

# Race Sex and Hollywood

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**BLACK MEN AND WHITE WOMEN  
CENSORED**

**By Nicole Haggard**

Race Sex and Hollywood: Black Men and White Women Censored  
– Nicole Haggard

Negro and White Love Scenes That Shock-It-To-You!  
Negro boy gets white girl in torrid love scenes that  
break the last of Hollywood's great taboos!  
Hollywood is now asking *Guess Who's Coming to Bed?*  
-*Coronet Magazine*, April 1969

*The question of interracial sexual relations remains virtually untouched.* -- Jane Gaines<sup>i</sup>

From 1927 to 1956, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) officially mandated that: “Miscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden.”<sup>ii</sup> Although the miscegenation clause speaks directly to white-black relationships, the MPPDA also used the clause to censor scripts that portrayed interracial relationships beyond black-white pairs. A range of censorship ensued, from forbidden to acceptable interracial screen couples, leading film scholars to summarize the genre as such: “No nonwhite man can have sanctioned sexual relations with a white woman” in contrast to the “frequently actualized relation between a nonwhite female and a white male.”<sup>iii</sup> This work, however, questions the vague term “non-white,” and calls attention to the specific intersection of gender and race in interracial relations.<sup>iv</sup>

By focusing on the gender and race of couples censored by the MPPDA, it becomes clear that the only “sex relationship” they consistently forbid was *black men* and *white women*; they repeatedly banned these films and permitted scripts that featured other interracial combinations such as white men and Chinese women or Mexican men and white women.<sup>v</sup> In fact, William Hayes, the renowned first president of the MPPDA, declared that it was “inadvisable always to show white women in scenes with Negroes

where miscegenation is implied.”<sup>vi</sup> This explicit censorship of black men and white women is at the core of interracial relationships in film and history. One would therefore assume that the exact cinematic frame we literally see a “sex relationship” between a black man and a white woman would be documented and analyzed in various studies of interracial romance, sex in cinema, or “Hollywood firsts.” However there is no such scholarly agreement on this precise visual moment.<sup>vii</sup> This work will identify the landmark scene, and use it to develop an interdisciplinary reading that will intervene into pre-existing analyses of cinematic interracial relationships.

bel hooks adamantly reminds us that “from slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.”<sup>viii</sup> As an explicit statement of image control, and a literal mediator between the screen and reality, the MPPDA reinforced and maintained racism by determining which race-and-gender interracial pairs could and could not be visually represented, and how that representation looked when it was actually screened. This censorship mirrored America’s anti-miscegenation laws, which Peggy Pascoe shows was *also* a multi-racial project in white supremacy that has much to tell us about bans against ‘illicit’ interracial sex.<sup>ix</sup> The judicial obsession with interracial sex and the MPPDA’s specific forbiddance of sex relationships, clues us in to the crucial role that *sex* plays in America’s conception of interracial relationships. As renowned American author and activist James Weldon Johnson stated, “in the core of the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted.”<sup>x</sup>

Yet, when discussing interracial relationships in film we seem uncomfortable talking about sex, we discuss interracial romance, marriage, and the complexities of their

children; but what about the in between? As Jaine Gaines has noted we seem to skip over the important step of interracial *sexual* relations. Linda Williams has taken up the task of looking directly at sex in film and reminds us that, “To dismiss these 'dirty parts' as gratuitous - as not part of the cultural story of the history of movies - is to fail to write the formal and cultural history of those moving pictures.”<sup>xi</sup> As the title of her work *Screening Sex* reveals, we need to understand the dialectic between both what is revealed to us and what is concealed during any historical moment, and as I would add between any specific race-and-gender pair. Taking a cue from Williams, what happens when the ‘ob/scene’ of interracial sex comes ‘on/scene?’

