "proved" that the Movement had produced the intended outcome of removing old barriers to racial progress. In particular, the growth of Black elected leadership and the sizable Black middle class that these officials ostensibly represented stood as proof that the race-neutral values of hard work and good character could allow citizens of any color to secure a foothold in the American dream.[26] However, such declarations belied a more complicated reality in the persistence of racial disparities

and hardening of animosities throughout the 1980s. Asian American activists decried the "model minority" discussion around educational achievement as an American myth that masked a troubling reality: Asian American college grads frequently faced hiring and promotion discrimination, and serious income inequality separated Asian American men from their White counterparts, which belied the exaggerated narratives of success popularized by the media.[27] Despite the economic growth in natural resource mining and gaming on many American Indian reservations, over 30% of all American Indians still lived below the federal poverty line in 1989, and the casino boom did not benefit Native far away from densely populated metropolitan areas.[28] Additionally, the reports about Black political and economic progress were often overshadowed by the story of rapidly declining fortunes in America's largely-Black and Latino inner cities ghettos suffering under accelerated cycles of abandonment, economic evisceration, and privatization that left millions largely cut off from public supports and the Reagan Era's promise of prosperity for all. The steady evaporation of urban jobs due to deindustrialization and suburbanization coincided with the explosion of illegal economies, particularly drug dealing. The appearance of crack cocaine as a highly addictive and destructive drug fueled antidrug enforcement policies that largely targeted users of color and overwhelmingly punished non-White offenders more harshly for comparable offenses.[*] Incarceration rates of men of color exploded over the decade so that by 1990, one in four young Black men were under some sort of criminal justice supervision.[29]

As the growth of the colorblind discourses paradoxically grew alongside uneven and/or plummeting opportunities for racial minorities, some critics noted a hardening of

[*] Although more Whites in the 1980s used drugs than African Americans, the near-hysterical news coverage of the crack epidemic and the war on drugs fueled the popular perception that crack was a Black and Latino problem, a pathological sickness of the indolent urban "underclass."

Figure 53. Photograph of President Reagan signing MLK Day into law. While Reagan initially opposed the creation of a federal holiday observing the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., he eventually signed the bill that established the holiday into law in 1983, inviting MLK's widow Coretta Scott King (second from the left) to witness the signing. On the first official observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (January 18, 1986), Reagan delivered a national radio address during which he appropriated phrases from King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech to promote a conservative colorblind agenda that stood against much of what the Civil Rights leader fought for. (The National Archives)

racial animosities and a deepening of racial misunderstandings. Many conservatives vocally denounced liberal programs like affirmative action as disadvantaging Whites, expressing racially-coded resentment for being punished for past prejudices. Reagan's racially-coded denunciations of inner city "welfare queens" living wantonly off of the public coffers and his open support for states' rights galvanized Whites who felt themselves victims of "reverse discrimination."[30] Conversely, many racial minorities evinced a fear and loathing towards Reagan that diametrically opposed Whites' love of the President, and Reagan's unpopularity among Black voters was solidified by his opposition to the establishment of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and his vetoing of a 1986 bill that imposed economic sanctions on South Africa for its White supremacist apartheid

policies.[31] Most importantly, Reagan and the New Right preached the gospel of colorblindness while eroding affirmative action policies, furthering anti-civil rights agendas via the US Commission on Civil Rights and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and appointing conservative judges in the federal courts who worked to undo and reverse decades of civil rights gains.[32]

Thus the rhetoric of colorblindness simultaneously cloaked and fueled an expansive agenda to dismantle many of the race-conscious corrective policies and priorities born directly from the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement, an irony not lost on critics and activists wary of the New Right's proclamations that racism was no longer a problem. Although films like *Fame* were not conceived as textual markers of the new racial zeitgeist, conservatives could increasingly point to popular cultural as evidence of the nation's growing indifference towards race. Minorities enjoyed previously unprecedented exposure in mainstream US popular culture. Black comedian Eddie Murphy landed on the list of Hollywood's highest paid actors following the success of films like *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), while singer Michael Jackson earned the title "King of Pop" after storming White radio stations and cable music video channels with crossover albums *Thriller* (1982) and *Bad* (1987).[33] Novelists Amy Tan won critical acclaim and a sizable White readership with *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), an insider portrait of Chinese American immigrant families, while Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Color Purple* (1985), her saga of Black Southern women in the 1930s.[34] Most importantly, Black comedian Bill Cosby became one of primetime TV's biggest stars with *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), a sitcom centered on the Huxtables, a middle class Black family comprised of parents Cliff and Claire, a successful doctor and lawyer

respectively, and their five children. Critics praised *The Cosby Show* for depicting Black characters without resorting to crass racial stereotypes, and as millions of White viewers accepted a Black family into their homes each week (symbolically speaking), conservatives argued that the majority culture had discarded old prejudices and become blind to the differences of color. Influential conservative commentator William Buckley touted White America's love of the show as proof of the nation's growing race-blindness: "A nation simply does not idolize members of a race which that nation despises."[35]

Integrated Dance Floors

If Buckley read *The Cosby Show*'s crossover success as evidence of declining White racism, opinion polls and Census data also showed rising numbers of White individuals accepting non-Whites as marriage partners. Gallup found 43% of White respondents approving of interracial marriage in 1983 (as opposed to 32% in 1978), while 71% of Black people agreed (as opposed to 66% in 1978), all-time high figures for both racial groups.[36] Additionally, interracial marriage rates continued to climb over the decade. In 1980, interracial unions comprised 1.3% of all marriages; by 1990, that number had risen to 1.8%, a small but not insignificant increase.[37] Popular media increasingly framed interracial relationships as "normal" fixtures of a colorblind America. As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, *General Hospital* broke new ground by becoming the first daytime soap opera to depict an interracial couple, in this case a White man and a Black woman. Approving portrayals of interracial romances appeared on the popular prime time sitcom *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992) and the teen drama *Degrassi High* (1988-1991). Pop music also extolled the virtues of cross-racial mingling. Ex-Beatle Paul McCartney teamed with Michael Jackson on "The Girl is Mine" (1982), an interracial dueling love song in which both men vie for the affections of

the same woman (whose race is never identified). And of course, youth market movies like *Fame* boasted integrated casts that presented its youthful protagonists as far more accepting of racial diversity than previous generations born in more segregated times.

Fame's interracial ode to youthful ambition should be seen as part of a resurgence of teen films during the 1980s, as studios "rediscovered" young adults and adolescents as a viable and valuable movie market. The 1980s youth film craze birthed a number of subgenres, most notably teen romance/comedies like *Sixteen Candles*, youth horror films such as the slasher movie *Friday the 13th* (1980), and of course, the multiracial teen musical. In fact, in the years following *Fame*, the youth musicals *Flashdance*, *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin'*, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Rappin'* (1985) presented urban music subcultures as one giant integrated party where shared performance interests created bridges across deep race and class divides. Although it is difficult to assess the degree to which *Fame*'s success directly influenced this film cycle, all of the above movies similarly focused on a multiracial cast of people trying to make a name for themselves through popular dance, music, and/or performance, and nearly all of these texts featured one or more interracial romances forged through these interactions. Generally, race is not an issue and holds little to no bearing on these young romances. However, these films collectively pushed the colorblind frame one step further than their representational predecessor: while *Fame*'s invocation of colorblind romance included nods to the continued existence of structural and individual racism, these films are marked by a practical erasure of racial oppression, past or present.

The first post-*Fame* interracial teen musical to feature colorblind romance was *Flashdance*, a film centered on eighteen year old Alexandra "Alex" Owens, a light

skinned Black woman who works in a Pittsburgh steel factory while dreaming of being a professional dancer. Alex (played by mixed race actor Jennifer Beals) works nights as an exotic dancer, and associates with a racially diverse group of aspiring entertainers that includes a White girl who hopes to become a professional figure skater and a Black teenage boy striving to break into standup comedy. Kimberly Monteyne writes that *Flashdance* repeats a "familiar trope of the backstage musical genre. A kid from the wrong side of the tracks wants to break into "legitimate" theater/dance/showbiz. She lacks proper training but makes up for it in perseverance . . . while charming her way into the arms of the 'perfect man.'"[38] The "perfect man" in question is Nick Hurley, a wealthy White man who exploits his connections to secure Alex a successful audition at the elite Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance, an opportunity that could mark her entrance into the world of "legitimate" professional dance. As in *Fame*, Alex and Nick's romance is notable because nothing in the film references their status as an interracial couple, a cinematic move that would have been unimaginable in the previous decade. Although racial difference does not affect their romance, the class difference between Alex and Nick creates fascinating tensions that nearly drive them apart.[†] The colorblind frame ultimately shapes their cross-racial romance, and although Alex and Nick face relational issues, racial difference poses no problems.

[†] Additionally, although Beals could (in this author's estimation) ostensibly "pass" for White, several of *Flashdance*'s textual markers mark her as "Black," most notably the famous breakdancing scene. This scene finds Alex and Jeannie walking through an alley and happening upon a group of breakdancers. An up-tempo song by Black funk band the Jimmy Castor Bunch punctuates the proceedings, and by the end of the one-and-quarter minute scene, a medium-sized crowd of mostly-Black onlookers has assembled to cheer on the dancers. Monteyne notes that this scene identifies Alex with Pittsburgh's Black population, a point made evident when she ends her successful dance audition for the Conservatory of Dance by integrating street dancing and breaking moves into her classical routine. In other words, *Flashdance* portrays Alex as a Black woman despite her racially-ambiguous appearance, and frames her romance with a White man as uncontroversial and normal.

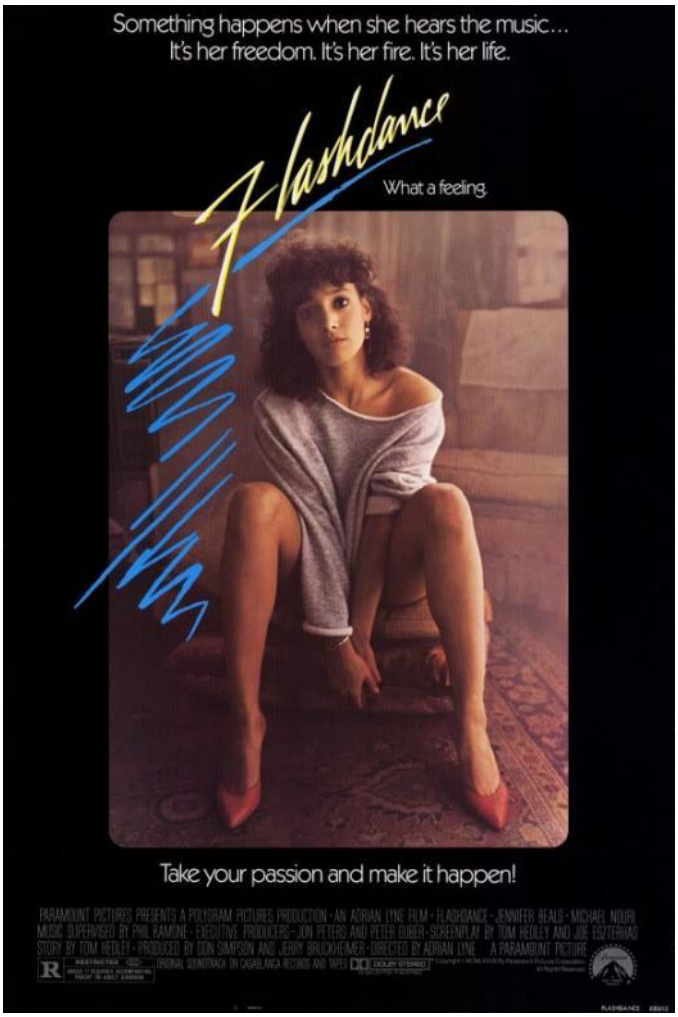

Figure 54. Promotional poster for *Flashdance*. Taking *Fame*'s successful formula of casting an integrated group of multiracial actors in a story of youthful ambition and interracial love, *Flashdance* surpassed its predecessor for sheer box office draw, becoming one of 1983's highest earners.

Although critics largely panned *Flashdance*, it became the 6th highest grossing film of 1983, and more recently, scholars have reassessed it is a historically important film marking a number of the era's key trends.[39] *Flashdance* was the first film by production team Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, a duo credited for popularizing the "high concept" brand of blockbuster filmmaking characterized by "catchy premise[s] uncluttered by excessive narrative development . . . layered with slick images like icing on a cake."[40] Simpson/Bruckheimer would produce some of the decade's biggest hits,

including *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Top Gun* (1986), melding filmmaking with rock music videos while promoting the movies through tie-in music videos on MTV.[41] *Flashdance* also captures a seminal moment in the popularization of the then-obscure subculture of hip hop through a roughly one minute scene in which Alex and Jeannie walk through an alley and happen upon a multiracial group of breakdancers. Hip hop culture was fashioned in the crucible of the South Bronx, a sprawling New York landscape of burned-out buildings and abandoned communities widely lamented and lambasted as the "the epitome of urban failure" in the US.[42] Hip hop emerged both as a response to ghetto deprivation and as a reclamation of communal art and performance in an era of "benign neglect" of America's inner cities. The young men and women who pioneered the culture fashioned the "four elements" of hip hop (graffiti, DJing, breakdancing, and rapping) out of the detritus of deindustrialized blight and decay, creating a cluster of celebratory cultural traditions that would eventually spread to the entire globe. Despite a series of hit singles like The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979), hip hop had not yet reached a mainstream audience in 1983; *Flashdance*'s brief breakdancing scene marked the first cinematic introduction of hip hop to a mainstream audience and would help spark a national fascination with the culture.

As hip hop music and dance became more popular with a diverse young audience, the film world took notice, and 1985 would produce no less than five low budget, high concept films designed to cash in on the popularity of breakdancing and rapping—*Breakin'*, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, *Beat Street*, and *Rappin'*. Each of these texts share nearly identical plot structures. Although they evince differences in story and characterization, a summary of the shared plot points will suffice over a specific analysis

of each text. All of these films focus on a group of young people from "the streets" involved in hip hop culture. Like Alex in *Flashdance*, they are befriended and "discovered" by someone from outside of the impoverished community who facilitates their introduction to mainstream culture while developing a romance with one of the hip hop protagonists. Unlike Alex, the central performer is always a Black or Latino man and the outsider is almost always a White woman, the exception being *Beat Street* where the outsider is an educated Black woman who associates largely with Whites and acts as what Monteyne calls a "representative of high culture."[43] For example, in *Breakin'*, White woman Kelly romances Black and Puerto Rican Ozone (played by real-life breakdancer Adolfo "Shabba Doo" Quiñones) while helping him enter the "legitimate" world of professional dance culture. The transformation involves some sort of identity crisis for the male protagonist who feels torn between the street culture that he knows and loves and the outside culture (either high culture or the mainstream entertainment industry) that will allow him and his impoverished friends to make a living. The protagonist usually resolves the tension by adopting a hybridized identity, maintaining the values and styles of street culture while partially embracing aspects of the outside culture. For example, *Breakin'* ends with Ozone and his crew winning a high stakes competition by performing a final number that mixes street dancing moves with jazz and classical dance.

Although the race of the male protagonist varies, the plot formula in *Breakin'* essentially reappears in the hip hop musical films *Breakin' 2*, *Beat Street*, and *Rappin'*. Additionally, in each of these films, the colorblind frame guides and shapes their narratives in two important ways. First, and most obviously, the interracial romances in

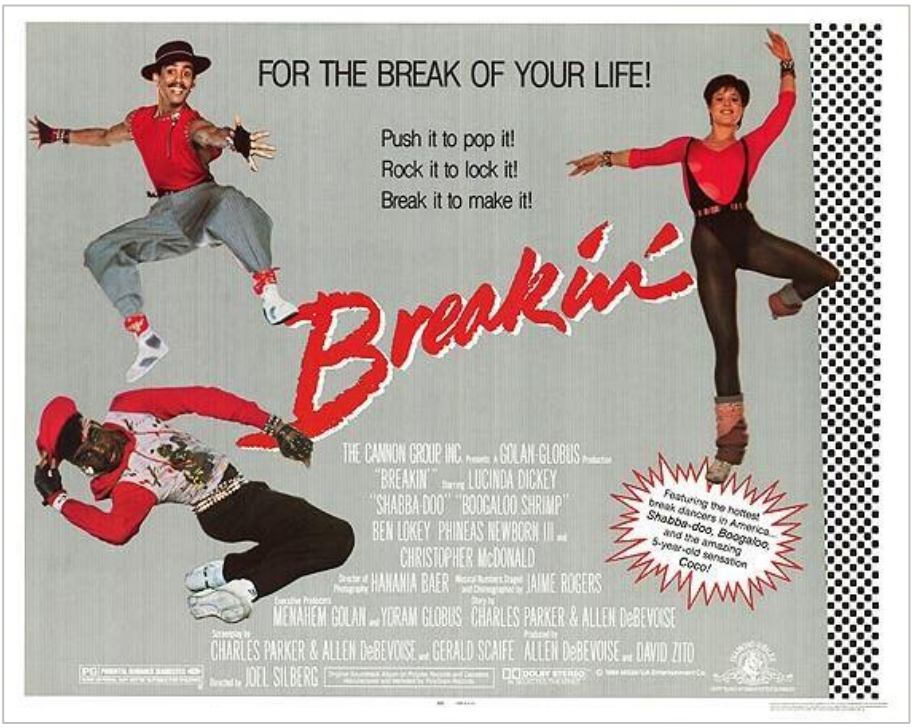

Figure 55. Promotional poster for *Breakin'*. Nearly all of the hip hop musicals center on a White outsider who first falls in love with hip hop and shortly thereafter romances a non-White male embedded in the subculture. *Breakin'* pairs Kelly (right), a classically trained dancer, with Ozone (top left), a tough street dancer struggling to stay true to his ghetto roots while pursuing a professional dance career.

each of these texts (except for *Beat Street*) are presented via the frame of colorblindness. Racial difference poses no threat to the interracial couples, and, like *Flashdance*, class tensions become more significant as the two young lovers attempt to bridge the hip hop subculture and the world of high art/corporate entertainment. The colorblind frame also shapes the ways in which these texts depict *non-sexual* interactions in hip hop performances. All of these films contain multiple extended hip hop musical/dance numbers performed in some sort of public venue—dance clubs, roller skating rinks, auditoriums, etc. Although most accounts of early hip hop demonstrate that the main drivers and creators of the subculture were largely Black and Latino, all of these films take great pains to populate their dance floors with a multiracial cast of extras that

arguably do not reflect the racial mix of early hip hop culture. More specifically, these scenes have a suspiciously high number of White faces in the crowd, certainly far more than would have actually attended early hip hop performances. In a key scene from *Breakin'*, Ozone and his Black male dance partner Turbo engage another breakdancing crew in a battle, an impromptu dance competition where rival crews engage each other in a warlike display of dance skill and showmanship in which the "winner" is decided by the crowd's response. Although all of the hip hop performers and most of the crowd are obviously Black or Latino, nearly every shot in the approximately two minute scene includes one or more White faces amongst the crowd dancing, clapping, and cheering on the performers. Furthermore, *Breakin'* reinforces unlikely racial harmony in the film's final number, a hybrid street/traditional dance number performed on a professional concert stage, complete with faux-graffiti spray painted all over the "gritty" urban landscape recreated for the paying audience. The very purposeful mix of multiracial performers dance to a song ironically titled "Street People" which includes unifying lyrics like "we come in every color/and we share a common ground."

This same dynamic characterizes *Breakin' 2*, *Beat Street*, and *Rappin'*: each text shows a cast of racially integrated extras coming together to celebrate and dance to the hard-edged hip hop beats. These implausible and historically inaccurate integrated dance scenes can and *should* be read in two ways. First, they should be read as an instance of calculated marketing, a tactic to make a mostly-Black and Latino/a working poor subculture sellable to a middle class White audience. The overall presentation of the subculture in these texts belies hip hop's roots in racialized urban poverty and conforms to the slick, flashy packaging of the 1980s high concept film. Although *Beat Street* and

Figure 56. Film stills from *Beat Street*. The performances in many of the 1980s hip hop musicals included a diverse mix of revelers that did not reflect the racial makeup of hip hop's largely Black and Latino/a roots.

Rappin' include authentic shots of the bleak urban landscapes that gave rise to hip hop, none of these films even scratch the surface of the complex roots of structural racism and discrimination that created racialized ghettoes, opting instead to ignore the culture's contextual incubator of ghetto despair and focus on the joyously life-affirming and unifying aesthetics of hip hop music and dance while largely. Furthermore, the calculated multiracial mixture in these films performs the logic of cinematic colorblindness in presenting early hip hop performances as racially-integrated spaces of fun, frolic and romance where racial difference posed no barrier of entry to the dance party.

The hip hop youth musicals become even more intelligible when placed in the larger context of 1980s popular music in general. American pop music during the years represented by *Flashdance* and the early hip hop musicals marked an increasing amount of synergy between film and popular music, a period in which music videos, movie soundtracks, and radio singles from films allowed media outlets to promote their texts across a variety of platforms. The movies joined popular music in participating in the rhetoric of colorblindness by emphasizing racial harmony and togetherness through integrationist lyrics and music videos. In 1982, ex-Beatle Paul McCartney and Black soul singer Stevie Wonder collaborated on the hit single "Ebony and Ivory" (1982), a pop

ballad in which Black and White "live together in perfect harmony." In this brave new colorblind world, entertainment companies began promoting previously balkanized musical genres to a wider racial audience (specifically, promoting Black music to White audiences).[‡] Black performers like Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, as well as the burgeoning hip hop movement, would reach audiences previously inaccessible to non-White artists. In such an environment, marketers drew on the logic of colorblindness as a useful tactic to sell minority culture to as wide an audience as possible, while popular performers like Jackson and mass movies like *Breakin'* helped perpetuate the rhetorical "truth" that racial discord had been triumphed by the crossover pop culture party.

To clarify this statement, I am not saying that entertainment moguls sat around boardroom meeting tables and specifically identified "colorblindness" as a key marketing strategy. Nor am I implying that the producers of *Flashdance* and *Breakin'* set out to make a grand statement about the meanings of race, social interaction, and romance in the 1980s. What I *am* arguing is that in Reagan's America—a political and social landscape largely dominated by conservative ideas about the meaning of race in a post-Civil Rights world—colorblindness was becoming the default frame for understanding race relations.

[‡] Ironically, the opening of the decade initially saw a backlash against crossover music. Disco, a form of flashy and upbeat music birthed in Black dance clubs and popularized in gay bars, had broken into mainstream (White) pop charts with songs like Donna Summer's "Love to Love You, Baby" (1975), tracks that years before would only have played exclusively on R&B (Black) radio stations. Disco's popularity with White audiences crested in 1979 and quickly plummeted as "disco sucks" became a national cry. Top 40 programmers quickly dropped disco records and most Black artists altogether, and the explosion of niche-oriented FM radio stations resegregated the airwaves and allowed listeners to tune in to their musical genre of choice, often with no knowledge of what other stations were playing. The appearance of Michael Jackson's 1982 album Thriller quickly reversed this trend—the album's mixture of pop, R&B and rock appealed to a variety of audiences, and the strength of his groundbreaking music video "Thriller" earned Jackson around-the-clock rotation on the previously-all-White music video channel MTV. Kevin Phinney, *Souled American: How Black Music Transformed White Culture* (New York, NY: Billboard Books, 2005), 257–263; Steve Greenberg, "Where Is Graceland?: 1980s Pop Culture through Music," in *Living in the Eighties*, ed. Gil Troy and Vincent J Cannato (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152–159.

Inevitably, popular music and film participated in the propagation of this frame, both reflecting *and* shaping the discussion through images such as *Flashdance*'s interracial couple and *Breakin'*s integrated dance floor. As clever entertainment producers and advertisers realized that racial harmony could mean big business, they (consciously or not) participated in the era's racial zeitgeist, and the colorblind frame traveled through all manner of cultural texts in the 1980s just as easily as the countercultural frame had spread through the texts of late 60s/early 1970s cinema.

When *Fame* framed interracial sexuality and cross-racial romance as an unsurprising and uncontroversial by-product of 1980's culture, it sparked a quiet representational revolution that would have immediate and far-reaching cinematic consequences. Initially, it birthed a brief cycle of 1980s urban youth musicals in which popular music acted as a bridge over which protagonists easily cross racial divides and form romances through participation in integrated musical subcultures. Although class differences occasionally pose problems and seek to divide the couples, these issues proved to be minor, and neither the offenses of individual racism nor the ravages of structural racism (that, ironically, gave birth to hip hop culture) placed any notable pressures on these couples. Ultimately, colorblindness won out, and the virtues of ignoring racial difference were prominently rewarded through oversimplified yet emotionally satisfying interracial romances absent of any noticeable race-related tensions.[§] After *Fame* and its offspring pioneered the colorblind frame for the representation of onscreen interracial sexuality, cinematic colorblind romances multiplied over the decade, seeping into film genres that had historically ignored interracial

[§] This urban musical film cycle would end roughly in 1985 with the releases of *Rappin'* and *Krush Groove*, the latter film starring New York rap trio Run-DMC, the group generally credited for truly bringing hip hop music to mainstream audiences.

sexuality. Colorblind love infiltrated the blockbuster action film with *Commando* (1985), in which a retired Delta Force soldier (played by a musclebound Arnold Schwarzenegger) falls in love with a Black airplane stewardess while trying to rescue his daughter from South American revolutionaries. In *Rambo: First Blood Part Two* (1985), John Rambo returns to Vietnam to locate missing American POWs and falls for a Vietnamese woman who begs him to bring her to the United States if his mission is successful. Colorblind love creeped into the horror genre with post-apocalyptic zombie films *Day of the Dead* (1984) and *Night of the Comet* (1986), both of which featured uncontroversial interracial romances between strong White female leads and Latino men. The children's film even climbed onto the colorblind bandwagon with *The Karate Kid, Part II* (1986) in which a White American karate student travels to Japan with his martial arts mentor and falls for a Japanese girl named Kumiko.

Cinematic colorblind romance would continue to evolve and grow throughout the subsequent years so that by the beginning of the 1990s, it had become the default frame for the depiction of cinematic interracial sexuality. Simultaneously, the Reaganesque rhetoric of the era that posited race-blindness as the panacea to all racially-tinged political problems would eventually enshrine colorblindness as the default frame for racial discourse in US society. Of course, the ideology of colorblindness, both then and now, had its critics. While some championed the 1980s as the "Cosby decade," an era of progress and understanding that had placed racial ills largely in the past, others posited the decade as the lowest point of racial relations since the 1890s, a period characterized by hardening racial lines, growing racial violence, and plummeting interracial understanding.[44] Although many younger Americans rejected the overt racial animosity

of their parent's generation, this did not necessarily signal the disappearance of racially-regressive attitudes or the evaporation of disparities in opportunity drawn along racial lines. As dramatized in Hilary and Leroy's romance in *Fame*, interracial sexuality could signal fetishization under the guise of race-blindness, and ignoring race did not paper over the long history of racial disenfranchisement and White supremacy. In fact, as *Fame* and the hip hop musicals threw a gigantic multiracial party, a series of films emerged to trouble the era's dominant racial logic, arguing that race did still matter, albeit in ways fascinatingly characteristic of the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan Era.

Affirmative Ambivalence: Colorblind Love on Campus in *Soul Man*

"America Loves Black People:" Race and Romance in the Cosby Decade

White director Steve Miner's romantic comedy *Soul Man* offered an ambivalent take on the colorblind romance frame, reproducing the basic contours of the representational schema while simultaneously critiquing it. Miner's previous credentials included producing the violent slasher movie *Friday the 13th* and directing the horror-comedy film *House* (1986), and although his résumé positioned him as an unlikely defender of the virtues of cross-racial understanding, Miner posited *Soul Man* as a comedic morality tale in which a White character "begins to get a glimmer of what it might be like to be black in America."[45] *Soul Man* centers on Mark Watson (C. Thomas Howell), a White, upper class Los Angeles twentysomething who has recently received his acceptance letter to Harvard Law School. Shortly thereafter, his wealthy father announces that Mark should find his "manhood" and pay for graduate school without relying on the family fortunes. Cash-strapped, Mark hatches a scheme in which he overdoses on experimental "tanning pills" in order to turn his light skin dark, donning a modest afro wig which permits him to pass as Black and apply for the Henry Q.

Bouchard Memorial Fellowship, a full scholarship for the most qualified Black applicant from Los Angeles.[**] His best friend Gordon Bloomfeld, also recently accepted to Harvard, initially chastises him for stealing a scholarship from "some Black person." Mark explains that only one Black student from Los Angeles gained entrance into Harvard, and that the applicant in question "got a better deal from Stanford"—the scholarship would have sat dormant had he not taken it. His guilt assuaged, Mark enters into his racial experiment optimistically, dismissing Gordon's intimation that he might face hardship. "It's gonna be great," Mark exclaims. "It's the Cosby Decade! America loves Black people!"

Mark's colorblind hubris becomes immediately challenged once he arrives at Harvard, where he struggles with being a minority at a mostly White institution, affecting an awkward, overwrought "Black act" in front of his peers. This creates the basic motif that established both the comedic and the romantic elements of *Soul Man*. An example of a typical comedic setup includes an instance where Mark shows up for a pickup basketball game and incites a draft feud between the two White team captains; his skills prove wanting, and the scene proceeds with a slow-motion montage of Mark's absurdly inept athleticism. Later, Mark plans to attend a meeting of the Black Law Student Association, and after misreading a sarcastic comment that it is a "real militant group," he embarrassingly arrives in camouflage pants and a black beret to find a group sitting around a table conservatively dressed in suits and ties. *Soul Man*'s romantic element emerges when Mark's new racial identity affords him a connection with Sarah Walker, a Black graduate student for whom he immediately develops romantic feelings. Initially,

[**] Actor C. Thomas Howell essentially donned blackface to play Mark in his Black iteration, an ironic yet disturbing image that harkens back to films like *The Birth of a Nation*. The blackface makeup angered some critics and audiences who deemed such a blithe image as deeply racist and disrespectful.

Figure 57. Film stills from *Soul Man* (1). Mark takes a regimen of tanning pills to turn himself Black in order to score a minority student scholarship to Harvard Law School, discovering that being Black in the "Cosby Decade" is not as easy as he once thought.

Sarah finds Mark buffoonish, cringing at his overwrought attempts to flaunt his Blackness, but she becomes study partners and slowly comes to appreciate his humor and kindness. Meanwhile, Mark's racial transformation comes with a price, and he is shocked at the overt racism he encounters from White people. He constantly overhears racist jokes in the cafeteria, and a White policeman unjustly pulls him over and incarcerates Mark for swerving to miss a careless pedestrian with his car. Mark also becomes the target of his racist landlord and downstairs neighbor who instructs his property manager to watch him closely for anything that might be cited as grounds for eviction.

Overall, these scenes counter the era's dominant racial logic, arguing that overt and covert racism persisted well into the Regan Era. It acknowledges unjust indignities historically heaped on racial minorities, from racist jokes to police profiling to housing discrimination, offering a series of counterarguments to Mark's glib assertion that "America loves Black people" in the Cosby Decade. Mark also experiences firsthand the complicated cultural politics of interracial sexuality. He falls for Sarah almost

immediately, declaring to Gordon his love for her after their first interaction at a graduate student mixer. However, his affections are temporarily derailed by Whitney Dunbar, the landlord's blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter who fetishizes Mark's Blackness and relentlessly pursues him for sex. In one scene, she lures him into her apartment where she tries to impress him by saying that her senior thesis at Radcliffe College is on the Civil Rights Movement. "I happen to love Civil Rights," Mark slyly coos. The next shot shows them post-coital, wrapped up in sheets lying on the floor. Whitney gleefully exclaims: "I could feel 400 years of oppression and anger in every pelvic thrust!" She then invites Mark to have dinner with her family where the audience is treated to blithe recreations of the family members' hypersexualized, stereotypical views of Mark. Mrs. Dunbar looks at Mark and sees a sex-crazed Black artist who proclaims his love for White women and tears off her dress, while her husband Mr. Dunbar looks at Mark and sees a fedora-clad pimp who orders a pregnant Whitney to get him a slice of watermelon and calls her a "White, fat-ass slut." In the world of *Soul Man*, these scenes are clearly meant to be read as satirical commentaries on White perceptions of Black male sexuality. All of the Dunbars see Mark as an eroticized, sexual beast who exists only to ravish White women, although the women desire sex with Mark while Mr. Dunbar sees Mark as a sexual threat to his daughter's racial purity. The comedic elements of the scene emerge from the dissonance between the Dunbars' perceptions of Mark's Blackness and his actual racial identity. Stereotypical perceptions of White sexuality, then, become the butt of the joke as Mark's racial tourism affords him an awkward window into the range of views held by some White people, from cartoonishly fetishized to alarmist. These scenes find *Soul Man* offering a filmic counterargument to the view that race held little meaning and that

Figure 58. Film stills from *Soul Man* (2). Mark's cross-racial tourism attracts the romantic attention of fellow Harvard student Sarah (*left*) as well as his landlord's daughter (*right*), who fetishizes sex with Black men as the ultimate transgressive thrill.

interracial sexuality was primarily shaped by Reagan Era colorblind cultural politics. In fact, Mark's dalliances into interracial sexuality comedically argue for the continued significance of racial difference and racist ideologies in shaping interracial encounters, and the satiric presentation of Mark as sexual fetish and fetishizer via the White imagination posits that the historical meaning of race still burdened interracial sexual interactions.

Soul Man also cut against the grain of most Hollywood portrayals of colorblind love by offering an examination of the power relations between historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups that shape intimate sexual relationships. This is made especially clear as the dynamics of racial power and privilege place pressure on his burgeoning relationship with Sarah. As the two study together for their challenging law classes, they grow closer and begin to share intimate conversations. In the course of one key conversation, Mark discovers that she was next in line for the minority scholarship that he "won," and as a result she is forced to do menial part time service work in order to pay for tuition. The film climaxes when Mark, guilt-ridden over his ruse, asks to be tried before the student/faculty judiciary committee. The committee is heavily attended by the (mostly-White) students of the Law School, and is presided over by Professor Banks

(James Earl Jones), Mark's lone Black law professor. The scene turns into a mock trial as Gordon enters the room before Mark appears, announcing himself as Mark's lawyer, through whom he confesses his wrongdoing while begging "the court" for mercy while explaining his actions as emanating from a state of racial disadvantage:

> My client is a victim . . . after all, who made him what he is—weak, greedy, unable to support himself by honest labor? Can you blame him for the environment in which he was raised? For the warped values which he learned from earliest childhood? For the people with whom he was surrounded? People who, as much as it pains me to say it, give daily evidence of underdeveloped intellect and deteriorating moral fiber? In short, can we blame him, ladies and gentlemen, for the color of his skin? I think not . . . I trust that this committee . . . will share with me my hope that despite his race and upbringing, my client may yet become a useful member of society.

Mark then walks sheepishly into the room, suddenly in his true White form, as the room gasps in reaction to the revelation. The committee ultimately accepts Mark's promise to make reparations, and he vows to return the funds plus interest to the original recipient (Sarah) and donate a percentage of his future salary to a minority scholarship in her name, and he is allowed to stay at Harvard despite his ruse.

The crux of these scenes lies in the fact that the film audience knows Mark's true racial identity while all attending the judiciary committee (minus Gordon) still believe him to be Black. Gordon's defense essentially boils down to a list of racist preconceptions that White people have historically held in regards to Black people (especially Black men), namely, that they are lazy, morally deficient, socially disorganized, unintelligent, and generally unlikely to become useful citizens. The scene is peppered with telling reactions to his speech. One nonplussed White student whispers to his neighbor "I hate this bleeding heart shit" as Gordon posits Mark's upbringing as a mitigating influence on his actions, while Whitney (who has recently decided to sexually

pursue a American Indian graduate student) swoons at Gordon's eloquent lament over his client's deprivation. The camera also captures the reactions of Black listeners in the room—Sarah sits stone-faced, while Professor Banks registers growing indignation at Gordon's increasingly offensive statements. Conversely, the film audience is meant to read this scene ironically, and Gordon's words perform a comedic skewering of White, male privilege, indicting the culture that Mark *actually* represents as greedy, immoral, and opportunistic. In other words, Gordon's speech performs an assault on many of the basic foundations of Reagan Era colorblindness, countering the view that race no longer shaped social standing or achievement, and asserting that White people enjoy a tremendous amount of racial privilege and social immunity from morally suspect behavior. Ostensibly, this argument becomes clear to the film's courtroom audience once Mark reveals his true racial identity. He essentially receives no punishment from the university for his immoral and illegal act and the committee issues forgiveness based on his promise of reparations. Ironically, one could read the end of this scene as a reification of Mark's privilege even while he attempts to publically acknowledge it, and this narrative turn would have arguably been less believable if Mark were a White woman or a non-White minority posing as Black. Still, this scene finds *Soul Man* critiquing the era's racial logic, countering Mark's initial assumptions that "America loves Black people." Ultimately, the film affirms the persistence of racism and White privilege, and Mark's desire to make reparations and contribute to a minority scholarship program argues for the continued need for structural interventions for racial disparities.

