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Skin Flicks on the Racial Border:  
Pornography, Exploitation,  
and Interracial Lust

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The question of interracial sexual relations remains virtually untouched.

—Jane Gaines

★ It has been argued that the so-called classical cinema is regulated by a semiotics of race relations posited on a single prohibition: "No nonwhite man can have sanctioned sexual relations with a white woman" (Browne 1992, 8). Yet this prohibition is now regularly flouted, if not in today's Hollywood, then in that parallel universe in the San Fernando Valley where a line of contemporary pornography labeled "interracial" aims specifically at violating precisely the taboos that once reigned supreme in Hollywood. Videos with titles like *Black Taboo*, *Black and White in Living Color*, *Black Meat*, *White Cream*, *White Dicks/Black Chicks*, *White Trash*, *Black Splash*, *Color Blind*, and *South Central Hookers* speak about racial differences in sex in ways that elsewhere in the culture have often remained unspeakable. The loudest thing they say is that *Crossing the Color Line* (to invoke yet another title) can be sexually exciting, especially the line between black and white that had been most firmly erected by America's history of chattel slavery. If Hollywood has been lacking in "honest and open explorations of the complexities of interracial sexual attraction" (Gates 1991, 163), pornography and sexploitation cinema have at least been willing to explore what more polite forms do not.

## Racialized Sexuality

Abdul JanMohamed has coined the term *racialized sexuality* to designate the field in which Michel Foucault's familiar "deployment of sexuality" joins with a less familiar "deployment of race" (JanMohamed 1992, 94). Racialized sexuality is constructed around and through the policing of an (unequally permeable) racial border. Unlike "bourgeois sexuality," which emerged through a compulsive discursive articulation, "racialized sexuality" has been characterized by a "peculiar silence" (94). While Foucault teaches that bourgeois sexuality was articulated through the intersection of techniques of confession and scientific discursivity, racialized sexuality in the United States was more occulted, grounded as it was in the "open secret" of the white master's sexual desire for, and sexual use of, the female slave (104). JanMohamed argues that this sexual relation, which implicitly acknowledged the slave's humanity, threatened the maintenance of the racial other in a subservient position. "Unable or unwilling to repress desire, the master silences the violation of the border and refuses to recognize, through any form of analytic discursivity, the results of the infraction. This peculiar silence prevents the development of the kind of confessional and 'scientific' discursivity central to the deployment of sexuality as Foucault defines it" (104). The hypersexualization of the black body (male and female) in some ways parallels the "hysterization" of the white woman's body: both are represented as excessively saturated with sexuality. However, the discursive exploration of the female body ultimately integrates that body into the social body, while the discursive silence and lack of confession about sexual relations with the racialized other has aimed at segregating it from the social body. JanMohamed thus argues that racialized sexuality constitutes an inversion of bourgeois sexuality; where bourgeois sexuality is driven by an analytic will to knowledge, as well as an empiricist discursivity, racialized sexuality is driven by a will to conceal its mechanisms and a reliance on unempirical stereotypes (105).

The situation JanMohamed describes may be true enough for the era he describes (his essay centers on a reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son*). What happens, however, when the racialized body becomes the subject of pornography's unique brand of confession? If, as I have argued (1989), pornography seeks to confess the discursive "truths" of sex itself, what happens when racialized bodies are asked to reveal their "truths"? In this case, the "peculiar silence" that JanMohamed so aptly describes can turn into a noisy confession. In contemporary video pornography, the pleasures of sexual-

racial difference once the province of white masters have become commodified, mediated, and available to all.<sup>1</sup> Not unexpectedly, the power differentials of that original relation inform them.

Consider a contemporary porn video, marketed under the rubric "inter-racial": *Crossing the Color Line* (dir. Gino Colbert, 1999). Like most examples of hard-core pornography, it presumes to confess the so-called truths of sexual pleasure. But, unique to the subgenre of interracial pornography, it speaks the once-silenced, taboo truths of racialized sexuality. The video consists of a series of interviews followed by sexual performances between African American and white performers who "frankly" discuss their feelings and observations about race in the porn industry. The interview sections are earnest and full of liberal sentiments of equality and the unimportance of race; the sex sections are intensely erotic, often "nasty," and contradict the preceding liberalism by a fascination with racial difference. Sean Michaels, a handsome African American with a shaved head and athletic build, begins in an initial interview with a complaint about racism in the industry and concludes with an appeal to progress: "Young ladies in our industry, white or black, are told that if you work with a black man you will probably have difficulty getting a job or gig dancing on the road in Southern states. . . . Okay, well, if that's the truth, then what about the rest of the continent? . . . Sure, the South is the South, we know this, but things are changing and they have changed . . . if we don't wake up as a people, we are going to be left behind by the rest of the world in the progression of our minds and our very souls." Next, a white female porn performer, Christi Lake, speaks: "I think people believe interracial sex is taboo just because of the Old South. The plantation owner getting a hold of black females and such. They could do it, but no one else, and so it was always kept taboo. I don't believe that, though. Having sex with a person of another color is very exciting, very erotic. I look at the person inside, not outside."

Both Michaels and Lake speak about the outdated taboos of the Old South, and Lake explicitly asserts the contemporary ethic of color blindness. Yet these supposedly outdated taboos against interracial sex inform and eroticize the subsequent sexual performance between them, proving not that Lake looks "at the person inside" but quite the contrary: that "sex with a person of another color is very exciting." Thus liberal, verbal protestations of the ethic of color blindness in the interviews give way to a dirty talk common in porn video performances. Lake, in particular, noisily articulates a sexual pleasure taken in the observation of racial differences linked to sexual differences. Sometimes this racialized sexuality becomes clearly

visible, as when Lake's verbal ejaculation, "fuck my tight, pink little pussy with your big black dick," can be seen in the form of an actually pinkish "pussy" next to Michaels's truly long, truly black-colored "dick." Sometimes, however, it is a suggestion not literally visible, as when Lake says, "put your spit in there and make it all wet and mix in with my white juices." Not all of the interracial sexual performances in this video verbally articulate such an overtly racialized sexuality, but once we have been cued by this first number to look for racial-sexual differences, such differences, visible and invisible, articulated and nonarticulated, seem to emerge. Thus, in the next interracial pairing, following similarly earnest interviews—this time between a white man, Mark Davis, and a black woman, Naomi Wolf—the usual visual pleasure of exaggerated gender difference typical of heterosexual pornography becomes complicated by race. When we see, for example, a pinkish penis and balls slapping up against a dark pubis, or creamy white ejaculate on black female skin, it is no longer just sexual difference that we see, but a racial one.

What does it mean to watch such comminglings of raced bodies? In a genre that tends to suspend narrative in order to scrutinize the sights and sounds of interpenetrating bodies—tongue in mouth, mouth around penis, penis in vagina or anus, hand on pubis, and so on—what does it mean when these bodies are not only differently gendered but also differently raced? And if it is possible to say that the pleasures of heterosexual pornography have something to do with the differences of gendered bodies, is it possible to say that pleasure can also be taken from the sight of differently raced bodies interpenetrating? Why is this once-forbidden commingling, as Lake puts it, "very exciting, very erotic"? Finally, is it possible to articulate the formal pleasures of the color contrast without sounding like or becoming a racist?

Pornography, because it has so long existed in determined opposition to all other forms of mainstream culture, has often become the place where sex happens instantaneously. Pornotopia is the land, as Steven Marcus once wrote, where it is "always bedtime," (Marcus 1974, 269) and where the usual taboos limiting sex are very easily overcome. Couples fall into bed at the drop of a hat, and nothing impedes the immediate gratification of myriad forms of sexual pleasure; the taboos that circumscribe and inform sex acts in the real world just melt away. Because it is always bedtime in pornography, the genre can often seem determinedly opposed to the generation of erotic excitement. *Erotica* is a term frequently opposed to pornography, often by antipornography feminists to contrast a tame and tasteful female pleasure

to a more gross and violent porn. However, this contrast belies the fact that both forms of representation ultimately aim at sexual arousal. What may more usefully distinguish the two terms, then, is the way taboo functions in each. Pornography as a whole defies the taboos against graphic representations of sex acts, but it often chooses not to inscribe these taboos into the truncated narratives of its fantasy scenarios. Erotica, in contrast, inscribes the taboo more deeply into its fantasy. Thus erotica is not necessarily more tasteful or tame than pornography (witness the grossly transgressive literary erotica of Georges Bataille, also the great theorist of transgression), nor is it without explicit imagery (witness the explicit but tasteful film and video erotica of Candida Royalle), but it does inscribe the tension of the forbidden into its fantasy.

If pornography is the realm where nothing impedes the immediate enactment of easily achieved and multiple forms of sexual pleasure, then erotic forms of pornography are those in which the taboos and prohibitions limiting pleasure are, at least vestigially, in force often in order to enhance the desire that overpowers them. Eroticism in pornography thus depends on the continued awareness of the taboo. This is one reason why interracial pornographies can sometimes have an erotic charge that other forms of pornography do not.

To transgress a taboo is certainly not to defeat it. Georges Bataille argues that transgression is the flouting of a taboo that fully recognizes the authority and power of the prohibiting law: "Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance" (1957, 37). Prohibitions thus often provide an element of fear that enhances desire. In much of what follows, I will be arguing that it is fear—the fear once generated by white masters to keep white women and black men apart—that gives erotic tension to interracial sex acts which in "ordinary," nonracialized pornography often become rote.<sup>2</sup>

The interviews in *Crossing the Color Line*, then, invoke the prejudices of the Old South as if they were passé. But in the sexual performances that follow, these passé stereotypes make the violation of the color line more vivid and dramatic. Awareness of these taboos and stereotypes lends erotic tension to the performance of the sex acts. The video takes the (unequally enforced, weakened) "taboo observed with fear" to elicit the "counterpoise of desire." To the extent that such pornography acknowledges the color line informing the taboo, it works against the contemporary goal of color blindness now operant in U.S. culture.