Although film scholars may overlook the topic, the presence of black man-white woman sex in the movies was a rousing theme in popular culture: in 1969 the cover of *Coronet* Magazine entitled “Negro and White Love Scenes That Shock-It-To-You!” announced that, “Negro boy gets white girl in torrid love scenes that break the last of Hollywood’s great taboos.” The magazine is filled with steamy still images of James Brown and Raquel Welch embracing in *100 Rifles*, Sidney Poitier kissing Joanna Shimkus in *The Lost Man*, and the pantless white Joanna being held by her black shirtless lover in the UK import *Joanna*. Playing on the overtly purposeful lack of sex in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* the article claims that Hollywood is *now* asking *Guess Who’s Coming to Bed?* as black men-white women love scenes are filling the screen. *Coronet* announces what we have avoided, it is the “torrid love scenes” that are taboo, the “sex relationships,” *specifically* between black men and white women that caught the attention of American audiences. Considered with the Production Code’s ban on “sex relationships between the white and black races,” *Coronet’s* announcement made me

wonder in what film exactly was ‘the last of Hollywood’s great taboos’ broken, and how did we get there?<sup>xii</sup>

In order to trace this visual development, I began chronologically watching every American film that includes a black man-white woman interaction in which a sexual relationship occurs or is implied.<sup>xiii</sup> I discovered that the first film to depict a black man-white woman marriage is *The View From Popmpey’s Head* (1955).<sup>xiv</sup> We are shown the first black man-white woman kiss and the couple half-clad in bed together in *The Black Klansman* (1966). The first time sex is implied through elliptical editing is in Sidney Poitier’s *The Lost Man* (1968),<sup>xv</sup> and the first time the couple appears completely naked together in a sexually suggestive position is in *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* (1970) based on a Tennessee Williams play. Finally the first visualized sex scene occurs in Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971).

Fifty minutes into *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, the black male fugitive Sweetback is caught trespassing by a white male motorcycle gang. As punishment they challenge him to a duel with their leader, Pres. Pres rides a motorcycle onto the screen and begins showing off various feats of weightlifting and knife throwing, while the gang chants to Sweetback, “Come on man, your choice! Whats it gonna be?” Pres then removes the motorcycle helmet, and long red hair flows out from beneath it, revealing that she is a white woman. Sweetback coolly pronounces, “fucking” as the challenge. The white male crowd cheers and Pres assertively yells, “Shut-up!” while motioning them to “round up.” The men create a circle of motorcycles and throw their jackets on the pavement as a surface for the duel to occur on. Pres enters the circle, fully naked, with fists clasped in the air as a victorious champion. She lies on her back as Sweetback

enters the circle and gets on top of her. Although we have previously seen Sweetback in sex acts, this is the first time we see his naked back side in motion between a woman's legs, as he circles his pelvis around, rhythmically penetrates and even moves Pres' legs into different positions. The crowd claps and cheers "Get him Pres" creating the soundtrack for the fucking duel. The scene lasts for about two minutes and toward the end she tightly wraps her legs around his torso and then spreads them out as she screams "Whoa Sweetback, Oooooooh Sweetback." the image freezes on her smiling face. Sweetback then gets off her and we are shown, for the first time, rather than just his sweet back, a full frontal naked shot of his body, including his flaccid penis. Sweetback has won. The crowd quietly disperses. Pres remains lying on the floor.

This explicit sex scene introduces cinema to visualized sexual relations between a black man and a white woman. From the film's opening sequence we are cued in to the primacy of the theme of interracial sexual relationships when a white woman is told she cannot have sex with a black man at a sex club. As Linda Williams notes our landmark scene "finally delivers the interracial sex so anxiously diverted in the sex club (not to mention...in countless other Hollywood flirtations with miscegenation)."<sup>xvi</sup> So why have we overlooked this landmark moment specifically as the first black man-white woman visualized sex scene in American film? And how does *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* fit into the trajectory of interracial films? It is not a film about a relationship, or love, or marriage, it is a film about institutionalized racism and the role that sex plays within that system. How then do we read *Sweetback*? And what does it have to teach us about interracial sexual relationships on film in general? In order to answer these questions and understand the significance of *Sweetback*, we first need to parcel out the

analytical framework we currently employ.