Despite my assertion that *Soul Man* represents a critique of the ideology of colorblindness, it simultaneously supports the basic tenets of colorblindness through its

depiction of Mark and Sarah's romance. This occurs in at least two ways. On the most obvious level, Mark's initial attraction to Sarah despite her racial difference clearly performs colorblind romance. Although he only meets her after he has "become" Black, he finds her appealing ostensibly not because she is Black (as in the case of Whitney's fetishistic desire for him) but because he sees her as a beautiful, intelligent woman. *Soul Man* also props up the ideology of colorblindness through the film's plot resolution that follows the revelation of Mark's whiteness. Shortly after Mark promises to restore the stolen scholarship money plus interest, Sarah unsurprisingly becomes furious with him. He apologizes for his actions, but proposes that they stay together, audaciously posing the question, "How [do] you feel about interracial relationships?" She initially dismisses his gesture, stating that she has "never met a White man I was interested in," insisting that their life experiences are "just too different" to make it work. As the two walk away from each other, Sarah passes two White students telling a racist joke. Mark explodes with righteous indignation and punches both of them onto the floor. Inexplicably, this display of masculine bravado causes her to almost immediately change her mind, and she runs after him sputtering: "I guess it's alright—interracial relationships—if the two people really care about each other, right?" The film ends with the happy couple walking down the sidewalks of Harvard arm in arm.

Most obviously, this ending could be read as an expression of the classic romance genre trope in which the couple must end the film happily together. I also read this ending as an expression of colorblind romance: although Sarah initially expresses outrage at his trickery, she decides that simple love and forgiveness can overcome Mark's indiscretions, and the potential racial blowback for his actions becomes a mere relational

hiccup. While *Soul Man* broke with the colorblind frame of its day by acknowledging the enduring existence of White racism, racial fetishization, and overt discrimination, it also trivialized Mark's conversion to race consciousness by a "love conquers all" framework through his romantic reunion with Sarah, offering generalized racial awareness and uncomplicated forgiveness for individual racism as the only barrier to racial reconciliation. Seen in this light, *Soul Man* is a border text, an expression of cinematic ambivalence that exposes the cracks and fissures in the colorblind narrative while simultaneously holding up the merits of ignoring race and pursuing interracial romance as a corrective to racial wrongs, past and present. In the final analysis, *Soul Man*'s resolution echoes the conventional racial wisdom of the decade by arguing that racism was ultimately an issue of individual prejudice, which could be overcome with understanding and experience, and the framing of interracial romance as an easy answer to racism concurs with the dominant colorblind ideology of its day that structural responses to racism were unnecessary.

"Our Obligation is to Make Money"

Soul Man stands as a crucial Reagan Era text, a cinematic interracial love story that comedically illustrates the problems and pitfalls of race-blindness while extolling the virtues of the same. It incited a flurry of discursive commentary about the ideology of colorblindness, controversial race-conscious programs like affirmative action, and the Right's attempts to dismantle the latter in the name of the former.[46] *Soul Man* itself tacitly acknowledged the links between the film's internal discourse and the larger rhetorics of Reagan's America by self-reflexively casting the President's son Ron Reagan, Jr. as the White college student who eagerly drafts Mark for his pickup basketball team. Jay Boyar of the *Orlando Sentinel* lamented the film's ironic casting as "bad taste," stating that "a

reverse-discrimination comedy ought to feature [President] Ronald Reagan, under whose administration the whole notion that reverse-discrimination is a problem has really taken off."[47] Thus far, we have paid little sustained attention to heads of state beyond references marking key moments in political and/or racial history. However, no US president before (or arguably, since) Reagan invited so many comparisons to the film and entertainment industry, and his blurring of real life and "reel life" produced many fascinating historical moments that directly shaped the ways in which critics and activists read and responded to *Soul Man*.

Reagan was one of the first figures to successfully leverage his career in Hollywood to move into politics, and he remains the only ex-Hollywood insider to secure the office of the US presidency. Administration insiders posited that his stint in Hollywood significantly shaped everything from his presentation style to his outlook on geopolitical events. Reagan's closest advisors quickly realized that their President worked best when handled as an actor in a grand production, frequently coaching him before meetings and appearances as a director might prep a movie star before a career-defining performance. Aides supplied Reagan with "scripts"—small cards and half-sheets of paper with typed monologues and talking points.[48] Reagan admitted that he had "seen too many war movies, the heroics of which I sometimes confused with real life," and this led to a series of embarrassing public gaffes. Once Reagan regaled a mass audience with a thrilling "memory" about a decorated World War II bomber pilot who chose to go down with a wounded crewmember rather than eject from a crashing fighter jet—a story unwittingly lifted from the war film *A Wing and a Prayer* (1944).[49] In a 1985 meeting with USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan sincerely stated that the US and Russia

would put aside their differences in lieu of an alien invasion, a scenario garnered from the science fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).[50] Most famously, his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a multibillion dollar project to research a "space shield" of lasers that could vaporize missiles launched at the US, bore a striking resemblance to a weapon called the "inertia projector" from *Murder in the Air* (1940), a film in which Reagan starred as a secret agent thwarting communist spies.[51] When Reagan's political detractors derisively labeled the SDI project "Star Wars," mocking the initiative's resemblance to pulpy science fiction cinema, he defended the project with a quote from *Star Wars*, wryly assuring naysayers that "the force is with us."[52]

Collectively, this blurring of film with actual events incited critic Michael Rogin to argue that Ronald Reagan should be thought of as "*Ronald Reagan*, The Movie," the italics denoting him as an actual living cinematic text.[53] While some looked to the images and myths of Hollywood as a window through which to view Reagan's presidency, others saw the Reagan Era's conservative ethos as directly shaping film culture. Film theorist Andrew Britton pejoratively labeled the era's films as "Reaganite entertainment"—wonder-inspiring, escapist fare offering narratives in which complex problems could be overcome within a traditional "good vs. evil" framework.[54] A classic example is *First Blood* (1982), a film about maverick Vietnam veteran John Rambo (played by 1980s icon Sylvester Stallone) who runs afoul of local police in a small northwestern town and reenacts his Vietnam experience as the National Guard attempts to capture him. Susan Jeffords interprets *First Blood* as a conservative appeal for a beefed-up military in the wake of the previous decade's military debacle of Vietnam and the shame of the Iranian hostage crisis.[55] Additionally, Rambo's routing of the National Guard can be viewed as a

Figure 59. Rambo and Ronbo. In *First Blood*, Sylvester Stallone played mentally unstable and deadly Vietnam veteran John Rambo. The film spawned three sequels and helped popularize the hypermasculine "hard body" action hero archetype. Photographic artist Alfred Gescheidt reinvented the president as "Ronbo," a satirical take on Reagan's reputation for using force in the defense of global American interests as well as his professed admiration for the violent film. (Library of Congress)

referendum on the nation's perceived lack of military preparedness in the event of a (Soviet) attack, and the hero's bulging muscles have been read as a symbolic argument for the necessity of a strong defense force.[56] The links between *Rambo* and Reagan echoed throughout the decade. After the negotiated 1985 release of American hostages held in Lebanon for seventeen days, Reagan quipped, "After seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do next time." Reagan's admiration for the film, as well as his penchant for defense buildup and militaristic rhetoric, led photographic artist Alfred Gescheidt to release a satirical image of Reagan's head superimposed on Rambo's muscular body with the title blood-red "Ronbo."[57]

While commentators found fascinating discursive connections between Reagan and Hollywood, the film industry underwent significant industrial transformations that align with the era's conservative tenor. While the major studios had historically been powerful film factories operating primarily in Hollywood, California, the movie industry transformed itself in the 1980s through a dizzying round of mergers and acquisitions, emerging rebranded as multinational media conglomerates. No longer focused exclusively on film production, these media empires specialized in "filmed entertainment," an enterprise that extended the movie experience to pay-for cable channels, VHS tapes, video game tie-ins, and theme park rides.[58] The Hollywood blockbuster both reflected and accelerated this shift. Studios easily resold the genre-based plots and uncomplicated characters of the blockbuster via filmed entertainment tie-ins, and multi-sequel franchises like the *Indiana Jones* (1981-present) films kept some series profitable for decades thereafter.[59] These trends did not come without critics, and some scourged the blockbuster as the crass logical conclusion of a revenue-hungry Hollywood that placed profits over artistic merit. Actor Meryl Streep criticized the industry for sacrificing cinematic quality for profit, rhetorically asking, "Where have the classic films gone? Look under the wheels of the blockbusters."[60]

Defenders of the art of filmmaking also located the crushed corpse of auteurist cinema under the "wheels of the blockbusters," and although the power of the countercultural New Hollywood had been plummeting since the mid-1970s, critics often cite director Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) the death knell of personal filmmaking.[††] Cimino rose to prominence in the wake of auteurs like Francis Ford

[††] Despite the grave circumstances for countercultural filmmaking, the ideology of the blockbuster did not transform Hollywood as totally as detractors claimed, and Hollywood's need to appeal to diverse audience

Coppola with *The Deer Hunter* (1978), a drama about a group of small town steelworkers who enlist to fight in the Vietnam War and endure horrific traumas. Despite its commercially risky 183-minute running time, *The Deer Hunter* proved critically and financially successful, and greatly inflated Cimino's cachet as a director. United Artists funded his next picture *Heaven's Gate*, a slow-paced western that took nearly two years to produce, alienated audiences, and cost upwards of $50 million while grossing approximately $1.5 million at the box office. *Heaven's Gate* essentially bankrupted United Artists and quickly became a favorite target of critics exhausted by the 1970s film auteurs, and detractors wearied by personal films that defied audience tastes giddily celebrated the film's demise as a colossal tombstone for auteurism.[61] One influential critic of auteurism was Don Simpson, the aforementioned co-pioneer of the high concept 1980s blockbuster. "I don't believe in the auteur theory," Simpson flatly insisted. "The movie is the auteur, the boss."[62] Simpson further dismissed auteurism and clarified his philosophy of filmmaking in even starker terms: "We [film producers] have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. Our obligation is to make money."[63]

Simpson's words could hardly be more representative of the ideology of the filmed entertainment industry, arguably performing the zeitgeist of 1980s America in general. Countercultural radicalism and social critique were largely "out," while success, money, and conspicuous consumption were declared "in." The economy produced

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tastes dictated textual heterodoxy as the norm for the industry. Thus, effects-driven spectacles like *Back to the Future* proliferated alongside an explosion of independent-minded filmmakers descended from the iconoclastic spirit of the New Hollywood, like David Lynch (*Blue Velvet* [1986]), John Sayles (*Matewan* [1987]), and Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*). Even the *Rambo* film's rightist celebration of US military muscle coexisted with leftist critiques of American interventionism in Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986) and *Platoon* (1986). Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989*, History of the American Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xv.

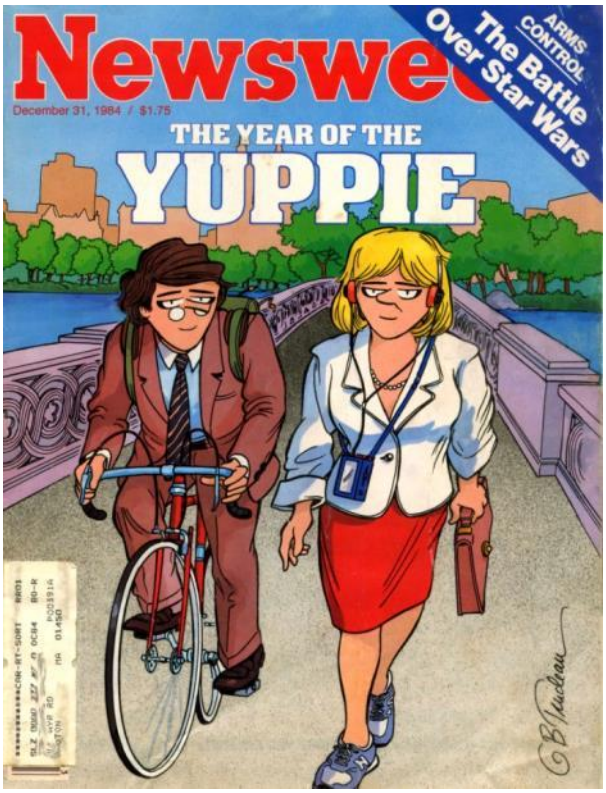

Figure 60. *Newsweek* magazine cover—"The Year of the Yuppie." *Newsweek* declared 1984 "The Year of the Yuppie," arguing that the young generation of materialistic, upwardly mobile professionals had discarded the liberalism of the countercultural generation. (*Newsweek*, December 31, 1984)

previously unimaginable levels of wealth for those at the highest income brackets, leading writer John Berry to characterize US financial instruments as being "tuned to gratify today's desires rather than to meet tomorrow's needs."[64] Commentators saw the rise of young ambitious "yuppies" as crucial cultural symbols of Reagan Era. Pundits coined the neologism "yuppie," a shortening of the phrase "young urban professional," as a catch-all term to characterize a mostly-White coterie of hip, upwardly mobile, and crassly materialistic children of the Baby Boomers.[65] Mainstream media registered the ascendancy of the yuppie in figures like Alex P. Keaton on the TV sitcom *Family Ties* (1982-1989), a wealth-obsessed twentysomething who rejects his parent's liberalism as anachronistic, irrational hippy nonsense.[66] Notably, critics read *Soul Man* as a response to

yuppiedom: an unsigned *Wall Street Journal* review referred to Mark as "a yuppie black," while Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times* praised *Soul Man*'s satiric characterizations as effectively "skewering trendy yuppies."[67]

Discourses surrounding the yuppie also intersected with discussions about race and racial advantage/disadvantage in a post-Civil Rights America. Writing in 1991, Richard Lowy noted the concurrent ascendance of "yuppie racism," essentially the propagation of colorblind rhetoric by the very generation of young White professionals who largely benefitted from the history of racial inequality that continued to advantage Whites and disadvantage Blacks, particularly members of the so-called Black "underclass" trapped in deteriorating urban ghettos:[‡‡]

> The emergence of yuppies and a Black underclass . . . should not be viewed as coincidence or social anomaly. The increase in structural inequality for the Black underclass is correlated with 20 years of White indifference [and] of hostility toward progressive civil rights policies.

Lowy further argues that many White members of the yuppie generation express little understanding of recent Civil Rights history and possess blatantly incorrect knowledge about Black progress, assuming prospects for contemporary Blacks to be far better and more advantageous than they actually were. White misconceptions about the state of Black America fed a growing White resentment against racially-minded programs like affirmative action and Black protests against racism in general, fueling White backlash and a resurgence of open White racism.[68] *Soul Man* appeared against this cultural backdrop, ambivalently critiquing yet propagating the "yuppie racism" that Lowy identified as dominating the era's racial discourse. More importantly, the film sparked a

[‡‡] I recognize the problematic nature of the word "underclass," a term widely used by sociologists in the late-1980s/early-1990s that has since become something of a pejorative in academic circles. However, I find Lowy's analysis of colorblind racism against the backdrop of the rise of the yuppie to be particularly useful, and I feel the need to maintain his original language even while I reject the term itself.

heated debate about the complex intersections of colorblindness, Reagan Era racism, and affirmative action as critics alternately praised or castigated the film's dissection of contemporary cultural politics via the trope of interracial romance.

Discourses of Race, Romance, and Rights in Responses to Soul Man

New World Pictures, an independent studio founded by exploitation auteur Roger Corman, produced and distributed *Soul Man*, and the film became one of New World's bigger hits of the 1980s.[69] While the film proved popular, particularly with younger audiences, critics sharply divided over it. Reactions generally split over whether *Soul Man* did or did not "get" the 1980s Black experience, specifically assessing whether or not Mark legitimately learned what it meant to be Black. The *Wall Street Journal* believed that he did: "Funny as it is, *Soul Man* isn't frivolous. Mark learns what it's like to be black."[70] Black *Chicago Tribune* film critic Clarence Page concurred, reading Mark's discovery of a racial consciousness as an indictment of Reagan Era colorblindness:

> Young Watson thinks he has it made . . . "America loves black people!" Until he becomes one . . . Watson unexpectedly gets his eyes opened and ears unblocked. He feels the pain but also realizes that, alas, he can always change himself back, any time he wants.[71]

Page's comments make for an interesting contrast to the unidentified (but presumably, White) staff writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Journal* writer found Mark's experience as a Black person authentic, citing various scenes from the film as examples of racism that Black people have historically faced in US culture: "He gets tossed in jail for changing traffic lanes without signaling, and he sees women clutch their purses when he steps onto an elevator."[72] Page similarly praised the film's representations of Mark's experiences as a Black man for "the lessons it tries to teach and the benighted notions it challenges."[73] But Page also reminded his readers that the "reality" of the representation

of the Black experience ended when Mark returns to being White, demonstrating that he was only just a tourist of oppression all along. Yanina Carter of the historically-Black newspaper the *Philadelphia Tribune* expressed similar sentiments:

> *Soul Man* shows an unerring sensitivity and understanding in its finely-tuned sense of humor . . . It becomes apparent that Mark, who is pretending to be a Black, is starting to take to heart the concept of being Black. We think that he has learned what it is to be Black . . . Instead, Mark has found, "When things got too tough and I didn't like it (being Black), I knew I could get out of it." But this is not the same for a person who is really Black.[74]

As African Americans themselves, both Page and Carter appreciated seeing a White person learning that Black people still faced discrimination and institutional roadblocks, even in the Cosby Decade. However, their subject positions compelled them to point out the obvious: Mark's White privilege created a situation in which he did not ultimately have to bear the brunt of racism forever, and their identification with the lead character ended when the blackface came off.

Negative reviews took particular issue with the idea that a White man with darkened skin could legitimately experience what Black people face. For Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times*, "[*Soul Man*] snaps whatever good will we might bring to it by the . . . offensiveness of its premise: that by putting on a farcical disguise you can experience what it means to be black."[75] Michael Blowen of the *Boston Globe* agreed, arguing that *Soul Man* "trivializes racism by claiming that . . . by adopting a different skin color, [Mark] could understand how deeply the roots of racism run in American life. The oversimplification . . . [is] aggressively offensive." Blowen presented a claim that appears in most of the negative reviews, specifically that this allegedly antiracist film was in fact itself *deeply* racist in its reliance on blackface humor and its refusal to wrestle with racial issues honestly or complexly. While most critics castigated *Soul Man* as racist

and/or racially insensitive in an era when race still greatly mattered, the reviews surveyed registered no disapproval at the film's inclusion of an interracial couple, ironically performing and reifying colorblindness via tacit approval and/or indifference to the presence of interracial sexuality. Many of the reviews did not overtly reference Mark and Sarah as an interracial couple and, oddly enough, in some cases totally failed to mention the film's romantic angle so central to its plot.[76] When reviewers did acknowledge the film's interracial romance, the very presence of interracial sexuality was largely accepted as a non-controversial plot convention that supplied a relational catalyst for Mark's development of a racial consciousness, and remarks on *Soul Man*'s interracial romance simply act as perfunctory references to the film's plot. Bruce Westbrook of the *Houston Chronicle* offhandedly stated that Sarah initially asked "questions of interracial compatibility" following his racial reveal.[77] Even the probably-White reviewer for the conservative *Wall Street Journal*, who confoundingly called Mark's ludicrous blackface makeup "authentic," raised no objection to the interracial romance. In fact, the reviewer referred to the mixed race actor Rae Dawn Chong who played Sarah as "appealing," and quipped "[she] is there partly to provide romance and partly to make a point."[78]

I find these ostensibly unremarkable quotes *quite* remarkable in their blasé attitude towards interracial sexuality. This contrasts starkly with the miscegenation hysteria of *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) and the controversial interracial sex spectacle of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. By time the time of *Soul Man*'s appearance in the mid-1980s, nearly three decades had passed since *Island in the Sun* (1957) introduced the then-progressive frame presenting interracial sexuality as the natural and normal right of free individuals. By the mid-1980s, that frame had been

successfully absorbed by the dominant colorblind ethos of the day, and Mark's interracial relationship with Sarah registered a collective yawn from the critics. The responses to the film largely ignored its interracial subplot and zeroed in on the racial discourse in which the film participated. The debate over *Soul Man* became less about the movie itself than about the meaning of race in a colorblind era that assumed the "victories" of the Civil Rights era had all been won. Page of the *Chicago Tribune* captured this tension well: "*Soul Man* could not have been made in the 1960s. It would not have made sense back in the days before we had affirmative action programs to give a rich, suburban white kid the illusion that he would be better off black."[79]

I find Page's reference to affirmative action interesting in that *Soul Man*'s plot did not focus on affirmative action *per se*—Mark entered Harvard via an endowed fellowship program for minority applicants, an altogether different process than an affirmative action admission. The set of policies and programs that came to be termed "affirmative action" emerge from a complicated history, and it would be instructive to briefly outline the contours of affirmative action as well as the criticisms and attempts to dismantle such initiatives. Affirmative action was established through a series of mid-20th century presidential executive orders that essentially sought to prohibit discrimination against minorities in federal hiring practices *and* to mandate the proactive pursuit of minority hiring in an attempt to redress past structural discrimination.[80] By the mid-1970s, many private institutions, including universities and construction trade unions, had adopted a variety of affirmative action initiatives either voluntarily or under Federal pressure. Typical affirmative action plans included numerical goals (minority participation as percentage of an organization's overall workforce/student body) plus timetables for the

implementation of increased minority representation. The watershed for affirmative action came in 1978 with the Supreme Court decision *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, a case that ruled that colleges and universities *could not* impose a "quota system" for minority representation onto their student application process, but that racial background *could* be one of several elements (but never the sole element) in deciding student admission.[81]

Although *Bakke* upheld aspects of affirmative action, it marked a trend towards a general weakening of these initiatives, and subsequent decades wrought a series of presidential actions, statutes from conservative state legislatures, and Supreme Court decisions that seriously undermined affirmative action.[82] These trends were driven by the New Right and bolstered by Reagan, who targeted such programs as part of his pledge to reduce governmental regulations and fight discrimination with colorblind polices. The administration saw varying degrees of success in its efforts to undermine affirmative action, although many conservatives were disappointed that Reagan did not abolish the initiative through executive order. However, Reagan and the New Right largely succeeded in propagating the rhetoric that Civil Rights and affirmative action equaled "reverse discrimination" and racial "quotas" (something declared unconstitutional under *Bakke*), inflaming a popular revolt against such programs.[83] *Soul Man* appeared early on in Reagan's second term in the midst of this roiling controversy over race and rights, and unsurprisingly, reactions to the film inevitably intersected with the fate of affirmative action in the age of colorblindness. As has already been noted, affirmative action did not help Mark win entrance into Harvard, but this does not disqualify the possibility that *Soul Man* was referencing/playing off of the controversy surrounding it. In fact, historical

traces of the film's reception show that many read the film as a response to the debate over affirmative action in higher education, and for some, the film became an incitement to clarify and qualify the state of minority participation in the American university.

In fact, the debate started before *Soul Man* began filming. Initially, screenwriter Carol Black proposed the film as a comedy about a young White man who cannot find a job and darkens his skin to take advantage of minority hiring quotas. Black stated that she "didn't like what that said about affirmative action," and opted for the racial scholarship angle that would eventually comprise *Soul Man*'s plot. Despite the screenwriter's effort to distance the screenplay from affirmative action, many reviewers read the movie as a direct reference to/discourse on affirmative action policies. The *Wall Street Journal* labeled the film an "affirmative action comedy," and up-and-coming Black filmmaker Spike Lee castigated it as "an affront to affirmative action."[84] Clarence Page, while offering a glowing review for the film, initially objected to its premise, criticizing the timing of its release as problematic in light of declining "enrollment by black college students" and "Reagan Era cutbacks in student loan programs."[85] This accusation proved true: between 1980 and 1986, the number of Black college students dropped by nearly 100,000, and the number of Black doctorates awarded declined by 66% from 1977 through 1987.[86] The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education and the NAACP joined forces to condemn the film and detail its distortions. Beverly Hills NAACP chapter president Willis Edwards objected to the film's assertion that Los Angeles County (with a population of 8 million) produced no qualified Black students for the scholarship.[87] NAACP public relations director James Williams elaborated: "The implication here is that blacks, as a whole, do not produce enough talented people to take

advantage of scholarship opportunities . . . The fact is that qualified blacks are always waiting in line for scholarships and other financial aid."[88] UCLA's Black Student Alliance protested the film on opening night for its "false statements about the economic realities black students face at school," and Harvard's Black Law Students Association issued a corrective statement assuring that "'in fact, financial aid at Harvard Law is in no way related to race."[89] Although *Soul Man*'s writer attempted an overt antiracist message that acknowledged the ubiquity of White privilege, many resented the film's intimation that a potential White college enrollee was somehow harmed by unclaimed Black scholarships (opportunities which were ostensibly wasted on a non-qualified pool of potential applicants) while cinematically depicting aid programs that did not even exist.

In response to the uproar, *Soul Man*'s producer issued this Don Simpson-esque defense: "We never designed the film to be the definitive statement on racial dynamics in the 1980s; our intention was to offer the audience a comedy."[90] David Kehr of the *Chicago Tribune* disagreed, calling it "the definitive Reagan-era film" for deploying

> a racist premise to hook the audience . . . and then, through a series of clever narrative transformations, ends by assuring the audience that they are the least racist of all creatures. "You've learned what it's like to be black," Howell is told by his mentor, a senior black law professor . . . although "being black," in this film's terms, amounts largely to making love to Rae Dawn Chong [Sarah].[91]

Kehr argued that *Soul Man* perpetuates racist assumptions ("white men make the best blacks") that mock the challenges of the Black experience while ending the story with an anemic lesson in racial understanding ("you've learned what it's like to be black"). Interestingly, Kehr particularly cites Mark's interracial romance with Sarah as the closest he will ever come to "being black," implicitly dismissing the encounter as an authentic lesson in cross-racial understanding and empathy. Perhaps the film's ambivalence

Figure 61. Film still from *Soul Man* (3). Dave Kehr of the *Chicago Tribune* posited *Soul Man* as "the definitive Reagan-era film" for its "racist" high concept hook that ultimately assured viewers that they are not racist. The film self-reflexively tied itself to the Reagan Era by casting Ron Reagan, Jr. (right) in a bit part as a pickup basketball team captain fighting to get the sole Black player on his team.

towards race and interracial romance does make it a quintessential film of the colorblind zeitgeist, a complex Reagan Era text that, in the words of Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, produces "wildly contradictory reactions . . . [and] can be both abhorred and enjoyed."[92] It refuted the reigning ideology of colorblindness, affirming that racial minorities still faced discrimination and societal roadblocks to progress, while simultaneously valorizing colorblindness in presenting a narrative in which the structural roots of racism could be conquered if people simply see past race and love each other.

The film also evinces a dualistic view of interracial sexuality. On one hand, interracial sex was still weighted down with the vestiges of exoticism and exploitation via Whitney pursuing Mark as an oppressed racial/sexual other. On the other hand, Mark's initial attraction to Sarah reproduces the colorblind frame that dominated the decade, and while his racial subterfuge initially affords him access to her, their romance is ultimately

portrayed as a relationship among individuals. Finally, the film's happily-ever-after resolution reifies the dominant assumption that "race does not matter" in the arena of love. Ultimately, *Soul Man* becomes a crucial film for the representation of interracial sexuality in the 1980s, a border text that negotiates a tense middle ground between the era's two dominant frames, asserting that interracial sexuality could take the form of a sexual fetish or a colorblind relationship among equals. It remains a textual bridge between the multiracial youth musicals produced in the wake of *Fame*'s success and a spate of largely disconnected Hollywood films released both before and after *Soul Man* that updated the interracial exoticism of the exploitation film for the 1980s multiplex.

Colorblind Curiosities: Racial Fetishism in High Concept Hollywood

The Savage, Silly "Chinaman": Sexual Otherness in Sixteen Candles

The ascendancy of colorblindness in US popular media brought with it a number of ironies. While the 1980s saw increased presence of racial minorities in popular culture, this shift coincided with a number of related regressive representational trends, including the marginalization of non-Whites to secondary roles supporting White leads and a resurgence of cinematic racial stereotypes. Both of these trends can be seen in the careers of Black actor Eddie Murphy who, despite being one of the biggest box office draws of the 1980s, found himself frequently cast in "buddy" films with more-established White actors in films like *48 hrs*. (1982) and *Trading Places* (1983). In both films, Murphy plays racially stereotypical roles, including a low-life street criminal and a jive-talking homeless man respectively. Film critic David Sterritt of *The Christian Science Monitor* noted "a tide of racial bias creeping across the movie landscape," quoting a statement released by an Asian American civil rights coalition that "the conservative climate in

America today is conducive to turning back all the social and political gains that . . . people of color have made over the last 20 years." Noted examples included the "conniving Arab sheikhs" in the comedy *Cannonball Run II* (1984), the "condescending view of Latin America" in the action-comedy *Romancing the Stone* (1984), and the "nasty Cuban portrayals" in the gangster film *Scarface* (1983).[93] The 1980s also saw a return of regressive, fetishistic depictions of interracial sexuality that troubled narrative of colorblind love. *Fame* and *Soul Man* both presaged this trend, acknowledging that racial and sexual fetishization potentially lurked at the margins of colorblind love. Recall that *Fame* explored this dynamic through the interactions between White, upper class Hilary and Black, working class Leroy, depicting their relationship as a power imbalance in which the former saw the latter as "homework," a mere fetishized adventure in race and class slumming. *Soul Man* offered the character of Whitney, also a White, wealthy young woman, who sees sex with Mark as a gateway to the forbidden wildness of Black sexuality. *Fame*'s matter-of-fact presentation and *Soul Man*'s satire employed different narrative conventions, but both films offered critiques of White fetishization of non-White (particularly Black male) sexuality, balancing their endorsements of colorblind love with a representational note of caution.

Of course, race/sex fetishization was not new to the American cinema. From the late-1920s exploitation travelogues to 1970s blaxploitation cinema, filmmakers had for decades been invoking racialized sexual otherness to titillate audiences and exploit interracial exoticism. However, the current crop of blockbuster era films differed in two important ways. First, they coexisted with a dominant discourse that claimed racism and racial problems had all been conquered, casting doubt on that assertion by their very

presence. Second, these texts were increasingly big budget productions that essentially coopted content historically relegated to the film industry's margins, updating classic exploitation tropes for the high concept world of 1980s Hollywood. The liberalization of film content sparked by the implementation of the film ratings system in 1968 continued throughout the 1980s, and while the ideologies embedded in popular film narratives arguably grew more traditional, representations of subject matter previously relegated to seedy exploitation films became fodder for big budget films by established directors and respected actors. Overall, mainstream films evinced unprecedented portrayals of sex and violence in the 1980s when compared with previous decades. *The Bounty* (1984) offers a perfect example, a historical drama about the real-life 1789 mutiny aboard the *HMS Bounty*, a British naval vessel dispatched to the island of Tahiti to collect botanical samples. *The Bounty* was a remake of the twice-made film *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935 and 1962, discussed in Chapter One and Two respectively) that topped its predecessors in depicting the crew's layover in Tahiti as a tropical heaven filled with topless, lust-crazed, sexually-eager "savage" women. To be fair, the film to an extent depicted true historical events—some sailors did in fact sexually engage and marry Tahitian women. But the R-rated film includes so many shots of topless, hypersexualized native women that it begs comparison to exploitation travelogue films of the 1930s and 1940s that promised "savage" nudity and sexual display under the guise of anthropological accuracy.

The Bounty also marks a resurgence of depictions of Asian/White sexual relationships as fetishized spectacles. Asian/White pairings had largely been overshadowed by the overwhelming number of Black/White films that dominated the turbulent 1970s, but *The Bounty* marked a period of increased Asian/White pairings that

would continue throughout decade. In many cases, Hollywood framed such sexual encounters as exotic spectacles, employing racist visual rhetorics that updated exploitation tactics for the blockbuster era. A notable example includes *Sixteen Candles*, the iconic 1980s high school comedy written and directed by teen film auteur John Hughes. *Sixteen Candles* concerns Samantha Baker (Molly Ringwald), a suburban teenager whose doltish family has forgotten about her 16th birthday. The movie chronicles her mishaps and woes as she navigates the rocky waters of adolescence (family strife, romance, etc.), centered on the social world of her mostly-White high school. In one of the film's comedic subplots, Samantha's overbearing grandparents come to stay at her house for her older sister's wedding, bringing with them Long Duk Dong (Gedde Watanabe), a Chinese exchange student they are hosting. Long is not a major character in the film, but all of his appearances characterize him as a wild, lust-crazed "racial other" ostensibly played for laughs. Long first appears in the film when Samantha flees to her bedroom to escape her family and plops down on the bottom part her bunk bed; he has been perched in waiting on the top bunk, and his head falls into the frame (upside down) and greets Samantha with a lusty "What's happenin', hot stuff?"

Subsequently, almost every time Long appears in a scene or a character says his name, the film's soundtrack punctuates his appearance with a crashing gong sound effect, an aural flourish that could be read both as an exaggerated marker of Long's racial otherness (the gong being Chinese in origin) and as a percussive cue emphasizing the comedic oddness of his phallic sounding name ("dong" being an American slang word for a penis). Samantha's family frequently refer to him as "the weird Chinese guy" and her younger brother calls him a "Chinaman named after a duck's dork [penis]." These

Figure 62. Film still from *Sixteen Candles*. Long Duk Dong's lust-crazed antics perform a comedic (although no less disturbing) 1980s update of the cinematic oversexed racial other. In this film still, Long and Marlene attend a wild high school party and turn an exercise bike into a machine for erotic stimulus.

comments, while meant to be funny, serve to highlight his status as a stigmatized, exoticized "other." The day Long arrives, Samantha attends the school dance hoping to find love, mortified that her grandparents force her to bring Long. Shortly after arriving, Long meets Marlene (Debbie Pollack), an awkward, tall, White girl with accentuated breasts. Their relationship revolves around "the Donger's" relentless sexual advances and Marlene's sexual insatiability; she affectionately calls him a "maniac," and he marvels at her chest size, exclaiming "Now I have a place to put my hand!" The couple crashes a wild house party and engage in excessive drinking and simulated intercourse via an exercise bike on which Marlene pedals furiously as Long sits in her lap. The evening ends with a drunken Long perched up in a tree outside of the house. Wrapped in a Japanese kimono, he madly hollers "oh, sexy girlfriend!" at a male passerby and leaps out of the tree with a cry of "banzai!" The next morning, Samantha's family finds Long passed out on the front lawn. They wake him and he groans, "No more yankee my

wankee [penis]. The Donger need food." Long then bursts into laughter as he informs Grandma and Grandpa that he drove their car into a lake, and Grandma calls him a "little scuzz bad" before kicking him in his crotch.