Whether this attention to racial difference makes for a good or a bad

thing—in pornography or elsewhere—is a matter for debate. On the one hand, “recognizing” racial differences—can seem to be, and sometimes is, synonymous with racism itself (Pascoe 1999, 482). On the other hand, in a culture now so determined to be officially blind to racial differences that it has created a new kind of taboo around their very mention, it can seem excitingly risqué to notice differences of skin tone, ass or lip shape. On one level, then, interracial pornography’s refusal to be color-blind points to the obvious fact that as a culture, Americans are not so much color-blind as, as Susan Courtney puts it, “color-mute”: we take note of racial differences, much as we take note of sexual differences, but unlike sexual differences, racial differences are not supposed to be noticed.<sup>3</sup> Ample female posteriors, for example, are often celebrated in “black” and “interracial” videos; Caucasian features can also be racialized. In *Crossing the Color Line*, for example, white male or female skin tone seems to exist for its contrast to black, and black skin exists for its contrast to white. Sometimes this contrast remains imaginary: “White pussy”—which actually registers as a pink color not visually all that different from the interior pink of African American women—nevertheless seems racialized in its contrast with the black penis. “White cock”—which registers considerably darker than the rest of the variously toned skin of white men, and therefore as not dependably lighter than the penises of all men designated black—nevertheless seems racialized in contrast with the darker skin of the black woman. An even more impressive contrast is offered in the white man’s pink lips and the black woman’s dark-haired pubis. Contrast, real or imagined, is what makes these comminglings so stunningly dramatic.

Contrasts are also invoked between men in this, and other, interracial videos. For example, we cannot help but note the hirsute quality of the white man, Mark Davis, who has sex with the black woman, Naomi Wolfe, in the second episode, compared to the smoothness of the black man, Sean Michaels, in the first episode. Nor can we fail to notice that Davis’s lighter-toned penis is shorter—though thicker—than Michaels’s, and also uncut. (Of course, both penises are oversized by any but pornographic standards.) If the white man’s penis is (comparatively) small and the black man’s is (comparatively) large, which is the norm? Pornography as a genre has its own, changing, norms. The large black penis once given by the white master as a reason for white women to abhor and fear black men is today valued by all in the world of interracial pornography. One thing is clear, however, though blackness and whiteness are articulated as racially and sexually saturated differences, they are articulated differently. The black woman does not

articulate her pleasure in the “whiteness” of the white man’s cock, as the white woman articulated hers to the black man. Only the black man and the white woman’s sexual-racial differences are singled out. This is the case both for those differences that can be registered visually and those that are only imaginary.

All of the above racial differences remain more or less unmentionable in polite discourse because of their associations with racial stereotypes. Once used to elicit fear and revulsion that would enforce separation, these stereotypes are now used to cultivate desire across the racial border. It would be a mistake, certainly, to consider the mere flouting of an increasingly anachronistic color line as a progressive act, especially if we accept Bataille’s notion that we actually honor transgressed taboos in their transgression. What, then, can we say about the deployment of racial stereotypes in the erotic excitement of crossing the color line? Do these stereotypes do further harm to people of color and should they be eschewed? Must we agree, for example, with Frantz Fanon that sexual stereotypes of black men, born of white fear, continue to reduce the black man to an “epidermalized” racial essence?

#### Racial Fear and Desire

Frantz Fanon has famously written about the experience of being interpellated as a raced being when a white boy points to him on the street to say, “Look, a Negro. . . . I’m frightened” (1967, 112). In this classic description of the power of the white gaze to reduce the black man to an epidermalized phobic essence, Fanon sees negrophobia as a form of white sexual anxiety. The white gaze sees the organ of black skin and immediately feels fear. According to Fanon, the deepest cause of this fear lies in the reduction of the black man to a penis, which ultimately constitutes a pathological projection on the part of the white man of his own repressed homosexuality (170). The white man’s fear is thus, to Fanon, also his desire. Yet, as Mary Ann Doane (1991, 221) has shown, the specific instances of negrophobia analyzed by Fanon tend to ground the pathology of this projection especially in the white woman. The white woman’s fear of rape by a Negro is viewed as an “inner wish” to be raped: “It is the woman who rapes herself” (Fanon 1967, 179). Pathology thus marks the white woman’s desire for the black man. Fanon similarly pathologizes the black woman’s desire for the white man. Yet, as Doane shows, Fanon does not equally pathologize the black man’s desire for the white woman. Indeed, he does not find anything in his behavior that is

motivated by race. This man is simply a typical “neurotic who by coincidence is black” (Fanon 1967, 79).

Fanon’s (unequal) condemnation of the epidermalization of racial fear and desire is understandable given his quest for revenge on the system that so fixes him. But his protestation that the man of color’s desire is not itself racially influenced remains unconvincing. It is as if Fanon’s response to the negative stereotype of the oversexed black man can only be to create another set of negative stereotypes: the oversexed white woman and the undersexed white man (a repressed homosexual to Fanon). Originally writing in 1952, Fanon, for good reason, cannot conceive of a world in which epidermal difference would become a commodity fetish grounded in the very fear expressed by the child who once hailed him. Nor can he admit that this fear-desire might exist (unequally but powerfully) on both sides of the racial border. He thus cannot imagine a black man’s desire for a white woman as grounded in a fear that enhances desire.

Kobena Mercer’s much later (1994) attempt to analyze his own, black and gay, attraction-repulsion to Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of nude black male bodies offers an intriguing new take on Fanon’s notion of epidermalization.<sup>4</sup> Mercer’s initial reaction to Mapplethorpe’s photos in the (in)famous *Black Book* (1986) follows Fanon’s example and dismisses them as stereotypical objectifications grounded in the phobia of the hypersexed black male body. He quotes Fanon: “The Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis” (Mercer 1994, 185). Mercer thus accuses Mapplethorpe of a fetishistic objectification of the black male body. In the much-discussed photograph, *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), showing a penis protruding from the fly of the eponymous suit, he objects to the conjuration of the large penis as a “phobic object,” evoking “one of the deepest mythological fears and anxieties in the racist imagination, namely that all black men have huge willies” (177). Mercer argues that Mapplethorpe’s camera fetishizes the black male body, masking the social relations of racial power between the well-known artist and his anonymous subjects and oscillating between sexual idealization of the racial other and anxiety in defense of the white male ego (178). This racial fetishization is ultimately Mapplethorpe’s way, Mercer argues, of splitting belief, of saying “I know (its [sic] not true that all black guys have huge willies) but (nevertheless, in my photographs, they do)” (185).

In a second article, however, Mercer opts for a more contextualized reading of the photograph’s aesthetic and political value and for a revision of the very notion of racial fetishism as a necessarily bad thing (190). Here,

he complicates his earlier discussion of the fetishized “big black willy” as part of the “psychic reality of the social relations in which our racial and gendered identities have been historically constructed” (191). Mercer now allows that fetishized (gay male) erotic representations are not “necessarily a bad thing.” Interestingly, he names as his reason that, like the point-of-view shots in gay male pornography, they are “reversible” (185)—the object of the gaze can look back. Because the gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representation, Mercer can justify Mapplethorpe’s objectification of the big black willy. Fanon’s argument against the epidermal fixing of the black man by the white man and the white woman had been to say that the irrational fear of the black man’s sex actually constituted pathological desire, a pathology from which the black man himself was exempt. In contrast, Mercer’s own homosexual (and intraracial) desire for the same black penis that the white photographer desires leads him to question the very pathology of fetishism. Torn between seeing the black man’s sex as desirable and seeing it as a phobic object, Mercer fails to see that it is the tension between fear and desire that marks the special appeal of these photos, whether the taboo transgressed is that forbidding same-sex desire or that forbidding interracial sex.<sup>5</sup>

Mercer admirably introduces a rich ambivalence into his reading of these images, claiming that it is not possible to say whether such images reinforce or undermine racist myths about black sexuality. Nevertheless, he wants to think that the homoeroticism of these images is capable of shocking viewers out of the stable, centered subject position of the straight “white male subject” (192). He thus comes close to saying that because Mapplethorpe’s photographs come from within a shared community of homoerotic desire, and because Mercer himself writes from a similar perspective, these images do not offer a “bad” kind of racial fetishization, even though, from the perspective of Mapplethorpe’s desire, they still objectify the blackness (if not the same-sexedness) of the black models’ “willies.” Does this mean that a progressive, taboo-breaking, same-sex desire can absolve interracial lust of its own bad history of fetishization? Mercer, who has already gone a long way in probing these difficult issues, does not further elaborate.

Mercer’s argument evades, but also evokes, the important question of whether the phobic fetishization that once fixed Fanon is still present in the new desiring fetishization. I argue that it is, but that now it works in the service of fueling a pleasure that has become more complex, a pleasure that serves more than the white former masters. Jane Gaines (1992), for example, in a complex response to Mercer’s essay, has called for a better under-

standing of the “full diversity” of Mapplethorpe’s *Black Book*, by which she means the full diversity of the readers of its images (27). Gaines suggests that straight black women, straight white women, and gay black men have all derived different kinds of pleasure from these pictures and that the actual sexual preferences of these models—whom Mercer presumes to be gay—are irrelevant to the fantasies they may generate (29). Her point is that there are many taboos that inform the fantasies of sexual and racial couplings and that the furor and ambivalence over these photos suggest that many people, gay and straight, black and white, who once only feared the appearance of the “big black willy,” are now becoming educated in its desire.

I would add that this “education of desire”—I borrow the term from Richard Dyer (1985, 131)—occurs along with the rise of aboveground hardcore pornography in the seventies and eighties. As is well known, this pornography has enshrined the penis—of whatever hue—as a commodified object of desire. Such commodification occurs in different ways across the racial border, but it now includes the black man’s own repertoire of sexual postures vis-à-vis the white women he once had good reason to fear. Indeed, the real historical change, as Jane Gaines demonstrates, is the simple fact of the circulation of a book of photos whose main *raison d’être* is the display of this once fear-inducing, now desire-inducing, sexual object. Thus while white supremacist stereotypes certainly inform the fascination with the black penis in these photos, we may not need to have recourse to Mercer’s intelligent, but also highly defensive, arguments to “save” Mapplethorpe’s black male nudes from Fanonian-style disdain. Mercer, for example, argues that the “commonplace stereotypes” of pornography can create, when mixed ironically with high art, a “subversive recoding of the ideological values supporting the normative aesthetic ideal” (1994, 199). In this light, racial fetishism becomes not a “repetition of racist fantasies but a deconstruction of the ambivalence at play in cultural representations of race and sexuality” (1994, 199).