Regardless of the thesis of their work, interracial film scholars begin from the tenet that a gendered dichotomy exists in the narrative construction of these films in which white *men* freely have sexual relationships with all races of women, while white *women* rarely have sexual access to non-white men. Nick Browne introduced this semiotic theory based on the matrix of sexual relations that regulate Hollywood's system of racial representation.<sup>xvii</sup> His description of the white gender dichotomy compiled with a binary notion of race (white vs nonwhite) has become the logical starting point for the field. Although this framework has helped us to identify and read the distinct themes that separate white men from white women in interracial relationships, it has also promoted a lumping together of all non-white races, and has limited our understanding of the representation and repression of specific race-and-gender pairings. It also implicates us in a colonialist signifying system, which Jan Abdul Mohammed explains "reduc[es] the colonized or racial subject to a generic being that can be exchanged for any other 'native' or racialized subject."<sup>xviii</sup> Rather than continue with this framework, I suggest we look to Peggy Pascoe's work on the intricacies of anti-miscegenation laws for a solution. She states, "it is essential to examine the distinctive historical trajectories of each of the various communities affected by the laws, to examine which groups were and were not named in miscegenation law (and where and when)."<sup>xix</sup> Applying this to the prohibitions of the Production Code, we can look to the representation and repression of specific race-and-gender pairs, and give an analysis that heeds these distinctions.

For example, when Carlos Cortés argues, "Code or no Code, taboos make titillating screen material. So filmmakers skirted the borders of the Code-hardened

convention, teasing audiences with touches or hints of interracial love,” he defends his claim by pointing to various interracial films made during the Code era: *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933, white woman-Chinese man), *Bordertown* (1935, white woman-Mexican man), and *Bird of Paradise* (1932, white man-Polynesian woman).<sup>xx</sup> Note, however, that none of his examples involve a black man-white woman pair. This is because it was not until almost twenty years later; in the 1957 film *Island in the Sun* that audiences were ‘teased’ with even a hint of a sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman on Hollywood screens. By this time miscegenation was not forbidden by the Production Code, but rather moved to ‘special subjects’ to be treated with care. So although filmmakers “teased audiences” with other interracial race-and-gender combinations during the Production Code era, they did not do so with black men and white women. Unlike other interracial pairs, films were continually rejected during this period if they merely implied a sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman. Inattention to the specific race-and-gender of the interracial pair misses this crucial distinction. Like Pascoe, if we pay attention to the race-and-gender of the interracial pairs named and not named, represented and repressed, we are able to make conclusions based on the historical context of their specific pairing.

We also must be careful when discussing black-white love, where scholars do not call attention to the specific genders of the interracial couple discussed. Such as when Susan Courtney argues that *Island in the Sun* “was partly responsible for the cycle of black-white ‘miscegenation films,’ as some called them, that followed it...the sheer volume of such films attests to the popularity of the trend.”<sup>xxi</sup> However, out of the seven ‘miscegenation films’ she lists made between 1957-1959, only one of them, *The World*,



*The Flesh, and the Devil*, has even the possibility of a black man-white woman relationship in it, and that relationship never actualizes on screen. The other six films depict a white man-black woman relationship. So although the topic of white man-black woman 'miscegenation' may have become a popular trend, this has quite different historical and cultural implications than black man-white woman 'miscegenation' becoming popular, and generalizing black-white relationships overlooks this important distinction. We need a framework that sees the continued silence of black men-white women on the screen in direct contrast to the newfound popularity of white men-black women. Doing so would allow us to read the history and significance of these films differently.

This is not to say that interracial scholars never utilize this method of parsing the race and gender of interracial pairs, in fact when they do so they notice the specific patterns and tropes that fully depend upon both the gender and race of the characters. For example, Cortés announces the genre's racial hierarchy, "[There was] a screen pecking order for interracial love, with Latinos requiring the most careful internal differentiation, Asians, Indians, and Arabs enjoying some flexibility, and African Americans becoming the least likely to cross interracial barriers."<sup>xxii</sup> Here, Cortés highlights the range of censored male characters paired with white women and is able to make a specific argument about their censorship. He acknowledges that the PCA did not treat all "non-white" men equally, but rather on a graduated scale. This acute attention to race-and-gender differentiation begins the work of outlining the distinct qualities of varied interracial pairs, and it is from this framework that we should engage the field.