Long's character is a troubling 1980s update of a foundational trope in American film: the racialized male as a rapacious sexual animal, i.e., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *The Cheat* (1915). His core nature, as intimated by his name, is one of an oversexed racialized male. Apart from some token minorities that populate the background at the school dance, Long is the only non-White character in the film, a fact that further accentuates his exotic otherness. Long differs somewhat from historic depictions of Asian male sexual aggressiveness in that he is presented as humorous, innocuous, and even lovable, as opposed to marauding and threatening. However, his comic presence in the film only served to perpetuate age-old stereotypes about racial minorities in general and Asian men in particular. Some critics (typically, White) found the character of Long Duk Dong humorous, such as Gene Siskel who noted him as an "inspired" comedic character.[94] Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times* disagreed, called the film "racist," arguing that if Long "were a black character, there would be protests at every theater that plays the film."[95] Benson's comment refers to the long-established tradition of Black protest of destructive images in popular media and film, from *The Birth of a Nation* through blaxploitation. Asian American film criticism was relatively young in comparison, having only recently developed out of the Asian American movement of the late 1960s/early 1970s and coalescing around a coterie of activists, independent filmmakers, and radical scholars clustered largely in West Coast cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco.[96]

This time, however, outraged Asian voices did speak out. Sophia Kim of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the film "inflame[d] the Asian community:"

> Once blacks were stereotyped in movies, "but they raised their voices and complained," said Elizabeth Szu, president of the South Bay Chinese American Assn. "Chinese people don't usually write to complain. We are usually silent." [Sumi] Haru [former president of the Association of Asian Pacific American Artists] agreed: "It's true. It goes back to the World War II days. After [concentration] camp, people are afraid to rock the boat." But she and some of the others interviewed plan to do just that—rock the boat and let . . . writer-director Hughes know that their community disapproves of the movie.[97]

Although *Sixteen Candles* did not provoke a backlash on the scale of the Black protest of *The Birth of the Nation* or *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a coalition of dissenters joined together to "rock the boat" over the character of Long Duk Dong. The National Asian American Telecommunications Association and Chinese for Affirmative Action issued a joint statement condemning *Sixteen Candles* and then-current hit *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) for portraying Asians as "cruelly etched comic foils or mindless, faceless inferior masses," insisting that such films "consciously or unconsciously determine people's attitudes towards Asians."[98] Freelance writer/activist Henry Ong spoke out about the character's lack of humanity. When Grandma kicks Long for driving the family car into the lake, Ong felt "it was like she was kicking an animal," and noting the audiences reaction during a showing of the film, wondered, "what they [the mostly-White audience] would think of me. Would they like to kick me too?" Some dissenting voices connected Long to historic oppressions suffered by Asian Americans. Commenting on Samantha's brother's reference to Long as a "Chinaman," Haru stated that referring to "a Chinese as a Chinaman is like referring to a black as a nigger." Filipino American UCLA senior Bernie Laforteza agreed, connecting the word to historic oppression and exploitation: "the use of the word goes back to the coolie days in the

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'16 CANDLES' INFLAMES THE ASIAN COMMUNITY

By SOPHIA KIM

The teen sex comedy "Sixteen Candles" has created an unexpected slow burn among some Asian-American community leaders, who use the words *horrified, shocked, offended* and *angry* to describe how they felt when they saw how a Chinese foreign-exchange student was portrayed.

"It seemed as if there was an intentional attempt, almost malicious, to stereotype Asians," said Duncan Lee, internal vice president of the Korean American Coalition and a third-year law student at UCLA. "The character was too offensive. I didn't laugh."

Certain references and scenes in the movie struck sensitive nerves. For instance, after the student had ruined the family car and is found sprawled on the front lawn, the car's owner reacts by kicking him.

"It was like she was kicking an animal," remembered Henry Ong, a free-lance writer and administrator for the Assn. of Asian Pacific American Artists. "I cringed when I saw that. I was really shocked."

Ong said the audience laughed at that scene and when the show ended and the lights came on, it made him wonder "what they [the audience] would think of me. Would they like to kick me too?"

would be protests at every theater that plays the film."

Sumi Haru, former president of the artists' association and a senior producer and moderator of two public-affairs shows on KTLA, said she reluctantly saw the movie because so many people had complained to her about it.

Not only were Asians portrayed negatively, "the scenes concerning the physically disabled were horrendous," she

Molly Ringwald, right, gives pre-wedding advice to sister Blanche Baker in "Sixteen Candles," which some say maliciously stereotypes Asians.

Once blacks were stereotyped in movies, "but they raised their voices and complained," said Elizabeth Szu, president of the South Bay Chinese American Assn. "Chinese people don't usually write to complain. We are usually silent."

Haru agreed: "It's true. It goes back to the World War II days. After [concentration] camp, people are afraid to rock the boat." But she and some of the others interviewed plan to do just that—rock

Figure 63. *Los Angeles Times* article—"*16 Candles* Inflames the Asian Community." Gedde Watanabe's portrayal of the wacky, animalistic Long Duk Dong "inflamed" many Asian American viewers, drawing fire from outraged activists who spoke out against *Sixteen Candles* and other contemporary Hollywood films featuring regressive images of Asian characters. (Sophia Kim, *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1984, P3.)

1800s when Chinese laborers were used to help build railroads."[99]

Writer-director Hughes declined official comment on the controversy, issuing an anemic defense of the character via his publicist, who explained that "as Hughes was growing up, he encountered at lot of people who took in foreign students and that the movie was attempting to poke fun at these people, who view them as nice and docile." Japanese-American actor Ken Watanabe similarly defended his role as Long Duk Dong, claiming that he felt the character "was helping to break a popular Asian stereotype—'submissive, smart'—because he was so 'far-out.'"[100] Despite Hughes' and Watanabe's justification of Long as a counter-stereotype, the character more clearly fits the type of the racialized, sexualized beastly Asian male typified in silent films like *The Cheat* and early sound films like *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1935). This perspective is

confirmed by responses of Asian American viewers who identified the consistent dehumanizing the character faces, being kicked like "an animal" and being called a "Chinaman," an evocation of an era when such individuals were expendable racialized laborers. Ultimately, the framing of Long Duk Dong as a sexually rapacious, exotic other represents a trend towards the proliferation of such images and characters in mainstream Hollywood films, disturbingly disrupting the colorblind frame by showing the persistence of regressive and virulently racist ideas and attitudes in US society. However, the response from the Asian American community (as well as the Black community's protest of *Soul Man*) captures a growing vocal anger against such representations in 1980s film, demonstrating that the conservative consensus of the Reagan Era fomented an undercurrent of rhetorical resistance that would continue throughout the decade.

Slumming in Chinatown: Female Asian Sexuality in Year of the Dragon

The tendency for 1980s films to frame racial others as sexual savages, as well the social protest of such representations, are further illustrated by the release and reception of *Year of the Dragon*. Although *Year of the Dragon* was not as successful at the box office as *Sixteen Candles*, the reaction to Long Duk Dong essentially became a dress rehearsal for the furor over *Dragon*, and the film's release approximately one year later sparked a national outrage among Asian Americans for its overt sexual racism. *Dragon* centers on Polish American policeman Stanley White (Mickey Rourke), a decorated officer and Vietnam veteran who makes it his mission to clean up the crime-filled streets of New York's Chinatown. The NYPD and the Chinatown crime syndicates observe an unofficial "truce" in which nonviolent illegal activities are overlooked as long as the bosses keep gang violence under control. Stanley has a reputation as a misanthropic racist trying to redeem the military losses of Vietnam via his crusade in Chinatown, and he

refuses to recognize the truce. His main target becomes Joey Tai (John Lone), a young, ruthless Chinese American "businessman" who rises to head New York's Triads, a transnational crime organization controlling Chinatown's extensive illegal operations. Discouraged by official channels, Stanley enlists the help of Tracy Tzu (Ariane Koizumi), a Chinese American TV news anchor anxious to make a name for herself, who agrees to expose key players in the crime underworld in exchange for story leads from Stanley. Stanley and Tracy begin having an affair, and they both become targets for going after the Triads. Stanley's boss fires him for defying the truce, while hitmen murder his wife and police partner. Conversely, Tracy's supervisors forbid her to pursue stories on Chinatown crime, and Joey Tai's thugs break into her apartment and gang rape her. *Dragon* climaxes with Stanley, recently stripped of his badge, embarking on a vigilante mission where he confronts Joey Tai and murders him in a violent shootout while escaping with serious injuries. The film's end scene depicts a funeral parade for Joey Tai meandering through Chinatown, interrupted by a crazed, vindictive Stanley breaking up the procession and trying to single-handedly "arrest" the crime kingpins heading the procession—an ambiguous scene that captures both the heroics and the futility of Stanley's war against the Triads. Stanley stumbles to the ground and is helped up by Tracy, and the final shot shows the two kissing and walking away together in an embrace.

The interracial romance between Stanley and Tracy in *Year of the Dragon* proved far more central to the plot than Long's comedic subplot in *Sixteen Candles*, and it also proved far more controversial. They first become involved after Stanley's wife, fed up with his disregard for their relationship, kicks him out of the house; he finds Tracey and invites himself up to her chic apartment with the promise of a "legitimate story." Stanley

begins to discuss Joey Tai's involvement in crime, and Tracy suggests that he is perhaps just a successful businessman. The following conversation ensues:

> *Stanley*: The Chinese are always involved in something, never involved in nothing. Remember that.
>
> *Tracy*: You're really cracked, you know that? The first time l saw you, l knew you were cracked. And a racist, too. Were you in Vietnam?
>
> *Stanley*: Yeah. Why?
>
> *Tracy*: I knew it. It ruined you.
>
> *Stanley*: First time l saw you, l hated your guts. I think l even hated you before l ever met you. I hated you on TV. I hated you in Vietnam . . . I hate the way you lie every night at six o'clock [on the television news]. I hate the way you kill real feelings. I hate everything that you stand for . . . So why do l wanna fuck you so bad?

Stanley then begins to make advances to her, and she informs him that she has a boyfriend named Roger, a privileged White lawyer. Stanley launches into a hostile attack on Tracy's boyfriend that devolves into racist insults: "If this Roger's so great, how come he didn't marry you? He didn't want a slant-eyed Roger the Fourth at Princeton?" Inexplicably, he grabs and kisses her. She slaps him twice as he picks her up and carries her over to the sofa, and the scene cuts as the two of them begin to make love. Several scenes later, he shows up with a suitcase and announces that he's moving in, and, despite her initial protests, she acquiesces and permits him to do so, even cooing "I love you" after they have sex for the second time. The film then progresses through the plot developments described above and ends with Stanley and Tracy walking away from his aborted citizen's arrest at the funeral parade as Stanley confesses: "I'd like to be a nice guy. I would. I just don't know how to be nice."

Year of the Dragon's racial and gender dynamics proved extremely problematic

Figure 64. Film still from *Year of the Dragon*. Stanley and Tracy strike up an uneasy and essentially abusive romance as they work together to bring down Chinatown's crime syndicate.

for a variety of reasons. First, Stanley spends the bulk of the film playing the part of the unrepentant racist, often hurling insults at Tracy like "slant-eyed". Other than his final admission that he does not "know how to be nice," the text offers no hint that Stanley has changed his racist views, and yet the film's "happily-ever-after" ending (set to a soundtrack coded as romantic and sentimental) invites the audience to be pleased with the pairing despite Stanley's virulent racism. This, of course, poses a number of troubling implications about the character of Tracy. She consistently accepts Stanley's abuse and somehow decides that she "loves" him, and other than telling him that he's a "cracked" racist, she never seems truly troubled by his racial superiority and misogyny. Tracy accepts his voracious advances, and his sexual pursuit of her despite her initial physical resistance (slapping him) contains overtones of rape. Seen in this light, *Dragon*'s invocation of interracial sexuality performs a perverse spectacle in which a White male aggressor arrives to dominate her, paralleling his attempts to "clean up" the lawless racial

degradations of Chinatown. Although the film presents Tracy as a confident, independent woman, Stanley's dominance entrances her, a narrative turn that can be read as a taming of her racial assertiveness and gendered power via White male supremacy. Ultimately, Tracy becomes a 1980s update of what Gina Marchetti calls the "submissive, exotic, and erotic" Asian woman that abounded in films of the 1940s and 1950s—a wild racialized/sexualized character malleable according to the desires of powerful White men that enter their lives and tame them.[101]

Critics largely hated *Year of the Dragon*, although recent events arguably predisposed reviewers to savage the film regardless of its actual worth. *Year of the Dragon* was the first film directed by Michael Cimino since his maligned *Heaven's Gate*, and in the five years separating these releases, Cimino had become the rhetorical scapegoat for the excesses of narcissistic auteurism. Paul Attanasio of the *Washington Post* called *Dragon* a "sprawling, grandiose mess that only Michael Cimino could make," praising the film's lush cinematography while denigrating the "hilariously overwrought" exploitation film dramatics.[102] More importantly, the reception history of *Dragon* captures a popular uprising of Asian American activists and critics denouncing the film's denigrating representations of the Chinese American community in general and Asian American women in particular. Asian American organizations in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Detroit picketed showings of the film, and connected the film to national spikes in violence and open discrimination against Asian Americans.[103] The Federation of Chinese Organizations of America and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (unsuccessfully) filed a libel suit in Los Angeles Superior Court against the film, claiming it exposed Chinese Americans to "hatred, contempt, ridicule

and obloquy."[104] Other critics specifically denounced the character of Tracy Tzu, condemning her as a racist, gendered throwback to a bygone era. Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote: "The aggressive young reporter collapses nearly every time he [Stanley] presses her for sex, turning her character ultimately into little more than a China doll in modern dress."[105] Judy Chu, instructor of Asian American studies at UCLA, stated: "She [Tracy] is a new version of an old stereotype of the Geisha girl. She is the fantasy of every white male who believes that Asian women . . . will do anything for them."[106] The "love" scene between Stanley and Tracy also sparked the ire of White feminists, inciting the Los Angeles County Commission for Women to write United Artists and Cimino a letter denouncing it for sending a "strong subliminal message that you can beat, batter and rape a woman and she comes up loving it."[107]

Activists successfully persuaded United Artists/MGM to pull 200 prints of the film and rerelease it with an apologetic disclaimer that read: "This film does not intend to demean or ignore the many positive features of Asian-American and specifically Chinese-American communities."[108] This can be seen as a small victory for a largely marginalized community in a period that was particularly hostile to identity-based claims against racism. The film proved to be a relative box office disappointment, although it is certainly debatable whether this can or cannot be attributed to the negative press generated by the film's opposition. In response to the furor, some (mostly, White men) spoke up in defense of *Dragon*, deflecting the accusation of racist exoticism via the rhetoric of colorblindness while accusing the film's detractors of hypersensitivity. Director Oliver Stone, who wrote *Dragon*'s screenplay, dismissed the accusation of racism as "unfortunate," assuring that he and Cimino undertook extensive research in

Chinatown to ensure the film was "true to life," adding that "there is no way to escape offending someone . . . if you're writing about something important."[109] Although Stone did not explicitly employ the language of colorblindness, he indirectly charged the detractors with blindness to reality in the name of antiracism, asserting that his "research" made him and an authority on Chinese American culture. His comments also evince a disconcerting centering on White maleness as the ultimate arbiter of racial knowledge, dismissing the identity claims of the film's Chinese American critics as missing how "important" the film's analysis was. Other defenders included *Los Angeles Times* reader Howard Veit who penned an editorial asserting "neither whites nor Asians are shown in a very "positive" light . . . This cop [Stanley] exploits all relationships for his own ends, with women and men of all races (perhaps this makes him a liberal?)."[110] Veit further claimed that the film equally denigrated Whites and Asians, and that Stanley, likewise, treated people of all races with contempt, capping off his defense with a subtle dig at "liberals," whose apparently misguided antiracist tirades blinded them to the film's narrative nuances. An unsigned essay in the neoliberal magazine *The Economist* offered the most comprehensive apologetic of the film, reading Stanley's unexplained shift from a hardcore racist to a man in love with a Chinese American woman as a miraculous colorblind conversion that extolled the virtues of tolerance: "[Stanley] thinks he hates all Asians, [but] finds . . . that he loves 'the enemy'. . . As he embraces Tracy Tzu it is clear that some kind of rebirth has taken place in him, too. The bigot has fought the war for so long that he has ended by making common cause with 'the enemy.'"[111] The *Economist* writer agrees with the detractors that Stanley is indeed "racist," but in true colorblind

fashion, his racial hatred is cured when he comes into intimate personal contact with a female member of "the enemy."

Ultimately, the furor over *Year of the Dragon* demonstrates that the 1980s cinematic representation of interracial sexuality as an erotic, exotic exhibition did not go unchallenged, and a coterie of diverse voices collectively mounted an assault on the film's portrayal of old race and gender stereotypes. The film detractors insisted that race did still matter, and that the dominant rhetoric of colorblindness proved essentially mythological in a nation where such regressive images of gendered racism enjoyed wide exposure through nationally released films. By contrast, the film's supporters deployed colorblind language to defend the film as a parable of individual triumph over an uninformed racist ideology through interracial sex/love, assuring viewers that the reactive racial hysteria amounted to little more than oversensitive hype. In the end, the critics, Asian American activists, and feminists who denounced the film successfully employed media outlets to counter what they described as destructive and regressive representations of sexual and racial otherness, and, at the very least, strong-armed the film studios to release the film with a disclaimer. However, this minor disclaimer did not come anywhere near stemming the tide of racially regressive images in Hollywood films, and the era would produce at least one more high profile, controversial text that mixed interracial eroticism with fetishistic exoticism.

That Old Black Magic: Interracial Exploitation in Angel Heart

Two years after *Year of the Dragon* provoked a backlash for its depiction of Asian female sexuality as an exoticized curio waiting to be dominated by an aggressive White paramour, the neo-noir/horror film *Angel Heart* featured a controversial, explicit Black/White interracial sex scene that incited a number of contradictory reactions that

further illustrate the discursive complexities of race, sex, and gender in "Reagan's America." *Angel Heart* was helmed by *Fame* director Alan Parker and starred *Year of the Dragon*'s Mickey Rourke as Harry Angel, a Brooklyn-based private detective who gets embroiled in an underground world of murder and occult practices. The plot begins with a sophisticated looking man named Louis Cyphre (Robert De Niro) hiring the rumpled gumshoe Harry to discover the whereabouts of Johnny Favorite, a musician who owes Mr. Cyphre certain unidentified "collateral." The film's somewhat convoluted plot follows Harry as he tracks down various clues and interviews old acquaintances regarding the mysterious musician. Things quickly become stranger as interviewees turn up murdered shortly after Harry makes contact with them. His investigation takes him to New Orleans after he learns that Favorite was involved with a secret lover named Evangeline Proudfoot, a Black woman who practiced voodoo and black magic. In New Orleans, he discovers that Favorite's lover has died but left behind a 17 year old mixed race daughter named Epiphany Proudfoot who herself has an infant son. (Epiphany was played by Lisa Bonet, an actor widely recognizable for playing Denise Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, Cliff Huxtable/Bill Cosby's third oldest child, a point that becomes extremely important later on.)

The same evening that Harry meets Epiphany, he witnesses her participating in an erotically-charged voodoo ritual in which she dances suggestively to pounding drums, smears chicken blood on her half-naked body, and leaps onto a supine fellow reveler while simulating the sex act. She also informs Harry that him her son resulted from a voodoo god impregnating her during one of these religious ritual, further adding to the intrigue. As more of Favorite's acquaintances die suddenly, Epiphany appears at Harry's

hotel for protection, where the two make love. The orgiastic scene is intercut with fantasy sequences of a voodoo orgy, and drops of blood rain down on the writhing couple with an increasing intensity that ends with Harry choking Epiphany at the moment of climax. Eventually, Harry learns from an informant that Favorite was a powerful occult magician who sold his soul to Satan in exchange for musical stardom, but reneged on the bargain shortly thereafter. Ultimately, the film resolves in a twist finale when Harry realizes that he and Johnny Favorite are the same person, that he has perpetrated the trail of murders, and that Louis Cyphre (i.e., "Lucifer," a pseudonym for Satan) has been chasing him to collect his soul. *Angel Heart* ends with Harry/Johnny returning to his hotel room to find his daughter/lover Epiphany murdered with a police officer waiting for him.

Angel Heart combined aspects of film noir with the psychological thriller and the gory splatter movie, the latter elements coalescing to create the explicit blood-soaked interracial sex scene. The scene proved controversial both before and after the film's release and sparked a vigorous debate about race, sex, and the regulation of mainstream film content. Before diving into this discussion, I will set the context for the film's reception, for the debate over *Angel Heart* only becomes intelligible in light of two recent but interrelated trends: the mainstreaming of exploitation content and the lingering controversies around the MPAA's film rating system. I have argued previously that the blockbuster as a cultural institution should be understood as the mainstreaming of the form and content of classic exploitation movies—easily accessible plots, reliance on genre conventions, emphasis on spectacle over narrative, etc. Unsurprisingly, the ascendancy of the blockbuster coincided with (and contributed to) the collapse of the classic exploitation film industry as a whole. 1970s blockbusters like the blood-soaked

Figure 65. Film still from *Angel Heart.* Harry Angel becomes enamored with Epiphany Proudfoot after secretly watching her perform a voodoo ritual in which she slits a chicken's throat, douses herself in blood, and dances erotically to tribal drum music. This gory sequence foreshadows a later controversial scene in which Harry and Epiphany make love as blood rains down on their writhing bodies.

horror film *Jaws* (1975) and the pulpy space opera *Star Wars* brought exploitation content to mainstream multiplexes, rendering the very existence of exploitation studios specializing in niche film genres anachronistic.

Additionally, the 1968 ratings system had so significantly liberalized film content that, by the 1980s, explicit depictions of gore, sex, and transgressive behavior could be routinely viewed in R-rated wide releases like the bloody *Friday the 13th* films and sexually violent dramas like *Cruising* (1980) and *Body Double* (1984). Concurrently, the growing accessibility of pornographic films through cable television and VHS tape sales and rentals allowed viewers to consume adult content in private spaces instead of in public porn palaces. By the end of the decade, home video helped adult film move from the fringes of the media landscape to become a multimillion dollar industry with a national audience.[112] If one could now enjoy big budget exploitation at sparkling, clean multiplexes or in the privacy of one's home, the rural drive-ins and run-down urban

theaters that historically exhibited such films offered declining appeal. Throughout the 1980s, exploitation movie grindhouses and pornographic theaters around the country shuttered their doors.[113] In light of this, the spectacle-ridden mixture of sex and violence in *Year of the Dragon* and *Angel Heart* should be seen as part of the general trend towards the mainstreaming of exploitation content, and the resurgence of interracial exoticism in 1980s cinema, long a staple of the exploitation film, could be read as the completion of a cycle of Hollywood cooptation that climaxed in the 1980s. However, the mainstreaming of exploitation content often came with a price. Bankable stars plus risqué content did not always equal box office success, and big budget films with lurid imagery invited stricter scrutiny than the seedy, low budget films of the past. *Year of the Dragon* offers a case in point—despite its spectacular sex and violence, it failed to even recoup its estimated $24 million budget, and the ire it provoked among liberal critics, feminists, and Asian American activists branded it with an aura of tawdriness that it could not escape.[114]

The mainstreaming of exploitation content also bumped up against the MPAA's "voluntary" ratings system, a structure that the major studios were still beholden to as they brought sex and violence to the movie masses. The perceived cinematic onslaught of violence and sex incited protests from groups as disparate as antipornography feminists and Moral Majority evangelical activists, and the ultimate arbitrariness of the entire ratings process increasingly came under fire from edgy, envelope pushing filmmakers. In the mid-1980s, the MPAA had settled on a ratings scale that included G, PG, PG-13, R, and X. Recall that the X rating had been created in the late 1960s *not* to designate pornography, but adults-only films with content not suitable for minors. Early on, the MPAA even assigned the X rating to a number of critically acclaimed films, including

the 1969 Oscar winner for Best Picture, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Unfortunately for the MPAA, they failed to copyright the X rating, opening the door for the budding adult film industry to essentially hijack the rating and market their non-MPAA fare as X-rated films to the point that, in 1980s parlance, the rating essentially became synonymous with pornography.[115] This MPAA had not yet come up with a rating between R and X, and they struggled to mitigate the growth of graphic content and appease industry insiders, activist critics, and the nation's diverse film audience (many of whom were paying to see salacious R-rated films). Texts like *Angel Heart* often toed the line between R and X, and the MPAA routinely asked directors, who viewed an X rating as box office poison, to excise certain shots and/or scenes from their films and resubmit them for review, frequently repeating the process multiple times until the MPAA's review board felt satisfied with the changes.[116]

The flap over the mainstreaming of exploitation content highlights the cultural fissures that divided and united 1980s culture along the intricate lines of sex, gender, political ideology, and morality. Race also further troubled these already complex issues, a point perfectly illustrated by the history of *Angel Heart*'s rating and reception. Several days before the film's opening in March, 1987, advance media reviews detailed the controversy at the MPAA surrounding the film's bloody sex scene. Approximately three weeks before its release, the MPAA notified director Alan Parker that *Angel Heart* deserved an X rating. In the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Parker penned an article explaining that the MPAA "refused to let me know what it actually was that they objected to . . . [hinting] at 'Something lurking in Reel 5.'" Reel 5, of course, contained the sex scene. Parker appealed the decision and lost, then reluctantly cut 3 seconds, then

went through several more rounds of cuts until finally gaining approval after cutting 10 seconds from the scene.[117] Critics inevitably weighed in on the fray, with nearly every review surveyed (both positive and negative) choosing a side, using the incident to highlight the entire capricious process of rating films. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* offered a strong critique of the MPAA, calling the rating system "pernicious," and likening the closed-door proceedings of the board to the secretive actions of hooded Ku Klux Klansmen.[118] Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine offered a more measured critique, arguing that the sex scene was "no more extreme than the acrobatics in many an R-rated teen farce, and the carnal violence was a lot less toxic than the damage Freddy or Jason [respectively, killers of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* horror franchises] or any other horror-show serial killer wreaks in an eyewink."[119]

While some journalists saw *Angel Heart* as an opportunity to blast the film ratings system, others, like Alan Bell of the *Los Angeles* Sentinel, posited larger forces as the "true" source of the issue:

> Whether or not *Angel Heart* is a praiseworthy film has been eclipsed by a more immediate and burning question: How hot is that infamous interracial sex scene between "Cosby"-kid Lisa Bonet and Mickey Rourke? The MPAA Rating Administration . . . at one time felt it was so hot it needed an X . . . I understand that it [the X-rated version] was no stronger than what routinely appears in other R-rated fare. It may have been the sight of a Black and White couple together that offended the Rating Board.[120]

Bell's comments offer an interesting perspective on the controversy. First, he noted the discussion and interest generated by the "infamous" love scene between the film's two leads. The insertion of the word "interracial" is important in that most of the reviews did not overtly mention the racial difference between the lovers in question. Unsurprising that Bell, writing for a historically Black newspaper, would defy the colorblind logic of

the day and note that the racial mixture added a level of transgressive intrigue to the proceedings, even going so far as to posit the interracial angle as the source of the MPAA's concerns. Also, Bell notably identifies Bonet as a "Cosby-kid." Alan Parker sheds light on the significance of this comment, citing Bonet's association with the squeaky clean, pro-family sitcom *The Cosby Show*, then in the middle of its third season, as *the* source of the problem. "'Cosby Kid in 'X' Sizzler' is an easy headline for the press," he commented, tying the reaction of the board to the conservative leanings of the era by sarcastically commenting that the cuts amounted to "no great loss to . . . Ronald Reagan's America."[121] Shales of the *Washington Post* stated that the MPAA attacked the picture "because the nude scene in question involves TV's Bonet."[122] Many on the Right held up Bill Cosby and his famous sitcom as promoting what Fiske calls "pure Reaganism . . . the achievement, happiness, and harmony of a professional nuclear family, who happened to be Black."[123] According to critics like Shales and director Parker, Bonet's appearance in *Angel Heart*, her first cinematic role, conflicted with the image of middle class, Black wholesomeness that she embodied as a "Cosby kid," and her association with raw interracial sexuality jeopardized the entire conservative cultural construction to which *The Cosby Show* contributed. Fascinatingly, the patriarchal figure of Bill Cosby loomed large as a major shaping influence of the responses to Bonet's role in *Angel Heart*. Stephen Hunter of the Baltimore *Sun* ironically intoned that "Dr. Cliff Huxtable would not permit his kids to see" the film.[124] Lynn Norment of *Ebony* magazine reported that Bonet "created an uproar for loyal *Cosby Show* fans [who] didn't think Denise was that type of girl," further stating that Bonet further "fueled the fire by baring her breasts in *Interview* magazine" shortly thereafter.

Some journalists even garnered an official statement from Bill Cosby, who claimed that "he did indeed give Lisa his 'approval' to do *Angel Heart*," but that he did not see the film because it "doesn't offer my appetite anything."[125] Other accounts portray this exchange as one of betrayal: "Sources close to Cosby maintain the way Bonet described the film and the finished product are a long way from each other . . . Sources in the Cosby camp are annoyed with Bonet and feel she deliberately misled Cosby."[126] It should be noted that Bonet was at the time a 19 year old *adult*, yet several reviews consistently portrayed her as a "Cosby kid" and reproduced Bill Cosby's comments as if he were the real-life father of a minor. Bonet defended her career decision as an attempt to break out of "teen roles" and recast herself in a "meatier" part as a sexually assured, competent woman, yet media accounts consistently framed the saga as a wayward daughter shaming her dignified father.[127] Abiola Sinclair, a Black female journalist for the *New York Amsterdam News*, pitted *The Cosby Show*'s televised world of wholesome Blackness against the excesses of a sex-obsessed and racist Hollywood in a scathing article tellingly titled "Huxtable Daughter in Shameful Skin Flick:"

> This film is a cheap throwback to the exploitation films of the 30s and 40s where Blacks were pictured dancing wildly around a cauldron to voodoo drums . . . It reverts to the more recent exploitation films of the 70s where Black women were sex objects . . . This move on her [Bonet's] part can only serve to perpetuate a growing image of Black women as immoral . . . The Black race suffers as well. Here we have whites portraying African-rooted religion . . . in a distorted bestial light.

Sinclair's analysis confirms my assertion that the interracial spectacle in *Angel Heart* amounts to, in her words, a "throwback" to representational frames of past exploitation films. She reads Epiphany's hypersexuality as part of a "growing image" that casts Black women as morally debased, and connects this to an overall trend in presenting Blacks as

"bestial." The article's title calls *Angel Heart* a "skin flick," a popular euphemism for pornographic movies, further linking the film to the most disreputable of media texts.[128]

Sinclair continued her attack on Bonet and the film by placing in the context of the larger struggle against racism in Reagan's America: "[*Angel Heart*] comes at a bad time for Blacks politically and socially. A time when our enemies seek constantly to project us as human waste . . . [when] racism finds fuel in casting us in a negative light as criminals and drug addicts and degenerates." Although Sinclair never identifies who "our enemies" are, we can assume that she has in mind the White cultural forces promoting the colorblind discourse that racial difference no longer held any meaning and that Black progress had essentially been achieved. Ironically, although many critics then and now lambasted Cosby's sitcom for promoting "White cultural mores in blackface for the entertainment . . . of the White middle class," Sinclair vociferously defended *The Cosby Show* as "the first time in history a Black-produced show aired where Blacks did not have to alter their behavior to . . . [please] whites." Sinclair even situates Bonet in a racialized conspiracy theory to undermine Bill Cosby's work: "Have certain groups found a way to knock Cosby off of his 2-year ratings pedestal? Have they done it through Lisa Bonet?" It is difficult to know what "groups" Sinclair speaks of or how what role Bonet plays in this supposed plot, but she clearly reads *Angel Heart*'s interracial sex show as the newest manifestation of an ongoing exploitive agenda to represent Black people in general and Black women in particular as dehumanized others instead of fully-human members of US society, represented by the Huxtable family.[129] Whether or not one agrees with Sinclair's jeremiad, she incisively connects the film's blood-soaked sex scene and characterization of Epiphany as a hypersexualized Black woman to the long cinematic history of

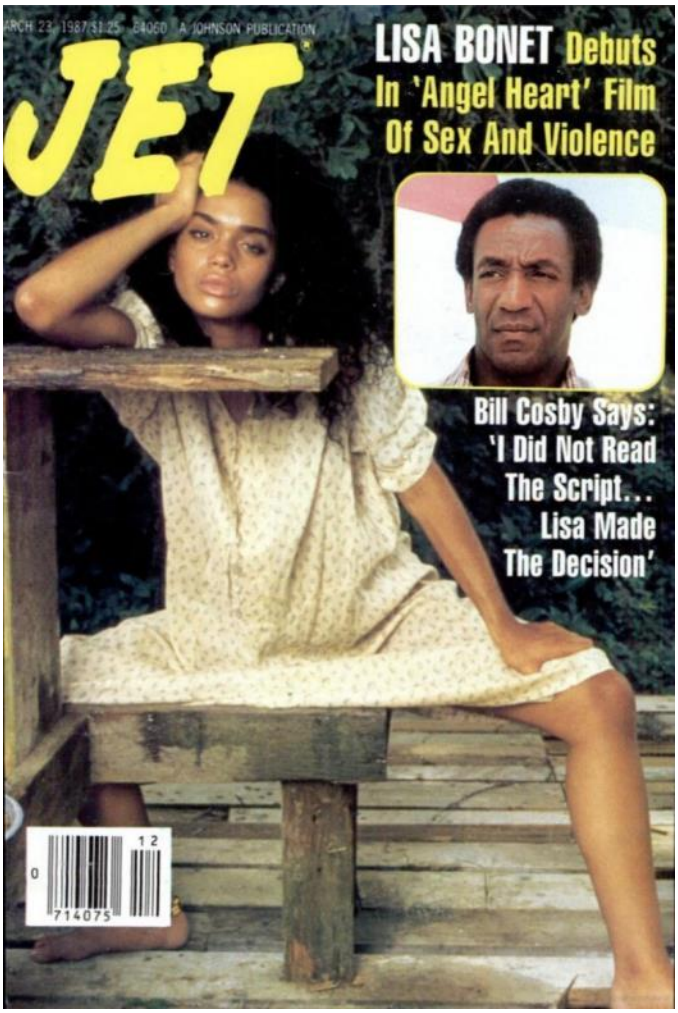

Figure 66. *Jet* magazine cover—"Lisa Bonet." The figure of Bill Cosby loomed large in the controversy over *Angel Heart* as critics discussed the impact of "Cosby kid" Lisa Bonet starring in this gory, sexually explicit thriller. *Jet* magazine ran a cover story on the flap, depicting Bonet in a suggestive pose with Cosby hovering overhead, as if observing the scene with stern disapproval. (*Jet*, March 23, 1987)

exoticized and eroticized representations of racialized others, placing her critique in a larger struggle against White-produced images of non-White female sexuality.

Taken together, *Sixteen Candles*, *Year of the Dragon*, and *Angel Heart* stand as the most important texts for performing the era's penchant for representing interracial sexuality as sexual and racial fetishism. A number of contemporary trends, including the collapse of the exploitation movie industry and the overall growth in extreme content in

Hollywood films, helped create an environment in which mainstream film fare mined the depths of exploitation's back catalog and offered up high concept revisionings of reliably transgressive images of explicit violence and interracial sex. However, the expansion of these cinematic images did not go unchallenged, and a chorus of voices from across US culture leveraged local and national outlets to express concern and outrage over representations of minorities, increased sexual content, and the intersection of the two. Proponents of *Sixteen Candles* and *Year of the Dragon* defended these films via the dominant discourse of colorblindness, accusing detractors of liberal oversensitivity and asserting that the films honestly portrayed the absurdity of exchange student host families and the criminal subculture of New York's Chinatown respectively. However, the Orientalist exoticism of Asians in these texts sparked outrage from a number of groups who accused the coterie of White men largely responsible for the film of reifying old stereotypes of Asian men as buffoonish beasts and Asian women as submissive and exoticized objects ready to bend their wills and expose their bodies to the whims of powerful White men. The Black/White horror-and-sex spectacle of *Angel Heart* provoked a more complicated discussion, particularly around actor Lisa Bonet's depiction of an insatiable, violent Black sexuality. Some criticized the MPAA's initial X rating as evidence of an irrational, arbitrary conservative impulse to protect the fictive integrity of the Huxtable family, the most beloved and debated racial image of the so-called "Cosby decade." Conversely, defenders of the show cast television dad Bill "Cliff Huxtable" Cosby as Bonet's actual father, reporting Cosby as granting Bonet "permission" to do the controversial film followed by paternalistic disappointment at the explicit final result. Finally, some Black respondents expressed outrage at the film,

reading Bonet's sexual performance as a Reaganesque update of regressively damaging stereotypes about the inherent degenerate rapaciousness of Black female sexuality. These disparate texts, and the multifaceted reactions they incited, offer a complex tapestry of historical images and voices that contradict the era's dominant colorblind logic, demonstrating that race *did* indeed continue to matter, and that the post-Civil Rights era did not, in fact, bring an end to racism and contentious racial discourse. Additionally, the reactions to *Year of the Dragon* and *Angel Heart* in particular illustrate the complex interactions between race and gender in depictions of interracial sexuality, and these films' hypersexualized representations of "good" and "bad" women of color sparked antiracist and feminist critiques of media images primarily produced by and for White males largely ignorant of the complexities of contemporary race and gender dynamics.