I am full of admiration for Mercer’s willingness to rethink his earlier condemnation of racial fetishism. I am a little suspicious, however, of his argument about the “subversive recoding” of both the high art ideal and the low pornographic stereotype because it tends to elide the fact that both the high and the low are not simply ironic but capable (to different degrees and in different ways) of arousing desire.<sup>6</sup> The real point of the combination of traditions in Mapplethorpe, I suggest, is not the shock of the juxtaposition, but that both are so frankly erotic. What Mercer seems not to recognize fully in his much-revised and extremely important argument is that the pho-

bic deployment of the stereotype of the black man’s sex had already been transformed by popular culture, not Mapplethorpe’s art, into an ambivalently mixed bag of stereotype and fetishistic valuation in which fear, desire, and envy blended. It is precisely the erotic appeal of this racialized sexuality around which Mercer’s essay seems to dance. The gist of his fascinating and honest argument with himself might come down to something like this: If Mapplethorpe’s photos were viewed only by (straight) white viewers, then they might easily be accused of fixing and negatively fetishizing black men in their very blackness and hypersexuality. But the context of viewing is everything. Black viewers of these bodies, and gay viewers of these bodies, and black gay viewers of these bodies, and women viewers of all races and sexual orientations now exist in a culture that has not only denigrated and “fixed” the black man negatively in his sexuality but has also celebrated his erotic power in the familiar poses of a macho black power. Racial fetishization is today not the same as the fixing to which Fanon objected. As Mercer notes, the statement “the black man is beautiful” takes on different meanings depending on the social subject who says it: white or black woman, white or black man, gay or straight. Beauty is indeed an important component of Mapplethorpe’s photos. But it may be more pertinent to alter the statement to “the black man is sexy,” for beauty in this case leads to an acknowledgment of desire. The black man is sexy in this instance in the way he is sexy in contemporary interracial pornography: in the stereotypical, racialized characteristics of black skin and large penis. These characteristics now inspire ambivalent mixes of fear and desire in a much wider range of subjectivities than Mercer originally conceived (including, as Gaines points out, white women and black women). Those who transgress taboos that proscribe either interracial or same-sex desire may experience an ambivalent mix of fear and desire that is part of these images’ appeal.

If we are willing to acknowledge that interracial lust evolves out of the taboos initially imposed by the white master, but which now serve to eroticize a field of sexuality that is no longer his sole province, then we begin to recognize the validity of varieties of commodification in contemporary visual culture, and not only in much-discussed, high art incarnations. But what if we now turn to a decidedly “low” example of interracial lust, which no one could call high art and which is not even attempting, like *Crossing the Color Line*, to counter the racism of the porn industry, but which seems vigorously to embrace its crudest stereotypes?

*Let Me Tell Ya 'bout White Chicks* (dir. Dark Brothers, 1984) is a porn video that became notorious, and popular, for its articulation of all the stereo-

types and clichés of racial difference. Since its release in 1984, when it won the XRCO Best Picture award, it has acquired something of a cult status and has, unlike many other porn titles, been subsequently reissued as a “classic.” The video box proclaims it “The Original Interracial Classic.” Its director, Gregory Dark, is a white man who also pioneered hip, politically incorrect “New Wave” straight porn and then briefly turned his hand to interracial pornography in the mid-1980s. Dark proudly proclaims that “you will not find one sensitive moment in any of my work.” (Bright n.d., n.p.). Like Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* (1991), it unearths the most regressive sexual stereotypes of taboo desire. Unlike Lee, who chooses to tell his version of the story from the perspective of an upwardly mobile black man who momentarily succumbs to “jungle fever” and then learns better, Dark revels in the black male enthusiasm for the ever more outlandish conquest of “white chicks.” The tone is set with this opening rap:

White chicks! They’re so hot and pretty, they get down to the real nitty-gritty.

White chicks got this attitude, they ain’t happy ’till they get screwed.

Give me five on the black hand side, there’s nothing as sweet as a little white hide.

When I see black chicks on the street, I know white chicks got them beat.

Got to get some fine white pussy, feel so wet and tastes so juicy.

Got to get some fine white chick, give her some of my big black dick.

White chicks!

In the film, a group of low-life black men—a pimp, some petty thieves, and one slightly more respectable figure whom I will call the resister—sit around in a bedroom, bragging about their sexual conquests of “white tail.” Each narrated conquest is viewed in flashback. Each consists of an intrusion into a perceived white, upper-class realm (actually only mildly upscale southern California kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms), until the final number, which occurs in the funky bedroom the men occupy. Typically, the episodes begin as robberies and then turn into opportunities for sex with exceedingly willing white women. Conspicuously absent from the video are white men. By behaving like the stereotypes that white men have made them out to be—lazy, lawless, and sexually insatiable—these black men take a crude revenge on the unseen white man.

The pimp figure begins the bragging, extolling the virtues of white over black women. The resister disbelieves him, saying at one point that white

women make his stomach turn. His buddies spin fantasy after fantasy to convince him, and finally, in the last number, they break down his resistance by offering him a white woman on his very own bed. Before he is finally won over, however, he confesses his fear of white women. Indeed, one could say that the entire drama of this video (such as it is) rests on the ambivalence of this one black man toward the white woman he has historically been blamed for desiring. The sex scene with which the film concludes, and indeed all of the outrageous sexual fantasies of black men “boning” eager white women, might thus be construed as a counter to this fear. Bataille’s statement about the relation of fear to desire again proves relevant: “Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives it its deepest significance” (1957, 37). The taboo observed with fear resides in the very real fact that black men were once justly afraid of white women for the danger they could cause. White racists also have been known to fear that white women would, if they tasted sex with black men, never “come back.” Both fears inform the racialized sexual fantasies performed in this video. However, fear is not, as it was for Fanon, the dominant emotion. It now is Bataille’s “counterpoise of desire”—the tension that enhances desire.

On one level, then, we can describe *Let Me Tell Ya ’bout White Chicks* as the racist white male fantasy arguing that black men are animals and that the white women who go with them are sluts. The pleasure taken in this depiction of their sex acts could be called the pleasure of seeing the white woman sullied by the animalistic appetites of the black man—appetites which the white man has historically projected onto the black man. In this case, the white man is not directly implicated in the nastiness except as its onlooker and, of course, as the main author of the fantasy. The black man who acts the part of the animal and the white woman who proves herself to be a slut by going with the black man may also be flouting the taboos of white supremacy for the very pleasure of the white men whom we know to be the dominant consumers of pornography and the writer, director, and producer of this video.

On another level, however, this video can play as a black male sexual fantasy. Narratively, the “me” who tells “ya” about white chicks is a black man talking to other black men, telling tall tales of the obliging availability of white women who crave sex with, and pay money to, low-class black men for their sexual services. On this level, the video can be viewed as a straightforward black male fantasy that takes pleasure in acting out what was once the white man’s worst nightmare. On yet another level, however, it is possible to see that even the eponymous white woman might take pleasure in

watching her counterparts have down-and-dirty sex with a primitive other. One thing at least is clear: while it is not in the least politically correct, this fantasy offers an eroticized transgression of a variety of racialized perspectives. The one racialized perspective studiously ignored, however, is that of the “black chicks” unfavorably compared to the “white chicks.” A companion video, *Let Me Tell Ya 'bout Black Chicks*, by the same writer, director, and producer, would appear to have rectified the imbalance of insult, but it is lost.<sup>7</sup> However we judge the racist stereotypes at work in these films, it would seem that by the time of their release, interracial forms of lust had begun to refunction the more purely phobic kinds of reactions to racial-sexual stereotypes. On both sides of the color line, men and women who watched these videos could participate in the “ambivalences” described by Mercer.

*Let Me Tell Ya 'bout White Chicks* thus neither constitutes a “subversive recoding of the ideological values supporting the normative aesthetic ideal,” as Mercer claims for readings of Mapplethorpe, nor is it a pure “repetition of racist fantasies.” It does not function, as did Reconstruction and Progressive Era racial fantasies, to keep black men in “their place.” Rather, it represents a new kind of racial pornographic fantasy come into being due to America’s history of racial oppression but not a simple repetition of these past racist stereotypes. Like *Crossing the Color Line*, the video reworks the phobic white fear of the black man’s sex, and the related fear of the white woman’s animalistic preference for that sex, into a pornographic fantasy that may have originated from but is no longer “owned” by the white man. Is it then a positive or negative stereotype? Perhaps the conventional language of stereotypes fails us in the attempt to analyze the refunctioning that has occurred around this phobia. For the phobia’s original purpose was to prevent precisely the kind of black male–white female couplings celebrated in these videos.