This framework would allow us to see the implications of black men and white women or any other race-and-gender interracial pairing as unique, with its own history and culturally constructed narrative attached to it. Reading the couple in this way, allows us to draw across disciplines in order to understand how the filmic representation of the couple relates to the historical lived experience of the interracial pair, and the narrative tropes that have defined their union in various cultural outlets. It will also allow us to compile a canon of films based specifically on their pairing, as opposed to interracial relationships generally, which will reveal the cinematic patterns and tropes associated with their particular union. We can then begin to re-read these films and intervene into previous analyses.

With this framework in hand, we shall turn to the representation of black men and white women specifically. Susan Courtney shows us that “*The Birth of a Nation* holds pride of place in cultural memory, and in film studies, as American cinema’s primal fantasy of miscegenation.”<sup>xxiii</sup> She describes this originating fantasy as the story of the idealized white woman under assault by a black male rapist, and nearly every work on ‘miscegenation’ in film, or the history of black masculinity in film, includes a discussion of the intersection of these archetypal characters. Donald Bogle explains that “*The Birth of a Nation* was the motion picture to introduce the mythic type the brutal black buck” through the characters of the “renegade black Gus [who] sets out to rape the younger Cameron daughter...[and] the mulatto Syllas Lynch [who] attempts to force the white Elsie Stoneman to marry him.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Bogle describes the brutal black buck as “big, baaaaad niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.”<sup>xxv</sup> This claim falls within a plethora of scholarship that analyzes and refers to the scene in which

Gus proposes marriage to Little Sister, which leads to her committing suicide as the “Gus rape scene.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Gus becomes the synecdoche for the image of the black male as rapist: the black male beast verse idolized white woman rape-scene that haunts representations of black men and white women on screen. And yet, as Gerald R. Butters Jr. reminds us in his work *Black Manhood on the Silver Screen*, “Gus never implies anything provocative, he never makes any sexual advances. He indirectly proposed marriage so his intentions appear honorable.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Although what the audience may have been ‘trained’ to see at this time remains debated, whether or not a 1915 viewer interprets this scene as rape, it still remains that no rape has to occur for Gus to be interpreted as a rapist.<sup>xxviii</sup> By looking at the scene directly and paying attention to what we see instead of how we have been culturally constructed to interpret it, Gus transforms from a brutal flesh hungry rapist to a man whose marriage proposal to a white woman is so degrading and appalling that she would rather kill herself than face this offer. We must focus on what we actually see verse what is imagined, for as Gaines shows us, “The censorial gaze does not look...[it] is a very particular point of view putting the interpretation before the image in such a way that the interpretation stands on its own quite apart from the scenes themselves.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Richard Wright spotlights this cultural act of ‘putting the interpretation before the image’ in his work *Native Son*. As Ishmael Reed explains, “Though sexual contact may have been in Bigger’s thoughts, there is *no* sexual contact between Bigger [, a black man,] and Mary Dalton [, a white woman,] when he ‘accidentally’ murders her. Yet from the very beginning of the case, the newspapers charged Bigger with rape.”<sup>xxx</sup> Like Bigger, Gus may or may not have had sexual thoughts while chasing Little Sister.

However, merely having sexual thoughts and chasing a woman does not make him a rapist. Seeing Gus and Bigger as rapists rather than the scorned suitor and baffled murderer that appear on screen, we perpetuate the fallacious interpretation that a black man in pursuit of/presence of a white woman must always/already be a rapist.<sup>xxxii</sup> Gus is our first cinematic example of this phenomenon.