Conclusion

Historian Manning Marable has argued that eras such as the 1980s were characterized by interracial "interaction without understanding," and the growing gospel of colorblindness seemed particularly good at promoting racial obliviousness and heightening tensions in the name of ignoring racial difference as an act of racial healing.[130] As we have seen, 1980s film performs a complicated mixture of colorblind affirmations and racially-charged images, a complex web of cultural interests and identity standpoints captured in popular texts that incited a wave of divergent responses. Retrospectively, the 1980s stands as a key transitional decade in the narrative of the cinematic representation of interracial sexuality. For many, the ascension of Reagan and the New Right marked the death of the counterculture and the triumph of a dormant and overshadowed conservatism. A traditionalist ethos generally drove the ever-evolving

discourse about the meaning of race, as right-leaning pundits and policymakers spread the gospel of colorblindness, arguing that racial strife and racism lay largely in our nation's past. Filmic representations of interracial sexuality shifted with the times, simultaneously reflecting and driving the discussion. Teen films like *Fame* and hip hop musicals like *Breakin'* presented multiracial mélanges in which cool kids from disparate racial backgrounds easily met and fell in love around shared interests in music, dance, and public performance. This film cycle marked the official introduction of a new and influential cinematic frame which represented interracial sexuality as colorblind romance—easy, conflict-free relationships attempting to representationally erase the tense, politicized cross-racial interactions of the countercultural era.

However, a cluster of texts presented critiques to the gospel of colorblindness, sometimes while simultaneously preaching the benefits of racial forgetting and forgiveness. The romantic comedy *Soul Man* argued that the deepest racial divides could be crossed through romancing a racial other (and literally walking in their shoes). While nakedly promoting the virtues of colorblind love, it also expressed ambivalence about its own position, asserting the continued problem of racism in US culture, mocking the cries that affirmative action and "reverse discrimination" hurt White privilege, and comically depicting the dehumanizing effects of race/sex fetishism. Conversely, *Sixteen Candles* uncritically reveled in race/sex fetishism, and the teen comedy's lone non-White character caused an uproar for his portrayal of Asian men as sexually-insatiable, cartoonish beasts. *Year of the Dragon* and *Angel Heart* took interracial exoticism even further, wedding the old exploitation industry staples of graphic violence and interracial

eroticism to create controversial race and sex spectacles that incited a firestorm of antiracist and antisexist critique.

Ultimately, the growing incidences of protest against minority cinematic representation foreshadowed a coming tide of social and cinematic ferment that would openly challenge the "common sense" wisdom of colorblindness. The Reagan Era would come to a close as identity-based agitation was mounting something of a militant backlash. As the 1960s generation reached middle age and entered positions of cultural and political influence, and as the moral and political skirmishes of the Reagan Era intensified and expanded, filmic depictions of interracial coupling evolved to participate in the ongoing battle of ideas about the meaning of race in US society. The dominant cinematic frame during the 1990s would be a relatively untroubled continuation of the previous decade's frame of colorblindness, and scores of films would follow *Fame*'s lead in presenting interracial couples as ordinary, uncontroversial fixtures of post-Civil Rights America. Concurrently, a young generation of multiracial stars would offer themselves to the filmgoing public as utopian symbols of race-mixing, literally embodying the virtues of ignoring racial difference.

Of course, the expansion of colorblind cinematic discourses in the 1990s did not go unchallenged, and the decade witnessed a boom in independent minority films offering unique and powerful counterframes to the meaning of race and interracial sexuality. Black male director Spike Lee's racially-charged *Do the Right Thing* appeared as something of a warning shot, an aggressive repudiation of the colorblind ideology of the Cosby Decade. Lee presaged a cinematic onslaught of texts that would redefine the meaning of interracial sexuality in an era reportedly "wracked by culture wars" between

the Nation's traditional forces and the subaltern elements that the previous decade's conservative ethos had largely repressed.[131] A new generation of young minority filmmakers explored the cultural politics of largely unexamined interracial couplings and/or offering interpretations of the meanings of interracial sexuality from identity positions that had been historically silenced in US cinema. Additionally, Hollywood filmmakers of a variety of race and gender identity positions offered thought provoking excavations of our nation's interracial past, working to further undermine the assumption of colorblindness while exploring the ways in which our national interracial past continued to fuel the culture wars of the present.

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Chapter Five

Mixed Reviews
Interracial Sexuality in US Film, 1990-2001

Racism will not disappear by focusing on race . . . Any American, I hope, feels badly about [the past] . . . We can go back and have all sorts of apologies. But will one more child read because of it? The emotional symbolism [of Congress apologizing for US slavery] as an avoidance of problem-solving strikes me as a dead end.[1]

Newt Gingrich, 1997

Americans share common values and aspirations . . . Dialogue is a tool for finding common ground . . . Honest, open racial dialogue is difficult.[2]

The Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, 1998

I have the right . . .
To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic.
To change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once.
To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.
To freely choose whom I befriend and love.[3]

Maria P. P. Root, 1994

Introduction

If the blockbuster ruled the 1980s box office and dominated the landscape of film culture, the 1990s proved a time of agitation and identity-based insurrection, a cinematic return of the repressed countering the consensus-driven ethos of the previous decade. A generation of filmmakers resurrected the New Hollywood spirit of cinematic protest through a cluster of provocative and often popular films exploring the cultural politics of identity in a supposedly "colorblind" nation. Many of these culturally insurgent auteurs saw the trope of interracial sexuality as an instantly recognizable symbol that could be framed and cinematically re-represented to prove a variety of contemporary claims about the meaning(s) of race and race relations. Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) put interracial

sexuality squarely at the center of the racial debate, arguing that the issue of Black/White sexuality remained as volatile and meaning-laden in the 1990s as it did in the 1960s. A concurrent wave of filmmakers further complicated the matter by introducing other markers of difference into the mix. Foreign born directors like Mira Nair (*Mississippi* Masala, [1991]) and Wayne Wang (*The Joy Luck Club* [1993]) placed interracial sexuality in a globalized context, representing sex/race issues in the US as being further complicated by globalized migration and transnational subjectivities, while "new" queer filmmakers like Cheryl Dunye (*The Watermelon Woman* [1996]) examined the ways that sexual orientation and interracial sexuality complicated each other. Concurrently, seasoned independent directors and Hollywood stalwarts mined our interracial past in order to make sense of the racially contentious present. John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996) depicted a small Texas town struggling to bury an interracial past that continually resurfaces, and a string of interracial biopics on historical cross-racial romances, most notably the alleged affair between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, sparked new debates about the uses and abuses of interracial history in present debates.[4]

In spite of these provocative filmic statements on the meaning of interracial sexuality in US society, cinematic colorblindness—the presentation of interracial coupling as incidental and unremarkable—remained the dominant filmic frame for interracial sexuality. The romantic thriller *The Bodyguard* (1992) employed well-worn Hollywood romance tropes while incidentally placing an interracial love story at its center, all without commenting on or drawing attention to racial difference. The film's incredible nationwide popularity perhaps suggested that audiences had "moved past" race, choosing not to see it as an "interracial romance" movie but a romance film in

which the protagonists "happened" to be Black and White. *The Bodyguard* also demonstrated that incidental interracialism could score at the big box office, and more so than *Fame* (1980) or any other 1980s film, it marked the beginning of the cinematic spread of colorblind love, with every major movie genre from horror to the family feature framing interracial coupling as unremarkable fixtures of an ostensible colorblind consensus. The decade also produced a spate of multiracial film stars, including singer/actor Jennifer Lopez and muscleman Vin Diesel, whose racial ambiguity allowed them to play a surprising range of different racial roles while appealing to a broad demographic. These young, versatile actors became key markers of the zeitgeist, with commentators touting them as symbols of the virtues of interracial mixing, interpreting their popularity with a variety of audiences as "proof" that multiraciality could transcend the old barriers of racial hierarchy.[5]

These films emerged from a culture deeply embroiled in a caustic debate about the shifting meanings of race and interracial sexuality in an America that many assumed to be officially "colorblind." The three quotes that open this chapter capture the range of perspectives in this national disagreement. Newt Gingrich, conservative darling and then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives, represented the Right's ongoing insistence that race no longer mattered in US society, asserting that racism was a problem of the past. When a liberal Democrat introduced House legislation calling on Congress to officially apologize the US's participation in the African slave trade, Gingrich vigorously denounced the move as "emotional symbolism," a wrong-headed gesture that failed to address contemporary issues such as childhood illiteracy. He punctuated his dismissal of the bill by insisting that "racism will not disappear by focusing on race," upholding the

Right's position that not talking about or seeing race provided the best path towards racial progress.[6] As the Right insisted on the inappropriateness of racially conscious discourse, racial issues gripped the national discourse after a decade of relative suppression. From the 1992 urban unrest in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict to the 1995 O.J. Simpson trial, racial spectacles dominated the decade, inciting an explosion of contentious discourses that seriously destabilized the Reagan Era's valorization of colorblindness as the cure to all ills. In response to ongoing racial dramas, President Bill Clinton, publicly expressed his desire for healing across racial divides and declared a "national conversation on race," announcing in 1997 the appointment of a seven member advisory board to educate the President and the public on ways to understand the nation's growing diversity and persistent divides. Known as the President's Initiative on Race, the panel released a report a year later presenting a number of policy proposals and suggestions for response, including a call for individuals to engage in intentional, cross-cultural dialogue. The report noted that "few citizens have been involved in . . . genuine dialogue on racial issues," encouraging the importance of racial discourse, even though many found "honest, open racial dialogue" difficult.[7]

As Clinton's Initiative on Race held up difficult dialogue as the response to entrenched disparities and increasing diversity, Gingrich lashed out, derisively insisting that "we've been commissioned and commissioned and commissioned" with no tangible result, reiterating colorblindness as the only appropriate response to increased racial tensions.[8] Taken together, the suggestions from the Initiative on Race and Gingrich's dismissive comments perform the two "sides" of the conflict over the meaning of race. On one side stood a broad coalition of liberals, multiculturalists, and identity-based

activists who saw racism and racial justice as systemic issues that could only be redressed through discourse leading to political and social action. On the other side stood a coalition of mostly-White Americans forged out of Nixon's "silent minority" and the New Right's "moral majority." Broadly speaking, the Right viewed race-based claims as "playing the race card"—emotional exploitation of "White guilt" over long-buried racism—to gain special protections or privileges. In the midst of this battle rose the Multiracial Movement, a national coterie of activists agitating for the official recognition of mixed race individuals, challenging the thinking of those on both the Left and the Right on the very meaning of racial categorization. The decades following *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) saw the growth of millions of interracial couples and mixed race children, and many began to agitate for the recognition of "multiracial" as a unique demographic group deserving all the rights and respect afforded those claiming single race identities. Dr. Maria P. P. Root's "Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage" stands as a founding statement of the multiracial movement, and it captures the desire expressed by many mixed race people to break free of rigid racial binaries and form their own racial identity just as freely as they might choose whom they "befriend and love."[9] Rhetorically and politically, the Multiracial Movement combined the liberal call for identity-based claims with the conservative ethos of individual rights and colorblindness in government policies, straddling political and racial lines while causing a mixture of joy and consternation for some on both sides of the so-called "culture wars."

The cinematic image of interracial sexuality could not remain static in an era marked by such passionate and polarized racial discourses, and the movies played a very important role in the national discussion about the meaning of race. In this final chapter,

we will unpack the ongoing history of interracial sexuality in US films, focusing on the major representational frames of the 1990s: interracial sexuality as a multicultural battleground and interracial sexuality as incidental interracialism. I will be selecting a set of films between 1990 and 2001, beginning in the year that Spike Lee released *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), a text that included a brief but prescient diatribe on the deeply politicized nature of interracial love, and ending with the year that multiracial actor Halle Barry made history by winning the Academy Award for Best Actress for her interracially sexualized role in *Monster's Ball* (2001). The 1990s essentially established representational precedents for the depiction of interracial sexuality that continue to populate mass culture in 2015, creating a crucial link between the Reagan Era and the "Age of Obama." This chapter will detail the solidification of two broad representational camps, one in which interracial sexuality means nothing at all and "proves" that love has essentially conquered race, and another in which the complexities of race continue to trouble the representation of interracial sexuality, framing such encounters as troubled conflicts resting uneasily above the buried fault lines of race.

Border Wars:
Interracial Sexuality in Identity Cinema

Interracial Fever in the Early Films of Spike Lee

Director Spike Lee emerged in the late 1980s as a promising young Black filmmaker trying to break into an industry with little opportunities for non-Whites. He has deservedly received much credit for sparking a new wave of racially conscious filmmaking, and critics and historians have cast Lee's early work as archetypical of 1990s identity filmmaking in general, noting how his films served the dual role of being mouthpieces for the community he represented as well as being "information conduits" to

a dominant culture un/misinformed about his people.[10] However, commentators have largely missed the pervasiveness of interracial sexuality in his early work, as well as the ways in which Lee's framing of cross-racial sexual relations became paradigmatic for such images in 1990s minority cinema. Lee first gained commercial attention with *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), a successful independent sex comedy that convinced Columbia Pictures to fund his first major studio release, *School Daze* (1988). Lee conceived *School Daze* as a musical lampooning campus life at historically Black colleges, comedically examining the intraracial tensions experienced among the students. The film explored a number of identity issues, including a trenchant colorism that pitted light skinned Black students against their dark skinned rivals. Lee memorably captured this in a song-and-dance number titled "Straight and Nappy" in which the fairer toned, straight haired "wannabees" and the darker complected, kinky haired "jigaboos" alternately sing about the virtues of their hair type and the evils of their opponent's via charged slights like "tar baby" and "high yellow heifer." This light/dark intraracial division stems from the history of master/slave sexual relations which created a hierarchy of color, an unfortunate legacy in which lighter skinned Blacks were considered more desirable and worthy of better societal treatment. As if to drive the point home, Lee reportedly went as far as giving the actors represented by the two groups separate hotel accommodations based on skin color—a "shitty" hotel for the dark skinned group and "plush" arrangements for the light skinned group—in an effort to elicit believable onscreen tensions.[11]

While *School Daze* does not directly deal with interracial sexuality, Lee's satiric commentary on intraracial colorism demonstrates his interests in cinematically exploring how the legacies of past racial/sexual dominations continue to haunt contemporary Black

Figure 67. Film still from *School Daze*. Spike Lee's satiric musical included a number titled "Straight and Nappy" in which the straight haired "wannabees" and the kinky haired "jigaboos" argued over whose skin tone and hair was more desirable, praising the virtues of their own complexions and hair types while throwing a litany of racially-tinged insults at the other side.

life. A similar dynamic characterizes Lee's third feature *Do the Right Thing* (1989). The film centers on the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, dramatically depicting a world in which impoverished Blacks struggle to thrive financially and culturally in an environment powerfully shaped by outside forces, including racist policeman, White business owners, and yuppies trying to gentrify the neighborhood. The film climaxes when White police murder a Black man during an arrest, inciting a crowd of angry Black residents to attack the police and burn down a pizza shopped owned by an Italian American family. Although *Do the Right Thing* contains no Black/White sexual relations, Lee has stated that the film's theme of White police brutality sparking a Black riot was partially inspired by the 1987 accusations of Tawana Brawley, a Black teen who alleged that a gang of White men including a police officer had sexually brutalized her.[*]

[*] The investigation received national media attention, and as the case proceeded, evidence began to mount that Brawley had fabricated the entire incident, perhaps to avoid punishment for staying out too late. A special state grand jury eventually ruled her claims to be false. See: Kaleem Aftab, *Spike Lee: That's My*

Lee referenced the story by including a brief shot of a graffiti covered wall scrawled with the tag "Tawana told the truth." If interracial sexuality peripherally shaped Lee's early studio films, he directly addressed the issue in his fourth film *Mo' Better Blues*, a drama centered on the dysfunctional personal life of Black jazz trumpeter Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington). In one scene, Bleek's all-Black band is readying for a club performance backstage when drummer Left Hand Lacey (Giancarlo Esposito) brings his White French girlfriend into the dressing room. The other band members instantly react, berating him for his predilection for White women. Left Hand angrily responds by insisting that she's a "sister," to which they respond with cacophonous derision, shoving a nude pinup of a Black women in front of him and exclaiming "*that's* a sister . . . you make a choice!" Although a brief moment in the film, the ridicule that Left Hand endures by his Black male bandmates suggests that Blacks pairing with Whites amounted to "selling out," and that "real" Black people (especially men) value their own race as sexual partners.

Lee expanded this argument and placed interracial romance at the center of his next feature *Jungle Fever*, a drama featuring an ensemble cast who air a host of competing perspectives on the meanings of Black/White sexuality. Like *Do the Right Thing*, Lee found inspiration for *Jungle Fever* in an incident of sexually tinged racial violence. In 1989, Black male teen Yusef Hawkins travelled into the heavily-Italian American Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst and was shot to death by a gang of White teens who wrongfully thought he was dating a White girl in the neighborhood.[12] Although the film contains no such incident, Lee successfully represented the passionate

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Story and I'm Sticking to It, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 74–75; Mark Memmott, "15 Years Later, Tawana Brawley Has Paid 1 Percent Of Penalty," *NPR*, August 5, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/08/05/209194252/15-years-later-tawana-brawley-has-paid-1-percent-of-penalty.

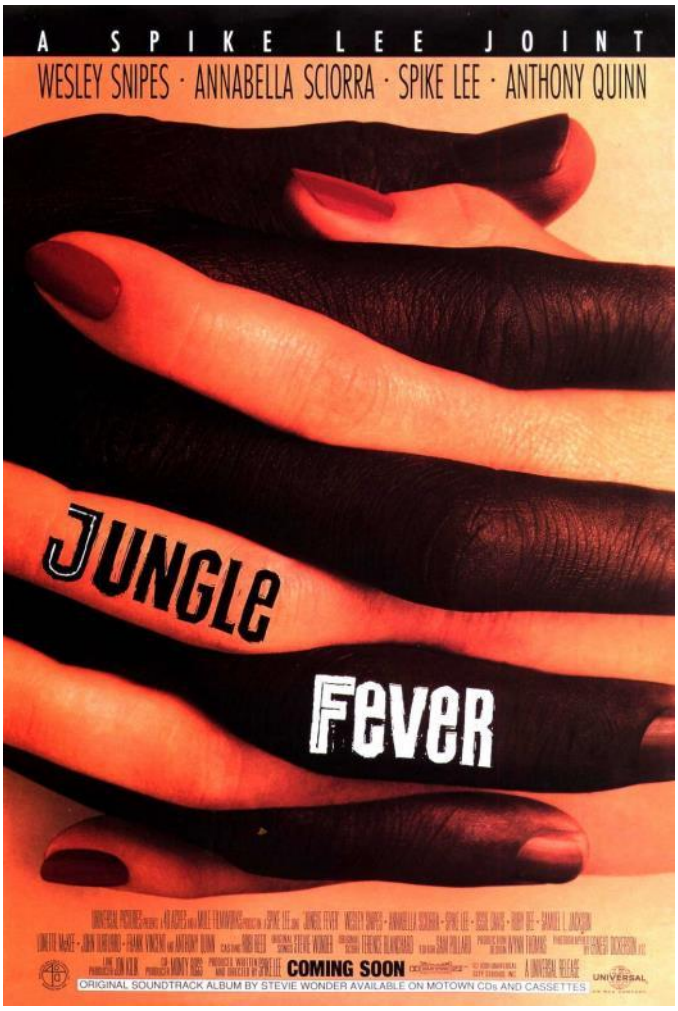

Figure 68. P**romotional poster for *Jungle Fever*.** This advertisement prominently displays the film's interracial romance in the form of two hands, one Black and one White, interlocked over an abstract background that suggests White skin. This image of racial unity (perhaps intentionally) belies the film's emphasis on contention and conflict.

and sometimes extreme reactions that could be incited by public displays of illicit interracial intimacy. *Jungle Fever* centers on Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes), a successful Black architect who engages in a torrid romance with his Italian American secretary Angela Tucci (Annabella Sciorra). Although their relationship begins as strictly professional, Flipper and Angie bond over a late-night dinner at the office and have sex on Flipper's desk. Once word of their affair reaches their respective families, Flipper's jilted wife angrily throws him out of the house while Angela's racist father beats her

mercilessly and calls her a disgrace. The embattled couple move in together and endure scathing disapproval from family as well as harassment from White police officers. Their only supporters include Flipper's crack addict brother who praises him for scoring a "Penthouse Pet" and, ironically, Angie's ex-boyfriend Paulie (John Turturro) who uses the breakup as motivation to act on a longstanding crush on Orin (Tyra Ferrell), a Black woman who frequents his workplace. Eventually, Flipper and Angie's resolve collapses under the weight of the pressure and each sorrowfully returns to their respective families and communities.

In a 1991 interview with *Cineaste*, Lee stated that he conceived *Jungle Fever* not as a love story but as an exploration of the sexual myths that muddy interracial attraction. Flipper represented a ubiquitous Black male "fevered" obsession with White femininity as the epitome of untouchable beauty, while Angie embodied White female desire for the Black "sexual superman with a penis that's two feet long."[13] To this end, Lee structured *Jungle Fever* with a minimal plot and essentially composed the film as a series of dialogue-heavy vignettes in which characters of various race, class, and gender positions passionately draw from their identities and experiences to discuss, argue, and preach about the meaning of Flipper and Angie's affair. The film's Italian American characters represent the reactionary, White racist position. Angie's White girlfriend flatly calls sex with Black men "disgusting," while her enraged father ferociously screams "I'd rather you be a mass murderer or a child molester than fuck a black nigger!" The Black characters offer less incendiary, but no less provocative, takes on Flipper's dalliance. Flipper's wife Drew, played by mixed race actor Lonette McKee, bitterly reads his infidelity as further evidence of a light skin fetish: "I guess I just wasn't light enough for

you, was I, Flipper? You had to eventually go get yourself a white girl!" Flipper's father the Good Reverend Doctor (Ossie Davis) condemns their affair as being purely motivated by a base sexual curiosity inherited from the legacy of slavery:

> [Plantation wives were] so proud to be white, and therefore superior, they kept their mouths shut [when White men raped Black slaves] . . . But in the midnight hour, layin' there, alone on the hot bed of lust, I'm sure they must've thought what it would be like to have one of them big, black bucks their husbands were so desperately afraid of . . . Here it is the 90s, [and White women are] still tryin' to make up for what you missed out on. As for the black man . . . still got to fish in the white man's cesspool.

The Good Reverend Doctor's level of revulsion rivals that of Angie's friends and family, but his contempt for the pair springs from a historical understanding of interracial desire. He frames their pairing as a contemporary update of the transgressive sexual denials and desires created by the American slave system. Flipper himself seems to confirm his wife and father's condemnations in the breakup scene in which he announces to Angie that they were mutually motivated by sexual curiosity rather than love: "You were curious about black . . . and I was curious about white."

Not all of the film's voices see their attraction in such stark terms. When Flipper asserts their mutual lack of love, Angie retorts "don't tell me what I felt or didn't feel," perhaps suggesting some deeper motivation.[†] Additionally, the ostensible impossibility of real interracial intimacy is balanced by the subplot in which Paulie expresses genuine, non-fetishistic affection for Orin; the film ends with their relationship ambiguous, holding out the possibility of the two developing an intimate relationship. Despite these

[†] Interestingly, actor Annabella Sciorra worked against the script and strove to inject an emotional intensity into her portrayal of Angie's attraction to Flipper. Ignoring director Lee's claims that Angie's interest was purely carnal, she insisted that her character was "falling in love with the man . . . She had these brothers who were kind of bullies and racists . . . In Flipper she saw something that she hadn't come close to before." Kaleem Aftab, *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It*, 1st American ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 128.

Figure 69. Film still from *Jungle Fever*. Flipper and Angie (left) engage in a torrid interracial affair in *Jungle Fever*, inciting a firestorm of controversy in their respective racial communities. Flipper's wife Drew (right) calls a "war council" of Black women to commiserate with, as her friends gather around her and air their frustrations about the challenges they face finding Black men in a world where "White bitches throw themselves at Black men."

textual flourishes, the film overwhelmingly frames interracial sexuality as a fraught practice in a color obsessed world in which identity-driven individuals see such infractions as a call to arms to close ranks and engage in cultural warfare. This is most clearly illustrated in the so-called "war council" scene, a segment in which Drew's closest Black female friends gather together to vent their frustrations and posit the sources of the mutual obsession between Black men and white women. One perspective posits White woman as unnecessary and unwanted competition in the midst of a paucity of marriageable Black men, lamenting the onslaught of "White bitches [who] throw themselves at Black men." The women also blame Black men, particularly upwardly mobile ones, for seeing White women as status symbols: "In order to go up that little ladder to success, seems like you got to have 'Miss Thing' on your arm." Another perspective posits the dynamic in strictly gendered terms, seeing Black male infidelity as a problem of masculine sexual privilege and a "fundamental disrespect for women" in general: "The best man, it's hard for him to say no [to] some pussy starin' him in the face . . . I don't know the man that's been born that's gonna say no." One lone voice in the mix blames Black women for unwillingness to date interracially: "Chinese, Black, White,

whatever . . . Give me a man, regardless of color, who is nice to me, sweet to me, and who I believe loves me."

Tellingly, the one view in *Jungle Fever* that gets little to no screen time is the colorblind one—not one character in the entire movie asserts that Flipper's affair is devoid of racial meaning. Critics debated if the film's confrontational voices were actually unfiltered expressions of Spike Lee's ire towards interracial attraction, or, as film scholar Sharon Willis argues, if *Jungle Fever* presents a range of opinions on interracial sex and invites viewers to decide and choose their allegiances.[14] Although *Jungle Fever* does certainly showcase a spectrum of views on the issue, the dissenters clearly receive more screen time, and the film's overall embattled tone sparked a critical discourse as viewers spoke from various race and gender positions to assess the accuracy (or lack thereof) of the film's portrayal of the contemporary state of interracial sexual politics. Many Black women resonated with *Jungle Fever*'s depiction of racial hurt and betrayal evinced by the female characters during the "war council" scene. Black journalist Sheryl McCarthy wrote that the film "gives us a glimpse of black women's anger" at not feeling desired by Black men, as well as the frustration about the "overall man shortage" facing contemporary Black women, particularly women in professional classes. McCarthy also argues that the film's portrayal of Black female reluctance to date interracially is actually a White problem: "Most white men simply don't view black women as dating or marriage material . . . A few, like Paulie in the movie, will attempt to engage a black woman on a personal level. But most do not."[15] Black men also sounded off in article for the *Orlando Sentinel* in which Tyrone, a 23-year-old insurance claims adjuster, sympathized with Flipper and blamed Black women for their own plight: "Black ladies will become upset

when they see a black guy talking to a white lady . . . but then when you try to talk to them, you get an attitude. A lot of the white girls are a little more easygoing."[16] *Jungle Fever* also sparked a series of news articles in which journalists surveyed interracial couples, particularly Black male/White female couples, about their views on the film. Unsurprisingly, most of them took offense. Patricia Smith of the *Boston Globe* interviewed two Black male/White couples after a screening of the film, recounting their vigorous assertion that *Jungle Fever* did not reflect their experiences. "The relationship was a sideshow with no basis in reality," recounted one Black man. "Real people with real feelings just don't relate to each other that way."[17]

Although viewers could not agree on a singular reading of *Jungle Fever*'s heteroglossic discourses, they were united in agreeing that race mattered greatly in contemporary interracial relationships, both cinematic and real. None of the fifty-plus articles about *Jungle Fever* that I examined for this study capture respondents borrowing from the rhetoric of colorblindness to counter the film. Many of the reviews and responses were negative, even bitterly vitriolic. Yet not even the film's harshest critics denounced it for refusing to acknowledge that race no longer mattered, or complained that Lee failed to realize that US society had moved pass racial issues. The appearance of Spike Lee's early films culminating with *Jungle Fever* marks an important break from the carefree, integrated cinematic party of the Reagan Era. Although colorblind love persisted throughout the decade and overshadowed race conscious representations of interracial sexuality for sheer cinematic number, Lee's ascendance as a filmmaker marks a small but powerful wave of cinematic assertions that race remained a major fault line that destabilized American culture in general and cross-racial romances in particular.

Culture Wars and Movie Theater Doors

Lee's aggressive cinematic reclamation of the centrality of racial conflict in understanding past and present realities was part of a larger cultural trend that some saw as a battle over the very meaning of America itself. In fact, the intertwined fields of race relations and US cinema became embroiled in a discursive collision broadly termed "the culture war," and no discussion of Lee and the spate of identity-based films that emerged in his wake would be complete without a brief history of the culture wars and the discursive battlefields identified as part of this caustic rhetorical conflict. The term "culture war" largely entered the national lexicon following the 1992 Republican National Convention where conservative commentator Pat Buchanan encouraged voters to choose President George H. W. Bush (who was running for a second term) over the "radical" Democratic nominee Bill Clinton. Buchanan framed the two candidates as symbolizing two mutually exclusive ideologies struggling to dominate America:

> There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself. And in that struggle for the soul of America, [Bill] Clinton and [Hillary] Clinton and are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side.[18]

Although Buchanan did not coin the term, his identification of a "cultural war" (or more popularly, "culture war") offered a rhetorical frame through which many would view the decade's events. After the Berlin Wall fell and the global Communist began to erode, pundits declared the Cold War officially over, and the dominant discourse of conflict in the US increasingly moved away from global conflagrations to a renewed focus on domestic tensions over so-called "identity" issues like race, gender, sexuality, and family.[19] While the Cold War had primarily been a global conflagration of opposing ideologies, armies, and economic theories, the culture war thesis posited the tumultuous

existence of an internal battle over personal values, public moralities, and national identity, a "religious war" for the very "soul of America."

The decade's cultural skirmishes can arguably best be understood as the ripple effects of the turbulent 1960s, the ongoing clashes between those *opposed to* and those *aligned with* one or more of the late 1960s/early 1970s liberal social movements. Although these radical movements (initially) largely focused on political and social reform, the culture wars thesis posited that the revolution in morality (discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation) remained the most significant and ultimately destructive (by conservative accounts) legacy of the 1960s. For example, right-leaning thinker Gertrude Himmelfarb viewed the "permissive" 1960s as unleashing "loose morals" on the masses, splitting the US into "one nation, two cultures" both mutually exclusive and irreconcilably divided by a yawning "ethics gap."[20] Critics then and now dismissed the culture war thesis, finding the term inadequate in capturing the diversity of public opinion and/or arguing that the idiom creates a self-perpetuating feedback loop of conflict egged on by a 24-hour news industry.[21] Regardless of the phrase's accuracy, "culture wars" became a nearly ubiquitous term throughout the 1990s deployed to frame everything from skirmishes between "religious fanatics" and "secular humanists" over school prayer to the reactions of apocalyptic outrage and bemused ambivalence over President Clinton's marital infidelity with Monica Lewinsky. Buchanan's opening comments typify the culture war rhetoric, as vocal combatants from both "sides" often presented themselves as the besieged protectors of all things truly "American" while framing their foes as the barbarians at the moral gate, monstrously trampling everything sacred and good in US society.

Traditionalists on the Right had reason to fear, for after a long period of conservative dominance in public debate, the repressed elements of US society powerfully "returned" to the heart of 1990s discourse. Groups that struggled at the margins during the Reagan Era enjoyed much wider exposure as identity and difference regained the national spotlight. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan organized the Million Man March, a public rally for Black men in Washington D.C. aimed at countering media stereotypes of Black masculinity and raising awareness about critical issues facing urban Black men. A "wave" of young women activists refashioned feminism to unmask the ways in which gender oppression intersected with other marginalized identity positions (race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc.), while an increasingly vocal coalition of LGBT activists challenged the accommodationist tactics of earlier gay movements and pioneered an aggressive style of activism that demanded the recognition of a queer identity. Higher education contributed significantly to this activist ferment, fueled by critical theories, movement histories, and tactical analyses from university identity-based/cultural studies departments—Black and Africana studies, women's studies, LGBT studies, Chicano/a studies, and Latino/a studies. Commentators increasingly favored the catchall term "multiculturalism" to encompass the rapid proliferation of identity claims and the anaytical lingo flowing from academia. Although the moniker encompassed many different (and sometimes, antagonistic) identity groups, multiculturalists successfully captured the national discourse and scored victories in key public arenas, pursuing agendas as diverse as the qualitative and quantitative improvement of minority representation in visual culture to the overhaul of school

textbooks and university curricula to include the histories of marginalized/minority populations.[22]

Race remained one of the most fractious issues in the debates over multiculturalism. As has been the case throughout the decades surveyed, the experiences of African Americans and their relations with the majority White culture dominated the racial discourse of the era, with many viewing this key relationship as a litmus test for racial progress in general. Some looked at Black/White relations and saw continued racial progress, proof that the colorblind ethos of the Reagan years had buoyed Black progress and improved race relations. Gains by middle and upper income Blacks made in the 1980s continued to expand, while the number of Black elected officials and college graduates grew considerably over the decade.[23] One estimate found the total earned income of Black Americans increasing by one third between 1980 and 1999 (after adjusting for inflation).[24] However, a series of events showed that a rising economic tide did not float all boats, and that increased racial diversity did not necessarily lead to improved interracial understanding. In March of 1991, White Los Angeles officers pulled over Black motorist Rodney King, resulting in an altercation in which police beat King repeatedly with batons. A videotape of the beating widely circulated in the news media, and many (particularly poor urban Blacks and Latino/as who routinely experienced police violence and profiling) read the footage as clear evidence of abuse,. The following month, a mostly-White jury acquitted the officers of all charges, and thousands of Black and Latino residents in South Central Los Angeles' urban ghettoes responded with protests, looting, property destruction (particularly Asian American owned businesses), and acts of aggression against random Whites. After six days of violence and the

deployment of 20,000 federal troops, 42 people were dead, 5,000 had been arrested, and the total property damage exceeded $1 billion.[25]

This incident incited a flurry of analysis as constituents from the various "tribes" of the nation's culture war grappled to make sense of the tragedy. Responses generally split along culture war lines, with a mostly-White chorus of conservatives denouncing the violence as liberalism gone wrong and a multiracial coalition of liberals highlighting it as an unsurprising response to decades of accumulated racial oppression and resentments. The Bush administration blamed the riots on the failure of social welfare programs, while Vice President Dan Quayle accused a "poverty of values" spurred on by a morally bankrupt entertainment industry that glorified "anti-family" lifestyles.[26] US Representative Maxine Waters expressed no shock at the violence, explaining the event as "a spontaneous reaction to a lot of injustice and a lot of alienation," while LA activist Father Gregory Boyle castigated the LAPD for years of ubiquitous yet systemically denied repression in which the urban poor were "dehumanized, disparaged and despised by the police."[27] The LA Riot/Rebellion sparked heated arguments but little productive dialogue, often resulting in different identity groups retreating to ideologically segregated discursive spaces that rarely overlapped.[‡] The prolonged incident highlighted the gaps separating disparate racial demographics, ultimately shattering, at least temporarily, the myth that Americans had reached a colorblind consensus.

Spike Lee's career blossomed in the midst of these and other racially-charged

[‡] The meaning of the violence in LA so divided the populace that analysts could not even agree on a name for "the event"—conservatives and the mainstream media generally deemed it a "riot" perpetrated by a "mob," while racially conscious commentators dubbed it an "insurrection," underscoring the predictability of the rebellion in light of decades of accumulated repression and abuse endured by the community. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller, "Reel Time/Real Justice," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 57.

events, and his early films directly responded to issues like racial poverty and police brutality. *Do the Right Thing*'s jarring scenes of police violence inciting a ghetto uprising arguably presaged the racial rebellions that would explode in LA the year after *Jungle Fever*'s release, and both of these films incited heated discussions that paralleled the polarized reactions to the urban unrest in Southern California. Hollywood had during the 1980s largely avoided such uncompromising and controversial depictions of racial issues, but the success of Lee's early films somewhat reversed that trend. *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* respectively grossed over $27 million and $32 million for Universal Pictures, showing Hollywood that a director could pursue an aggressive, identity-based cinema and still make the studio money.[28] Lee's box office returns encouraged the film industry to gamble on minority directors, spurring a small but important Black movie boom. Tom Jacobs of the *Chicago Tribune* noted more than 20 Black-directed films released in1991 (more titles by African American filmmakers in a 12-month period than during the previous decade) and declared it the "Year of the Black Film."[29] Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* (1990) and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) both became high box office grossers and critical successes, while Julie Dash emerged as the first Black woman to have a movie theatrically distributed in the US with her acclaimed art film *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). The Black movie boom also roughly coincided with a notable rise in young directors whose identities fell outside of the traditional mold of the White male auteur. White women filmmakers like Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol* [1996]) made significant inroads into the film industry, and Chris Eyre, a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, became the first American Indian to direct a wide release film (*Smoke Signals* [1998]) since the 1920s.[30] A crop of Asian filmmakers immigrated to

Figure 70. Promotional posters for *Boyz N the Hood*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and *Poison*
The 1990s proved to be a productive decade for minority cinema. John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* dramatized the challenges Black youth face in the impoverished gang-filled neighborhoods of South Central. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* depicted the social world of the Gullahs of St. Simons Island, Georgia, offering a unique cinematic vision of a creolized people who have maintained many aspects of traditional slave culture and language. Todd Haynes' *Poison* forwarded an aggressive, unapologetic image of queer sexuality.

the US and enjoyed critical and box office success, including Indian-born Mira Nair (*Mississippi Masala*), Taiwanese Ang Lee (*The Wedding Banquet* [1993]), and Hong Kong native Wayne Wang (*The Joy Luck Club*). Critics also noted the rise of a "New Queer Cinema" as openly-gay directors like Todd Haynes (*Poison* [1991]) released proudly queer work that reached a relatively wide audience. Collectively, these filmmakers and their representative works hold few similarities in terms of cinematic form, genre, or narrative style. Yet each of these directors shared an independent commitment to textually representing the identities of the communities from which they hailed, striving to give cinematic voice to those whose images in Hollywood films were historically marked by stereotype, slander, and/or invisibility.