The problem in thinking about stereotypes, as Mireille Rosello has pointed out, is our stereotypes about them (1998, 32), leading to a lack of precisely the sort of ambivalence noted by Mercer. Rosello argues that stereotypes are important objects of study not because we can better learn to eliminate them from our thinking, but rather because they cannot be eliminated. Stereotypes persist, and perhaps even thrive on, the protestations against them; the louder the protest, the more they thrive. Instead of protest, Rosello offers a nuanced study of the changing historical contexts of stereotypes. Something like this seems to be what we need in our understanding of stereotypes of interracial lust as well. To forbid all utterance or depiction of the stereotype of the originally phobic image of the large black penis is to grant it a timelessness and immortality that it does not really pos-

sess. Once uttered, however, a stereotype does have an enormous power to endure. Racial stereotypes especially, as Homi Bhabha has noted, take on a fetishistic nature as a “form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’ as already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse be proved” (1994, 66). In the perpetual absence of proof (say a random sampling of penis size and actual sexual behavior of black men), there is no truth to the stereotype. But precisely because there is no truth the claim must be repeated. Rosello, however, argues that the refunctioned repetition of stereotype shows what happens when what the culture thinks it knows comes in contact with the stereotyped person’s reaction to that supposed knowledge. In this case, the “iteration” of the refunctioned stereotype does not deny it, but uses it in historically new ways that are more erotic than phobic. In other words, the racial stereotype of the big black “buck” that right-thinking Americans have now come to label as unjustly “negative” (but have in no way eliminated as a vacillating form of knowledge and belief) has ceased to function in the same way it did when the Klan was riding. It has ceased to so function precisely because it has, in the intervening years, been refunctioned to different ends by black men who have willingly occupied the fantasy position of the hypersexed black man in order to instill fear in the white man and to counter the older stereotype of the passive Uncle Tom.<sup>8</sup>

The typical argument against stereotypes is to say that “real” people do not resemble them. But as Steve Neale (1979–80, 35) and Jane Gaines (1992, 27) point out, it is almost never actually “real people” who are asked to offer the antidote to harmful stereotypes, but an imaginary ideal that can serve as a “positive image” for stigmatized minorities. Harmful, negative stereotypes are not measured against the real but against the culturally dominant ideal. Jane Gaines quotes Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer on this point: “It’s not as if we could strip away the negative stereotypes of black men . . . and discover some ‘natural’ black masculinity which is good, pure and wholesome” (Gaines 1992, 27; Mercer and Julien 1986, 6). Historically, then, the negative stereotype of the oversexed black buck was countered in the late 1950s and early 1960s by the positive stereotype of the supercivilized (handsome but never overtly sexual) Sydney Poitier. But this desexed image of the black man was in turn countered by more explicitly sexualized—“bad”—images of black men produced in reaction to the perceived passivity of the Tom figure. Thus the reappearance of the stereotype of the black buck in the



post-civil rights era does not represent a return to a *Birth of a Nation*-style stereotype. Stereotypes, if we follow Rosello, do not simply repeat. The very emergence of this figure, in a newly aboveground, post-civil rights era pornography, would seem to provide evidence that the older function of what Foucault calls the deployment of power through “systems of alliance” and a “symbolics of blood” (1978, 147) indeed does give way to a newer deployment and analytics of sexuality. But like so much else in Foucault, these two modes of power are intertwined.

A stereotype that once functioned to frighten white women and to keep black men in their place (as in JanMohamed’s stereotyping allegory), now functions to solicit sexual desire in the form of a transgressive, pornographic tale. However, this arousal remains propped on the original phobic stereotype aimed precisely at prohibiting the very sexual commerce depicted. Are black men and white women kept any less “in their place” by this sexual fantasy whose point of origin is the power of the white man? I would argue that the white man’s power remains the pivotal point around which these permutations of power and pleasure turn. The sexual fantasies depicted primarily constitute rivalries between white and black men. The agency of white women, and black women even more, is difficult to discern. Nevertheless, there is a big difference, as Tessa Perkins has observed, between “knowing” racist stereotypes and “believing” them (qtd. in Gaines 1992, 27). I suggest that pornographic and erotic fantasies of interracial lust rely on all viewers, male and female, black and white, *knowing* these stereotypes. Although nothing necessarily rules out their also *believing* them—that is, they can certainly be interpreted in a racist manner—the pleasure taken in pornographic depictions of interracial lust does not depend on believing them. It would seem that what is involved instead is a complex flirtation with the now historically proscribed stereotype operating on both sides of the color line. Thus the very taboos that once effectively policed the racial border now work in the service of eroticizing its transgression.

#### “Fear of [and Desire for] a Mandingo Sexual Encounter”

We have seen that a mix of fear and desire lies at the heart of interracial pornography’s erotic tension. The resister figure in *White Chicks* who admitted his fear of white women was also, inadvertently, admitting his fear of white men. White men, for their part, have historically feared black male prowess, even while (and as a means of) exercising sexual sovereignty over black women. White male fear of the black man’s sexual threat to white

women has been the ostensible reason, as JanMohamed notes, for countless acts of violence against black men. What we see in the above examples of interracial pornography is that this fear has now been iterated in a new way. Where it once operated in a more exclusively phobic mode to keep the black man and the white woman apart, now its reversal in pornographic fantasy shows how the stereotype informs the erotic tension of representations of interracial lust. I do not mean to suggest, however, that a racialized mix of fear and desire informing contemporary pornography now renders it totally innocuous. Quite the contrary. One of the worst riots of recent American history was precipitated by the phantasmatic projection of one white man’s racial-sexual fear, envy, and resentment grounded in just such a scenario of interracial lust.

When the white Los Angeles police sergeant Stacey Koon saw a powerfully built black man holding his butt and gyrating his hips at a white female highway patrol officer, he claimed to see a lurid scenario of interracial sex that then triggered the beating of Rodney King. Koon’s reading of King’s pornographic gestures is described in his book, *Presumed Guilty*.

Melanie Singer . . . shouted at King to show her his hands. Recognizing the voice as female, King grinned and turned his back to Melanie Singer. Then he grabbed his butt with both hands and began to gyrate his hips in a sexually suggestive fashion. Actually, it was more explicit than suggestive. Melanie wasn’t so much fearful as offended. She was being mocked in front of her peers. . . . Control and common sense were cast aside. Melanie’s Jane Wayne and Dirty Harriet hormones kicked in. She drew her pistol, and advanced to within five feet of the suspect. (Koon 1992, 33-34)

In the original manuscript of this book, however, Koon had offered a slightly different version of his reason for intervening, stressing this time not Singer’s “offense” but what he called her “fear of a Mandingo sexual encounter” (Fiske 1996, 145). In a May 16, 1992, interview with the *Los Angeles Times* after his acquittal in the first (state) trial, Koon tried to explain what he meant by these words, which were eventually eliminated from the book: “In society there’s this sexual prowess of blacks on the old plantations of the South and intercourse between blacks and whites on the plantation. And that’s where the fear comes in, because he’s black.” Koon’s phrasing is worthy of note: he uses the word *intercourse* rather than the word *rape* that his logic of imputed fear seems to imply. Yet he clearly wants it to appear that he was saving the white woman from a fear-inducing black “sexual

proWess." It is not clear whether he realizes that "intercourse between blacks and whites on the plantation" historically occurred almost entirely between white masters and black slaves. Most likely, he is attempting to subscribe to the Reconstruction era myth of the helpless white woman in need of rescue from the lustful black man by a heroic white man (himself).<sup>9</sup> But the scenario no longer fits. Koon's improbable imputation of sexual fear to the six-foot-tall and highly professional Melanie Singer at the moment King was surrounded by no less than eight highway patrol officers with drawn guns says more about his own sexual insecurities regarding the competence of the female cop who threatens to usurp his own authority. The vacillations in his story are telling: in one version he attributes sexual fear to Singer; in another version mere offense. It is clear that in both cases, fear and offense are not only a projection of an actual sexual threat onto King but a form of punishment enacted on Singer for having the gall to place herself in the "Dirty Harriet" position of a male officer. The real fear for which he also punished *her* by taking over the arrest may very well be that she was a perfectly competent cop doing her job arresting a speeder.

At the same time, however, Koon's use of the phrase *sexual prowess of blacks* intimates something of white sexual envy of black men; it is hardly a phrase old-fashioned racists like Thomas Dixon or D. W. Griffith would have invoked. This envy, I suggest, is inherited from a much more recent legacy of pornography and exploitation cinema that has culminated in the fantasy depictions of interracial lust cited above. While Stacey Koon would like us to believe that Singer's "fear of a Mandingo sexual encounter," caused him to initiate Rodney King's beating, his motives differed from Dixon and Griffith's brand of racism. Like them, he wants to keep black men and white women in their place. But unlike them, he seems aware of the various ways in which the fantasy of the black male sexual threat to the white woman has also become material for overtly titillating scenarios.

One clue to his different deployment of the figure of the "black beast" may lie in Koon's peculiar use of the word *Mandingo*—which designates, along with the variant *Mandinka*, a tribe of African warriors—instead of *black* or *African* or any of the other available animalistic epithets apparently used by police before and during King's beating. This word signals Koon's own semi-conscious acknowledgment that the scenario he invokes has since the 1970s become something more than the white patriarch's fear of the pollution of his own racial line by a hypersexual African slave and the subsequent loss of control over "his" women. *Mandingo* does not mean to Stacey Koon's generation what *African* meant to Dixon and Griffith's. One reason may be that in

1975, a popular sexploitation film with the very title *Mandingo*, which Stacey Koon is old enough to have seen as a teenager, had already refashioned the older scenario of white female fear in the face of black male lust. Stacey Koon's overreaction to King's grabbed butt and gyrated hips may have unleashed the same kind of overkill as the ride of the Klan, but the raced and gendered fear that Koon attempted to project onto Melanie Singer was no longer a historically believable emotion. This is one reason for its excision from the manuscript of his book and its replacement with the word *offense*. But in saying "fear of a Mandingo sexual encounter," Koon also invoked a white female *desire for* that encounter as depicted in the film of the same name. For Richard Fleischer's 1975 film is most famous for its depiction of a white mistress's taboo-breaking seduction of her husband's Mandingo slave.

As noted above, one component of the legacy of Black Power in American popular culture since the sixties has been to fight the stereotype of the emasculated Tom with gestures of black male virility. From the virile stances of the Black Power movement proper, to Eldridge Cleaver's claims to have raped white women in *Soul on Ice*, to an array of early seventies blaxploitation films which *Mandingo* followed, to the Black Power-derived poses of *Mandingo* itself, the defiant gesture by which the black man asserts his virility in the face of a white dominated world has become as automatic a reflex as "rescuing the white woman" was to Stacey Koon. Perhaps if we could begin to understand the reach of the sexual-racial fantasies that fuel the relations between the races at so many levels, we might better understand not only the reasons Stacey Koon grabbed his taser but also the reason Rodney King "grabbed his butt" in the first place.