What then happens when we are actually given a sex scene? We can see the effect of this misreading in a review of James Baldwin's novel *Another Country*. While describing the characters in the novel, the critic, Bill Ott, claims: "He's black, bisexual, and a jazz drummer; she's white, timid, and newly arrived in New York from the Deep South. Their relationship begins with an encounter that, by modern standards, would certainly qualify as date rape."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Similar to descriptions of the scene with Gus and Little Sister, when I read this I was confused, for the description I read was anything but a date rape. Rufus and Leona have been engaging in flirtatious banter with sexual undertones all night long. When Rufus finally asks her "You seen anything you want since you been in New York?" Leona replies "Oh, I want it all!" Later they replay this conversation and he whispers to her, "Well then, come and get it."<sup>xxxiiii</sup> They then aggressively, passionately, and playfully roll around on the balcony, finally having sex while sobbing and cursing during their interaction.<sup>xxxv</sup> Baldwin does not sugar coat the moment with soft sweet nothings, but he is also not giving us a scene of date rape. He allows two people, a black man and a white woman, who know nothing about one another except a mutual attraction to collide on a balcony, they consume one another and being fully poetically in the moment feel each tide of emotion that falls from their bodies. How then does this moment that ends with Leona looking up at Rufus with "a shy,

triumphant smile” kissing him and exclaiming, “It was so wonderful” get critically interpreted as date rape by the reviewer?<sup>xxxv</sup> Sure Leona cries and screams out, but it comes from that erotic intersection of pleasure and pain that sex produces, not fear or rejection of Rufus. Perhaps Baldwin has better insight into the joyful pain that penetration produces for Leona, which Ott can dismiss as rape. Or perhaps Bill Ott’s comment should be dismissed as mere misinterpretation, but that would disconnect it from all the historical precedents that have called rape at the mere sight of a black man and white woman together.

And this “myth of the black rapist” has not existed merely in our films and literature; it has explicit consequences on the lives of *real* black men. The historical legacy of lynching black men falsely accused of raping white women has been well documented and, as Patricia Hall notes, black men “have received disproportionate punishment for sexual assault ... of the 455 men executed for rape since 1930, 405 were black, and almost all of the complainants were white.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Perhaps to the culturally constructed eye Gus, Bigger, and Rufus may all look like rapists, however when we call attention to the narrative tropes that historically plague, not just interracial couples, but specifically the sexual relationship of black men and white women, we find a completely different story.

These misreadings are not reserved for the alleged black rapist; they also latch on to images of white women involved in sexual relationships with black men. In a demeaning and misleading summary, Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims that in the film *Shaft*, “the eponymous hero makes love to a prostitute in his shower.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, if we once again focus on what we are shown verse what we imagine, the woman, Linda, is not by

any means a prostitute. She is a white woman who picks up a black man, Gate's hero Shaft, in a bar. She comes back to his house. We see them passionately kissing in his shower, and then he kicks her out of his bed the next morning with promises that they will do it again. This does not make her a prostitute. Gate's assumption makes sense, however, if we consider feminist scholar Ruth Frankenberg's observation that, "Like the negative stereotypes of African American men, images of white women in relationships with men of color frequently reduce them to sexual beings."<sup>xxxviii</sup> We must not allow these historical negative stereotypes to further impede and misdirect our analysis of interracial couples.

Film scholar Robin Wood also notes this typical misreading of a sexual white woman in his critique on Leonard Maltin's summary of the film *Mandingo*. Maltin assigns the film a bomb and describes it thus: "Trashy potboiler will appeal only to the s&m crowd. [James] Mason is a bigoted plantation patriarch. [Susan] George his oversexed daughter, [Ken] Norton--what else?--a fighter. Stinko!"<sup>xxxix</sup> Wood notes, "one may reasonably begin questioning whether the writer has even *seen Mandingo!*"<sup>xl</sup> As I was, Wood is rightfully astounded at Maltin's mis-description of Susan George's character Blanche:

That 'oversexed' is wonderful, a sociological testament in itself: rejected by her husband after their wedding night when he discovers she isn't a virgin...Blanche is forced into a life of total abstinence, and experiences what one would assume to be the perfectly natural need of an adult woman for sexual satisfaction. This, in the writer's eyes, makes her 'oversexed' - apparently the Victorian belief that women should merely 'lie on their backs and think of England' still thrives.<sup>xli</sup>

What Wood fails to mention here is that Blanche fulfills this "need for sexual satisfaction" by having sex with her husband's *black male* slave Mede. Although Wood aptly notes the sexism involved in Maltin's misreading, he avoids stating the obvious

intersection of gender *and* race that signals Blanche not as the sympathetically forlorn woman driven into an affair (of which Hollywood historically loves), but as the “strange *white* lady,” (as her husband calls her), the sex crazed maniac (the dvd summary describes her as a nympho). It is the presence of a *black* man in her arms that brands her ‘oversexed,’ a Victorian belief in the purity of *white* women, conjured up at the sight of a black man and a white woman together, that fully defines Maltin’s mislabeling of Blanche as ‘oversexed.’