Identity cinema did not "appear" in the 1990s. For decades, minority filmmakers had been forming film collectives dedicated to cinematic texts exclusively "by and for"

the racial/sexual minorities they aimed to represent.[§] These films were not necessarily intended to reach viewers outside of the minority audience, and they rarely did. The identity cinema of the 1990s differed in that their existence largely depended on some measure of success in the marketplace. The decade's subaltern filmmakers revised the motto "by and for," crafting films that spoke to their intended minority audience *plus* a largely-White, middle class viewer. Ed Guerrero, speaking of 1990s Black filmmaking, discusses the inevitable tension this created:

> [Black filmmakers represent] the long-suppressed sensibilities, aspirations, and narratives of the black world . . . These same filmmakers must appeal to a broad enough commercial audience to earn sufficient revenues . . . The black filmmaker must struggle to depict the truth about black life in America while being inextricably tied to the commercialized sensibilities of a mass audience that is for the most part struggling to deny or avoid the full meaning of that truth.[31]

Guerrero's observation about Black filmmaking captures the paradox of identity filmmaking in the 1990s crossover marketplace in general. One could easily substitute "Black" in the passage above with "Asian," "Native American," "woman," "queer," etc., and find filmmakers having to balance representational integrity and commercial viability.

Fortunately for identity filmmakers, the blockbuster obsessed film marketplace of the 1980s had been undergoing a slow buy seismic shift driven by a growing demand for independent films that countered the commercial accessibility and simple morality of the high concept blockbuster. Many of the identity-based filmmakers discussed above came to prominence via the emergence of a new "indie" cinema, a wave of maverick

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[§] Examples include the founding of the San Antonio's Chicano Film Festival in 1975 to showcase the work of Chicano filmmakers, as well as publicly funded projects like the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, a Nebraska-based organization founded in 1977 to fund Native American-made programming on public television. See Chon A Noriega, ed., "Between a Weapon and a Formula: Chicano Cinema and Its Contexts," in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 143; Beverly R Singer, *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 39.

filmmakers who flooded the industry with uncompromising images of US society, updating the spirit of the New Hollywood for the era of the culture wars. Ironically, the rise of the market for alternative films can be at least partially attributed to forces that indie filmmakers overtly resisted and resented, namely accelerated studio conglomeration and the hegemony of the blockbuster. Effects-driven blockbusters like the *Jurassic Park* (1993-2001) films continued to be Hollywood's biggest moneymakers, and as the captains of the media industry accelerated the mergers and acquisitions of the 1980s, an oligopoly of six enormous international conglomerates controlled the vast majority of America's media output by the end of the 1990s.[32] However, the rising costs of blockbusters allowed for independent filmmakers to occupy the spaces of smaller budget productions, while the growth of conglomerated cable and home video markets created a demand for product that the relatively small number of big releases could not meet.[33] Additionally, the blockbuster had alienated a sizable portion of the filmgoing audience. Indie studios like Miramax demonstrated the size of this untapped audience when Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which cost the studio $8.5 million, grossed over $100 million at the box office and won multiple prestigious film awards.[34] *Pulp Fiction* forced the majors to take notice, and the decade brought major/indie studio partnerships and acquisitions that muddied the line between the two. Detractors coined the cynical term "Indiewood" to describe the collusion, but the access to major funding and marketing also fueled audience interest and expanded opportunities for aspiring directors pursuing personal filmmaking.[35] This indie film boom welcomed an unprecedented number of minority directors into the mostly-White, male coterie that had dominated Hollywood (and, for that matter, independent filmmaking) since its earliest days. The

growth of Indiewood afforded minority auteurs previously unavailable opportunities to reach a diverse coterie of viewers with their cinematic work, and a crop of non-White, foreign-born, female, and/or queer directors emerged to unleash a flurry of complex and contentious works that presented multicultural American experiences from a variety of non-White/male perspectives.[36]

Crossing Racial Borders, Crossing Oceans

Like Spike Lee, many indie filmmakers found the image of interracial sexuality a useful and provocative trope through which to explore the complicated dynamics of identity in multicultural America. This new crop of cinema mavericks echoed the representational tactics of the New Hollywood generation, framing interracial sexuality as contested terrain in a cultural battle over the meaning of racial difference in a divided nation. We see this in the early American films of Wayne Wang, Mira Nair, and Ang Lee, three foreign-born Asian directors that entered the US movie industry via the indie film boom. Each of these directors differs in terms of biography, nationality, and filmmaking style. Yet, they all share parallel experiences as foreign-born, American-educated filmmakers advancing hybridized cinematic visions that explore the complex intercultural exchanges and interactions fostered by the global movement of people, identities, and images. Collectively, these directors' early works depicted transnational subjects who had recently emigrated to the US, often invoking interracial romance to dramatize their struggles to form identities and interpersonal attachments in the face of cultural disjuncture and geographical displacement. In a 2005 interview, director Ang Lee articulated his own transnational subjectivity as being shaped by a sense of unfixed national belonging: "I was never a citizen of any particular place . . . My parents left China to go to Taiwan. We were outsiders there. We moved to the States. Outsiders.

Back to China. Now we were outsiders there, too—outsiders from America."[37] US cinema has often similarly framed interracial couples as experiencing states of unfixed belongingness and outsiderness; unsurprisingly, each of these directors found the image of interracial sexuality to be fertile ground for exploring the unique challenges facing transnational people in the late-20th Century United States, and mined the trope of cross-racial romance to explore racial *and* national difference in particularized projects of identity formation.

Wayne Wang has had the longest career out of these three directors, and his story typifies the dynamics of transnational Hollywood filmmaking that the careers of Nair and Lee would echo. Born in Hong Kong, Wang's father named him after American actor John Wayne, a prescient decision given the director's interest in the cinematic intersections of Eastern and Western culture.[38] After moving to California in the late-1960s, Wang defied his father's wishes to enter medical school and studied film, eventually releasing his arthouse hit *Chan is Missing* (1982). *Chan is Missing* centers on two Chinese American men who aimlessly follow a trail of contradictory testimonials to find their missing friend Chan, whom they ultimately fail to locate. Critics generally read the fruitless search for Chan as a metaphorical "composite sketch of Asian American identity . . . hard to pin down, up for grabs, something you make up as you go."[39] After a string of similarly themed indie features, Wang hit mainstream success with *The Joy Luck Club*, an adaptation of author Amy Tan's bestselling novel, and arguably the first Asian American feature produced by a major studio. *The Joy Luck Club* centers on the lives of four Chinese American women and their Chinese mothers, dramatizing their trials and joys through a series of contemporary vignettes and flashbacks. The film contains many

intersecting stories that span decades and leap between the US and China at an almost breakneck pace. Common themes unite this diverse collection of tales, most notably the struggles of the Chinese-born mothers to understand and relate to their American-born, privileged daughters as well as the shared experiences of gender oppression faced to varying degrees by all of the women.

Just as Spike Lee's early films balanced the burden of telling untold stories with achieving commercial success, Wang conceived the film as a multilayered, diasporic story that was "specifically Chinese . . . [yet] emotionally powerful for anyone."[40] This dynamic plays out in two different vignettes featuring interracial relationships between first-generation Chinese American women and White men. These two episodes frame Chinese American women as facing complex cultural identity issues when they intermarry with Whites, depicting these women as juggling the contradictory expectations to assimilate into American culture yet continue to hold onto Chinese traditions. The first interracial subplot centers on Waverly (Tamlyn Tomita), an intelligent woman who feels overburdened by the expectations of her demanding mother Lindo (Tsai Chin). Waverly first marries a Chinese man to please Lindo, but it quickly ends in divorce. Waverly later moves in with Rich (Christopher Rich), a prototypical yuppie, whom her mother initially refuses to meet ostensibly because he is White. Lindo finally agrees to meet him and invites the couple over for dinner, but things worsen when Rich's ignorance of Chinese manners results in a series of embarrassing *faux pas*. For example, Waverly forgets to inform Rich that Chinese cooks traditionally insult their best dish with the expectations that the diners will taste it and declare it "the best she ever made." When Lindo disparages her own prized shrimp recipe, Rich tastes it, announces

“all this needs is a little soy sauce,” and disrespectfully dumps sauce all over the serving plate while all look on in horror. This comedy of errors frames interracial sexuality as a symbolic wedge between the Americanized Waverly and the traditional Lindo, and Rich’s accidental trampling of Chinese manners both confirms and symbolizes Lindo’s fears that Waverly has rejected Chinese traditions. On the ride home from dinner, Waverly underscores the acrimony between mother and daughter when Rich asks why she failed to inform Lindo of their upcoming wedding, to which Waverly replies that her mother would “rather get rectal cancer” than have a White son-in-law.

While Waverly and Rich’s relationship explores the conflicts between immigrant parents and US-born Chinese Americans over interracial/intercultural dating and marriage, a second subplot in *The Joy Luck Club* depicts the prejudices faced by Chinese Americans from Whites who see interracial sexuality as a threat to the racial purity of their family. While attending graduate school, Rose Hsu (Rosalind Chao) meets Ted Jordan (Andrew McCarthy), the rich White son of a publishing baron, and they quickly fall in love. She first meets his parents at a swanky party held at their palatial estate. Ted’s mother smilingly pulls Rose aside and essentially orders them to break up, insisting that while she know lots of “charming Oriental people,” Ted will “be judged by people of a different standard . . . and they won't be as understanding as we are.” When Rose protests, Ted’s mother reminds her about “how unpopular Vietnam was,” to which Rose tersely responds: “I'm not Vietnamese. I'm American.” On the surface, both Waverly and Rose’s romances with White men touch on themes explored by many past Asian/White interracial romance films, including dealing with resistance from family and enduring racially insensitive comments. The film even self-reflexively acknowledges this

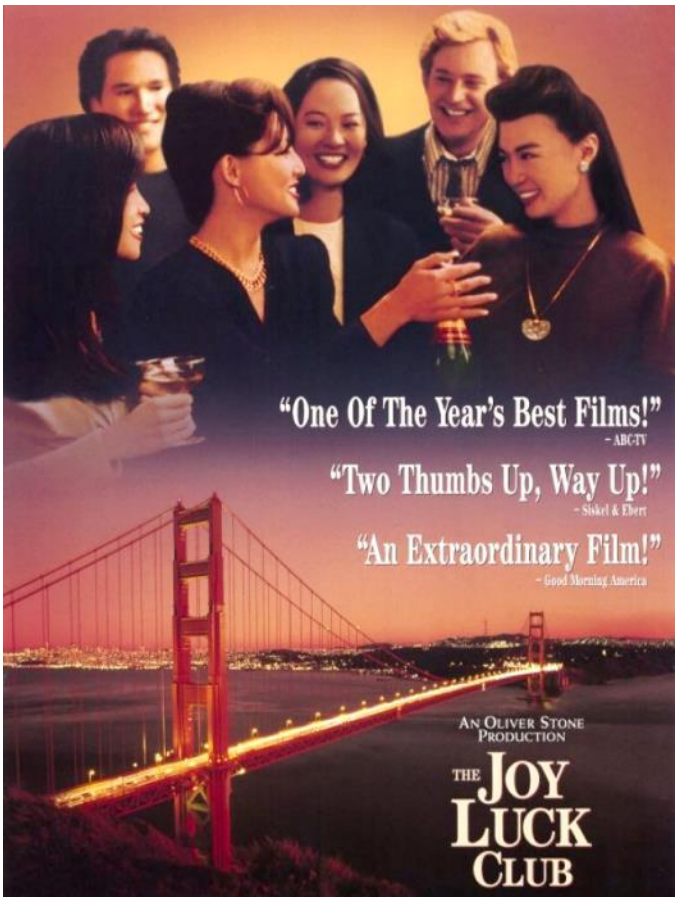

Figure 71. Promotional poster for *The Joy Luck Club*. Wayne Wang's film dramatized the challenges faced by Asian American women who date interracially. Waverly (third from the left) faces resistance from her traditional mother for living with Rich (fourth from the left), while Rose Hsu (center) experiences overt racism from her lover Ted's (second from the left) parents. Interestingly, both of the White men in this poster occupy very small roles in the film, and their inclusion in this poster (as well as the exclusion of several important Chinese central characters) could be read as an attempt to market the film to a White audience.

cinematic history when Rose's narration describes the incident as "straight out of some awful racist movie, like *The World of Suzie Wong*," the 1960 drama (discussed in Chapter Two) about a love affair between an American artist and a Chinese prostitute. However, this film differs significantly from past cinematic images of Asian/White romance in that it comes from an Asian American perspective, the screenplay being co-written by first-generation Chinese American Amy Tan and directed by Wang. Instead of Asian lovers playing a supporting role in White characters' narrative arcs, White lovers are playing a

supporting role in Asian characters' stories. Wang also adds an extra layer of outsiderness in their explorations of interracial sexuality, examining issues of belonging that an indisputably "American" director like Lee may not understand. Ultimately, *The Joy Luck Club* frames interracial romance in the US as being additionally complicated for individuals possessing identities shaped by racial, cultural, *and* national otherness.

Transnational filmmakers like Wang demonstrate how conflicts over interracial sexuality and racial otherness are inseparable from national outsiderness. A similar dynamic characterizes the films of Mira Nair, also a foreign-born, Western-educated director whose first US-based feature film *Mississippi Masala* examined the complex layers of racial/national outsiderness experienced by Indian Americans. US arthouse audiences were introduced to Nair via her Hindi feature *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), a drama about children living in the slums of Mumbai. The film's success piqued stateside interest and Nair conceived her first American feature as an exploration of the Indian diaspora in the US, centered on a Uganda-born Indian family who flees to the Deep South after being expelled in 1972 by ruthless dictator Idi Amin. In the present day, Jay (Roshan Seth) now lives in Greenwood, Mississippi with his wife and adult daughter Mina (Sarita Choudhury), having joined a cluster of Indian families who jointly operate a run-down hotel. Like the Chinese mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, Jay pushes his brilliant daughter to get an education and make a better life for herself, but he also struggles with Mina's Americanized desire to deviate from traditional behavioral expectations. Jay longs to return to his true home of Uganda and bitterly views his exile as the result of racial hatred, yet he hypocritically exhibits racial prejudice towards Greenwood's largely-Black population. All of these tensions come to a head when Mina meets and secretly romances

a Black businessman named Demetrius (Denzel Washington). When their relationship comes to light, the Black, White, and Indian communities of Greenwood all react in alarm. Black residents scourge Demetrius for flouting the unwritten rules of race and acting as if “he got himself a White chick," while Mina’s parents chastise her for bringing shame on their family through her sexual exploits. Demetrius’s carpet cleaning business plummets as his Indian customers cancel their contracts with him, while the White manager at Demetrius’s bank suddenly demands full payment on his business loan. The film resolves open-endedly as the couple flees the state together, while Jay, after visiting Uganda and finding that it now longer feels like “home,” relinquishes his dream of returning to live there.

The film received generally favorable reviews and did respectably at the box office on a limited release, although some feminists criticized Nair for stereotyping South Asian women by framing Mina as an exoticized sexual other who only finds agency in heterosexual romantic love.[41] Whether or not *Mississippi Masala* fairly represented the identities depicted, it stands as a fascinating attempt to frame the cultural complexities that transnational subjectivity brings to the terrain of interracial sexuality in the US. Like many films of the past, both Demetrius and Mina experience racism and resistance for their taboo romance. However, their differing identity positions in US society and their divergent relationships to US racial history differently shape the fallout from their forbidden love. Since Mina’s identity is primarily shaped by her experience as an Americanized child of a traditional immigrant family, her sexual indiscretions and refusal to marry an Indian man from a reputable family leads to shame and, ultimately, expulsion from the community. However, the film does not register any particular consequence

Figure 72. Film still from *Mississippi Masala*. Indian American Mina and African American Demetrius carry on a secret love affair in Mira Nair's first US film.

from the dominant White culture, and Black community members respond to Mina's presence with bemused curiosity and acceptance. By contrast, Demetrius's relationship to the dominant culture is largely economic, and although Mina is not White, the wider response approximates the sanctions his character would suffer if he broke the taboo of sexual relations with a White woman. Additionally, although Demetrius's dark skin ostensibly positions him closer to the Indian Americans in terms of racial caste, he views that community's somewhat more advantaged economic position as closer to that of the White community, and their collective decision to punish him economically for his sexual dalliances makes them, in his eyes, "White." This is captured in a key scene in which he confronts Jay, tersely pointing out the ironies that "you and your folks can come down here from God knows where and be as Black as the ace of spades, and as soon as you get here you start acting White and treating us like we your doormats." *Mississippi Masala* touches on a host of issues facing transnational subjects but resolves none of

them, maintaining an ambiguous position towards the formation of identity in a globalized world. The film's final scene captures this ambivalence as it depicts Demetrius and Mina, clothed in traditional African and South Asian garb respectively, cavorting in a cotton field as the credits roll. This arresting yet opaque image has alternatively been interpreted as a narrative-disrupting exercise in absurdity to an acknowledgement of the importance of Western economic oppression in maintaining global racial hierarchies—cotton being a crucial crop in both the US slave economy and the colonial economy of British India, two deep historical realities that, arguably, facilitated the couple's introduction via forced migration.[42]

Wang and Nair were joined by a third key transnational filmmaker, Ang Lee, a Taiwanese-born man educated at New York University's Tisch film school. Lee's first stateside indie comedy film *The Wedding Banquet* centers on a Taiwanese-born, US-educated gay man named Wai-Tung (Winston Chao) whose parents Mr. and Mrs. Gao (Sihung Lung and Kuei Ya-lei respectively) do not know that he is gay. The Taiwanese Gaos, who have never visited their son in the US, constantly badger him to get married. Wai-Tung's White lover Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein) hatches a plan to placate his parents, proposing that he enter into a sham heterosexual marriage to satisfy them. Wai-Tung approaches a Chinese woman named Wei-Wei (May Chin), a starving artist in desperate need of a US green card, to legally marry him and thereby solve his need to placate his parents and her need for permanent American citizenship. The Gaos fly in and convince the couple to have a traditional wedding banquet, after which the "newlyweds" have a drunken one-night stand that leaves Wei-Wei pregnant. Simon, who has been posing as Wai-Tung's landlord and roommate, becomes enraged after learning of Wai-

Figure 73. Promotional poster for *The Wedding Banquet*. In the film's promotional poster, Wai-Tung (center) holds his gay lover Simon's (left) hand while hovering above a seated Wei-Wei, a Chinese immigrant whom he marries to please his traditionalist parents.

Tung's (hetero)sexual indiscretion. The two men have a bitter argument in front of Mr. Gao who, unbeknownst to all, speaks English and learns that his son is gay and the two are committed lovers. The film ends with Wai-Tung, Simon, and Wei-Wei agreeing to collectively raise the unborn child as Mr. Gao returns to Taiwan after officially blessing his son's relationship with Simon. Thematically, *The Wedding Banquet* joins *The Joy Luck Club* and *Mississippi Masala* in exploring themes of transnational outsiderness and belonging via interracial sexuality. It similarly represents traditional foreign-born parents

coping with their Americanized child's hybridized cultural identities, and yet again, interracial sexuality becomes a meaning laden trope through which to explore these complicated tensions. Lee's film differs notably from *The Joy Luck Club* and *Mississippi Masala* by adding sexual difference into the mix as it focuses on an interracial, transnational, *homosexual* couple. It further expands the decade's cinematic repudiation of colorblindness to a globalized arena while also demonstrating that the practice of interracial sexuality is not confined to heterosexual couplings.

New Queer (Interracial) Cinema

The Wedding Banquet's depiction of gay interracial sexuality remains especially noteworthy in that prior to the 1990s, the vast majority of cinematic depictions of such couples had been heterosexual, with homosexual/queer interracial sexualities barely registering cinematically. The popularity of Ang Lee's film occurred during a flourishing of queer-themed movies by a coterie of gay and lesbian filmmakers whose diverse work loosely came to be termed the "New Queer Cinema" (NQC). The term, coined by film scholar B. Ruby Rich, described a wave of films that aggressively and proudly framed queer sexualities while often promoting "positive," empowered images of lesbians and gays as human beings who happen to be queer. These images stood as correctives to decades of cinematic history in which non-heteronormative sexuality was at best framed as comedically flamboyant, and at worst as monstrously deviant and horrifying. Although celebratory depictions of LGBT individuals were not new in the early 1990s, the films of the NQC far outstripped previous cinematic eras in terms of sheer numeric output and market penetration, and the flourishing of gay-themed film festivals as well as the popularity of queer films at the influential Sundance Film Festival nurtured a previously

unimaginable mainstream audience for such movies. Additionally, openly-gay directors typically lensed NQC films, something largely unknown in previous decades.

The academic literature on NQC has documented the breadth and depth of the movement, from wide release films to obscure arthouse features, but little has been said about a small crop of texts in which depictions of queer romance and sex become further complicated by racial difference.[43] Key examples include Maria Maggenti's teen lesbian romance *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), John G. Young's gay crime thriller *Parallel Sons* (1995), British-born director Nigel Finch's historical drama *Stonewall* (1995), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and Canadian-born director of Indian ancestry Nisha Ganatra's cross-cultural lesbian comedy *Chutney Popcorn* (1999). In nearly every case, the interracial NQC focused on Black/White queer sex and romance (Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn* being the exception), a fact that further reinforces the assertion that Black/White sexuality lies at the heart of discourses about interracial sexuality in the United States. We do not have the space to examine each of these film in depth, and I will focus on the two most critically acclaimed films of this group, *Parallel Sons* and *The Watermelon Woman*.

Parallel Sons centers on Seth (Gabriel Mann), a White teenager living in a small upstate New York town who rebels against his working class conventions by pursuing the visual arts and obsessively identifying with Black street culture. Seth sports blonde dreadlocks, blasts rap music, and awkwardly spews hip hop slang. While working part-time at a roadside diner, a Black prison escapee named Knowledge (Laurence Mason) barges into the diner and passes out from a gunshot shot wound. Seth transports Knowledge to a family cabin in the woods where he nurses him back to health.

Knowledge initially responds to Seth's kindness with hostile incredulity, deriding his pained and uninformed appropriations of Black urban culture. However, the two slowly overcome mutual suspicion and begin to forge a deep friendship around congruent experiences of outsiderness and, it is later revealed, repressed homosexual longing. The unlikely couple is forced to flee their idyllic cabin getaway after a confrontation with law enforcement ends in the shooting death of the local Sheriff at Seth's hand, and the two embark on a desperate journey through the Adirondacks hoping to start a new life together in Canada. The film climaxes tragically when the authorities catch up with the fugitives and Seth's homophobic father shoots him in the back, leaving a devastated Knowledge weeping in the back of a police car.

Parallel Sons was written and directed by John G. Young, an openly-gay White man who would return to the subject of queer interracial sexuality with his subsequent features *The Reception* (2005) and *Rivers Wash Over Me* (2009). Although the film saw a very limited release, it played at over 40 film festivals and won multiple awards, including the Best Feature Award at LA's Outfest.[44] Thematically, *Parallel Sons* echoes themes seen in many previous interracial texts, yet places them outside of a heteronormative context, putting a new angle on an old issue (cinematically speaking). Seth's identification with hip hop culture initially smacks of the most obvious form of racial/sexual fetishization. He plasters his bedroom with homoerotic magazine images of shirtless Black men, and he initially approaches the incapacitated Knowledge with an almost a starry-eyed reverence, as if his very presence in Seth's all-White world performs some impossible racial/sexual fantasy. However, the narrative unfolds in such a way that their "parallel" identities as poor *and* gay young men unite them more strongly than racial

Figure 74. Film still from *Parallel Sons*. Seth and Knowledge connect over shared experiences of gay oppression in John G. Young's gay romance.

difference and regional distance divide them.

While *Parallel Sons* brings these youth together through shared experiences of outsiderness and sexual repression, the film eschews a simplistic "colorblind love conquers all" trope and still maintains that Knowledge's status as a *Black* gay youth adds an extra layer of experienced oppression that Seth cannot claim. This is underscored in a key scene where the two end up hanging out in Seth's room, solemnly swapping their tales of hardship growing up gay in severely antigay environs. Seth shares a story about receiving death threats from a classmate after his father found him "fooling around" with some friends. Knowledge explains, "In my hood . . . if you're Black and you're a fag, you're just a fag," adding that his counselors at his detention center "just wanna break a nigga." Although both youth experienced homophobic persecution in their working poor environments, Knowledge's comments simultaneously highlight his racial difference while insisting that his sexual orientation overshadows his race as a site of oppression—gay Black men are still "just fags" where he hails from. Although Knowledge puts sexual

orientation ahead of race as the primary identity position structuring his life, his comment about the prison counselors trying to "break" him should remind viewers that young Black men in the 1990s had phenomenally higher incarceration rates than non-Blacks, and that the racially-slanted nature of the prison industrial complex affected Knowledge's urban community far more than it did Seth's rustic town. Ultimately, the film demonstrates that the "race" in interracial sexuality cannot be divorced from other forms of difference—class, gender, or sexual orientation. *Parallel Sons* performs the complexity of introducing queerness into the representation of interracial sexuality on film, acknowledging how multiple intersecting identity positions problematize and, arguably, enrich, the long history of cinematic interracial sexuality.

Parallel Sons represents a moment in which a respected New Queer Cinema filmmaker pushed the filmic depiction of interracial sexuality beyond the strictures of heteronormativity, yet it still partially fits into the mold of the past in that the narrative is told from a White male perspective. Writer/director John G. Young is, of course, a White male, so it is hardly surprising that this film largely focuses on Seth's experiences and privileges his perspective, casting Knowledge as a part in Seth's story. Fortunately, NQC proved to be a relatively broad tent that included many women filmmakers, several of whom produced compelling cinematic works focusing on lesbian interracial sexuality. The most acclaimed of these films remains Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, a film credited with being the first feature length film directed by a Black lesbian. The film centers on Cheryl (played by writer/director Cheryl Dunye), an aspiring documentary filmmaker who funds her projects by working at a VHS rental store and shooting wedding videos. Cheryl identifies as a Black lesbian and largely socializes in Black

lesbian circles. While working at the video store, Cheryl becomes obsessed with a (fictitious) 1930s film called *Plantation Memories* featuring a Black woman who plays a stereotyped mammy figure, listed only in the credits as "The Watermelon Woman." Cheryl vows to discover The Watermelon Woman's identity and uncover the facts of her life, deciding to make her search the subject of a documentary film.

After some initial research, Cheryl thrills to discover that The Watermelon Woman was actually Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson), a deceased entertainer who also happened to be a Black lesbian. Following this discovery, Cheryl's hunt for Richards' story begins to perform a deeper desire to tell the marginalized history of Black lesbian women in general. The bulk of the actual film *The Watermelon Woman* takes the form of an experimental pseudo-documentary that mixes dramatic scenes from Cheryl's complicated life, vignettes showing her frustrating search for information on Richards, and scenes from Cheryl's finalized documentary in which she directly addresses the camera and reflects on her experience as a Black lesbian. As her search deepens, Cheryl's life blurs with Richards' biography. She begins dating a wealthy White lesbian named Diana (self-reflexively played by lesbian filmmaker Guinevere Turner) just as she discovers that Richards was romantically involved with Martha Page, a wealthy White actor who played the plantation mistress in *Plantation Memories*. Diana's ties to privileged people connects Cheryl to a wealthy interviewee for her film (Martha Page's sister), a life event that mirrors Richards' dependence on her White lover's bankability to land screen roles. Ultimately, Cheryl's relationship with Diana falls apart just as she exhausts her sources of information on Richards, and *The Watermelon Woman* ends with scenes from Cheryl's completed documentary *The Biography of the Watermelon Woman*.

Figure 75. Film still from *The Watermelon Woman*. As Cheryl searches for information on Fae Richards, she becomes involved with Diana (*left*), and their relationship eerily parallels Richards' own life. As Cheryl scours libraries and archives, she films herself examining the historical traces that she finds, including this rare photograph (*right*) of Richards on a film set speaking to a White lesbian actor/director with whom she was romantically involved.

Like *Parallel Sons*, *The Watermelon Woman* enjoyed a very small theatrical release, but it won multiple festival awards and received glowing critical reviews.[45] It also became an important artifact of the culture war in that the film's relatively explicit lesbian sex between Cheryl and Diana incited a Republican congressman to pledge to cut the National Endowment for the Arts' budget by $31,500 for awarding Dunye a grant of that amount towards the "offensive" film's production.[46] Retrospectively, film scholars have lauded it as an important cinematic archive of 1990s Black queer life, both in terms of cinematically representing contemporary Black lesbian culture and for self-reflexively capturing the drive to unearth hidden queer histories that, in Cheryl's words, "have never been told."[47] Additionally, *The Watermelon Woman* stands as a crucial 1990s film text in cinematically representing the cultural politics of queer interracial sexuality from a Black lesbian perspective. Prior to dating Diana, Cheryl moves in almost exclusively Black queer spaces, but Diana first "integrates" Cheryl's world when she begins frequenting the video store and flirting with her. Diana invites Cheryl to her posh loft apartment, and,

after dinner and conversation, the two make love and declare themselves "girlfriends" thereafter. Cheryl's friends almost immediately protest Diana's presence in their all-Black sphere—her best friend Tamara (Valarie Walker) charges both with cross-racial envy, referring to Diana as a "wannabe Black" while accusing Cheryl of being a "Black girl acting like [you] want to be White." Tamara further dismisses Diana's advances as the actions of a White woman "into chocolate," accusing her of fetishizing Black flesh while performing a lesbian version of race/class slumming.

Cheryl initially fumes at Tamara's harsh take on their relationship, but she arrives at similar conclusions over time. In the couple's final scene together, the two are talking in bed when Diana reveals to Cheryl that she previously had two Black boyfriends and giddily states that her aunt's first husband was an ex-Black Panther. Cheryl asks how her family reacted to these interracial relationships, to which Diana proudly explains that they are "liberal hippie types" and reacted positively. Much to Diana's surprise, Cheryl suddenly becomes agitated at these statements and quickly leaves under the pretenses that her film requires immediate attention. Matt Richardson reads this scene as revealing Diana's tendency to be "fetishistic toward black culture and oblivious to her own deployments of privilege," and although the couple evinces genuine affection and a mutual respect, Cheryl reacts to her racially insensitive comments by refocusing on her film project, symbolically returning to Black queer history to make sense of her present life.[48] Shortly thereafter, Cheryl receives a letter from June Walker (played by LGBT activist and writer Cheryl Clarke), an elderly Black lesbian who became Richards' life partner years after her acting career and her relationship with Martha Page dried up. In a voice over narration of the letter's text, June chides Cheryl for focusing so much on "that

White woman" when she played such a small yet troubling role in Richards' life. "Make our history," June counsels Cheryl, a plea to unearth the untold stories of Black lesbians in US history and culture, adding, "our family will always only ever have each other." Immediately following June's final comment, we learn that Cheryl and Diana have unceremoniously broken up for good.

The interracial romances in *The Watermelon Woman* serve as a warning that the interests of Black and White lesbians, although unified by queer allegiances, are often divided by gaps in racial and economic privilege. Catherine Zimmer argues that both the Fae Richards/Martha Page coupling and the Cheryl/Diana pairing serve to illustrate this:

> Fae's reliance on Martha Page to find work . . . [is] reflected by Cheryl's reliance on Diana to support her film project . . . Cheryl seizes control over the means of representing her visual image, but cannot escape the economic disparity between herself and Diana or white fetishizing desire for black bodies. Their relationship signifies the sexual and emotional labor of having to negotiate materially through white lesbians that black women often find necessary.[49]

At the risk of overstating the obvious, *The Watermelon Woman* leaves no place for colorblindness, and it argues that the practices of queer subcultural communities cannot be divorced from historic racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The film does acknowledge the existence of colorblind thinking via Diana's sanctimonious declarations of her family's tolerant acceptance of (straight) Black boyfriends and husbands. But ultimately, the film's protagonist—a proud Black lesbian sensitive to the nuances of race/class cultural politics and deeply invested in the story of her "family"—rejects her lover's generic multiculturalism that ignores power imbalances. In the final analysis, *The Watermelon Woman* stands as a landmark text in the history of interracial sexuality on film, representing the complex intersectional issues raised by cross-racial sex for queer individuals in general and Black lesbians in particular. It also represents one text in a

larger trend in which subaltern filmmakers infiltrated the citadels of the mostly-White film industry, putting to work the very mechanics that had historically silenced minority voices to make uncompromising subaltern cinematic visions. While the transnational cinema Wang, Nair, and Lee and the queer interracial films of Young and Dunye differ greatly aesthetically and thematically, they together constitute a textual bloc repudiating the Hollywood colorblind consensus that dominated the previous decade. These compelling texts leveraged the popular interest in identity-based filmmaking and independent cinematic representations, collectively reasserting the view that the issue of race could not be divorced from interracial sexuality, and they ultimately expanded the territory of interracial sexual politics to include transnational and queer subjects.

Back to the Past: Cinematic Interracial Sexuality and the "History Wars"

Excavating the Interracial Past

In Cheryl Dunye's National Endowment for the Arts grant application for funds to support the production of *The Watermelon Woman*, she pitched her film as an exploration of "the specificity of identity . . . and the rewriting of American history."[50] For Dunye, the very act of unearthing buried stories and unstopping silenced voices offered the opportunity to revise, correct, and even rewrite the history of the nation. Throughout this study, we have seen the complicated ways in which the present battles over the meanings of interracial sexuality are inseparable from the struggles of the past. From the Good Reverend Doctor's assertion that Flipper and Angie's affair recreates the forbidden slave/plantation mistress sexual attraction of antebellum days to Cheryl's obsessive documentation of forgotten interracial lesbian biographies, 1990s cinema finds filmmakers looking anxiously and even angrily to past events in an attempt to grapple

with the complexities of contemporary race/sex dynamics. Interestingly, the work of filmmakers like Lee and Dunye paralleled contemporary movements in historical education and scholarship to move marginalized identities to "the center" of US history, a field that for centuries had been lopsidedly "written in the interests of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males." Throughout the decade, multiculturalists identified the very teaching and presentation of history in the public sphere as a crucial site for agitation and amendment, arguing that the "official" story of this nation demonized minorities or erased their cultural contributions, while ignoring (or even defending) the legacies of racism, sexism, and exploitive market driven domination endemic to WASP hegemony.[51] This broad movement came to be popularly labeled "historical revisionism" or "revisionist history" a rallying cry for those working to rescue previously unexamined histories and marginalized voices and a byword for the Right who largely saw such gestures as irrational attacks on foundational American stories and beloved heroes.[52]

In the 1990s, the work of revisionist historians could be found in the rewriting of national curricular standards and history textbooks to include the social histories of women, racial minorities, and working people as well as the re-presentation of historical monuments, sites, and museum exhibits to incorporate oft-ignored perspectives and voices. Unshockingly, this trend in historiography precipitated a "crisis in historicity" as the academic field of history became entangled with the culture wars. Conservatives spun the growing interest in social history as a coordinated, unpatriotic attack on cherished national values and figures, while multiculturalists often lambasted such revisionist impulses as anemic token gestures from White liberals trying to speak for the oppressed.[53] In 1994, the UCLA-based National Center for History in the Schools

released a voluntary history framework for public schools that reflected decades of recent scholarship on women, racial minorities, and labor movements. Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh scourged the standards as a disguised plot to "flush" students' minds down the "sewer of multiculturalism," erroneously claiming that the standards deleted George Washington and a host of other important figures simply for being White men.[54] Conversely, Afrocentrist, Jewish and Muslim activists in Oakland, California blocked the adoption of a progressive series of history textbooks rich with social historical content because the books allegedly "placed the white establishment at the center of the universe and all the rest of us as their 'burden.'"[55] These and other so-called "history wars" raged throughout the decade as the two broad sides of the culture wars jockeyed for power to define the past, the present, and the "correct" ways to frame the connection between the two.