We thus need to understand Stacey Koon's fateful projection onto Melanie Singer of a "fear of a Mandingo sexual encounter" as a nexus of extremely ambivalent, highly stereotypical white and black sexual fear that Koon certainly wanted to see reaching back to the mythic plantation, but which actually joined mainstream popular culture in the 1970s. It is the emergence of this mixture of racial fear and desire that I would like to examine now. As we have seen, the racially inflected hard-core pornography examined in the last section rests on the old, purely phobic, picture of the threatening, hypersexual black male. In these films, white myths of the Old South come into contact with post-civil rights era assertions of black power and black sexual potency. But how do they actually interact? We can see the effect of this interaction in the catastrophic collision of the two reflexively macho gestures described above: the reflexive gesture with which Rodney King asserts

his defiance of the law by adopting a “sexually provocative” pose vis-à-vis a white woman police officer; and the reflexive gesture of beating the black man in order to “rescue” a white woman who was never really in danger. I would suggest that neither of these reflexes constitutes a pure repetition of the past: the macho bravado of King’s response to Singer’s order is as deeply conditioned by the very same 1970s popular culture that Stacey Koon inadvertently invokes when he says the word *Mandingo*. The macho bravado of Koon’s response, which wants to see itself repeating a gesture of heroic rescue out of the mythic white supremacist past, is also deeply conditioned by the imagination of a “Black Power” sexual prowess. The word *Mandingo* seems to function as a screen memory—a memory that both recalls and blocks out unresolved questions of interracial sex and violence percolating in the culture since the 1970s. It would therefore behoove us, before trying to say too much more about Stacy Koon and Rodney King’s fantasies, to examine the film titled *Mandingo* as a way of excavating a moment in American culture when mainstream audiences, black and white, began to find titillation—not just danger—in depictions of interracial lust.

### *Mandingo*

*Mandingo* is not a pornographic film, but for many viewers who did not yet venture into the porn theaters of the era, it came close. Reviewers unanimously viewed it as an exploitative potboiler and a work of lurid “trash.”<sup>10</sup> Directed by Richard Fleischer in 1975, and a big hit at the box office, *Mandingo* has only recently begun to receive its critical due.<sup>11</sup> Nor does this rather expensively produced film directly belong to the category of blaxploitation films. However it is best understood, as Ed Guerrero (1993) argues, in relation to them. *Blaxploitation* was Hollywood’s word for an exploitation of both race and sex that became popular, and economically important, to the very survival of Hollywood in the early and mid 1970s. Often breakthroughs for black directors, Blaxploitation films typically offered contemporary reworkings of outlaw and detective genres set in the inner city with contemporary jazz scores and tough, sexually desirable black heroes who displayed sexual prowess toward both black and white women (the Isaac Hayes theme song for *Shaft* [dir. Richard Roundtree, 1971] sings of the “black private dick that’s a sex machine for all the chicks”). *Mandingo*, in contrast, is set on a plantation of the Old South, was directed by a white man, and has a primary white hero. But like the blaxploitation cycle, it portrays black struggle against racism while also celebrating black male sexual prowess. Also like

blaxploitation, it became popular with the same black urban audiences who played such a major role in Hollywood’s recovery from economic slump in the early seventies.<sup>12</sup> The film represents a new post-civil rights, post-Black Power view of the coercive sexual relations of slavery, but one which also takes a frankly lurid interest in those relations. Finally, *Mandingo* presents interracial sexual relations not only as compellingly erotic but also systematically in relation to the different economic situations of white masters and mistresses and black male and female slaves. It thus represented a revision of the most recent incarnation of the plantation genre—a type of pulp fiction already predicated, sans Black Power message, on a certain lurid fascination with black/white sexual relations.

The film is one part gothic sexploitation, one part blaxploitation, and one part philosophical treatise on the Hegelian bond between master and slave. The story concerns a young white master (Perry King) who openly enjoys his *droit du seigneur* with a particular female slave while, unbeknownst to him, his sexually unfulfilled white wife furtively enjoys the sexual services of his prize Mandingo “buck.” Here, Kyle Onstott’s lengthy 1957 novel about interracial sex on the plantation has been overlaid with a post-civil rights celebration of black power that systematically revises *Gone with the Wind*-style clichés of the plantation melodrama.<sup>13</sup> The plantation, presided over by the young master’s enfeebled patriarch (James Mason), is a breeding farm for slaves. When the young master discovers that his new wife is not a virgin, he turns to one of his previous slave “bed wenches” and develops a romantic relationship with her.<sup>14</sup> Sex between master and slave is not in itself presented as transgressive, though the romantic nature of this relationship is. Out of jealousy and frustrated desire, his wife then orders her husband’s prize Mandingo to service her sexually in a prolonged sex scene. When she later gives birth to a mixed-race child, the master kills it and poisons her.

The one thing the film is not, however, is what Stacey Koon’s conflicted memory seemed to want it to be: a lesson teaching white women to fear the “sexual prowess” of black men. Rather, it teaches that these transgressive relations of racialized sexuality are the only relations that have any emotional force in a film otherwise structured by totally instrumental uses of both white and black flesh. But the part of the film that Stacey Koon really ought to have remembered is its conclusion. For when the white master seeks revenge on his slave for having had sex with his wife, his excessive violence,<sup>15</sup> like Koon’s, leads to civil unrest—in this case a slave revolt.<sup>16</sup>

*Mandingo*’s black male revenge on the white master marks the film as a post-civil rights era expression of black power. The film systematically re-

vises happy black servility with equal parts of black rage and illicit sexual desire. There are two major interracial sex scenes. They are not the first interracial sex scenes offered up for prurient, as opposed to phobic, interest in mainstream American cinema, but they are the most sustained and the most provocative in their challenge to plantation genre precursors.<sup>17</sup> Both entail transgressive erotic recognitions across racial difference.

The first scene shows the young master on a visit to another plantation where he and his traveling companion receive slave women for the night. Although he has previously been shown to have matter-of-fact breeding relations with a female slave, the kindly Hammond here responds differently. Sickened by the sadistic treatment of one of the women by his traveling companion, and responding to the fear shown by Ellen, the woman he has been given, he retreats into the next room with her. But the kiss his companion has planted on “his” woman in violation of the code against real intimacy between the races has also repulsed him. Ellen, for her part, is shaken by the rough violation of her fellow slave, afraid of her own violation (she is a virgin), and intrigued by Hammond’s vulnerability, symbolized by a childhood injury that has left him lame. He reciprocates her kindness toward his lameness by telling her that if she does not want to stay she needn’t. During the scene she stands above him. Andrew Britton has argued that Hammond’s abrogation of his mastery then leads to Ellen’s desire to please him, suggesting “not the submission of a servant but the emotional commitment of a lover” (12). Britton, who mounted the first major defense of the film, argues that Ham and Ellen thus overcome their differences: she overcomes the fact that he is master, and he overcomes the fact that she is a slave, as well as his revulsion to the idea of kissing a slave on the mouth.

Where Britton argues that Ellen’s “color and status become irrelevant for Ham” and that he “renounces mastery” (12), I would argue that the abrogation of mastery can never be complete; its residue, in fact, is what marks the scene’s erotic tension.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, if we look at how master and slave get to the point of their dramatic first kiss, we see that difference and mastery are never truly overcome. For example, even though Ham tells Ellen that she is free not to service him, and even though he invites her to “put your eyes on me; look at me straight into my eyes,” she resists: “I can’t. Niggers don’t.” Although Britton argues that Ham then more gently *asks* her to look at him, and that when their gazes meet they overcome their differences, I suggest that the shift from demanding to asking does not overcome mastery or negate difference. Ellen is never truly free to refuse a master and her color and status do not become irrelevant for Ham. Rather, they become relevant

in a new way. If Ellen’s desire coincides with her need to please the master, so much the better. But when Ham says that she needn’t service him, she reassures him with words whose sincerity we cannot ascertain: “I like you, sir. I want to please you.” Ellen’s *apparently* willing recognition of Hammond as a man, not a master, elicits a corresponding recognition of Ellen as a woman, not a slave, when he finally overcomes the revulsion to kiss her on the mouth. But the recognition figured by the multiple kisses that end the scene is never free of the powered and raced differences that fuel its eros.

In their own way, however, these kisses are revolutionary, especially if we recall Abdul JanMohamed’s (1992, 104) argument that sexual relations between master and slave do entail potentially subversive recognitions of humanity. In *Mandingo*’s larger narrative, this transgressive kiss initiates a chain of events that threatens the entire institutional edifice of slavery by exposing the homology of the black (male and female) slave’s position as chattel and the white mistress’s position as breeder for the master’s seed. For this kiss precipitates the wife’s sexual envy and her own much more transgressive violation of the taboo against interracial intimacy when she has sex with Hammond’s Mandingo slave, Mede. The repercussions of that sex act will in turn precipitate the master’s Stacey Koon-like overkill, which in turn sparks a slave revolt. Thus while it is possible to say that “common humanity” becomes recognized in these transgressions of the racial border between master and slave, the recognitions take place *through* and *because of*, not *despite*, erotically charged racial differences.<sup>19</sup>

It is almost impossible not to see the sexual encounters between master and slave and mistress and slave in terms of racialized versions of Hegel’s scenario of the dialectic of recognition between the lord and the bondsman that has proven so influential in postcolonial studies. In this Hegelian turn, I am especially indebted to Celine Parenas Shimizu (2000), whose paper on *Mandingo*, “Master-Slave Sex Acts: *Mandingo* and the Race/Sex Paradox” has clarified many of these issues for me. Hegel’s description of the relation between the bondsman and the lord in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) concerns the philosophical problem that “the one”—the “ego subject” or “I” of human self-consciousness—must relate to the “ego object” of the other in order to achieve its identity and become itself. Hegel frames this relation to the other in terms of desire—ultimately the desire of “the one” for recognition by “the other.” Although Hegel’s sense of desire is never, as Jane Gaines notes, sexual, there is a strong sense of the bodily confrontation between sameness and difference in his discussion of how the bondsman or slave becomes an object for the lord or master which eminently suggests the

sexual scenario (Gaines 2001, 62). The Hegelian dilemma of mastery lies in the fact that the more complete it is, the more the master fails to achieve genuine self-consciousness. For the master needs to be recognized by an independent will or consciousness, which is precisely what he has not granted the slave. Thus the master's very power frustrates the recognition of his own will and consciousness by an independent other. Jessica Benjamin calls this dilemma the dialectic of control: "If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me then I cease to exist" (53). Only in mutual recognition can the two become what Hegel calls actively universal subjects.