In her work, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth*, Celia R. Daileader argues, “Miscegeny from a racist point of view is always at some level rape. And if it isn’t rape, if she ‘wanted it,’ it is not miscegenation, but rather proof that the woman is not truly white.”<sup>xlii</sup> For Gates, Maltin, and many other scholars and critics, the sight of a white woman openly and willingly engaging in sexual activity with a black man signals them as ‘not-quite-white’ sexual deviants; what Ann duCille has coined the ‘Mandingo Syndrome.’<sup>xliii</sup> By paying attention to the race and gender of the pairs represented, the fact that these are scenes portraying specifically a black man and a white woman engaged in a sexual relationship allows us to recognize these misreadings.

Like the myth of the black rapist, white women have also been historically persecuted for sexual relationships with black men. Paul Lombardo revealed that the state of Virginia deemed white women who engaged in sexual relations with black men as “feeble-minded” and “depraved,” therefore they were liable to both the state’s 1924 Racial Integrity Act and Eugenic Sterilization Act. This ultimately produced a state mandated sterilization of white women who produced children with black men.<sup>xliv</sup> By continuing to blatantly misread the representation of white women in relationships with

black men as sexual deviants, we perpetuate the stereotypes that have historically discriminated against the specific sexual union of black men and white women. We must first highlight these blatant misreadings, understand where and why they appear, and then analyze the images that actually appear on screen, not the ones that live in ingrained stereotypes.

Abdul JanMohamed argues that “racialized sexuality is driven by a will to conceal its mechanisms and a reliance on unempirical stereotypes.”<sup>xlv</sup> When interracial sexuality is then represented, these two concepts go hand in hand. For as Calvin Hernton explains in his work *Sex and Racism in America*, we are plagued by “a superstitious imagining of the pornographic nature of interracial sex.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Through this imagining we conjure up symbolic stereotypical images, quite distant from the bodies on screen or the lived experience of interracial couples. By concealing the mechanisms of interracial sex we can continue to ‘imagine’ the stereotypes that plague them. But what happens when a black man-white woman sexual relationship actually comes on screen? Do we view Gus differently once we literally see black Rafe rape white Miss Wyckoff in *Secret Yearnings*? Does Linda continue to be a prostitute when white Angie openly and willingly gives herself to black Flipper in *Jungle Fever*?<sup>xlvii</sup> It is specifically the sexual in these explicit relationships that we have generally misread and avoided. Perhaps because as with *Sweetback*, these unmistakable sex scenes prove much more difficult to read than the ambiguous or implied sex scenes which we can ‘imagine’ in multiple ways.

*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is fully complicated and challenging. Typical of the Blaxploitation genre, it complicates the ‘normal’ character tropes for black men and white women, and challenges the very taboo it transgresses. The character of



Sweetback does not fit the brutal black buck or Uncle Tom character type associated with black men in the presence of white women, and as the leader of the white male motorcycle gang Pres is not bound by the system of white patriarchal power dictating her whiteness or sexuality. Ironically and brilliantly Sweetback must ‘fuck’ the white woman in order to escape punishment by the white male mob as opposed to the historical legacy of black men receiving punishment from a white mob for the mere allegation of sex with a white woman. It also denies the trappings of Hollywood romance and gives instead the performance of sex as a public competition, placing black man-white woman sex literally into the public sphere. These are just a few elements of the film that allow *Sweetback* to open up a space for a new cinematic story to be told, one that escapes and transgresses the confines of imagined sexual stereotypes between black men and white women. It also opens a space for other race-and-gender pairs; it helps us understand the significance of being attuned to the cultural constructs that define specific interracial unions. By acknowledging this scene as the first, *Sweetback* can pave a new path, and allows us to go back and re-read other films with fresh eyes.