John Sayles' film *Lone Star* (1996) brilliantly captured this clash between an entrenched conservative nostalgia and a revisioning multicultural project. A dramatic mystery/thriller set in the fictitious border town of Frontera, Texas, *Lone Star* features a diverse ensemble cast set in a historically White community that is becoming increasingly de-anglicized due to immigration and interracial mixing. The film begins with the discovery of the body of Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), a notoriously corrupt lawman who went missing 40 years ago after racking up a lengthy list of misdeeds that included extorting local minority businesses and murdering undocumented Mexican laborers. Local legend says that Wade had been chased out of town by Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey), the deceased but beloved sheriff who replaced Wade after he disappeared. The present day sheriff is Buddy's son Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper), a

mild-mannered man who has lived in his father's long shadow ever since taking up the badge. After the discovery of Wade's body, Sam opens the old murder case and almost immediately fingers his father as the prime suspect, ironically commencing his investigation the day before a public ceremony to dedicate a memorial to Buddy on the steps of the town courthouse. Sam's unexplained but obvious grudge against his father casts doubt on his motivations, and the White townsfolk of Frontera, not wanting to sully their local hero's memory, offer Sam nothing but resistance. Sam's search for the truth leads him to cross various borders as he interviews residents of the segregated town's White, Black, Chicano/a, and Indian communities, until he finally arrives at a complete picture of the story. Sam learns that his father did not kill Charlie Wade. Rather, the corrupt lawman died at the hands of Deputy Hollis (Clifton James), the city's present-day mayor, who shot Wade for trying to murder a Black bartender who challenged his abusive power. In a surprising twist, Sam chooses to keep the story quiet after learning the full truth, deciding to bury the past and allow the White townsfolk to remember Buddy as their pristine hero.

Sayles identified two intertwined themes at *Lone Star*'s core: borders, both literal and metaphorical, as well as "history and what we do with it."[56] Sayles deemed the Mexico/Texas border, with its complicated intercultural and multiracial history, as the ideal setting for this story of territorial conflict, positing the violent historic clashes over land, power, and racially demarcated territory as "a metaphor for the history of the United States" in general.[57] "Frontera" is the Spanish word for "border," and the town's name highlights both the power of borders to shape peoples' lives and the ubiquitous practice of border crossing.[58] In addition to exploring the crossing of literal borders (migrants

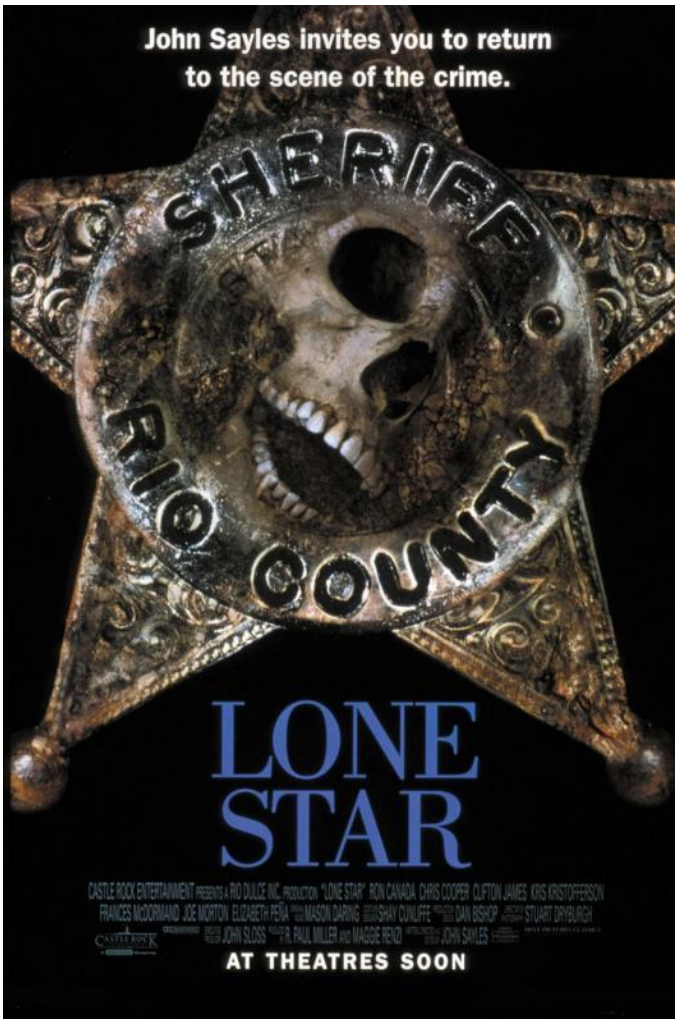

Figure 76. Promotional poster for *Lone Star*. John Sayles' complex film opens as a murder-mystery and ends as a multilayered meditation on the ubiquity of borders (geographical, racial, and sexual) in American life. The movie's promotional poster emphasized the murder plotline via a grisly image that belied the film's subtle tone and deliberate, almost contemplative pace.

crossing the Mexico/US boundary on which the town lies) and cultural borders (Frontera's segregated neighborhoods), *Lone Star* examines the transgressing of racial/sexual borders through interracial romance. The first interracial romance occurs between Priscilla (LaTanya Richardson), a Black woman, and Cliff (Stephen Mendillo), a White man, both army officers who met and fell in love while stationed at a military base in Frontera. Priscilla and Cliff are minor characters, but their presence at a historically-

White local bar introduces a key piece of dialogue. After Sam stops in for a drink, the bartender regales him with this rambling jeremiad on the sorry state of borders:

> We are in a state of crisis. The lines of demarcation are getting fuzzy. To run a successful civilization, you have got to have your lines of demarcation between right and wrong, between this'n and that'n. Your Daddy understood that. He was the . . . referee of this damn *menudo* [stew] we got down here. He understood how most folks don't want their salt and sugar in the same jar . . . This bar is the last stand. Say, "*habla* American," goddammit! And even in here, it's sliding away. Take that pair over in there in the corner [points out Priscilla and Cliff]. Place like this, twenty years ago, Buddy'd been on them two.

The bartender's monologue links the transgression of all sorts of borders (geographical, racial, sexual) with the White townspeople's' perception that their population, language, and power are rapidly dwindling. He identifies external border threats like migrants crossing the Mexican border challenging the cultural and linguistic ("*habla* American") status quo, as well as internal border threats such as interracial couples flouting once-hard boundaries, reading all of these shifts as a collective loss for White Fronterans. The barkeep's words also capture the importance of history in the town's present "crisis," as he looks to a mythical golden era when the patriarchal White male reigned and enforced his "lines of demarcation" without any serious challenge.

While the bartender views history as a source of pride and nostalgia, other denizens of *Lone Star* see the past as an oppressive burden from which they struggle to escape, either through historical revisioning or through historical amnesia. Again, Sayles uses the trope of interracial sexuality to capture this dynamic. In the film's major subplot, Sam reconnects romantically with Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña), a Chicana American woman he has known since childhood. A widowed mother of two, Pilar teaches history at the local high school where the White parents are accusing her of poisoning their students with propagandist, revisionist accounts of the "official" story of the Texas Republic,

replacing the favored narrative of White heroism and military strength with a story of bloodshed in the pursuit of slavocracy and White power. Pilar's battles parallel Sam's investigation in that both are essentially history wars—the White power structure views their crusades as challenges to the town's memorialized White male heroes. Their shared plights draw them closer together, and as the two reconnect, we learn that they fell in love as teenagers and engaged in a passionate romance. Buddy put a stop to their relationship after discovering them having sex at a drive-in theater and forbidding Sam to ever see Pilar again. Pilar's mother Mercedes Cruz (Miriam Colon) also objected so strongly to their pairing that, decades later, she still refers to the town's sheriff as "that boy," making it clear that time has not softened her disapproval of their romance.

Initially, we are led to believe that the shared antipathy that Buddy and Mercedes feel toward their children's teenage romance stemmed from mutual desires to maintain traditional racial/sexual lines of demarcation. However, in a twist ending that multiplies the transgression of borders, we discover that decades ago, Buddy was having an affair with Mercedes that resulted in an out-of-wedlock child, essentially making Sam and Pilar half-siblings. In *Lone Star*'s final scene, Sam and Pillar must sorrowfully weigh their options and choose to break up or continue an essentially incestuous relationship that has perhaps been denied them for good reasons. Sam suggests ending the relationship. Pillar protests, insisting that she can no longer get pregnant due to complications with her second child. With the prospect of inbred progeny off the table, they nervously embark on a life together as Pilar utters the film's final words: "All that other stuff, all that history—the hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo." This final scene acknowledges that interracial couples, like the denizens of Frontera, cannot escape the burdens of racial

Figure 77. Film stills from *Lone Star*. Sayles drew upon the film trope of the interracial couple to metaphorically examine the various historical and present crises facing the diverse residents of Frontera. The presence of an interracial couple in a historically-White bar (*left*) incites the bartender to pontificate on the sorry state of racial/sexual borders. Shortly after Sam informs Pilar that they are half-siblings (*right*), they decide to "forget the Alamo" and pursue a romantic relationship anyway.

history through force of individual or collective will. The "happy" pair cannot possibly forget their incestuous status any more than students of Mexico/Texas history can forget the Alamo, the bloody Mexican-American War combat site immortalized by White Texians in the patriotic battle cry "remember the Alamo" as they fought to permanently appropriate Mexican territory.

Yet, a sober awareness of these looming burdens and oppressive borders does not damn their intimate personal commitments, and the two choose to "forget" history so that they can live together in peace. *Lone Star* frames its star-crossed lovers between two well-worn tropes of interracial romance, neither ending the film with a "doomed relationship" scenario nor a sunny "love conquers all" finale, instead opting for a rare balance between the historic representational extremes of cinematic interracial relationships. Sayles himself confirmed this interpretation, stating that the film's romantic conclusion was "not going to change society . . . You may be [interracially] married to a

black person, but if you're in the middle of the Watts riots, that's not going to help you. That individual accommodation you made has not changed the social situation."[59] In other words, one can never extract or separate the "race" from "interracial sexuality." Interracial love cannot radically change the ongoing legacies of structural racism, and cross-racial romances can never fully escape the enormous burdens of racial history. However, the deep power imbalances that plague the history of race does not inherently negate all "individual accommodations," and two people of different races can still find love and operate as romantic equals despite rampant social and racial inequalities. Ultimately, *Lone Star* argues that the meanings of interracial sexuality and the lives of interracial couples cannot be separated from history, that the past, in the words of Glenn Whitehouse, is ever "intruding on us, demanding recognition of often uncomfortable truths."[60] Romantic love may offer temporary individual respite from history, and "forbidden" love may offer the illusion of transcending deep structural divides, but the borders that separate us stand largely unaffected, stretching before us into the future and behind us into the past.

The Interracial Biopic

The idiom of "history wars" framed the state of historicity as a bitter conflict between mutually exclusive worldviews, one of many fractious battlefields in the rhetorically violent culture war that overshadowed the 1990s. On a somewhat softer note, the struggles over historical meaning in the West could alternatively be framed as a "memory boom," the bitter feuds coinciding with a sincere desire to reconnect with the past as a fixed point of reference in a fragmented nation.[61] The 1990s film industry both responded to and fueled this trend, producing a particularly large crop of historically-minded films that inspired and, at times, infuriated viewers hungry to reconnect with the

past. Historical dramas like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) allowed audiences to experience troubling events of the past, and the surprise success of Ken Burns' PBS docudrama *The Civil War* (1990) sparked a growing interest in historical documentary film. While Spielberg and Burns sought to reverently reconstruct the past, others toyed with history, treating it as a postmodern playground ripe for manipulation. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) received bipartisan condemnation for presenting dubious conspiracy theories around President John F. Kennedy's assassination as historical fact, while director Robert Zemeckis literally revisioned history in *Forrest Gump* (1994), using cutting edge digital effects to seamlessly insert the title character into archival footage of Lyndon Johnson decorating Vietnam veterans and Governor George Wallace attempting to block Alabama school integration. While films like *Forrest Gump* nostalgically soft-pedaled racially-divisive events like Civil Rights, others confronted audiences with recreations of our contentious racial history. Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) invited 20th Century audiences to empathize with 19th Century African slaves struggling to gain their freedom, while Spike Lee preceded his biopic *Malcolm X* (1992) with a brief video clip of the Rodney King beating, linking the Black separatist's struggles for freedom to contemporary issues of racial oppression and police brutality.

The era also produced a cinematic "interracial history boom," a crop of films that sought to resurrect and reexamine the meaning of interracial sexuality in a history riddled with racial injustice. Alan Parker's *Come See the Paradise* (1990) depicted a marriage between a Japanese American woman and a White man torn apart by the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Barry Levinson explored the sexual politics of

school desegregation in *Liberty Heights* (1999), depicting a Jewish boy and a Black girl meeting at an integrated 1950s Baltimore school and falling in love, much to their parent's mutual horror. The 1990s interracial history boom included a series of interracial biopics—a cycle of wide release films and made-for-TV movies centered on historical figures whose biographies loom large in the story of interracial sexuality in the US. The premium cable channel HBO aired *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991) and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), biopics about Black female entertainers noted for their crossover sexual appeal and their romances with White men. Universal released *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993), a film about the pioneering Chinese martial artist, detailing his marriage to a White woman and the initial rejection they experienced from her racist family. Cable network Showtime released *Mr. and Mrs. Loving* (1996), a TV movie about the trials of the "illegal" Virginian interracial marriage that ultimately moved the 1967 Supreme Court to overturn all US miscegenation laws. The sentimental biopic *The Tiger Woods Story* (1998) depicted the mixed race golf superstar who famously countered media assumptions about his status as a "Black" athlete, plainly stating that he identified as "Cablinasian," an invented term he coined to capture his mixed Caucasian, Black, Native American, and Asian heritage.[62]

Films as disparate as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Mandingo* (1975) show that filmmakers have always looked to our problematic interracial past for cinematic source material. However, I assert that the 1990s interracial biopic comprised a new movie subgenre as these films strove to cinematically recreate the interracial stories of *real* historical figures, as opposed to placing *fictional* interracial couples in historical settings. The growing filmic interest in interracial biographies can be read in a number of

ways. Erica Chito Childs reads the growth of these texts as supporting a regressive colorblind agenda in "portraying racism—and more specifically white opposition to interracial unions—as something that happened in the past . . . [assuring White viewers] that race does not matter and therefore they are not racist."[63] Although I partially support this interpretation, I offer a more nuanced reading that additionally (if not primarily) reads these films as discursive contributions to a larger epochal struggle over national identity and historical meaning as filmmakers turned to foundational interracial romances to frame the meaning of racialized sexuality in the present. I particularly see this in the cinematic treatment of two iconic interracial stories from US history, the story of Pocahontas as well as the alleged sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, two subject that received multiple media treatments throughout the 1990s. The cinematic resurrection of these figures sparked culture war-style debates over the politics of historical accuracy and the uses of the racial/sexual past in framing contemporary issues. In both cases, the release of these films sparked two strands of discourse that often overlapped—one in which historians and scholars debated the historical accuracy (or lack thereof) of the films' portrayals of their subjects, and a second, far more heated strand in which stakeholders representing various identity positions judged the texts based on their ability to accurately speak for or to the unique features of their people's history.

Both of these discursive strands can be seen in the reaction to *Pocahontas* (1995), Walt Disney Pictures' animated feature in which the iconic Powhatan princess saves colonist Captain John Smith from tribal execution. *Pocahontas* takes great historical liberties to broadly retell the story of the English arriving in Powhatan Indian territory

Figure 78. Film still from *Pocahontas*. In Disney's animated biopic, Pocahontas falls in love with Englishman John Smith and eventually saves his life after her father Chief Powhatan tries to execute him.

(modern day Virginia). Englishman John Smith (voiced by Mel Gibson) and Chief Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas (Irene Bedard) urge their respective communities to welcome the "others," and the two begin to fall deeply in love even as their pleas for tolerance are ignored. Both sides become increasingly driven by mutual distrust and hostility that ultimately leads to armed conflict. The film climaxes when Chief Powhatan orders John Smith captured and executed, and Pocahontas throws herself onto Smith in order to save his life. *Pocahontas* ends with Smith returning to England and the Powhatan princess remaining with her people. Historians quickly enumerated Disney's many historical inaccuracies, most notably the transformation of the prepubescent Pocahontas (who was approximately 10-14 years old in 1608) into a fully grown buxom woman, as well as the inclusion of a romance between her and Smith, an apocryphal tale introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the work of "creative" historians.[64] Closely related to the debate over historical accuracy was the discursive strand in which *Pocahontas*' message of cross-cultural understanding and interracial love

lent itself to contemporary discussions about identity, history, and multiculturalism, typically with the critic analyzing *Pocahontas* through the lens of his/her own identity. For example, Caryn James, a female *New York Times* film critic, offered a feminist reading of the film, praising Pocahontas as "the most subversive heroine in the Disney canon, a real-life princess who doesn't waltz off with the prince."[65] Robert Eaglestaff, principal of the American Indian Heritage School in Seattle, castigated the film for dumbing down the history of White/American Indian relations, saying that the colonizer/indigene romance was like teaching "teach[ing] about the Holocaust and putting in a nice story about Anne Frank falling in love with a German officer."[66] Paula Schwartz of the *New York Times* read *Pocahontas* as a failed attempt to tap into the multicultural zeitgeist, seeing the title character as a "politically correct" mélange of "healthy, spiritually adept, canoe-paddling Indian feminism—a character assuredly drawn in the hope of offending no one."[67]

Although *Pocahontas* disappointed historians and multiculturalists, it became a huge box office hit and even spawned a home video sequel, *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998).[**] The discourse around the film generally died down after it left theaters. Not so with the representation of a more controversial interracial couple, namely Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, a pairing that became the subject of two dramatic adaption, the wide release film *Jefferson in Paris* (1995) and the TV miniseries *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (2000), inflaming a vigorous debate that continues

[**] The Pocahontas story also received treatment in no less than four direct-to-video children's movies released about the time of Disney's big-screen version. All of these releases were most likely low budget titles meant to cash in on the sudden interest in Pocahontas. I was unable to find much information about these largely-obscure films other than references on the Internet Movie Database. The Internet Movie Database, "Results for 'Pocahontas,'" *The Internet Movie Database*, accessed September 9, 2015, http://www.imdb.com/find?ref_=nv_sr_fn&q=pocahontas&s=all.

today. Before examining these texts, I will offer a brief overview of the history of the Jefferson/Hemings allegations. The accusation that the widowed Jefferson was pursuing a secret relationship with his light skinned slave Sally Hemings first came to the public's attention in September of 1802 when a muckraking political enemy reported in a Richmond newspaper that the President had for years "kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves," fathering several children with her.[68] Jefferson stayed silent on the rumors which surfaced during his first term as president, and he easily won reelection to a second term. Although historians occasionally revisited the charges, the general public showed little interest in the story until 1974 when historian Fawn Brodie published *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, a bestselling "psychobiography" of the third President in which she argued that he engaged in an affair with Hemings for decades. Several years later, a popular historical novel titled *Sally Hemings* (1979) included fictionalized recreations of the Jefferson/Hemings relationship. CBS optioned to adapt the novel into a TV miniseries, but, in a harbinger of things to come, a coterie of outraged Jefferson scholars pressured the network to cancel the production.[69]

Interest in the story again receded until Merchant-Ivory Productions, a British film company known primarily for lush period dramas, released *Jefferson in Paris*, a movie depicting Thomas Jefferson's 1785-1789 stint as United States Minister to France under George Washington's administration. The film portrays as fact a variety of disputed incidents from Jefferson's life, including an affair with a married Italian-English artist named Maria Cosway, as well as the beginnings of his sexual relationship with Sally Hemings that left her pregnant with her first child. Although *Jefferson in Paris* touched on a variety of subjects, including Jefferson's views on slavery and his partial

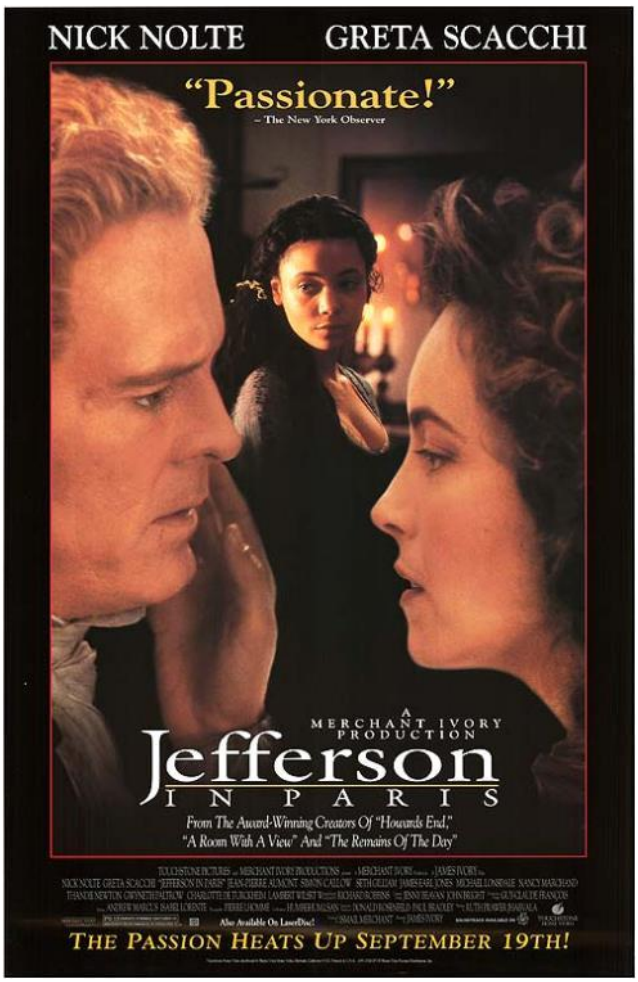

Figure 79. Promotional poster for *Jefferson in Paris*. This advertisement for Merchant-Ivory's historical interracial romance presents a visual love triangle involving Thomas Jefferson, Maria Cosway, and Sally Hemings.

influence on the French Revolution, it focuses largely on the future president's sex life, as evidenced by the film's promotional poster which arranged Jefferson (Nick Nolte),

Hemings (Thandie Newton), and Cosway (Greta Scacchi) in a triangular formation and promised audiences "passion" and "heat." It received largely poor reviews, and, despite all popular interest in the Jefferson/Hemings story, it did poorly at the box office, grossing about $2 million on a budget exceeding $14 million.[70] While failing to make a commercial impact, *Jefferson in Paris*' presentation of the alleged Jefferson/Hemings romance as historical fact sparked a significant rhetorical scuffle,

particularly amongst rankled Jefferson scholars who generally denounced it as a culture war-like assault on Jefferson's character and legacy.[71] Jefferson expert Dumas Malone argued that it was "inconceivable that this fastidious gentleman whose devotion to his dead wife's memory . . . bordered on the excessive could have carried on through a period of years a vulgar liaison."[72] *Jefferson in Paris* director James Ivory countered by pointing out that the Revolutionary icon's defenders expressed more unease with the statesman's involvement in a possible master/slave sexual relationship than by his status as a slave owner. Ivory proudly noted that following his film's release, "people come to Monticello [Jefferson's estate] and everyone asks about Sally Hemings," pleased with his contribution to the project of historical revisionism.[73]

Taken together, these comments represent two opposing arguments that would resurface repeatedly over the decade as new Jefferson texts (and, as we shall see, scientific evidence) appeared. The pro-Jefferson (or, anti-relationship) camp saw themselves as protectors of Jefferson's "factual," historical image against irrational multiculturalists giddily working to see refashion the American icon as a hypocritical race mixer. Conversely, the pro-relationship camp envisioned themselves as a much-needed corrective to the cabal of mostly-White, male historians irrationally protecting their beloved Jefferson from the stain of miscegenation while peddling racist assumptions about the inherent tawdriness of interracial sexuality. The debate reopened by *Jefferson in Paris* surged in 1997 when historian Annette Gordon-Reed released *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, a critically-acclaimed book that merely collected and presented the historical evidence for a *possible* relationship between the two. The book incited a vigorous war of words that paralleled and perhaps exceeded the

film's polarized responses. On one side, pro-Jefferson historians accused the pro-relationship camp of "agenda-driven scholarship," dismissing Gordon-Reed's work as a disingenuous attempt to "topple the great 'dead white males' of American history," positing Jefferson as the "most valued trophy" in this academic blood sport.[74] The pro-relationship camp accused the pro-Jefferson side of peddling racism for framing the *possibility* of Jefferson's sexual desire for a Black woman as "inconceivable," and for accepting as fact the oral histories of Jefferson's White descendants (who roundly dismissed the accusations) while wholly rejecting the oral histories of the Hemings' progeny (who universally acknowledged the liaison).[75]

As the argument continued, science journal *Nature* printed a 1998 article provocatively titled "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child." A team of researchers reported the findings of a genetic test of living Jefferson and Hemings descendants, positing Jefferson as "the most probable" candidate for at least one of Sally Hemings' children.[76] Following the revelation of the DNA evidence, many historians, including some who had discounted the possibility of a Jefferson/Hemings relationship, accepted that such a liaison probably if not definitely existed. Even the scholars from the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, the staff researchers of Jefferson's famed Monticello, released a report upholding the findings.[77] The pro-Jefferson contingent dug in its heals, and in 2001 a team of Jefferson scholars reanalyzed the DNA data in light of historical evidence and judged the likelihood of Jefferson fathering one of Hemings' children to be approximately 4%.[78] As scholars debated the DNA findings, CBS overcame its earlier hesitancy over the subject and aired the TV miniseries *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*. The broadcast film mixed historical fact with romantic fiction, filling in the

Figure 80. Film still from *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal*. CBS' made-for-television movie dramatized the Hemings/Jefferson romance that allegedly began while Jefferson was US ambassador to France and endured until his death in 1826. The film attracted an enormous viewership and helped further popularize the story of the Founding Father's interracial relationship. Some Jefferson scholars still viewed the story as a malicious, apocryphal rumor, and reacted to the broadcast with anger and disgust.

details between Jefferson's (Sam Neill) initial interest in Hemings (Carmen Ejogo) and his death, depicting the births of their children as well as their rocky relationship complicated by deep master/slave power differentials. The four hour broadcast secured an audience of 19.5 million over two nights, far exceeding the viewership that *Jefferson in Paris* attracted.[79] Since the DNA findings and the airing of *An American Scandal*, the general public has largely accepted Jefferson and Hemings' relationship as historical fact, although a subset of Jefferson purists continue to this day to produce works of popular history aimed at debunking the "myth."[80]

Neither "side" of this culture war controversy has ever been able to verify the true nature of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's relationship with irrefutable, 100%

certainty, but the question held such enormous symbolic weight in the 1990s that a discursive confrontation seemed inevitable. The clash moved beyond a cordial disagreement over the interpretation of historical data to become a symbolic debate in which both sides accused the other of placing identity allegiances ahead of honest historical analysis, either defending the privileged federation of embattled "dead White males" or siding with the non-White underdog out of multiculturalist solidarity. The Jefferson/Hemings skirmish and its representation in popular film and television also captures the ways in which debates about foundational figures of the past become inseparable from contemporary issues of interracial sexuality. The pro-Jefferson scholars apologetically acknowledged that he permitted and benefitted from slavery (while verbally condemning it), yet they rejected a possible sexual relationship with a Black slave as incompatible with his character, ironically placing interracial sex ahead of slavery in terms of imaginable moral lapses. The pro-Jefferson scholars rejected the *possibility* of Jefferson's interracial desire as staunchly as any segregationist opponent of interracial romance and marriage, and their refusal to accept the testimony of Hemings' descendants and the work of the "revisionist" historians who believed them performs the resistance and annoyance that many felt towards the growth of interracial marriages and the explosion of mixed race progeny throughout the nation. Conversely, the pro-relationship camp saw the Jefferson-Hemings connection as an important symbol for understanding the complex intersections of race and sexuality in US society, past and present. Gordon-Reed explains:

> Jefferson has been called the personification of America . . . There's enormous symbolic value if the personification of America mixed his blood with a black person . . . [If] people see themselves in Jefferson, and identify him with the nation, what does it say about the nation that he had children who were of mixed

> race? . . . [It is] a way of establishing black people's birthright to America. If you look at the flip side of it, rejecting the story is a part of the rejection of black people's birthright and claims to America. So people invest a lot in the topic and the subject.[81]

If, as Gordon-Reed puts it, Jefferson is a synecdoche for the very heart and history of the United States, then demonstrating that interracial sexuality and mixed race progeny remain an inextricable yet suppressed part of this iconic President's biography has tremendous symbolic value for those traditionally dehumanized and excluded because of racial difference or "mixed blood."

The repositioning of Sally Hemings from the margins to the center of US history stands as a symbol for the 1990s multicultural movement as previously silenced voices of the past spoke up and reshaped our collective understanding of the nation's history. Validating the existence of a Jefferson/Hemings link performed the excavation of a repressed/denied interracial past in which slavery allowed White slaveowners to privately sleep with slave women while publically decrying the "abomination" of race mixing. A Jefferson/Hemings relationship, whether genuinely romantic or purely carnal, unearths this buried history and places it at the center of the American story, a dynamic that held particular significance to the millions of mixed race individuals increasingly questioning foundational racial ideologies designed by White architects like Jefferson. Ultimately, the Jefferson/Hemings films and 1990s interracial biopic boom in which they participated collectively represented a desire on the part of some filmmakers, actors, and audiences to understand contemporary race relations and identity politics through our nation's hidden and frequently disavowed interracial history. Far from being merely conciliatory texts reassuring modern audiences that racism and deep racial divides lay behind us, the

decade's cycle of historical interracial biopics served as windows into the past that attempted, to varying degrees of success, to shed light on the multicultural present.

Colorblindness 2.0:
Incidental Interracialism and Multiracialism in 1990s Cinema

The Bodyguard: The Triumph of Incidental Interracialism

In the long story of interracial sexuality in US film, the 1990s arguably produced a larger, more diverse, and more complex crop of cinematic texts than any previous decade. However, despite the wave of provocative minority-helmed studio productions, identity-conscious indies, and revisionist interracial biopics, the vast majority of the era's films represented interracial sexuality as acts of colorblind love, presenting such interactions as essentially devoid of racial meaning or tension. By the decade's end, incidental interracialism—the romantic pairing of couples in ways that downplay, dodge, or totally ignore race as a shaping factor in the life of the romantic couple—would become the default representational frame for interracial sexuality in US film, television, and media in general. Of course, 1990s incidental interracialism was not new, and it should be understood as an extension of the colorblind frame pioneered in 1980s youth films like *Fame* (1980) and *Soul Man* (1986). However, such depictions in the 1990s far surpassed the Reagan Era for sheer numbers. I have identified approximately 50 US narrative films depicting interracial sexuality from 1980 through 1989, whereas the years 1998 through 2001 produced over *200* movies with such images, most of which framed interracial coupling as an incidental, unremarkable fixture of post-Civil Rights America.

The decade's flood of interracial love began as a slow trickle in the early 1990s. The media noted the beginning of the trend shortly after the success of *Jungle Fever*, as

in a 1991 *Ebony* magazine article titled "The Last Taboo?" that cited the sudden explosion of mixed couples in movies and television. The tipping point came a year later with *The Bodyguard*, a romantic thriller that would become the first true interracial blockbuster, a cross-racial romance melding the high concept production practices of the 1980s with the colorblind framing pioneered in the Reagan Era. *The Bodyguard* centers on Rachel Marron (real-life R&B star Whitney Houston), a wealthy pop singer who routinely receives and ignores death threats from an obsessed stalker. She hires a straight-laced former Secret Service agent named Frank Farmer (Kevin Costner) as her head of personal security. Frank bristles at Rachel's pampered, extravagant lifestyle but approaches his job with a meticulous seriousness, tightening the lax security procedures surrounding Rachel to protect her from any potential dangers. The carefree Rachel initially dismisses his new protocols as paranoid and overprotective, until some frenzied fans grab her and start a riot at one of her concerts. As Rachel begins to trust Frank with her physical safety, the two draw closer emotionally, ultimately sleeping together in an off-screen love scene. Frank immediately regrets the tryst and tries to end the affair, insisting it would inhibit his ability to remain professional. She protests by brazenly defying his security procedures, until the death threats become so intense that she again complies with his wishes. The film climaxes when we learn that Rachel's jealous, overshadowed sister Nicki (Michele Lamar Richards) hired a hitman to kill her, and Frank shoots the hitman in a bloody televised confrontation while Rachel preforms at the Academy Awards. The film ends with Frank and Rachel parting ways, and the credits roll to a Whitney Houston cover of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You."

Critics overwhelmingly panned the film, particularly criticizing the weak

Figure 81. Film still from *The Bodyguard*. Frank Farmer and Rachel Marron make an unlikely couple, and while they share little in common, race proves to be a non-issue in their romance.

chemistry between the lead actors and lack of dramatic suspense. Audiences, however, flocked to *The Bodyguard* and its various ancillary media texts—it became the 7th biggest box office draw of 1992, Houston's recording of "I Will Always Love You" became the year's biggest single, the song's music video played constantly on cable channels like MTV, and the soundtrack album would become the bestselling film soundtrack of all time.[82] While *The Bodyguard* ruled the box office and music charts in 1992, it retrospectively occupies an important position in the narrative of cinematic interracial sexuality, perfectly capturing the era's colorblind zeitgeist both in terms of its textual rhetoric and its critical and commercial reception. Textually, nothing in *The Bodyguard*'s narrative acknowledges the race the romantic leads or any of its characters. Interracial sexuality stands as totally unremarkable and unnoted, even though the film's core plot and one of its subplots (in which Rachel's jealous sister tries to seduce Frank) revolves

around interracial desire. In interviews, both leads agreed that acknowledging race would have distracted from *The Bodyguard*'s romantic heart. Costner told *Ebony* that "the film is about a relationship between two people, and it would have been a failure if it became a film about interracial relationships."[83] Houston agreed, telling *Rolling Stone* that audiences responded well to the strategy of ignoring race: "Nobody made an issue of that . . . They weren't looking at a black person and a white person, they were looking at two people having a relationship."[84] Some read the popularity of the film and its soundtrack as evidence that times had changed. "Interracial relationships have been played out for years in Hollywood," wrote Carla Hall of *The Washington Post*, citing the film industry's discovery of colorblind love as "playing catch-up" with the rest of America.[85] *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* film critic William Arnold agreed, praising the film as "a transcendent vision on the part of the filmmakers, and a major breakthrough for Hollywood that could have a revolutionary ripple effect that lasts long after Spike Lee is forgotten."[86]

Arnold's comment pitting *The Bodyguard*'s incidental interracialism against Spike Lee's racial hyperconsciousness could hardly be more telling. Arnold accurately identified the presence of filmmakers still insisting that "race mattered" in intimate relations alongside *The Bodyguard*'s race-blind love, while also correctly predicting that the elevation of the colorblind frame for interracial sexuality would rhetorically overshadow the latter. While colorblind romance proved popular on the big screen, marketers still saw color, often struggling with how to promote such films, demonstrating a tendency to downplay or hide the interracial angle in advertisements. Bob Strauss of the *Baltimore Sun* noted a spate of films whose plots centered on interracial sexuality, including the slavery-themed horror film *Candyman* (1992) and the British import *The*

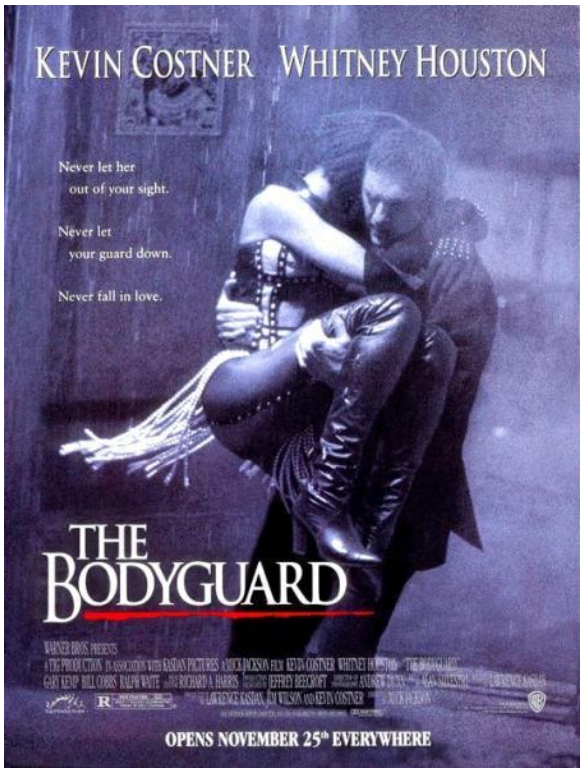

Figure 82. Promotional poster for *The Bodyguard*. Some criticized the film's marketers for white-washing Whitney Houston's brown skin and hiding her face for the film's promotional poster, accusing Hollywood of being too timid to advertise its interracial romance angle.