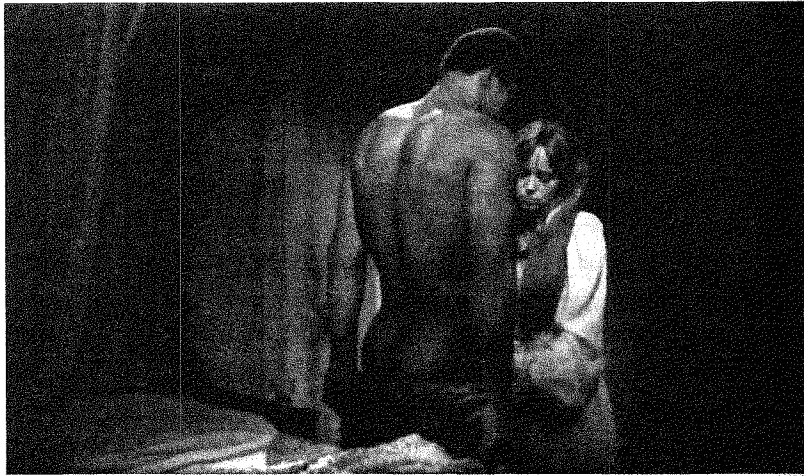
Hegel's paradigm may offer a way of conceiving forms of recognition extended to forms of racialized and sexualized subjugation inherited from American slavery.<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler's (2000) recent interpretation of both Hegel and Jessica Benjamin rejects the notion of a mutual recognition that functions as normative ideal of an inclusion of the other by the self. According to Butler, the kind of overcoming of difference that we saw Britton argue above with respect to *Mandingo* would constitute an example of the easy and overly optimistic interpretation that she challenges in Benjamin.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Butler stresses a version of the master/slave recognition that sees both as running the risk of destruction. But this risk of destruction also proves, she argues, constitutive of the self. It is a recognition grounded in difference and instability. Butler's argument is complex and nuanced, ultimately challenging Benjamin's dyadic concept of desire with a more multiple—heterosexual, homosexual, and unnamably sexed—triad. I only take from it the basic paradox that recognition does not overcome difference or destruction but is, rather, grounded in both. I find this Hegelian reinterpretation, along with Shimizu's, helpful for understanding the nature of the erotic recognition that occurs between Ham and Ellen and that their kisses symbolize. In a film in which sex acts have functioned in the economic interests of the master, these transgressive, interracial sex acts do not, as Andrew Britton would have it, overcome difference. Rather, they offer a perversely exciting form of sexual-racial recognition-in-difference.

This negativity of a destructive difference offers an important qualification for understanding erotic forms of recognition whose very eros is grounded in racialized differences of power. Consider, for example, the second big moment of interracial lust depicted in this film, that between the aptly named Blanche (Susan George), the sexually frustrated plantation mistress, and Mede, the Mandingo wrestler (the boxer Ken Norton). Blanche had disappointed Hammond by proving—due to sexual abuse by her older

brother—not to be a virgin on marriage. When Ham purchases Ellen and then turns to her for love, elevating her to quasi-mistress status, Blanche seeks revenge by seducing her husband's slave. On a steamy afternoon, dressed in her white nightgown, with long blond hair falling down nearly to her waist, a half-drunk Blanche orders Mede to her bedroom to sit on her bed—a move which momentarily equalizes the difference in their height when she stands before him, making it possible for each, as in the previous master/slave "recognition," to look into the other's eyes. First, she threatens him with his master's wrath: if he does not do what she wants, she will claim to have been raped by him. But since such coercion will only make her like Hegel's master, she then entreats: "Mede, ain't you ever craved a white lady before?" With this shift from terrorizing command to an entreaty that addresses his own desire for the other, she kisses his unresponsive lips, caressing the sides of his face and looking him in the eye.

It was at the point of just such an interracial kiss that the previous "love" scene between Ham and Ellen faded out. Here, however, the kiss begins a prolonged seduction that climaxes in a soft-core depiction of mutual orgasm. Considered simply as a sex scene, it proves no more transgressive than a great many of its era; considered as an interracial sex scene, it pushes the envelope, an effect enhanced by Maurice Jarre's gothic music. Blanche slowly removes Mede's shirt and pulls him up from the bed to stand, towering over her. Embracing the full length of his body she reaches her hand down his chest and toward his groin. A reframed shot of their upper bodies shows both of them looking down in that direction. With this allusion to Mede's involuntary sexual response to her coercive "seduction," Blanche begins to undress him (figure 1). This gesture leads her, eventually, to kneel at his feet as if in abject submission to a virile response that she nevertheless controls. From behind Mede's back, we see a powerfully built black man, naked buttocks prominently displayed, with a white woman kneeling at his feet. This scene clearly puts Mede's body, not Blanche's, on display. Standing once again, Blanche now removes her clothes and embraces him, rubbing her face with its long blond hair against his naked chest.

At this point, Mede finally begins to respond voluntarily to her seduction. His arms embrace her and she smiles. Taking "control," he lifts her briefly up and then onto the bed where he lies on her. Once again, it is his body, especially his buttocks, that is on display as the camera glides along its length to reveal her feet caressing his thighs. Suddenly, as if remembering that she should be in charge, Blanche reverses this arrangement and climbs on top, for the first time in the scene revealing the upper part of her own naked



1. In *Mandingo*, Blanche undresses Mede. His body, not hers, is on display.

body. Immediately, however, Mede puts her back under him, and trembles as if in the grips of orgasm that gives the appearance, if not the guarantee, of mutuality. The scene ends with a languorous crane shot pulling up, revealing his body sprawled on top of hers with her legs spread-eagled beneath him.<sup>22</sup>

What kind of Hegelian recognition can we see in this scene? First of all, it is literally one that runs the “risk of destruction” by keeping in play a negativity—a possibility of obliteration that is the very source of its erotic tension. Indeed, both mistress and slave will die as a consequence of this sexual-racial recognition. The very death at the master’s hand with which Blanche threatens Mede, will be delivered to them both. The intense eroticism of the scene derives not merely from the explicit (relative to previous, nonexploitation Hollywood films) details of their sexual relations—reference to Mede’s off-screen erection, nudity, shuddering orgasm—but from the way his body itself becomes a battleground between fear and desire. Here is another permutation of the fear of, and desire for, the racial other. But where Ellen risked destruction in refusing to satisfy her master, Mede risks destruction both ways—in refusing to satisfy his mistress *and* in satisfying her.

Judith Butler writes,

The self in Hegel is marked by a primary enthrallment with the Other, one in which that self is put at risk. The moment in “Lordship and Bondage” when the two self-consciousnesses come to recognize one another

is, accordingly, in the “life and death struggle,” the moment in which they each see the power they have to annihilate the Other and, thereby, destroy the condition of their own self-reflection. Thus, it is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability, that recognition becomes possible and becomes self-conscious. (2000, 287)

Butler’s interpretation of the achievement of Hegelian self-identity through a relation to the other that runs the risk of destruction suggests, in contrast to Jessica Benjamin, that the price of self-identity is, paradoxically, self-loss. To be a self, according to Butler’s reading of Hegel, is not to “enjoy the prerogative of self-identity” but to be *ek-static*, cast outside oneself, to become other to oneself. Thus Butler resists the sort of “happy” interpretation of recognition that sees it as an incorporation of the difference of the other into the one. Her challenge to Benjamin is to think about the desire for (and the desire of) the other beyond the complementarity of the dyad—master/slave, self/other—to consider the ways in which a third term intervenes.

In the various scenarios of interracial lust we have discussed thus far, both in pornography and here in a film thought to “exploit” (soft-core) sex in pornographic ways, the different interracial permutations of lust—those of the white woman and the black man and those of the white man and the black woman—contain a nonpresent third term that haunts the scene. This is the putatively “proper,” same-race partner whom the spectacle of interracial lust can be said to betray. When the black woman and the white man recognize and desire one another across their differences, this recognition is nevertheless haunted and erotically animated by the missing figure of the black man, who finds his very masculinity and virility jeopardized by his exclusion. It is also haunted by the missing figure of the white woman deprived of a partner because of the white male’s interest in the “othered” woman. Similarly in the sexual-racial recognition of the white woman and the black man, it is the jealous white man who represents the absent third term and who has his masculinity (and mastery) put in jeopardy by his exclusion. To a lesser degree, the second scenario is also haunted by the black woman who loses a potential partner to the myth of superior white womanhood.

These exclusions are not equal, however. The white man has much more power in his absence to structure the scene in which he does not act than does the black man, the white woman, or the black woman. And for this reason we might say that the transgression inherent in the sex scene between the white woman and the black man is greater and therefore more

erotic. The point, however, is that the interracial recognition taking place never occurs only between the two figures present in the scene and that this mutual but unequal recognition is animated, in different ways, by the desire and jealousy of an absent third person. As Butler suggests, "If desire works through relays that are not always easy to trace, then who I am for the Other will be, by definition, at risk of displacement" (2000, 284). Thus "part of what it means to recognize the Other" is to recognize that "he or she comes, of necessity, with a history that does not have oneself as its center" (285). The lame white master who looms so large in the Blanche/Mede recognition, the sex-starved white mistress who looms so large in the Ham/Ellen recognition, are what give these erotic recognitions their sexual charge. They are the (unequally) powerful, white, transgressed-against figures whose very absence structures the erotic tension of the scenes. The black woman who would be the "appropriately raced" partner for Mede, and the black man who would be the "appropriately raced" partner for Ellen, do not have the same power to constitute a force in the scene as their white counterparts. The transgression, in other words, is perceived as against the dominant white power: the large power of the white master and the much smaller power of the white mistress. The "hotter" the sex, the greater the transgressed-against power.

Both Blanche and Mede put themselves at risk in their enthrallment with each other. The "hot sex" that ensues is not a gesture of each "including" the other in his or her unity or oneness or humanity. Rather, it constitutes a dangerous giving over of the self to the other, one never "freely" given and never achieving complementarity. Yet Blanche and Mede *do* recognize one another in sex through the very power differentials of their (similarly but unequally) enslaved conditions. If their recognition flouts the key sexual taboo of chattel slavery, it is also informed by it. Indeed, the sexual encounter between Blanche and Mede is erotic in a way that the more romanticized relationship between Hammond and Ellen is not—precisely because the component of fear is greater. Fear of one another and fear of the white master are both palpable in the white mistress's and the black slave's bodies. Erotic tension unlike that seen in any previous Hollywood film manifests itself especially in Mede's body, which becomes a battleground of fear and desire.<sup>23</sup> Because Blanche is less conflicted in her desire for the "Mandingo" sexual encounter—since she, in effect, has less fear and more desire—her body is less eroticized than Mede's (though it is more eroticized than Ellen's whose "proper" mate has no social power). Blanche and Mede recognize one another not in their common humanity, not in their unique individuality, but

precisely across racial and sexual skin and hair differences displayed in a sex act that flirts with but at least momentarily holds "destruction in check" (Butler 287). And their erotic relation is haunted by the power of the white master who is not there.