In referring to the black man’s alleged desire for white women, Franz Fanon pleads, “this sexual myth...must no longer be allowed to impede active understanding.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Literally seeing Sweetback and Pres have sex makes the misreading of other black man-white woman characters even more apparent, for when their union is visualized we discover that the black man is no brutal black buck thirsting for white flesh, and the white woman is not a sexual deviant suffering from ‘Mandingo Syndrome.’ In describing Jean Toomer’s sexually provocative work *Cane*, Jonathan Smith argues that one must be “less concerned with making large moral judgments about behavior than

with simply mapping and charting the territory.”<sup>xlix</sup> We have far too often allowed our interpretations (judgments) to obliterate the images on the screen, and must now simply map and chart each couple’s specific story as it appears.

By focusing on race and gender, I suggest we can utilize an interdisciplinary reading specified to the cultural history of specific race-and-gender pairs, not merely a generalization of interracial romance in Hollywood cinema. When race specificity enters the conversation we can develop specified canons and begin to trace the patterns that define the representation and/or repression of specific interracial pairs. We also must pay attention to what we see on the screen, as opposed to the patterned misinterpretations of imagined stereotypes. Through this two-fold method we can begin the work of intervening into preexisting analyses of interracial cinema. Acknowledging the specificity of race-and-gender in interracial relationships will help us begin the work of analyzing how Hollywood’s representation of interracial relationships truly connects to the changing face of racism and sexism in American culture.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Linda Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border: Pornography, Exploitation, and Interracial Lust," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 271.

<sup>ii</sup> MPPDA, "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," in *The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America*, ed. Gerald Mast (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982). Note that the organization changed their name to the Motion Picture Association of America in 1946.

<sup>iii</sup> Nick Browne, "Race: The Political Unconscious of American Film," *East-West Film Journal* 6, no. 1 (1992).

<sup>iv</sup> Referring to the white person's partner as simply "nonwhite," rather than delineating that character's particular race, dismisses the significance that the intersection of both race and gender hold in the identity of an interracial couple. Similar to the work of Peggy Pascoe I will be reading a black man-white woman interracial couple differently than a white man-Chinese woman couple, or any other pairing. I will use her terminology "race-and-gender pair" to emphasize this distinction. Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> Including white women with other *non-white* men besides black. See for example films *Son of India* (1931, Indian man and White woman), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933, Chinese Man and White woman), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936, Native American Man and White woman), and *Right Cross* (1950, Mexican man and White woman).

<sup>vi</sup> Cited in Auster memo, 13 March 1934, *Imitation of Life* file, Production Code Administration Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. Susan Courtney's work directed me to this memo, as well as other informative holdings of the Production Code Administration. Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>vii</sup> Susan Courtney claims that "*Mandingo* (1975), [is] the first Hollywood film to... actually show interracial sex between a white woman and a black man" specifically

emphasizing the race-and-gender of the pair. (Ibid. 361n. 39.) However Linda Williams reveals the debate in a footnote of her work, "[*Mandingo*] 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." (Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border," 306.) In *Screening Sex* Williams also states that the scene in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) "finally delivers the interracial sex so anxiously diverted in the sex club (not to mention in *Vixen* and in countless other Hollywood flirtations with miscegenation)." Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 98.

viii bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

ix Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 8.

x As quoted in, Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*, 1st Evergreen ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1988) xx.

xi Williams, *Screening Sex*, 7.

xii Linda Williams has argued repeatedly that to merely transgress a taboo does not defeat it, but rather it must also contain the combination of fear and desire which established it as taboo in the first place. In other words merely showing a black man and white woman having sex would not break this taboo, there must be within the scene reference to the fear and desire which makes black man-white women sex taboo. It is beyond the scope of this work to take up this aspect of her argument, however her insight sheds light on many of the issues we can explore by looking directly at interracial sex. For my purposes any representation of black men-white women always/already conjures our preconceived notions of the taboo that dictates their pairing.