Crying Game (1992), yet their promotional materials masked any interracial subtext. Strauss also accused the designers of *The Bodyguard*'s film poster with obscuring Houston's faced and monochromatically tinting the photograph, literally whitewashing her brown skin and obscuring her face.[87] Others implied that audiences more readily accepted *The Bodyguard*'s Black woman/White man pairing than if the film had presented a Black man/White woman coupling. Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles noted that audiences would only accept interracial love under certain conditions, "as long as the woman is exotic—Chinese, Japanese, [or] a light-skinned black woman—and the man is in control . . . The guy makes the choices and then goes on about his business."[88] Hollywood also found less success with Black/White romances that switched the gender

dynamic, and several films contemporaneous to *The Bodyguard* pairing Black men with White women failed to attract a wide audience. Both *Love Field* (1992), a 1960s period film that paired Michelle Pfeiffer and Dennis Haysbert, and *Othello* (1995), a Shakespearean adaption that cast Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Irène Jacobmade as Desdemona, fared poorly at the box office. Perhaps learning a lesson form these failures, Paramount reportedly reworked the crime thriller *Kiss the Girls* (1997) to eliminate the interracial romance between stars Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd found in the bestselling James Patterson novel from which the film was adapted. Rising star Denzel Washington famously shunned onscreen romances with White women as a stated career move after a test screening of the original cut of the thriller *The Mighty Quinn* (1989), in which he kissed White female actor Mimi Rogers, proved so unpopular with Black women and White men that the studio excised the shot.[89] Washington kept his promise for years thereafter, reportedly refusing to kiss the White leads in the crime thriller *The Pelican Brief* (1993) and the futuristic action movie *Virtuosity* (1995) for fear of alienating crucial filmgoing demographics.[††]

Perhaps, as argued by Van Peebles, *The Bodyguard*'s popularity partially rested on old cinematic race/gender stereotypes, including the framing of Black femininity as requiring control and direction from White patriarchy.[90] Or, perhaps the film largely benefitted from the public's willingness to more readily accept a Black woman/White man pairing over a Black man/White woman romance. Indeed, most of the notable interracial films that followed *The Bodyguard* paired White men with non-White women,

[††] Washington did eventually kiss a White woman in Spike Lee's *He Got Game* (1998), reportedly infuriating a segment of his Black female fan base. According to *Jet* magazine: "[In] *He Got Game*, Washington does . . . cross the line when his convict character kisses a White prostitute. Washington told the *Chicago Sun-Times* . . . 'Black women stood up and yelled, 'Denzel, you promised!'''" "Is It Still Taboo for Blacks and Whites to Kiss in Movies?," *Jet*, April 1998, 32–36.

reproducing the trend of White male centeredness noted since the earliest days of interracial cinema. However one critically assesses *The Bodyguard*, it proved to the Hollywood establishment that films centered on colorblind interracial sexuality could find a wide audience, and it enshrined incidental interracialism as the most appropriate frame for market friendly depictions of such pairings. Although it is impossible to determine whether *The Bodyguard* directly caused or merely participated in the trend, the following years produced scores of cinematic interracial romances. Sometimes interracial sexuality was central to the plot, as in *Pocahontas* or the Whoopi Goldberg/Ted Danson comedy *Made in America* (1993). More often, interracial sexuality simply appeared in film, sometimes very briefly, and ostensibly meant nothing. For example, in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, the director played a bit part as an unwilling accessory to murder who "happens" to have a Black wife, a character who appears onscreen for a brief moment. Incidental interracialism eventually touched the historic Black man/White woman taboo noted by Van Peebles. The same year that Paramount cut the interracial romance from *Kiss the Girls*, the sci-fi comedy *Men in Black* (1997) featured Black lead Will Smith pursuing a love interest who is "incidentally" White, a textual flourish that did not stop the film from becoming the second-highest grossing movie of the year.[91]

Colorblindness and its Discontents

Alongside the rising tide of cinematic incidental interracialism, Hollywood continued to produce race-conscious texts that flouted the dominant logic of colorblindness and explored the complex cultural politics of interracial sexuality. John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1997) depicted the contemporary American college campus as a messy mélange of racial conflict and volatile interracial love, while Warren Beatty's comedy *Bulworth* (1998), previously discussed in this dissertation's

introduction, satircally framed cross-racial love as a vehicle for White men to access transformative revelations about race privilege and class oppression in 1990s America. Outsie of the multiplexes, other popular media produced contradictory accounts and conflicting messages on the contemporary state of interracial romance. Gangsta rapper Ice Cube released his bestselling 1991 album *Death Certificate* which featured the song "Horny Lil Devil," a confrontational track in which he threatens to kill White male "devils" who desire Black women:

> Cause the devil is a savage motherfucker
> That's why I'm lighter than the average brother
> Cause you raped our women and we felt it
> But it'll never happen again if I can help it.

That same year, pop music star Michael Jackson released the song "Black or White," a chart-topping single built around the lyric, "If you're thinkin' of being my baby/It don't matter if you're black or white." The popular music video for "Black or White" offered viewers a visual metaphor for the song's colorblind ethos in one sequence which shows men and women of different races digitally "morphing" into each other while singing along to the lyrics. Thus, popular music joined mass movies in performing the same extremes of cultural contradiction, simultaneously producing texts that framed racially-mixed relationships as incidental byproducts of colorblind America alongside race-conscious films that presented interracial sexuality as contested terrain on a fierce multicultural battleground.

While incidents of racial conflict like the LA Riot/Rebellion and the polarzied reactions to the O.J. Simpson trial cast doubt on the assumption that the US had reached a colorblind consensus, a sizable portion of the population, especially Whites, still insisted that race no longer mattered and continued to see the world through colorblind lenses. A

Figure 83. Film stills from "Black or White." The music video for Michael Jackson's hit single included a sequence in which people of different races and genders morph into each other, offering a digital rendering of the song's message. (The Computer History Museum)

1995 survey by *The Washington Post* found 64% of Whites believing that "past and present discrimination" were not major contributors to Black economic and social problems, while a 1997 Gallup poll found a majority of Whites believing "there are fewer race problems, less discrimination, and abundance of opportunity for blacks." In nearly every case, Black responses inversely reflected White responses—whatever the majority of Whites thought, the majority of Blacks thought the opposite, and vice versa.[92] Others reported a concurrent backlash against the resurgence of racially-conscious rhetoric as the conservative forces of the Reagan Era struggled to counter a resurgence of racial claims and discourses. Commentator Dinesh D'Souza's bestselling book *The End of Racism* (1995) argued that color-conscious government policies and divisive multicultural curricula further disadvantaged minorities while angering and alienating nonracist Whites.[93] *Time* magazine reported White university students wearied by professors shoving "political correctness" down their throats, decrying an "unwelcome rhetoric of

guilt" that expected them to apologize for past offences for which they held no responsibility.[94] Many on the political and academic Left saw the simultaneous persistence of racial disparities and the popularity of anti-progressive ideologies under the guise of race-blindness as a call to arms. A 1997 *Wall Street Journal* article noted the growth of "Whiteness studies"—historians and academics seeking to destabilize the category of White culture by treating it as a distinct racial group shaped by dominance—while race conscious law scholars pioneered Critical Race Theory, a radical analysis of the ways racial power shaped US law.[95]

As in past eras, interracial sexuality becoming a malleable symbol as culture war combatants deployed clashing rhetorics to frame and reframe the ever-shifting meaning of the interracial couple. While *The Bodyguard* and other likeminded films presented interracial romance as untroubled by racial strife or racist persecution, many looked at the daily experiences of contemporary interracial couples and insisted such pairings continued to face hardship, perhaps suggesting little or no improvement in routine instances of discrimination and overall race relations. A 1991 *New York Times* article titled "Interracial Couples Struggle Against Hostility" documented such pairings as routinely facing opposition from friends and family, Black and White, while interracial families across the nation cloistered themselves in support groups where their multiracial children could safely mingle with other mixed kids.[96] Others noted stubbornly resistant and even hardening attitudes towards interracial dating, particularly amongst Asian men and Black women, some of whom expressed resentment at the intermarriage disparity drawn along lines of gender. The 1990 Census found that 72% of Asian/White unions consisted of White men with Asian American women, leading one Asian American man

to denounce this dynamic as "a manifestation of a silent conspiracy by the racist white society and self-hating Asian [women] to effect the genocide of Asian Americans."[97] Black male/White female unions comprised 71% of Black/White marriage in 1990, and the frustration felt by many Black women at the prevalence of Black men choosing White spouses received even more press.[98] Writer Bebe Moore Campbell noted many Black women cursing the onslaught of "trespassing" White women who dared to "take our men," while Maria T. Padilla of the *Orlando Sentinel* despaired of the plight of Black professional women who often "moved up alone," finding fewer marriageable Black males the higher they moved up the educational and/or professional ladder.[99]

Conversely, many looked at the state of interracial sexuality and drew opposite conclusions, confirming the rhetoric of *The Bodyguard*'s colorblind love. Reporting on interracial love and marriage in the news media more than doubled from the previous decade, much of this spurred on by 1990 Census figures that showed notable increases in interracial unions and opinion polls that captured liberalizing attitudes towards such couples.[‡‡] The Census Bureau reported that interracial unions had nearly doubled between 1980 and 1992, while a 1997 Gallup poll found 64% of Whites and 77% of Blacks approving of marriage between the two groups (as opposed to 48% and 70% respectively just six years prior).[100] Some celebrated these results as proof of ground gained. Sherman N. Miller penned a *Philadelphia Tribune* editorial in which he credited interracial love with "dissolving the race problem" despite widespread media coverage of deepening racial divides, while sociologist Phillip Gay described how interracial unions

[‡‡] A *New York Times* database search for "interracial marriage," "interracial dating," and "interracial love" found 101 articles between 1980-1989 versus 247 articles between 1990-1999. Interestingly, the 1990s yielded more articles than the subsequent decade (225 between 2000-2009), perhaps denoting a high water mark for discursive interest on the subject.

created a “ripple effect” that converted previously racist friends and family to the cause of racial equality.[101] Others even noted liberalizing attitudes towards interracial love in the ranks of political and social conservatives, as old-guard Republican Party members fought for the nomination of Black judge Clarence Thomas as a Supreme Court Justice, ostensibly unperturbed that he was married to a White woman.[102]

Vague is Vogue

As a host of interlocutors debated the meaning of the rise of interracial dating and marriage in light of racially contentious present, some wondered what the growth of racial mixing meant for the future. In 1993, *Time* magazine released a special issue with a cover featuring a headshot of a young, racially ambiguous woman with this piece of explanatory text: “Take a good look at this woman. She was created by a computer from a mix of several races. What you see is a remarkable preview of the new face of America.”[103] This cover celebrated race mixing as the nation’s inevitable multiracial destiny, a literal multicultural melting pot where racial differences would disappear and meld into the figure of a racially nonspecific everywoman. No longer the “abominable mixtures” of Colonial times or the “mongrelized” progeny of Jim Crow, mixed race people had for some become the ultimate symbols of the virtues of colorblindness, the portents of a truly integrated future.[104] Pundits often projected their utopian racial dreams onto the so-called Millennials (those reaching adulthood around 2000), a diverse generation that expressed greater comfortability with multiculturalism and interracial romance than any previous generation. In the field of television, industry watchers argued that Millennials exhibited colorblindness in their viewing habits. Black cast sitcoms like *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999) attracted a surprisingly large young White viewership, while White hip hop fans helped make MTV’s *Yo! MTV Raps* (1988-1995) the channel's most

Figure 84. *Time* magazine cover—"The New Face of America." In 1993, *Time* magazine ran a cover story with this portrait of a woman, a digital mixture of "several races," that symbolized a future racial utopia facilitated by increasing racial diversity and interracial love/marriage. (Time)

popular early 1990s show.[105] Others welcomed growth of multiracial youth proudly flouting centuries of racial logic by forging their own mixed race identities. Farai Chideya credited Millennials with "recreating America's racial identity every single day . . . If anybody is going to erase the color line, it's going to be them."[106] Vanessa E. Jones of *The Boston Globe* reported that for many mixed race Millennials, race "has never been an issue," including one child of a Jewish mother and a Black father who told Jones simply, "My parents always told me I was both."[107]

The growing acceptance and even celebration of multiracial kids and their interracial parents can be seen as a hard-fought victory for the multiracial movement—a

coterie of activists agitating for the recognition and rights that had traditionally been denied mixed race individuals. The multiracial movement began in the 1970s as a handful of local organizations aimed at building social support and networking opportunities for multiracial families ostracized by monoracial communities. By the 1990s, these isolated groups had coalesced into an overtly political network working to challenge government policies and group identities that perpetuated the myths of racial categorization.[108] Some multiracial activists decried race-conscious policies like affirmative action for supporting arbitrary racial categories, alienating the Civil Rights establishment while garnering the attention of conservatives like Newt Gingrich who supported the multiracial individual's right to choose his or her race or races. The high water mark of the multiracial movement came in late in the decade when activists successfully agitated for the inclusion of a "mark one or more races" box on the 2000 Census, a moment of official national recognition.[109]

Long before the word "multiracial" designated a national movement, Hollywood played an important role in mixed race identity moving from a signifier of racial pollution to a celebrated symbol of progress and tolerance. Recall that the film industry historically had held mixed race individuals to a cinematic version of the one-drop rule. Characters with any trace of non-White blood were cinematically consigned to the non-White race, and films typically framed such individuals as tragic figures alienated from both races and psychologically tortured by their mixed racial caste.[110] If the tragic mulatto was fortunate enough to be "blessed" with Anglicized features, they could renounce their Black heritage and family and pass as White, often sorrowfully returning and finally accepting their Blackness after a period of racial penance. Such problematic constructions

of multiracialism started becoming anachronistic in the race-conscious 1960s, and overtly mixed characters largely disappeared from the countercultural films of the 1970s and the colorblind cinema of the 1980s. In the 1970s/1980s, actual mixed race individuals generally played non-White characters—biracial Ron O'Neal played the Black drug dealer Youngblood Priest in *Super Fly* (1972) and Rae Dawn Chong (who cites Chinese, Scotch-Irish, African, and Cherokee ancestry) played Black women in *Beat Street* (1984) and *Soul Man* (1986).[111] By the waning years of the 20th Century, with the multiracial movement in full swing, Hollywood increasingly realized the lucrative potential of mixed race actors as marketable, racially ambiguous everymen/women that could appeal to a larger audience than monoracial actors. Kimberly McClain DaCosta explains this shift:

> During the 1990s, racially ambiguous people and even interracially intimate scenes began to appear in advertisements designed to appeal to a broad, ethnically nonspecific audience . . . [The reasons] for using such images lie in their symbolism . . . Unlike target marketing, in which a message or product is created to appeal to a particular demographic, this kind of marketing uses multiracialism to appeal to a mass audience.[112]

Although DaCosta speaks specifically of multiracials in commercial advertising, her comments equally apply to the late 1990s/early 2000s film industry as a young generation of multiracial actors rode the racial zeitgeist to film stardom, leveraging their racial ambiguity to appeal to a wide audience while touting their mixedness as a cure for past and present racial ills. In short, "vague" had become "vogue."

This wave of multiracial movie stars included Jessica Alba, Jennifer Beals, Halle Berry, Rosario Dawson, Vin Diesel, pro wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, pop singer/actor Jennifer Lopez, Freddie James Prinze, Jr., and Keanu Reeves. No generalization adequately captures the diverse careers of this cohort, but some broad patterns emerged in terms of the types of film roles they played. First, many of these

Figure 85. Film stills from *Little Buddha* and *The Matrix*. Keanu Reeves' multiracial ancestry allowed him to play distinctly racialized roles, such as the Siddhartha in *Little Buddha* (*left*), as well as racially-unmarked ones, including sci-fi superhero Neo in *The Matrix* films (*right*).

actors chose to play racialized characters (characters whose race or ethnicity is specifically noted or implied in the film) as well as non-racialized characters (characters whose race or ethnicity is unidentified). For example, Keanu Reeves' ancestry includes White, Native Hawaiian, Chinese, and Portuguese, and his racial ambiguity has allowed him to play both racially marked and unmarked characters; he played the role of ancient South Asian prince Siddhartha in *Little Buddha* (1993) as well as the racially nonspecific superhero Neo in the dystopian sci-fi series *The Matrix* (1999-2003). Secondly, many of these actors have exploited their racial ambiguity to play a variety of racial/ethnic roles that often do not match their actual ancestry, altering dress and voice to suit the needs of the character. The career of Puerto Rican American Jennifer Lopez demonstrates this. Her filmography includes playing a Cuban woman in *Blood and Wine* (1997), a Latina pop star in the Selena Quintanilla-Pérez biopic *Selena* (1997), and an Italian American woman in *The Wedding Planner* (2001). She also accepted various racially unmarked roles, including documentary filmmaker Terri Flores (a surname that could be interpreted as Latina or Anglo) in the horror film *Anaconda* (1997) and detective Karen Sisco in *Out of Sight* (1998), in which her character has a White father (played by Italian American

actor Dennis Farina). Finally, surveying these actors' careers demonstrates that "racially ambiguous" is not the same as "ambiguously White," meaning that the variety of racial roles offered to mixed raced actors is often circumscribed by how White/non-White they "look." For example, both Jennifer Beals and Halle Berry were born to interracial couples comprised of a White mother and a Black father; however, Beals' facial features and skin tone are considered "more White," while Berry's features appear "more Black." This plays out in their respective filmographies. Beals has generally played racially unmarked roles (*Four Rooms* [1995], *The Last Days of Disco* [1998]) as well as racially marked roles (*Devil in a Blue Dress* [1995]), whereas Berry has largely played explicitly Black characters in movies (*Bulworth*, *Losing Isaiah* [1995], *Monster's Ball*).

Out of this new generation of multiracial actors, the career of Vin Diesel best exemplifies the various contradictory nuances of the rise of multiracial stardom. Diesel's mother is White and his biological father, whom he does not know, is of an indeterminate race. Diesel first explored his mixed race identity in the dramatic comedy short *Multi-Facial* (1995), a semiautobiographical film that directly addresses the cinematic politics of multiracialism. *Multi-Facial* follows struggling multiracial actor Mike (Diesel) who spends his day trying out for various acting roles. The film frames his multiracialism as a blessing and a curse: it allows him audition for the part of an Italian American guido, a Latino tough-guy, and an African American rapper. However, he loses the Latino role because he cannot speak Spanish and is denied the Black role because he is "too light." For his final audition, he delivers a self-reflexive monologue in which he reveals that his Black father, a stage actor, saw himself as a "Black actor" while encouraging his son to aspire to be "an actor—just an actor." Although little seen outside of the film festival

Figure 86. Film stills from *Multi-Facial*. An aspiring multiracial actor leverages his racial ambiguity to try out for the part of an Italian guido (left), a Latino tough-guy (center), and a Black rapper (right). Vin Diesel's semiautobiographical independent short proved prescient, essentially predicting the race-hopping he would go on to exhibit in his rising Hollywood career.

circuit, *Multi-Facial* proved important in essentially predicting the trajectory of Vin Diesel's career, and its popularity at Sundance landed him a bit part in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as an Italian American rifleman. His subsequent films found him continuing this race-hopping trend. He played racially unmarked characters in *Boiler Room* (2000) and *Pitch Black* (2000). In *The Fast and Furious* (2001), he plays Dominic Toretto, a street racer with a surname that critics called Italian or Cuban, while *Knockaround Guys* (2001) casts him as a Jewish strong arm.[113]

As Diesel's popularity grew, reviewers became increasingly intrigued about his racial background as well as his muteness on the topic. Black-oriented *Jet* magazine included Diesel in a cover story titled "Hollywood's Black Action Heroes," while the *L.A. Sentinel* reported that "white audiences have claimed him as well."[114] Diesel adopted an official policy of evasion, alternatively citing his background as being "100 per cent multicultural," "Italian and a lot of stuff," and/or "a person of color," driving the point

home by naming his media production company One Race Films.[115] In a real-life performance of his monologue from *Multi-Facial*, Diesel continually asserted that he desired to be considered "an actor, just an actor," and his racial elusiveness coincided with a steady stream of hits that attested to his wide appeal. His symbolic importance stretched beyond the niche market of the action movie as critics read his popularity as a sign of racial progress and broadening tolerance. Roger Ebert cited Diesel's fame as "one of the most heartening trends in movies," while the *New York Times* hailed the popularity of multiracial stars with young audiences as proof of a younger, more accepting, and racially-mixed generation of American consumers and filmgoers.[116] Others have sardonically dismissed such trends as "mixploitation," framing the commodification of multiracialism as a crass marketing ploy capitalizing on the fetishized "exotic" looks of racially mixed people.[117]

Ultimately, the rise of multiracial film stardom in the 1990s joined incidental interracialism to cinematically manifest and validate the colorblind ethos sweeping Hollywood films. Diesel's savvy decision to embrace a malleable, chameleon-like racial identity performed the colorblind rhetoric that race did not matter anymore. Although the popularity of multiracial movie stars certainly signaled a positive trend in that previously stigmatized and even hated identities were becoming more acceptable, some touted the multiracial film star as additional "proof" that the racial issues of the past had been largely conquered. "Race shouldn't matter," Diesel told *Ebony* magazine in 2002, "I just want you to come see my movies," driving home the point that race should neither be a factor in audiences choosing their entertainment nor individuals selecting their identities.[118] In the final analysis, the racially ambiguous movie star joined the scores of

incidental interracial romances to cinematically argue that race, and by extension, interracial sexuality, “shouldn’t matter.”

Conclusion

At the 2002 Academy Awards, history was made when Denzel Washington won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of a corrupt cop in *Training Day* (2001) and Halle Berry won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role as a grief-stricken woman in *Monster’s Ball*. Washington became the second Black man to win the award after Sidney Poitier for *Lilies* of the Field (1963), and not coincidentally, Washington co-presented an Honorary Award to Poitier that same night. Berry, however, received an enormous amount of attention as the first Black woman in cinematic history to win this prestigious award, and her recognition pushed *Monster’s Ball* from the arthouses into nationwide distribution and a sizable box office return. In *Monster’s Ball*, Berry plays Leticia Musgrove, a small town Southern woman whose life is marred by pervasive tragedy. In a very short span of time, Leticia loses her incarcerated husband to the electric chair and her preadolescent son to a fatal hit-and-run. In her emotionally fragile state of desperation, she finds comfort in the arms of White corrections officer Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton), a man who, unbeknownst to her, oversaw the execution of her husband *and* lost his adult son to suicide in the same day. Hank’s aging father Buck (Peter Boyle), an unrepentant racist, tries to drive them apart, luridly informing Leticia that he also “had a thing for nigger juice” in his youth, adding, “Hank's just like his daddy.” Disgusted, Leticia leaves Hank, who responds to his father’s meddling by putting him away in a nursing home. Leticia’s woes continue when she is

evicted from her house for failure to pay rent. Hank woos her back and convinces her to move in, and the film resolves open-endedly as the two begin a new life together.

The film's release and reception perform all of the complex nuances surrounding the cinematic depiction of interracial sexuality observed in this chapter. Race continued to matter a lot, yet not matter at all, at the same time. While the film recognizes racism (both Buck and his son Hank are initially presented as deeply prejudiced), it ultimately becomes a story of breaking down racial barriers as the shared human experience of despair and loss help Hank shed his racial biases and fall in love with Leticia. Buck's unreconstructed racism could be read as a problem of the older generation, and Hank's decision to put his father out of sight as a symbolic act of retiring the racist ideas handed down from previous generations. Ultimately, *Monster's Ball* downplays race and becomes a story where love conquers all, demonstrated by the film's final line of dialogue in which Hank breathlessly assures Leticia, "I think we're going to be all right." Many critics read the film as an official endorsement of colorblind romance, including Roger Ebert who opined, "This is not a message movie about interracial relationships, but the specific story of two desperate people . . . [who] turn to each other because there is no place else to turn."[119]

While *Monster's Ball* could be read as a parable of colorblind romance, the film's production and reception could alternatively be read as evidence that interracial sex remained controversial and contested terrain. It contains an explicit and intense sex scene between Berry and Thornton, which occurs shortly after they reveal their common experiences of loss. The scene reportedly left test screening audiences feeling uncomfortable and voyeuristic, and the studio cut a minute of footage from the steamy

sequence to avoid an NC-17 rating.[120] Several months after the Oscars, Black actor Angela Bassett revealed that the filmmaker initially offered her the role of Leticia but she turned it down over concerns of being "a prostitute on film," adding that the script reinforced "stereotype[s] about black women and sexuality." Black reviewer DeWayne Wickham of *USA Today* supported Bassett's critique, castigating *Monster's Ball* as "a leering, fanciful look at interracial sex from a white perspective . . . [featuring] a grunting, groaning, lust-filled beautiful black woman and an unsuspecting white guy on whom she throws herself."[121]

Immediately after Berry was announced the winner of the 2002 Academy Award for Best Actress, race again simultaneously mattered, yet did not matter. Berry argued for the tremendous importance of race in her tearful acceptance speech. "This moment is so much bigger than me," she stated, inviting the Black female actors, past, present and future, to see themselves in her win. "This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, [and] Diahann Carroll. It's for the women that stand beside me—Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett, [and] Vivica Fox. And it's for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened."[122] Critics lauded her win as racially significant, excitedly touting Berry as the first Black/African American woman to win that coveted award. Tom Ortenberg, president of Lions Gate Films which released *Monster's Ball* and spearheaded Berry's Oscar campaign, celebrated the event as a "watershed evening," adding that "Hollywood picked a great time to correct some historic wrongs."[123] Others criticized the casting of racial overtones onto Berry's acting talents, including Tammy Carter of the *Orlando Sentinel* who insisted that Berry won "because her performance was the best."[124] NAACP president Kweisi Mfume feared

Figure 87. Film still from *Monster's Ball* and Halle Berry's Oscar acceptance speech. Berry played Leticia Musgrove (*left*), a Southern Black woman who sexually throws herself upon a White corrections officer after enduring a series of unimaginable losses. Berry's emotionally gripping performance earned her an Academy Award for Best Actress (*right*), making her the first Black woman to win this coveted award. (New York Daily News)

racial tokenism, encouraging Hollywood to "judge performance based on skill and not on skin color."[125] Some even took issue with the nearly ubiquitous assumption that Berry was indeed "Black" or "African American," words that Berry implied although never uttered during her acceptance speech. An anonymous editorialist of the *San Francisco Chronicle* insisted that labelling Berry an "African American lends credence to an odious racist concept . . . [that disrespects] her white mother. I look so forward to the day when we discard the prison of these limited terms."[126] *Chicago Sun-Times* reader Nick Curtis agreed: "Vin Diesel recently said he considers himself 'multicultural' rather than belonging to any particular ethnicity . . . Everyone kept referring to Halle Berry as an African-American, even though such ethnicity makes up only half [of] her identity. In other words, she's just as multicultural as Diesel is. Agree?"[127] Vincent Cirrincione, Berry's manager, offered an adequate although somewhat unsettling answer to Curtis'

question, explaining that such distinctions were lost on Hollywood when it came to issues of Black/White mixing: "Milk is milk until you add a little Hershey [chocolate syrup]. It doesn't matter if you add a little Hershey or a lot."[128]

Monster's Ball and the various reactions it incited narrates an ongoing rhetorical wrestling match over the meaning of cinematic interracial sexuality in a culture marked by conflicting frames for the very meaning of race. This decade produced the largest crop of films featuring some form of interracial sexuality, and the colorblind ethos of the 1980s grew throughout the 1990s to become the dominant frame for the depiction of such couplings. *The Bodyguard* became the first true blockbuster colorblind romance, proving that audiences could and did welcome deracinated interracial love with open arms (and open wallets). By the decade's end, the representational gospel of incidental interracialism had become the film industry's default frame for the depiction of interracial sexuality. Many read *Monster's Ball* in this vein, interpreting it as a colorblind parable for the personal and social benefits of not seeing race in the sphere of intimate encounters. Although Berry's physical features marked her as "Black" in most viewers' minds, others underscored her mixed status, insisting that she be considered as "multicultural" as Vin Diesel, placing her in the group of multiracial movie stars that emerged in the late 1990s/early 2000s.[129] Berry, however, placed herself in a historic and contemporary coterie of Black female actors, obviously asserting her Blackness. Even if the film which afforded her Academy Award arguably preached the gospel of colorblindness, Berry proudly claimed her significance as the first Black recipient of the Best Actress award, arguing that race *did* matter a great deal.

Moreover, Berry's receipt of this important award appeared at the end of an era in which various minority groups jockeyed for power and influence after a decade largely dominated by a conservative dismissal of identity claims. This renewed focus on identity in the 1990s fueled the rhetoric of the culture wars while fostering cultural industries like the indie film movement which allowed individuals from historically oppressed groups to tell their peoples' stories through narrative film.[130] Unsurprisingly, the practitioners of identity cinema frequently turned to the trope of interracial sexuality as a useful image through which to examine the complexities of race in the contemporary United States. Spike Lee's early films framed interracial sexuality as deeply contested terrain in the landscape of Black America, while foreign-born filmmakers like Wayne Wang (*The Joy Luck Club*) and Mira Nair (*Mississippi Masala*) expanded the territory of interracial sexuality, demonstrating that the formation of a transitional identity through global migration uniquely complicated these "local" encounters on US soil. New Queer Cinema auteurs further enriched the history of cinematic interracial sexuality, as independent directors like John G. Young (*Parallel Songs*) and Cheryl Dunye (*The Watermelon Woman*) offered examinations of the complex intersections of queer sexuality and cross-racial desire. The resurgent interest in historical memory also fueled an interracial history boom. Left-leaning indie director John Sayles (*Lone Star*) framed interracial romance as an "individual accommodation" that could neither escape nor cure the burdensome weight of the nation's racist past, while foundational interracial American stories like the encounter between Pocahontas and John Smith as well as the alleged affair between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings fueled a crop of films attempting to draw from our contentious past to make sense of our multicultural present.

By the early 2000s, the film industry had essentially established the major cinematic frames for the representation of interracial sexuality that would dominate the next fifteen years. Depictions of cross-racial romance and sexuality would continue to proliferate throughout the early years of the 21st century, and the vast majority of these couplings would essentially reproduce the colorblind frame pioneered during the 1980s and perfected in 1990s. Depictions of incidental interracialism became so ubiquitous in the American media landscape that such couplings would increasingly incite little-to-no discursive comment or debate, perhaps silently arguing for the triumph of colorblindness. However, the occasional brave filmmaker would release a text countering race-blind representations, insisting that race mattered while echoing the frame favored by identity filmmakers like Lee, Nair, and Dunye in presenting interracial sexuality as an embattled contemporary practice resting on an old but very deep network of racial fault lines. Ultimately, the complex crop of films that emerged over the embattled 1990s would create a crucial link between the Reagan Era and the "Age of Obama," and as the election of the first Black US President incited a fresh round of clashes between the rhetorical forces of colorblindness and racial consciousness, many looked to the pantheon of Hollywood's interracial films to make sense of the historic moment.

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Epilogue

The Legacies of Cinematic Interracial Sexuality

Several months after Halle Berry took home an Academy Award for Best Actress for her role as Leticia Musgrove in *Monster's Ball* (2001), Vanessa E. Jones of the *Boston Globe* assessed the contemporary interracial cinematic landscape, proclaiming that interracial couples were "creating sparks" on the big screen. "Hollywood has come a long way with interracial couples since 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*," writes Jones, who excitedly celebrated a contemporary "melting pot of whites, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians . . . hooking up on celluloid." However, Jones tempered her breathless statement somewhat by noting conflicting messages, citing a crop of films that directly deal with the race/class/gender problematics of interracial love, including the teen films *Save the Last Dance* (2001) and *O* (2001), alongside movies that "tackle the subject by not tackling it at all," including the James Bond vehicle *Die Another Day* (2002) in which Bond (Pierce Brosnan) romances Black secret agent "Jinx" Johnson (Halle Berry).[1] The Albany *Times Union* agreed, publishing an unsigned article titled "Ignoring Race is a Statement of its Own" in which the author surveyed the contemporary media landscape and noted the veritable ubiquity of texts presenting "race and ethnicity as an everyday presence rather than race and ethnicity as a topic for on-screen discussion and dissection." The author highlighted romantic comedy *The Wedding Planner* (2001), which paired Jennifer Lopez with Matthew McConaughey, and the thriller *The Truth About Charlie* (2002), which coupled Thandie Newton with Mark Wahlberg, as evidence of a "racial stride forward" for choosing to ignore race in the realm of romance and sexuality. However, the author also noted the persistence of texts

like *Monster's Ball* that uneasily placed such relationships over a hidden yet ever-present racial fault line, presenting cinematic worlds where a racist remark could "transform" non-White characters into racialized subjects. "The nonracial society turn[s] into the multiracial society at the slip of a tongue or through some small gesture. The hidden multitude of maddeningly complex racial layers get [sic] peeled away. Sometimes we feel like looking. Other times we don't."[2]

These two articles capture a key moment in this narrative of interracial cinema, marking a point in time in which two competing frames essentially came of age. The films released during the 1990s essentially established the two dominant representational frames for cinematic interracial pairings that would characterize the next decade and a half. Since the early 2000s, the U.S. film industry has produced hundreds of texts featuring some form of what I have been calling interracial sexuality—representations of cross-racial romance, marriage, sex, desire, multiracial childbearing, and even horrific images of interracial sexual violence. My research has uncovered more than 500 such films released between 2000 and 2015, almost as many cinematic instances of interracial sexuality in US narrative films in the past fifteen years as in the entire previous century of film history. These texts evince an incredible amount of diversity in terms of genre, narrative technique, production quality, and distribution practices, ranging from internationally distributed Hollywood blockbusters to low-budget direct-to-video/online releases. However, these variegated films largely share a key feature. To borrow Jones' words, the vast majority of these varied cinematic texts "tackle" interracial sexuality by "not tackling it at all," framing such couplings as deracinated interactions between two individuals. Incidental interracial pairings of various sorts have popped up in the gory

zombie movie *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), the fantasy blockbuster *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005), David Lynch's surrealist art film *Inland Empire* (2006), the sci-fi reboot *Star Trek* (2009), the queer indie comedy *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), the multiracial action movies *Fast & Furious 6* (2013) and *Furious 7* (2015), and the crime drama *Focus* (2015), which includes a steamy "colorblind" love scene between Black star Will Smith and White actor Margot Robbie.

The representational tension observed throughout this study continues into our own time, and a host of filmmakers over the past fifteen years have released films flouting the colorblind logic that seems to rule the contemporary film industry, offering the counterframe that such relationships continue to register the persistence of racial tensions and racism in US society. Paul Haggis' ensemble drama *Crash* (2004 film) won Best Picture at the 78th Academy Awards for its unflinching portrayal of explosive racial clashes in a deeply divided 21st century Los Angeles, while Sanaa Hamri's *Something New* (2006) became one of the first films to explore (heterosexual) interracial romance from a Black female perspective, offering a window into discourses not given a cinematic since the famous "war council" scene in *Jungle Fever* (1991). The world of independent cinema has continued to be a space for minority directors to explore the cultural politics of interracial sexuality in contemporary society. Black director Jennifer Sharp's independent comedy *I'm Through with White Girls (The Inevitable Undoing of Jay Brooks)* (2007) satirically depicts the travails of a Black man with a predilection for White women who vows to only date Black women. Mye Hoang's semibiographical *Viette* (2012) depicts an American-born teenager attempting to escape her oppressive Vietnamese family via a passionate interracial romance with a White boy. Queer cinema

Figure 88. Promotional posters for *Focus* and *Something New*. Over the past fifteen years, the film industry has produced hundreds of interracial texts in which race does not matter, as in the crime drama *Focus*, and scores of films in which race continues to structure and strain romance and sexuality, as in *Something New*.

has also continued to explore the meaning of interracial love within the LGBTQI community, including John G. Young's *Rivers Wash Over Me* (2009) and Afdhere Jama's *Apart* (2010), while transnational filmmaker Mira Nair revisited the topic in her adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2006), a film that explores intergenerational family tensions between Indian-born parents and their American-born children via the trope of cross-cultural/interracial romance.