Obviously one can only take Hegelian readings of interracial sex in this film so far. While Butler is interested in what Hegel has to teach about the notion of the self, I am interested in what her reading of Hegel's master-and-slave scenario can teach us about cinematic representations of erotic excitement. I simply hope that this mining of insights can point to new ways of reading moments of erotic recognition informed by fear and transgression. For it is fear, finally, that fuels the erotic fantasy of *Mandingo*. Stacey Koon got that much right.

The sex scenes in *Mandingo* need to be understood not only for their ambivalent political celebration of black male and white female sexual power and pleasure but as a new kind of mainstream visual pleasure—a pleasure explicitly and knowingly derived from flirting with taboo. In 1975, amid the tumult of a mainstream film industry seeking to appeal to younger and more racially and ethnically diverse audiences, interracial lust became a new commodity, acknowledged not for the first time, but in a way that explicitly foregrounded the context of the master/slave dynamic of power as an erotic pleasure grounded in the taboos it transgresses. *Mandingo*, a film that ranked sixteenth at the box office, helps us recognize the emergence of the peculiar conjunction of Black Power, cinematic sexual explicitness, and self-conscious revisions of white myths of the Old South into a quasi-mainstream popular culture.

#### *Behind the Green Door*

But, of course, not only *Mandingo* ventured into this taboo territory. I would like to conclude this essay by returning to a "classic" work of film pornography that has already been much discussed as pornography but very little as interracial sex. It is the early *Behind the Green Door* (dir. Mitchell Brothers, 1972), and the scene in question is the film's first heterosexual sex act. As far as I can determine, this is the first American feature-length hard-core film to include a major interracial sex scene; yet, as far as I can also determine, this sex scene has gone unnoticed by critics.<sup>24</sup> A woman named Gloria (Marilyn Chambers) has been abducted and placed on a stage where a series of men will ravish her before an elegantly dressed audience wearing masks. A frightened Gloria is led on stage, disrobed, stroked, kissed and

fondled by a group of black-robed white women in seemingly ritual preparation for her first sexual “number.” Suddenly a spotlight directs attention to a green door at the back of the stage. A barefoot black man (the boxer Johnny Keyes, here anticipating the later Ken Norton in *Mandingo*) emerges through the door dressed as a pornographic version of the African savage. He sports an animal-tooth necklace, facial paint, and yellow tights with a hole in the crotch from which his semi-erect penis already protrudes. The “African,” as if just let out of a cage, tentatively approaches the brown-haired white woman, not exactly stalking her but as if led to her by the magnetic pull of his projecting penis. She is held on the floor of the stage by the robed women who direct him to her spread legs. As the African performs cunnilingus, the robed women look on intently and massage Gloria’s body while some members of the cabaret audience begin to masturbate. The scene builds as cunnilingus gives way to penetration and Gloria begins to respond to the rhythms of the African’s thrusts, the initial hushed silence giving way to jazz music.

The scene is intense, with both the white woman and the black man displaying initial reticence and then abandon. As pornotopia—the place where it is always time for sex—the scene does not portray the moment of sexual-racial recognition as the same dramatic battleground between fear and desire as does *Mandingo*. Like all hard-core pornography, it turns to explicit sex acts very quickly, though an erotic tension much more intense than our examples discussed earlier from the 1980s and 1990s distinguishes the scene. This sex scene marks, for the feature-length, on/scene genre of pornography, the first moment in which the blatant invocation of taboos against interracial lust become a way of adding drama and excitement to hard-core pornography’s usual celebration of easy polymorphic perversities.

Here again a white woman and a black man display highly theatricalized mixtures of fear and desire as each slowly gives him- or herself over to the sexual-racial other. The face paint, animal-tooth necklace, and crotchless tights emphasize the racial difference of the African in contrast to the white woman he ravishes. This is not, like *Mandingo*, a scene in which the mistress has a measure of power over her slave. The African trappings seem designed to assert the animal power of the black man against the more servile iconography of the slave. Yet the African is no more in charge of the sexual show than he was in *Mandingo*, and once again the specter of the white man, the absent third term, haunts the performance. Although the black man finds himself in the more typically masculine position of ritualized “ravisher,” he is obviously subject to the power that orchestrates his entrance and

exit. Nevertheless, the film resembles *Mandingo* in its depiction of the black man’s desire tinged with fear, and in its theatrical performance of an interracial sex act as a form of commodified visual pleasure. In both cases, this pleasure consciously plays on racial and sexual stereotypes—of the hypersexed black man and the sexually voracious white woman. It is worth noting that the excitement of this particular performance is not measured in the usual close-ups of penetration and money shots, but in a sustained rhythmic give-and-take, in which “recognition across difference” is paramount. Although we see their entwined, whole bodies gyrating, the camera also frequently holds tight on their faces as they look one another in the eye, kiss, and thrust in increasingly fast rhythms until Gloria suddenly closes her eyes and stops, as if unconscious, and the African slowly withdraws. We see his still-erect penis as he pulls it out and walks back to the green door from which he entered.

Earlier hard-core pornography in the form of stag films had occasionally played on stereotypes of African animality.<sup>25</sup> But no feature-length theatrical film shown to sexually and racially mixed audiences in “legitimate” theaters had ever displayed these kinds of sexual-racial stereotypes for the primary purpose of producing sexual pleasure in viewers. This certainly does not mean to say that these films do not traffic in stereotypical depictions of African animality (or, indeed, white female purity—let’s not forget that Marilyn Chambers began her career as the Ivory Soap girl) suddenly transformed into insatiable lust. However, it is to say that the effect of the portrayal of animality differs quite markedly in a generic world that celebrates lust and the fetishes enhancing it.

It is certainly true that white men can still deploy the quasi-taboo relation of the stereotypically hypersexual African man and the white man’s stereotypically pure white woman as cautionary tools to maintain the sexual-racial hierarchy of white man over black man and white woman. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the fact that the hypersexual black man no longer features as a purely phobic object in the shared cultural imaginary deeply complicates such deployments. He has become, rather, a familiar element in erotic sexual fantasy producing visual pleasure for an audience that can now include—and does include in the case of the diegetic audience in *Behind the Green Door*—white men, black men, white women, and black women, and a wide range of other sexualized and racialized beings. In 1972, this black man is thus very different from what he had been. A fear that had kept black men and white women “in their place” now began to fuel an eroticism bringing them together, not in a happy mutual overcoming of difference, but run-



ning the risk of destruction by tempting the outrage (however vestigial) of the excluded third term.

#### Conclusion: "In the Blink of an Eye."

This essay has worked backward from a 1999 example of the fully commodified category of interracial porn, marketed as such, to a 1972 classic of pornography that preexists the emergence of interracial porn as a marketed category, but that appears to be the first example of the pornographic commodification of interracial sex acts in aboveground feature film. The 1975 film *Mandingo*, while not an example of interracial pornography proper, has nevertheless permitted us to probe some of the deeper questions of power and pleasure in depictions of interracial lust. What conclusions can we now draw from these examples?

All depictions of interracial lust develop out of the relations of inequality that have prevailed between the races. They grow out of a history that has covertly permitted the white man's sexual access to black women and violently forbidden the black man's access to white women. The racist and sexist assumptions that underlie such unequal access to sex have generated forms of pornographic sexual fantasy with an important purchase on the American sexual imagination. To recognize the racism that has generated these fantasies does not suggest that the function they fulfill today is racist in the same way. Nor is it to say that it does not participate in aspects of an increasingly outmoded racial stereotyping. This, indeed, is the lesson of the historicity of the stereotype. Distasteful as some of the stereotypes that feed these fantasies are, I hope to have shown that the simple charge of racism is increasingly imprecise when we talk about visual pleasures generated by depictions of interracial lust. Tessa Perkins's distinction between knowing and believing racist stereotypes seems worth remembering: the excitement of interracial lust—for both blacks and whites—depends on a basic knowledge of the white racist scenario of white virgin/black beast. But the pleasure generated by the scenario does not necessarily need to *believe* in the scenario. Rather, we might say that there is a kind of knowing flirtation with the archaic beliefs of racial stereotypes.

It would seem, then, that the racialized sexuality described by Abdul Jan-Mohamed is not always as silent as he claimed, at least not recently and at least not within the realm of pornographic and exploitation discourse. The pleasures of sexual-racial difference once available to white masters alone are now more available to all, though not equally to all. Black female viewing

pleasure, it would seem, is the least well served by these newly racialized, noisy confessions of pleasure. Kobena Mercer writes, "Blacks are looked down upon and despised as worthless, ugly and ultimately unhuman. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere black bodies, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idolized as the embodiment of its aesthetic ideal" (1994, 210). As I have been trying to argue, aesthetic ideals are deeply imbricated in the sexual desirability of this "black subject." And the change to which Mercer refers may not have exactly occurred within "the blink of an eye." Rather, as we have seen, it has occurred through a somewhat slower, three-decade-long process of re-aestheticization and positive sexualization, in which low forms of exploitation and pornography have played an important part.

#### Notes

Thanks to Jane Gaines for enabling this essay in the first place and to Celine Parrenas Shimizu for many stimulating conversations and for sharing her pioneering paper on *Mandingo* with me. Thanks also to Elizabeth Abel, Karl Britto, Heather Butler, Anne Cheng, Noel Carroll, Lawrence Cohen, Susan Courtney, Tom Gunning, Ralph Hexter, Michael Lucey, Ara Osterweil, and Steven Schneider for helpful comments. And special thanks to Rich Cante for a chance to say some of this out loud for the first time.