xiii I compiled a list of films beginning with *Birth of a Nation* to the present that include a black man-white woman interaction in which a sexual relationship occurs or is implied between the characters. I ordered the films chronologically based upon the date of their USA release according to the American Film Institute. I define the first visualized black man-white woman sex scene as consisting of nude or partially nude bodies engaged in sexual relations in which we are shown from some angle and motion the physical act of sex, not simply implied sex through kissing and rubbing or elliptical editing.

xiv Note that we previously granted this distinction to *One Potato Two Potato* (1964) which traces the couple's courtship to marriage. Some may disagree with granting this moment to *View From Pompey's Head* due to the fact that the husband has been 'passing' and we and his wife do not discover that he is black until the end of the film, however I find it fascinating and significant that a 'passing' film is the first representation of a black man-white woman marriage on Hollywood screens.

xv Also note Van Peebles film *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (1968) previously had implied black man-white woman sex through elliptical editing, however technically this would be considered a French film made during the time that Van Peebles expatriated to France. Al Johnson submitted it to the San Francisco Film Festival as a French entry.

xvi Williams, *Screening Sex*, 98.

xvii Browne, "Race: The Political Unconscious of American Film," 8.

<sup>xviii</sup> Abdul JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of Racialized Sexuality," in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to Aids*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 106.

<sup>xix</sup> Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 8.

<sup>xx</sup> Carlos E. Cortés, "Hollywood Interracial Love: Social Taboo as Screen Titillation," in *The Making and Remaking of a Multiculturalist* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 134.

<sup>xxi</sup> Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, 193.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cortés, "Hollywood Interracial Love," 133.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004) 10-12.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.* 13.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See for example Jane Gaines explaining that the scene has been read in countless ways and her specific use of quotation marks to signify the debate: "Gus chase" scene and "Gus rape" scene. She also argues that Little Sister "dies both instead of and because of the rape." Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 239.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Gerald R Butters, *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 79.

<sup>xxviii</sup> There is also debate over whether or not the "rape" scene was cut from the original version. As Gaines notes, many arguments ride on the uncovering of this missing footage. She states we should not focus on whether or not the rape occurred but rather "the use of imagery that stands for 'rape,'" and as I am arguing what this imagery does for future interpretations of 'rape.' Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 340.

<sup>xxix</sup> Gaines, *Fire and Desire*, 240.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ishmael Reed, "Bigger and O.J.," in *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 190.

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist," in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Bill Ott, "Unlikely Love Stories," *American Liberties* 1994.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 20.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, "'the Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 343.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Henry Louis Gates, "Jungle Fever; or, Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner?," in *Five for Five: The Films of Spike Lee*, ed. Spike Lee (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991), 163.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 87.

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xxxix Robin Wood, "'Mandingo': The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece " in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 266.

xl Ibid.

xli Ibid.

xlii Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-Racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

xliii Ann duCille somewhat cynically coined the phrase in response to the alleged Othello Syndrome. She describes the Mandingo Syndrome as "white women's penchant for and willing submission to black men and the national anxiety that even the possibility of such coupling has traditionally evoked." Ann duCille, "The Unbearable Darkness of Being: 'Fresh' Thoughts on Race, Sex, and the Simpsons," in *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 303.

xliv Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, outlawed miscegenation for being scientifically unsound and polluting America with mixed-blood offspring. The Eugenic Sterilization Act required the sterilization of the insane and socially inadequate. Lombardo uncovered a report in which John Plecker, head of Virginia's Statistic Bureau, wrote, "Not a few white women are giving birth to mulatto children. These women are usually feeble-minded, but in some cases they are simply depraved." Paul A. Lombardo, "Miscegenation, Eugenics, and Racism: Historical Footnotes to *Loving V. Virginia*," *U.C. Davis Law Review* 21 (1987-1988): 438.

xlv Abdul JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border," 106.

xlvi Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America*, xiv.

xlvii Linda Williams has used interracial pornography to explore these questions concluding that stereotypes refunction throughout history and are not always held with the same negative connotation. Williams, "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border," 285-288.

xlviii Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 81.

xlix Jonathan C. Smith, *A Thin Line to Stand On: Mapping Poetics in Contemporary African American Poets*, 264.