The two major frames that characterize contemporary cinematic images of interracial sexuality are the result of a historical and cultural process, a representational evolution in each frame. Filmmakers, consciously or not, refashioned the interracial sexual encounter in light of the racial discourse of the day, via competing frames struggling for cultural dominance. In the turbulent 1960s, interracial sexuality proved a

valuable trope through which to frame the issues posed by the activism and rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, and the movies released from 1956-1967 largely presented such couples as cinematic arguments for or against integration, framing interracial sexuality as a either civil right or a lurid miscegenetic spectacle. As the call for integration evolved into the assertive rhetoric of Black Power, a revolutionary ethos drove the depiction of interracial sexuality, and films released from 1968-1979 generally framed such encounters as politicized clashes in a larger cultural struggle over racial meaning and power. A diverse coterie of countercultural filmmakers framed interracial sexuality via the politics of revolution, while the blaxploitation film exploited the revolution as a profitable spectacle of erotic exhibition. As a conservative discourse reasserted and reorganized itself in reaction to the counterculture, the years 1980-1988 produced a cluster of texts applying the Reaganesque rhetoric of colorblindness to cinematic interracial sexuality, arguing that race should no longer trouble such romances, while a wave of big budget studio pictures brought exploitation tropes to the multiplexes to frame such encounters as alluring spectacles of racial/sexual fetishism. The years 1990-2001 proved to be an important watershed in this overall story, with some commentators reading the rise of incidental interracial romances and multiracial actors as signifiers of the declining significance of race. Concurrently, a resurgence of identity-conscious texts argued from a variety of racial and gender positions that race continued to hold a deep significance in the realm of sexual intimacy.

Representations of interracial sexuality since the early 2000s have largely furthered, reproduced, and only slightly updated the two major frames that emerged in the 1990s, suggesting that US culture is essentially “stuck” reliving the racial issues and

re-arguing the heated discourses of that decade's so-called "culture wars." The two articles that opened this chapter perform the contradictory impulses to see and to not see race, to embrace a "nonracial" ethos where racial difference does not matter and racism does not exist, or to emphatically insist on the complicated interpretations and real impacts of race in a color-conscious world marked by deep structural inequalities and rampant misunderstandings and resentments. The unidentified Albany *Times Union* writer succinctly described the situation: "Sometimes we feel like looking. Other times we don't."[3] Assuming that "we" refers to the totality of the US populace in all of its irreducible complexity, cultural diversity, and often fractious ideological multiplicity, "we" continue to manifest the polarized tendencies of seeing expressions of interracial sexuality as inherently racialized and totally deracinated, as embodying the ongoing significance of race and as containing no racial meaning. Additionally, many of "us" careen between the two positions, as evidenced in the two articles discussed above, struggling to synthesize the growing prevalence and ostensible acceptance of interracial couples and multiracial people with pervasive evidence that race continues to divide "us." The history of interracial images in American film sheds some light onto this ongoing cultural disagreement in US society, and the pervasive image of interracial sexuality in popular film stands as just one cultural arena where these complex issues get worked out, played with, and cashed in on. These texts prove instructive both as presentations of a wide range of constructions arguing for a variety of positions on the meaning of interracial sexuality, and as historical artifacts narrating the ever-shifting currents in this ongoing discussion.

Suggestions for Future Research

My research has uncovered and presented an interdisciplinary narrative of cinematic interracial sexuality between 1956 and 2001, resurrecting a host of forgotten films and shedding new light on several influential and widely recognized texts. Although I have contributed to the existing academic literature on cinematic interracial sexuality, my research has raised many questions and concerns that could not be addressed here, and the framework that guided my research inevitably evinces limitations that could be corrected and refined through future research. I will briefly outline several suggestions for future research below.

Interracial Images Outside of Film

Although this dissertation has focused on images of interracial sexuality in US film, the movie industry remains one of many cultural industries. In fact, interracial sexuality has been referenced and represented in a variety of media, including television, popular song, news media, advertising, video games, and most recently, the ever-expanding world of digital social media. Focusing on any one of these media could produce its own fascinating history that would add to the narrative I have offered, perhaps confirming the interpretations made or even challenging the conclusions drawn in this dissertation.

Additionally, this narrative of interracial sexuality in US film between 1956 and 2001 could be further enriched by a cross-media approach similar to that employed by Erica Chito Childs, particularly since the growth of the internet and digital content increasingly blurs the boundaries between traditional media, making such markers increasingly irrelevant.[4] For example, in May, 2013, American food conglomerate General Mills released an advertisement for the popular breakfast cereal Cheerios that

opened (rather conventionally) with a mother and daughter sitting in their kitchen discussing the various heart-related health benefits of daily Cheerios consumption. The scene then cuts to the living room where "Dad" is napping on the couch while, unbeknownst to him, a generous helping of Cheerios has been piled on his chest approximately where his heart rests. Dad wakes up with a start, spilling Cheerios all over the floor to comic effect, and the commercial ends with the word "Love" emblazoned on the screen. After running the spot on national television, General Mills posted the video to their YouTube channel, inciting an almost immediate flurry of negative responses from angry online commenters. The issue?—the family depicted included a White mother, a Black father, and a biracial daughter. *The Huffington Post* reported that the brand turned off the comment section after some posters responded with references to Nazism, troglodytes, and "racial genocide." Closing the video to comments did not stop the tide of racist reactions. Outraged commenters on Cheerios' Facebook page stated that the "disgusting" ad made them "want to vomit," while social media trolls created a satiric meme from the commercial condemning Cheerios for promoting "genetic suicide" through race mixing.[5] Cheerios supporters quickly counter-posted supportive comments on the cereal's Facebook page, while Cheerios' vice president of marketing released a statement defending the commercial while assuring consumers that "there are many kinds families, and we celebrate them all."[6] This brief episode illustrates how an interracial image released in one medium (television) and then another (the world wide web) incited an internet firestorm over the meaning(s) of interracial sexuality and multiracial families. The internet in particular, with the its ability to give agency to a range of voices from the most liberal/progressive cheerleaders of mixed race families to the most atavistic,

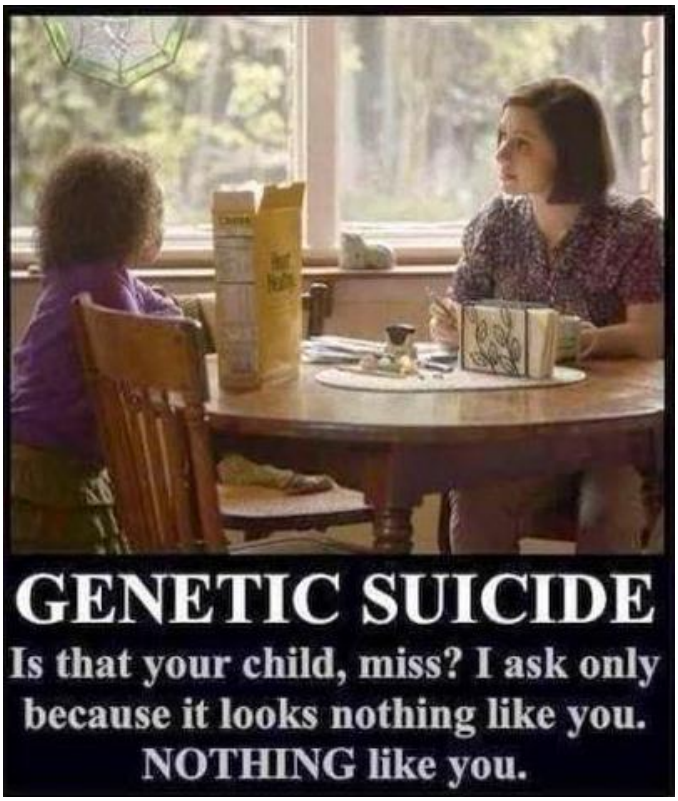

Figure 89. "Genetic Suicide" internet meme. After General Mills released a Cheerios commercial featuring an interracial (Black man/White woman) family with a preadolescent biracial daughter, an anonymous social media user released this satiric meme mocking/attacking the commercial for promoting "genetic suicide" through interracial sex. (Reddit)

reactionary antimiscegenists, has certainly expanded the terrain through which individuals and social groups can air their views on the prevalence of interracial sexuality in US media. In short, this ostensibly innocuous Cheerios commercial and the discursive firestorm it incited demonstrates that there remains much unexplored territory in the history of media representations of interracial sexuality, both in the recent past and the ever-expanding present.

Cinematic Interracial Sexuality in Other Cultural Contexts

In the introduction to this dissertation, I briefly discussed how the British horror film *28 Days Later* (2002) started me on the path that eventually led to this study. However, I have also almost exclusively examined films released by US film companies

and/or directors for a US audience. What could we learn by studying cinematic interracial sexuality in other national contexts? For example, in my own research, I uncovered a cluster of British films stretching back for decades examining the cultural politics of interracial sexuality via the particular concerns and racial histories of the United Kingdom, including the gritty urban drama *A Taste of Honey* (1961), the award winning neo-noir thriller *Mona Lisa* (1986), and critically acclaimed period drama *Belle* (2013) about a legendary mixed race British noblewoman. What, then, is the narrative of cinematic interracial sexuality in France, Germany, or Japan? How have Southeast Asian filmmakers or directors from any number of African nations framed romantic collisions between people of different races and/or nationalities? What can cinematic interracial sexuality teach us about the unique histories of various nations and/or diasporas? What can be learned from comparing the similarities and differences among texts from disparate contexts, and how may they be in "conversation" with each other as they circulate transnationally?

The Cultural Uses of Interracial Media Texts

In writing this narrative of interracial sexuality in US film, I frequently drew upon cultural discourses surrounding the films to read them contextually, combing critics' reviews to see how these texts were interpreted, and/or connecting the films' internal narratives and representations to a host of external figures, events, and discourses. I did not give much space to the ways in which myriad interlocutors have drawn from media representations of interracial sexuality to talk about racial dramas outside of the multiplex. Several of the films examined here have entered into the library of widely recognized American cultural references. For example, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* gets routinely referenced in discussions about contemporary racial issues, while internet

searches for “jungle fever” and “Mandingo” return all sorts of results, ranging from the amusing to the deeply disturbing. How have the more influential interracial texts been used to frame issues and debates outside of film? What could we learn from a closer analysis of the central ideas, images, and metaphors that these interracial films have contributed to the historical discourse of race and interracial sexuality?

Cinematic Interracial Sexuality Post-9/11

Previously, I discussed my decision to end my historical analysis in the year 2001 with the release of *Monster’s Ball*, a film that essentially marks the dominance of the colorblind frame for cinematically representing interracial sexuality. An astute reader will note that I said nothing of what was arguably the most discussed event of that year, namely the September 11 attacks by Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda on the US, including the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in New York. The flurry of political discourses, policy changes, and tactical responses that followed those attacks also altered race in the US, particularly as thousands of individuals from Arab nations, including many natural-born American citizens, found themselves the target of profiling, discrimination, hate crimes, and detention without due process.[7] In the years since, a host of media texts have appeared representing a post-9/11 America, including a small but fascinating crop of films that explore the cultural politics of immigration, religion, anti-Arab backlash, and the War on Terror via the trope of interracial romance. For example, *Amreeka* (2009), written and directed by Palestinian American filmmaker Cherien Dabis, follows a Palestinian woman battling xenophobic hatred after moving to a mostly-White Chicago suburb, while falling in love with a Jewish man who commiserates with her struggles fitting into American culture. More recently, *Amira & Sam* (2014), directed by ex-Army officer Sean Mullin, depicts an American military

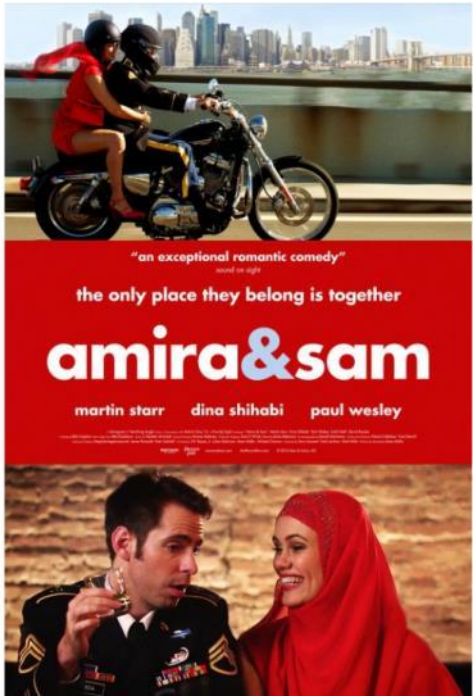

Figure 90. Promotional posters for *Amreeka* and *Amira & Sam*. How has the image of interracial sexuality in US film altered since the events that transpired on September 11, 2001, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the War on Terror? *Amreeka* and *Amira & Sam* represent just two examples of a cluster of academically-ignored texts that explore the complex shifts in post-9/11 American society and policy via the familiar trope of interracial romance.

veteran of the US Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq finding love in the arms of an undocumented Iraqi woman being pursued by immigration officials. These and other films remain largely unexplored by the academy (and because of their obscurity, largely unseen by the general public). In short, there remains much unexplored textual territory here, and the history of post-9/11 interracial intimacy on film, particularly of texts representing romances between individuals from both "sides" of the War on Terror, has yet to be written.

Interracial History from Silenced Subject Positions

The vast majority of the films examined here were produced, written, and/or directed by White heterosexual men. I have tried to include many notable examples that

fall outside of this trend, such as the films of Oscar Micheaux, Melvin Van Peebles, and Spike Lee, as well as the explosion of identity filmmakers that emerged in the 1990s, including Mira Nair and Cheryl Dunye. My work uncovered scores of texts produced by individuals representing minority identity positions that I did not (or could not) include in my analysis. How would this story read if these voices were given prime importance? While we cannot go back and change the structure of the film industry or the movies released throughout the decades, we can more closely reread these texts through analytic lenses of less privileged identity positions. For example, how could the lens of queer theory help us better understand the role of heteronormativity in interracial romances, or how could feminist theory help us more closely understand representations of women's sexual agency in these films?

***Dinner*'s Long Shadow**

While many of the films discussed in this dissertation have been largely forgotten outside of academic circles, several of these texts have persisted in the popular memory, continuing to provide fodder for contemporary interracial films and racial discourses, shaping both the movie industry and American culture in general. I will close with a brief appraisal of the influence of one interracial text, Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, demonstrating film's ongoing relevance in contemporary debates about race, rights, and Black/White relations. Nearly four decades after *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*'s theatrical release, Black director Kevin Rodney Sullivan released *Guess Who* (2005), a 21st century comedic remake of the now-classic integrationist tale of interracial romance. *Guess Who* essentially recreated the original film's basic scenario—a young male suitor works to convince his lover's father to bless their interracial marriage—but

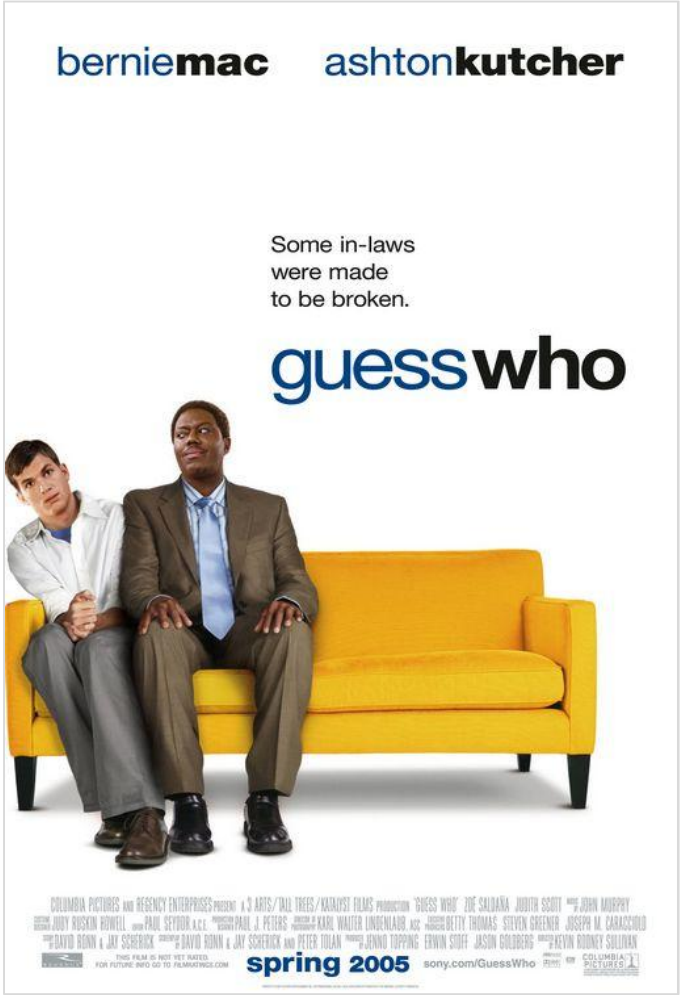

Figure 91. Promotional poster for Guess *Who*. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has remained such a recognizable film that Columbia Pictures released this 2005 remake, switching the races of the original's protagonists.

flipped the script by depicting a *White* man cajoling his *Black* fiancé's racist father to accept him as a worthy candidate. While past representations of interracial sexuality continue to shape present films, they also continue to influence 21st century discourses outside of the movies themselves. For example, in the summer leading up to the 2008 election, Barack Obama was fundraising in Minneapolis–Saint Paul and stopped by the popular local breakfast spot the Copper Dome on the way to the airport. The Minneapolis

Star Tribune posted a story on its website about the visit, innocently giving it the title "Guess Who's Coming for Breakfast: Obama in St. Paul." The headline created a small internet controversy covered by Minneapolis' alternative weekly *City Pages*:

> The title was a play on the 1967 award-winning film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a story about a white woman bringing her black fiancé home . . . It seems the public just wasn't ready to be reminded that Obama is, indeed, black. In no time at all . . . [the writer] got e-mails about the piece saying it was demeaning and wrong. The headline was later changed and appeared online and in print as the blander: "Obama in St. Paul: Silk stockings and buttermilk pancakes."[8]

The *Star Tribune*'s editor claimed to not "understand the reaction . . . We decided rather than debate it [the headline], we'd change it so people didn't take it the wrong way." *Star Tribune* readers took to the comment section of the paper's website to debate the "way" in which people were meant to "take it." User Gcm58Aug expressed outrage, calling it "a very derogatory, racist headline . . . Most insensitive, offensive headline I've read in long time." Uscitizen disagreed, accusing people of blowing things out of proportion: "As to the "headline"—it's to catch the reader's attention. It obviously worked."

It would be tempting to write this reference off as an isolated incident, but, in fact, media outlets and national figures invoked this Hollywood tale of interracial romance to talk about Barack Obama both before and after the election. Before Obama clinched his Party's nomination, Black Entertainment Television founder Bob Johnson appeared at a Hillary Clinton rally in South Carolina where he attacked Obama with this characterization: "[Obama] says 'I want to be a reasonable, likable, Sidney Poitier [from] *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* . . . This ain't a movie, Sidney. This is real life."[9] While Johnson compared Obama with the film's ingratiating groom, others read it as a forward-looking predictor of Obama's presidency. Peter Howell of the *Toronto Star* screened the film weeks before the election and found himself "struck by a comment Poitier's quiet

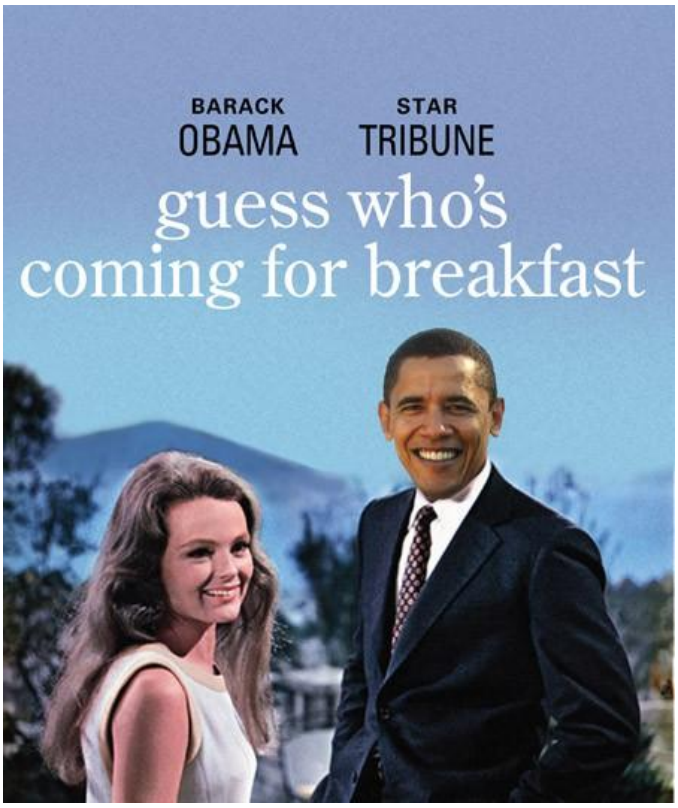

Figure 92. "Guess Who's Coming for Breakfast" digital image. Minneapolis–Saint Paul's alternative weekly *City Pages* covered the flap over the *Star Tribune*'s decision to change the online article about Obama's visit to the Twin Cities from the controversial "Guess Who's Coming for Breakfast" to the innocuous "Silk Stockings and Buttermilk Pancakes." A *City Pages* graphic artist created this satirical image, digitally inserting Obama's head onto Sidney Poitier's body in a scene from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. (City Pages)

groom makes, as he muses that he and [his White fiancée] Joey might have a child who grows up to become the president of the United States. Their child would now be in his or her 40s, just like Barack Obama."[10] Several days before election night, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich drew even more explicit parallels between the film and Obama's biography:

> [*Dinner* depicts] a young white woman [who] falls madly in love with a black man while visiting the University of Hawaii . . . Barack Obama's own white mother and African father met at the University of Hawaii . . . It was not until the year of the movie's release that the Warren Court handed down the . . . [Supreme Court] decision overturning laws that forbade interracial marriage in 16 states; in the film's final cut there's still an outdated line referring to the possibility that the young couple's nuptials could be illegal (as Obama parents' marriage would have

been in, say, Virginia).[11]

The *Dinner* references continued after the election. In October 2010, President Obama attended a Bridgeport, Connecticut voter rally. Bridgeport mayor Bill Finch introduced the President by bounding onto the stage and shouting "Guess who's coming to dinner?"[12]

Perhaps the most pertinent link between President Obama and this enduring cinematic interracial romance remains the discourse of colorblindness. *Dinner* emerged at the end of a cinematic age in which Hollywood released a spate of interracial romances, including *Giant* (1956), *Island in the Sun* (1957), and *Sayonara* (1957), that defended the inherent morality of interracial sexuality, countering decades of previous film representations to argue that racial difference should not keep couples from exercising their civil right to be together. These integration era films arguably planted the cinematic seeds of a frame that would grow with *Fame* (1980) and the interracial teen musicals, coming fully into bloom with *The Bodyguard* (1992), the seminal interracial blockbuster that presaged the dominance of the colorblind frame for interracial sexuality. As we have seen, these films did not singularly invent the rhetoric of colorblindness, and all cinematic texts exist in a complex web of interlocking cultural discourses from which they emerge. However, film certainly helped popularize the rhetoric of colorblindness/ *The Bodyguard* in particular stormed the box office and its soundtrack ruled the pop charts following a decade of conservative political discourse insisting that racism no longer existed and declaring that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved all of its goals. Although many events of that decade, including the LA Rebellion and O.J. Simpson trial, cast doubt on the narrative of colorblindness, filmic depictions of interracial sexuality would increase throughout the subsequent years. By 2008, this film frame represented by

Dinner, not the first but certainly the most recognizable and remembered Civil Rights Era romance, had become a historic landmark in the collective imagination.

Obama rose to national attention in an era when colorblindness largely shaped the national racial discourse, and some, including many who opposed his policies and political leanings, declared his election as a victory for race relations, a symbol that the US had entered a "post-racial" era in which Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of a "colorblind" nation had been realized. Black conservative John McWhorter asked, "Is America past racism against black people," answering his own question: "I say the answer is yes."[13] *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen insisted, "It is not just that he [Obama] is post-racial; so is the nation he is generationally primed to lead . . . We have overcome."[14] By referencing the Civil Rights era slogan, "We *shall* overcome," Cohen posited Obama as the ultimate realization of the Movement that many on the Right had been insisting had achieved its goals at least as early as the Reagan Era. However, many disagreed strongly with these utopian announcements of the end of racism. *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. asserted "'Post-racial' America isn't here yet," insisting that those holding such beliefs would welcome a recent National Urban League report detailing pervasive racial inequities in employment, housing, education, criminal justice, and health with as they would "welcome . . . graffiti on the Lincoln Memorial."[15] In a blog post, communications scholar Ulises A. Mejias agreed, dismissing colorblindness as a fantasy, while insisting that "racism is a system of group privilege . . . White people have constructed a system where they enjoy certain advantages just by virtue of being white, and where they deny these advantages to non-white people. The election of a black president has not magically dismantled this system of oppression."[16]

As people debated the meaning of Obama's historic election, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* proved an important cultural touchstone, a shared text that individuals from a host of identity positions drew upon to debate the meaning of the so-called "post-racial" moment.

As we approach the end of Obama's second and final term in office, many events have transpired throughout his two terms as president that have challenged the rhetoric of post-racialism incited by his first election. After the racially-tinged drama of the "birther" movement to "prove" Obama's foreign-born status, Attorney General Eric Holder's "race-baiting" battle to strengthen voting rights and civil rights enforcement, and the Black Lives Matter movement speaking out against police violence in mostly-Black cities like Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, the idea that Obama's presidency signals a "post-racial moment" appears deeply anachronistic and/or spurious in hindsight. In light of these ongoing debates about race and inequality, some have continued to turn to the image of cinematic interracial sexuality to help make sense of the racial tenor of the times. In 2014, actor Malcolm-Jamal Warner, who played Cliff Huxtable's son Theo on *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), recently accepted the part of Dr. John Prentice in a modern stage adaptation of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (2013-present) at Boston's Huntington Theatre Company. Written by White playwright Todd Kreidler, the adaptation keeps the story in 1967, although Warner told the *Boston Globe* that the rewritten script proves relevant for today: "We are not in a post-racial America," he says, citing the recent shooting of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, adding, "It is important for young people to understand the journey and the progress that has been made. But that progress has been slow."[17] Kenny Leon, an award winning Black

Figure 93. Huntington Theatre Company performance of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Just months after racial unrest broke out in Ferguson, Missouri over the death of Michael Brown, Boston's Huntington Theatre Company put on a 21st century stage adaptation of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The play starred Malcolm-Jamal Warner in the role of Poitier's John Prentice, and included a number of plot updates and dialogue rewrites to make the anachronistic text relevant to today's racial climate. (BU Today)

stage director, had approached Kreidler in 2007 with the idea, although Kreidler initially felt the piece had no social relevance. Seven years later, the playwright no longer expresses such reservations:

> We're living in two Americas. There's an experience for black America that is totally unknown to white America, and there's an everyday reality, particularly for young black men being criminalized from the time they first step into a candy store to being shot by the police . . . We continue to have endemic poverty, cycles of violence, disproportionate incarceration of young black men. So I think what comes to bear here is not so much the mixed couple, but the fact that we have two Americas.[18]

Kreidler's revisioned *Dinner* attempts to address many of the criticisms lobbed at the original film. It humanizes the saintly John Prentice and saddles him with human flaws, and the play decenters the power of White patriarchal opinion by not making the couple's marriage contingent on parental consent. It also gives the text's Black voices more agency, allowing more stage time to the Drayton's Black maid Tillie and John's parents,

all marginal figures in the original. Finally, instead of closing the proceedings with a stirring speech from the White patriarch, the play closes with an assertive soliloquy from John Prentice in which he denounces Mr. Drayton's racism.

Much more could be said about President Obama, Black Lives Matter, the recent dramatic revisioning of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the cinematic struggle between colorblind romance and race conscious interracial sexuality, and a host of other contemporary racial topics. The point is this: interracial cinematic texts like *Guess Who's Coming Dinner* continue to prove their relevance in our own time. These movies are not merely filmic curios about a bygone era, or entertaining relics offering a window into the issues of the past. The evolving image of interracial sexuality in the films examined here help narrate the story of a racial discourse that continues into our own day, as interlocutors from a variety of identity positions differently frame the meaning of race to talk about President Obama, Black Lives Matter, and any number of racially-charged figures, issues, moments, and movements. The long history of cinematic interracial sexuality helps make sense of the present moment, showing us how we ended up here, while the most popular texts in this story continue to provide a stock of images, titles, characters, motifs, and narratives from which to draw as we discuss the most contentious contemporary racial issues. This dissertation has highlighted the importance of this little-understood and under-researched cinematic narrative, demonstrating how exhuming a largely ignored media past can continue to inform, enlighten, and pose stubborn questions about the roots of current debates that often masquerade as ahistorical discourses unconnected from our racially contentious past.

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Appendix: Selected Filmography

Below is a list of the major interracial films discussed in this study. It includes both films examined in depth and texts mention in passing. The list has been arranged chronologically so that readers can observe the overall development of cinematic interracial across these disparate film texts. This selected filmography only includes texts that directly contributed to/cinematically represented the image of interracial sexuality. For example, the influential film *Star Wars* (1977) received mention in both Chapters 3 and 4 in discussing the decline of the New Hollywood and the rise of blockbuster filmmaking, but since it did not represent interracial sexuality, it has not been included.

What Happened in the Tunnel (1903)
The Mis-Directed Kiss (1904)
The Tavern Keeper's Daughter (1908)
The Heart of an Outlaw (1908)
Mixed Babies (1908)
Nellie the Beautiful Housemaid (1908)
The Debt (1912)
The Octoroon (1913)
Matrimony's Speed Limit (1914)
The Squaw Man (1914)
The Birth of a Nation (1915)
The Cheat (1915)
The Squaw Man (1918)
The Homesteader (1919)
The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920)
Within Our Gates (1920)
The Toll of the Sea (1922)
The House Behind The Cedars (1927)
Uncle Tom's Cabin (1927)
White Shadows in the South Seas (1928)
Ingagi (1930)
Aloha (1931)
Blonde Captive (1931)
Gow the Killer (1931)
Never the Twain Shall Meet (1931)
The Bird of Paradise (1932)
Blonde Venus (1932)

Goona Goona (1932)
Isle of Paradise (1932)
Madame Butterfly (1932)
The Mask of Fu Manchu (1932)
Strange Justice (1932)
Veiled Aristocrats (1932)
Virgins of Bali (1932)
The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933)
King Kong (1933)
So This Is Africa (1933)
Massacre (1934)
Imitation of Life (1934)
Tarzan and his Mate (1934)
Behold My Wife! (1935)
I Live for Love (1935)
In Caliente (1935)
Legong: Dance of the Virgins (1935)
Mutiny on the Bounty (1935)
Broken Blossoms (1936)
Ouanga (1936)
Artists and Models (1937)
Daughter of Shanghai (1937)
Forbidden Adventure, AKA, *Angkor* (1937)
Her Jungle Love (1938)
Road to Singapore (1940)
Son of Ingagi (1940)
Aloma of the South Seas (1941)
The Shanghai Gesture (1941)
China Girl (1942)
The Shanghai Gesture (1942)
I Walked with a Zombie (1943)
Duel in the Sun (1946)
Forbidden Women (1948)
Lulu Belle (1948)
Lost Boundaries (1949)
Mighty Joe Young (1949)
Pinky (1949)
Broken Arrow (1950)
Bird of Paradise (1951)
Bowanga Bowanga (1951)
Mau Mau (1955)
Giant (1956)
The Searchers (1956)
Island in the Sun (1957)
Sayonara (1957)
Touch of Evil (1958)

The Decks Ran Red (1958)
Kings Go Forth (1958)
South Pacific (1958)
Tamango (1958)
Imitation of Life (1959)
Night of the Quarter Moon, AKA, *Flesh and Flame*, AKA, *The Color of Her Skin* (1959)
Shadows (1959)
The World, the Flesh and the Devil (1959)
Flaming Star (1960)
This Rebel Breed (1960)
The World of Suzie Wong (1960)
A Taste of Honey (1961)
West Side Story (1961)
The Intruder (1962)
To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)
My Geisha (1962)
Mutiny on the Bounty (1962)
Free, White, and 21 (1963)
Lilies of the Field (1963)
One Potato, Two Potato (1964)
Murder in Mississippi (1965)
Girl on a Chain Gang (1966)
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)
The Story of a Three Day Pass, French title *La Permission* (1967)
Alice's Restaurant (1969)
100 Rifles (1969)
Hi, Mom (1970)
The Landlord (1970)
Little Big Man (1970)
Soldier Blue (1970)
Honky (1971)
The Omega Man (1971)
Shaft (1971)
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)
Fritz the Cat (1972)
Jeremiah Johnson (1972)
Super Fly (1972)
Coffy (1973)
Foxy Brown (1974)
Mandingo (1975)
Drum (1976)
Hair (1979)
Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff (1979)
Fame (1980)
Fort Apache, the Bronx (1981)
Flashdance (1983)

Scarface (1983)
The Bounty (1984)
Breakin' (1984)
Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo (1984)
Day of the Dead (1984)
Purple Rain (1984)
Sixteen Candles (1984)
Rappin' (1985)
Year of the Dragon (1985)
The Karate Kid, Part II (1986)
Mona Lisa (1986)
Night of the Comet (1986)
She's Gotta Have It (1986)
Soul Man (1986)
Angel Heart (1987)
School Daze (1988)
Do the Right Thing (1989)
The Mighty Quinn (1989)
Come See the Paradise (1990)
Mo' Better Blues (1990)
The Josephine Baker Story (1991)
Jungle Fever (1991)
Mississippi Masala (1991)
The Bodyguard (1992)
Candyman (1992)
The Crying Game (1992)
Daughters of the Dust (1992)
Love Field (1992)
Malcolm X (1992)
Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story (1993)
The Joy Luck Club (1993)
Little Buddha (1993)
Made in America (1993)
The Wedding Banquet (1993)
Pulp Fiction (1994)
Devil in a Blue Dress (1995)
The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love (1995)
Jefferson in Paris (1995)
Multi-Facial (1995)
Othello (1995)
Parallel Sons (1995)
Pocahontas (1995)
Stonewall (1995)
Lone Star (1996)
Mr. and Mrs. Loving (1996)
The Watermelon Woman (1996)

Anaconda (1997)
Blood and Wine (1997)
Higher Learning (1997)
Jackie Brown (1997)
Men in Black (1997)
Bulworth (1998)
He Got Game (1998)
Out of Sight (1998)
Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World (1998)
Smoke Signals (1998)
The Tiger Woods Story (1998)
Chutney Popcorn (1999)
Introducing Dorothy Dandridge (1999)
Liberty Heights (1999)
The Matrix (1999)
Boiler Room (2000)
Sally Hemings: An American Scandal (2000)
The Fast and Furious (2001)
Knockaround Guys (2001)
Monster's Ball (2001)
O (2001)
Save the Last Dance (2001)
Training Day (2001)
The Wedding Planner (2001)
28 Days Later (2002)
Die Another Day (2002)
The Truth About Charlie (2002)
Crash (2004)
Dawn of the Dead (2004)
Guess Who (2005)
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005)
The Reception (2005)
Inland Empire (2006)
The Namesake (2006)
Something New (2006)
I'm Through with White Girls (The Inevitable Undoing of Jay Brooks) (2007)
Amreeka (2009)
Rivers Wash Over Me (2009)
Star Trek (2009)
Apart (2010)
The Kids Are All Right (2010)
Viette (2012)
Belle (2013)
Fast & Furious 6 (2013)
Amira & Sam (2014)
Black or White (2014)

Focus (2015)
Furious 7 (2015)

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