- 1 They are not, of course, *equally* available to all. Jane Juffer, writing about women's consumption of pornography in the home, notes that access to pornography is radically different for women when compared to that of men (1998, 5, 107).
- 2 For Bataille, this violation of prohibition constitutes a violent jolting out of discontinuous existence—a moment that puts the individual in contact with the continuity of death, which orgasm, often referred to by the French as *le petit mort* (little death), approximates. This jolt transgresses the law but does not defeat it (1957, 30–39).
- 3 I am indebted to Susan Courtney for the illuminating adjective *color mute*, which seems to me a useful description of the post-civil rights era dilemma of so much racial discourse: no one is blind to visible racial differences, but the practice of politely ignoring them produces a condition of muteness that often impedes the ability to deal with racial inequality. The term does not appear in Courtney's forthcoming book, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, but derives from that book's insights.
- 4 Mercer published an initial article attacking Mapplethorpe in 1986, and a second article, revising the first, in 1989. He then combined them in the 1992 "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." My notes are taken from his most recent revision, in his 1994 book, *Welcome to the Jungle*.

- 5 Of course the real issue may be, as Jane Gaines (1992) has pointed out, who is reading, and finding erotic pleasure in, the *Black Book*: Mercer and other gay black friends; white gay men, like Mapplethorpe himself; white women; or black women? Only the latter could be said not to transgress some racial or sexual border.
- 6 See, for example, Nead 1992, Dennis 1995, and Freedberg 1989.
- 7 The Dark brothers are white, as is the script writer, who writes under the pseudonym Antonio Pasolini. Pasolini claims that these videos were written with the intention of being as politically incorrect as possible. The companion video, *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks*, was about the slightly less taboo sexual relations of low-class white men and black women. It apparently contained scenes of white racists extolling the parallel virtues of "black chicks" and their special appeal to white men. Though the taboos against crossing this color line are historically less in force, in this instance, apparently the use of white characters in κκκ uniforms pushed many buttons. It was thus this video, not *White Chicks*, that was selected for indictment during the Reagan era, resulting in the disappearance of *Black Chicks* from all shelves. Even the writer claims not to be able to obtain a copy (personal phone interview with Antonio Pasolini, March 2001).
- 8 For a further discussion of this issue from the point of view of white supremacist mainstream American culture, see Williams 2001.
- 9 It is worth noting that in these two different accounts, Koon wildly vacillates between two competing images of the white woman cop: one casts her, somewhat improbably, in the Lillian Gish role of defenseless white woman cringing before the "black beast," while the other casts her as a trigger-happy Dirty Harriet trying to fill a man's shoes. I write about the racial melodrama of this fantasy of the endangered white woman in the white male imagination in my 2001 book *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*.
- 10 On May 7, 1975, *Variety* wrote: "Schoolboys of all ages used to get off on Kyle Onstrott's novel of sexploitation sociology, 'Mandingo,' and now, thanks to Paramount and producer Dino De Laurentis, they still can. Richard Schickel follows suit in *Time*, dismissing the film's luridness: "Most of the suspense in *Mandingo* is generated by the unconscionable amount of time it requires for the blonde mistress of Falconhurst to invite into her bed the handsome black slave . . . her husband purchased to improve the breeding stock down in the quarters. Until this moment we cannot be certain that the movie is going to employ every cliché of antebellum melodrama" (1975). In the *L.A. Times*, Kevin Thomas (1975) called it "this year's trash masterpiece" whose "condemnation of slavery" is "but an excuse to project the most salacious miscegenation-inspired sex fantasies ever seen this side of an X rating."
- 11 Several critics have made recent claims for the film's importance. Andrew Britton has made the earliest, and most auteur-centered, claim for the film's im-

- portance as a work of art, as opposed to a crass work of exploitation, which marked the film's original critical reception. Robin Wood (1998) has followed suit. Ed Guerrero (1993) places the film more or less within the tradition of blaxploitation, but does not make the same kind of claims for its importance. And Celine Parrenas Shimizu, in an unpublished paper entitled "Master-Slave Sex Acts: *Mandingo* and the Race/Sex Paradox," to which I am much indebted, has explored its connections to the Hegelian dilemma found in "Lordship and Bondage."
- 12 The cycle of blaxploitation began with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and was followed by *Shaft*, *Superfly* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1972), and a range of action-sex films set in the ghetto. They were closely followed by a cycle of female-centered action-sex films such as *Cleopatra Jones* (dir. Jack Starrett, 1973), *Coffy* (dir. Jack Hill, 1973), and *Foxy Brown* (dir. Jack Hill, 1974).
- 13 The elegant way in which the film reworks the luridness of both previous traditions is encapsulated in the cover of the novel's paperback edition, which, in turn, took its cue from the film's posters. On one cover, cleverly parodying the pose of Scarlett O'Hara in the arms of Rhett Butler in the posters for *Gone with the Wind*, we see the white master sweeping his black slave girl off her feet; in the next, we see the Mandingo "buck" sweeping his white mistress off her feet. See Wood 1998.
- 14 The novel is considerably less romantic: the young master is never really enamored of his wife and is already involved in a more than merely procreative relationship with his slave "wench."
- 15 He not only shoots him, but pushes his wounded body into a boiling cauldron with a pitchfork. The slave who picks up the gun at the end had been taught to read by Cicero, the revolutionary slave who is hung midway through the film, but not before delivering a speech in which he berates his fellow slaves for their servility and invites the masters to "kiss my black ass."
- 16 A house slave grabs a gun and kills the old master before running off. The young master is left mourning the body of his father, bereft of wife and child, while Muddy Waters sings the blues.
- 17 A frequently cited precursor to both this film and the urban genre of blaxploitation is the James Brown/Raquel Welch love scene in *100 Rifles* (dir. Tom Gries, 1969). Henry Louis Gates briefly cites it as Jim Brown making "wild and passionate love to Raquel Welch," (1991, 163), although Ed Guerrero (1993) notes that the fact that Welch was cast as a Mexican tempers this scene (79). The Brown/Welch scene has none of the frisson of the *Mandingo* scene. Indeed, when Gates writes that it is "safe to say that the frisson of miscegenation has never been treated in American film with either intelligence or candor [until Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*]," he clearly had not seen *Mandingo*.
- 18 Andrew Britton describes it as "one of the most beautiful and moving love scenes in the cinema," arguing that the beauty of the union lies essentially in its fra-

- gility, as the couple is “united in their horror at the other man’s use of another human being for a personal satisfaction . . . which denies and degrades their humanity” (1976, 11).
- 19 Celine Parrenas Shimizu writes of this scene: “The two who struggle against each other’s difference instead affirm each other’s insufficiencies and dependencies within a system of dehumanizing brutality” (2000, 16).
- 20 Celine Shimizu offers an intriguing, and somewhat more hopeful, argument that something like a subversive mutual recognition momentarily occurs in both this scene and in a later sex scene between the female mistress and her black slave before violence and subjugation reemerge: “Sex both ensures slavery and undermines it in a complicated formulation of power” (2000, 20). While she may be right about the (briefly) subversive nature of these recognitions, it is worth asking on what basis this recognition is made. Shimizu seems to suggest that it is grounded in a common humanity, that subject and other find themselves, at least momentarily, reflected in one another despite their differences. Intersubjectivity is thus conceived here as an overcoming of difference, a discovery of sameness with radical, “self-fashioning” potential able to undermine the structure of slavery. My argument inclines more toward the notion that the eroticism is fueled by the taboo, but that recognition keeps in place a destructive difference and aggression.
- 21 Butler differentiates Benjamin’s ideal of recognition in which “destruction of the self is an occasional and lamentable occurrence, one that is reversed and overcome in the therapeutic situation and that does not turn out to constitute recognition essentially” (Butler 2000, 274). Her own description of the ongoing process of recognition reads Hegel differently to argue that recognition cannot “leave destructiveness behind” (274), as if recognition was not also a form of aggression.
- 22 Shimizu says that as Blanche strips Mede of his clothes, she also strips off her mastery. However, her “mastery” has never been the same as her husband’s, proof of which is given in the fact that what she risks in having sex with Mede is not what her husband risks in having sex with Ellen: her very life. Ellen is “sleeping up”; Blanche, like her husband, is “sleeping down,” but, unlike him, at real cost.
- 23 This is not the first extended representation of interracial lust in Hollywood. A case could be made for the shower sex scene in *Shaft*, and even for the sex scene between Jim Brown and Raquel Welch in *100 Rifles*, both mentioned by Henry Louis Gates as rare moments of interracial sex. However, the sex in *Shaft* remains purposefully casual, and in *100 Rifles* it is arguably portrayed as occurring between two persons of color (Mexican Indian and African American). *Mandingo*, however, appears to present the first important scene of interracial lust in Hollywood cinema that inscribes the taboo against it into the very scene that transgresses it. It is thus also, in the Hegelian sense, the one film that portrays the difficulty of recognition.

24 I include my own, racially unmarked discussion in *Hard Core* (1989, 157).

25 A stag film from the twenties, entitled *Darkie Rhythm*, had an African American woman roll her eyes to the rhythm of the black male’s thrusts.

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## Crackers and Whackers:

### The White Trashing of Porn

CONSTANCE PENLEY

#### White Trash Theory

★ Before getting into my topic—porn's predilection for white trash looks and tastes—I want to say something about the benefits to one's theoretical formation that can accrue from growing up white trash. This brief comment does not mark a digression from my topic because it was precisely my white trash upbringing that gave me the conceptual tools to recognize this predilection, as well as the language to describe and explain it. I cannot imagine any better preparation for grasping the intricacies of contemporary theory and cultural studies than negotiating a Florida cracker childhood and adolescence. I understood the gist of structuralist binaries, semiosis, the linguistic nature of the unconscious, the disciplinary micro-organization of power, and the distinguishing operations of taste culture long before I left the groves of central Florida for the groves of academe. At the University of Florida in Gainesville, the University of California at Berkeley, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, I encountered the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and, somewhat later, Michel de Certeau, and Pierre Bourdieu. In those ideas I immediately recognized the home truths of white trash or, as Barthes would say, white trashnicity.

How does such theoretical precociousness emerge in cracker culture? Consider, for example, the intense conceptual work involved in figuring out the differential meanings of white trash—what it is because of what it is not, a regular down-home version of honey and ashes, the raw and the cooked.